Ponce de León, Alejo, "Un paréntesis a la uniformidad: sobre Miguel Harte y su trabajo" (Slackening Risk Management: On Miguel Harte and his Work), *Miguel Harte*, Buenos Aires, Mansalva, 2018.

As the soundest union between wasting time and learning that human civilization is capable of, the Internet provides users with increasingly segmented and specific packets of information, which ensures it an unwavering pool of engaged users. There will always be someone with an interest, however passing, in paraphilia and strange diseases, in stirring up debates on the mysterious Shugborough inscription, or in sharing and commenting on hour-and half-hour-long recordings of nighttime drives down rural highways. The transnational media conglomerate UBM, for instance, founded and funds *Radiopaedia*, a website ideally geared to radiology and medical students but available as well to any idle internet surfer. The medical tests of a child suffering from cherubism appear amidst this archive's myriad x-rays and tomograms that render visible more or less curable, deadly, and grotesque lesions.

A genetic disorder, cherubism entails a major deficiency in bone tissue usually concentrated in the jaw area. To compensate for the lack of bone, the body compulsively generates a large amount of fibrous tissue with no nerve endings. This tissue grows around the skull causing the patient's face to swell up, sometimes simply causing it to appear somewhat chubby and sometimes producing dramatic deformities that can lead to respiratory problems as well as difficulties speaking and swallowing.

It was a Canadian doctor that first documented cherubism, which thus earned him the right to name the disease. It is impossible to know if the name he chose reflects the doctor's sense of irony or if it is intended to console those afflicted; what is known is that the name makes reference to *putti*, those winged babies that first appeared in Classical art and whose chubby form reappeared during the Renaissance. *Putti*—soft flying masses—are mistakenly called "cherubs."

Visible thanks to tomography, the mass of tissue surrounding the jaw of the child with cherubism looks like a honeycomb that has been violated, that is, like a perfect structure whose constitutive logic has been ravished. Apparently—as you can see if you paste this image in other forums and websites—the orifices that are spread throughout this ball of organic matter have the ability to stir a vestigial repulsion in some people. It is entirely possible that Miguel Harte's work can incite this same phobic reaction.

A number of his *untitled* works, and the small structures that emerge in *Como una piedra que sueña* [Like a Rock that Dreams], fit trypophobics' descriptions of the visions that trigger their fear: flat surfaces riddled with cracks, patterned clusters of small elements, and perforations that expose an interior full of matter anomalous in relation to the larger body that contains it. Some researchers associate trypophobia with the pre-social fear of poisonous creatures forming nests in those hollows, an idea that takes us straight from

the image of a spider withdrawing into its nest to the suspicion of intrusive larva activity taking place within our own bodies.

It is hard not to associate the pillar of quails' eggs that breaks through the formica in *Los gusanos de la piedra* [The Worms of the Rock] with the image of a gang of parasites coming out of a larger organism, like insects that help each other surface for a breath of fresh air after having laboriously taken root in a fresh wound.

In its initial contact with the corporal, then, Harte's work has the dubious privilege of establishing a dialogue with its witnesses outside the realm of analytic thought; it acts on the body and resonates in the gut thanks to its ability to trigger disgust. It seems safe to assume that, not only for a trypophobic, but for a large proportion of the art-viewing public, the first reaction to Harte's work may well be reflexive rather than critical. It is likely to be mediated by a sense of aversion prior to a language capable of expressing that aversion.

Harte's early work in the painting medium—produced just before he began meddling with non-traditional materials and took a leap into the terrain of the body—is almost universally described as satirical in the accounts that encompass this stage of his career. This period evidences, albeit timidly, a few important deviations from the pictorial imagination of the eighties. The cunning green rhea in *Empanada criolla*, for instance, looks like the product of an uchronic fantasy in which Molina Campos becomes the right-hand man of Chuck Jones and produces some episodes of Roadrunner.

Harte himself describes his excursions into the grotesque and satire as a simple solution to expressionism. If, however, we bear in mind his future work and his temperament, it would seem that satire was less a statement of formalist principles than a means of personal protection as he made his way into the art scene and, hence, had to develop and uphold a public discourse beyond sheer image. For example, each member of the Harte-Pombo-Suárez triad was assigned an allegorical role on the occasion of the second show they held together, in 1990: *El águila, La gallina y El huevo*.. In this inside joke that ended up becoming almost official nomenclature, Harte was, obviously, the egg. His shell, it could be said, was satire, evasion, hermeticism. It was loud from within even though it didn't want to make any noise.

It would seem, then, that under the protective coating of this meeting of comedy and horror, the grotesque body that Harte projected—which was already beginning to swell up as volume and to move away from painting—acted as a sort of amulet against the ideal, the urgent, and the expressionistic. But, at the same time—and in keeping with the purely visceral reaction that his sculptures can provoke—that grotesque body acted as a discursive alternative to the manifest construction of political junctures in works—like those of Pombo, Suárez, and Schvartz—based on social protest and the representation of real worlds.

Certainty is temporarily suspended in the satire and disorder of the grotesque. Voluntary modes of existence are reexamined, modes of existence born of ideological conviction as

conscious decision to take action and to communicate with the rest of the world. Hermeticism affords the organization of moments regenerative in relation to the image, moments that exceed the commonplaces of social discourse. In this sense, a group of sculptures and paintings begins to take shape that would be excessive for theory restricted by the need to base its formulations on generalizing readings. Critical intent bounces off of glossy surfaces, rendering it ineffective unless Harte's work is boldly tied to notions like timidness, egoism, fear, and protection. Critical intent is useless if it fails to consider how the work strives to take measures—some more effective than others—to go beyond those restrictions.

Even though—or perhaps because—he was at Harte's side for most of his life, Pablo Suárez, in the catalogue to the Harte retrospective at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, calls him an outsider *(1). It is hard to know exactly what he meant unless we decide to overlook some of the particularities of Harte's life: the fact that his father, Ronnie, had a gallery called Vigne and a project for communal living in the sierras of Córdoba—which, according to Miguel, is connected to his own "artistic inclinations"; Miguel's improvised residence in Brazil, pursuant to a chance trip there. He ended up staying for a period of almost ten years that encompassed the early eighties, when many other Argentine artists traveled to Brazil as well due in part to the repressive atmosphere in Argentina at the time.

Why, then, would Harte's art be more "outsider" than the art of the rest of a generation that grew up in the shadow of common historical factors? Why more maverick than the other works that came to light in what Miguel Briante called the "naughty" venue that was the Centro Cultural Rojas? Clearly, something in Harte awakened in Pablo Suárez the same paranoia that a typophobic experiences before grottoes and crevices, something that has to do with that which is not in its proper place and, hence, unpredictable.

Let us envision for a moment the art system as a plane influenced by certain laws of regularity that, like the laws of nature, come from the inanimate (in the case of art, "the inanimate" would be the art market, certain formal and discursive tendencies, the process of building of a career, and so forth, that is, everything that lies outside the strict sphere of the work). Harte may well have been an outsider in relation to that plane, mostly due to his reluctance to embrace the figure of the artist-producer in vogue at the time, a figure whose work almost always revolved around the idea of the social and the mundane. This personification of Harte as a foreign element within an organism whose behavior is strictly regulated makes sense in relation to the structures forcibly stripped of their inner logical, the parasites and invasive agents, of which we spoke earlier.

He is an eccentric—not a saboteur or a vampire or a rebel—by virtue of silence and friendliness, by virtue of his rejection of conceptualism and compulsive protest, by virtue of his relentless return to the ingenuousness of pulp formalism, by virtue of his constant appeal to the repulsive and to production without agenda. His person produced in Suárez—artist of statements who defined Harte as a "non-native"— the same sense of

unease that his textures and perforations tend to produce in viewers. Of course, we would not venture to claim any of this without providing substantial material backing.

*1 Suárez, Pablo. *Un Outsider en el Museo*. In: *Miguel Harte en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires, 2003.

The eruption of the unforeseen in an established order with regular patterns (which has even meant the inclusion of insects and other biological components in his dioramas) is a resource employed in a good deal of Harte's production.

What produces this repugnance is precisely the "perfection" of the non-natural suddenly rendered organic; the living is a parenthesis in uniformity. The fantastical sheen that, like a skin, covers his creatures suggests an artificial genetics that undergoes deformation until it becomes a living thing. It is not by chance that Harte uses the inorganic material that most strikes the eye as organic, as if he were drawn to the possible existence of a mineral consciousness determined to compose an untranslatable sonnet with marble volutes or to command the eggshells to break out in small blotches to ward off who knows what threat.

Until he had taken full control of the organicity factor by molding bodies, he amused himself exhausting the formal use life of each and every material capable of providing prosaic yet willful imitations of the irregular-vital. It would appear that that quality of surfaces—which is visual, even narrative—is what moved him rather than their ability to further a certain social criticism by means of the kitsch or the domestic materiality popular in the nineties, a much-discussed phenomenon. He loves these surfaces due to their richness in contradiction; though industrial and dead, they can take in and hold a foreign element. They are promising for an outsider because they generate harmonics with the deformity of the natural.

But, if Harte is an outsider, where has he come from and where does he attempt to return to? One hypothetical point of origin may be his early teen years spent in the sierras of Córdoba, years of social and sexual exploration and activity, before the impetuous apparition of politics in the form of the "milicos in Unimog" and the abrupt end of any system of promiscuity due to the outbreak of the HIV /AIDS epidemic. The personal affliction in reaction to adolescence brought to an end by the return to school, re-socialization under external conditions, and the need to find a job was aggravated by a military dictatorship and a sexual state of siege that, like adulthood itself, seemed like dreadful diseases with neither cause nor cure.

Harte seems to have processed the catastrophic end to his experience in Córdoba the same way Lovecraft, in his literature, responded to the experience of the modernity of New York: mainly, by imagining baroque metropolises infested by creatures whose forms exceed human description. First, Harte took shelter in the indisputable nature of satire and then he began sculpting ominous forms and self-penetrating bodies—and impenetrable orifices—that feel no need to expose themselves to the risk of the other or to their own biological disorders.

His ideal body is apolitical, asocial, and perfectly deformed; it is sometimes preserved in a bubble, like Carita Dulce, one of the characters in Angélica Gorodischer's Los embriones del Violeta. Carita Dulce is granted by an intelligent planet the wish to live forever in a cradle-womb where it is cooed to and pampered day and night by a group of intersexual matrons. The works *Rampa mortal* [Mortal Ramp], *Accidente doméstico* [Domestic Accident], *La intrusa* [The Intruder], and *Perdiendo la protección* [Losing Protection] all seem to arise from that realm of paranoia and doom, as if insinuating that contact with unfiltered communal air could cause an organism to disintegrate. If Suárez always chose to lean on the other and Pombo recalls with great passion his friends from G.A.G *(2), Harte hits another stride in his attempts to break out of himself; the tremendous weight of the void in works like *Oscuridad* [Darkness] speaks as much of a will to ward off violent intrusion as it does of the inner struggle between the impulse to keep to oneself and the desire to be out in the open.

Interestingly, though his imaginary is bogged down in a dense air of sexual references, Harte almost never sculpts couples: when he presents more than one figure engaged in an action, he usually presents a great many, and they are tinged by a scatological narrative of final and catastrophic realities à la El Bosco. Sometimes Harte himself is portrayed with the angelic anatomy of the *putti* but the face of an adult man. Calm, alone, and commanding the others, he always seems to have the situation under control, erection guaranteed inside his bubble.

Perhaps the planetarization of sex is his cure for the dilemma of otherness: planetary sex is safe sex, with no oxygen to help along the development of unpredictable microbiologies. Many of his sculptures dwell in the same impersonal and flawless visual register as official pornography and its culture where—like in Harte's work—the sex act does not bear any real risk except for the failed execution of a certain acrobatics. Nonetheless, and even though Harte also rushes to the body as clinical and sterilized image, the sanitized sexuality that has a hold on the contemporary imaginary in, say, the work of Martín Di Girolamo, is not, for Harte, a zone of comfort. Indeed, it is in the planetarization of sex where his work may perhaps begin to resonate as an instrument of criticism and where his attempt to break the barrier of reserve becomes most effective. He re-creates the standardized surfaces of mainstream sex to condemn its stagedness, its flawlessness, and to bring those surfaces back to a more "natural" region of anxiety and defect. He blows up erotic voluptuousness and renders it weighty, but not like a swollen sex organ. This maximization exposes sectors that, though seemingly lubricated and flexible, are in fact hard and dry as a bone, course and hostile to the touch, sectors that it is impossible to invade.

Thanks to their ambiguous points of entry (a sphincter is an ungendered circular muscle) and their retractable tentacular members, Harte's creatures frustrate cultural attempts to master the body and reexamine the exact origin of the image of desire, the source of reference for how sex should be seen and experienced, and how people having it should look.

* (2) Gay Action Group, a collective reflection group pioneered in Argentina, active during the 1980s and dedicated to the vindication of homosexual civil life through small public actions and the publication of publications.

Like nostalgic forms that writhe when they sense the impending end of an era, Harte's sculptures, even though they voice a latent risk and tend towards self-sufficiency, formulate, in the end, the physical form of the individual as an image that cannot hold itself together as a unit, an image that is perforated or in search of natural complements that can only be manifested through experimentation.

Insofar as Harte's basic concern is to expand the gonadic canon, the different physiques and curvatures that appear time and again in his work are akin to the valuable attempts to update the sexual imaginary undertaken by, for instance, Bad Dragon, a small company that tries to create sex toys based on real and mythological creatures like wolf men, dolphins, anthropomorphic dogs, and faucets.

While Harte may not have the speculative spirit of the most delirious science fiction or obsessively pursue rigorous organic representation the way creators like Wayne Douglas Barlowe do, he is most certainly bound to that genre as an aestheticized set of concerns.

"Surface Tension", one of the stories in The Seedling Stars—a collection of short stories by James Blish that form part of that beautiful and passionate body of work known as the Golden Age of science fiction—tells the adventures of a group of human settlers forced to land on a planet that consists entirely of small puddles. Without exploitable natural resources to ensure their survival, the astronauts, in their desperation, realize that each of the puddles is in itself a microscopic ecosystem populated by multiple life forms. In a memorable moment of epic colonialist vision, they decide to readjust their genetic code so that, in the future, their descendents will evolve into a race capable of adapting to the planet's wider biotope and be able to design a vessel capable of withstanding the surface tension of some of the puddles in order to delve into, explore, and conquer those hostile spaces contained in just a few square centimeters.

Though its definitive version was not completed until 1952, Surface Tension was first published in 1942, fifteen years before the launching of Sputnik and eleven years before Francis Crick and James Watson's research into the molecular structure of DNA was made public. Blish inverted the traditional formulation of the conquest of space by rendering it exploration on a subatomic scale (imagine the size of the cells of each of the settlers' mini-humanoid descendent), one tinged by cosmic-imperialist mystique and enthusiasm: the boundlessness of the universe could be boiled down to a puddle of water. The story even foretells a future when genetic engineering would be a way to attack specific contingencies.

Harte's career advanced according to an impulse towards autonomy that might be connected to the reversal of interior/exterior space that Blish envisioned. In one of his

reviews, critic Fabián Lebenglik imagines a similar movement on the basis of the behavior of the embedded elements that gradually break out on the surface of Harte's sculptures: [...] as time goes by, these embedded formations—ever greater in number—gradually become more autonomous until they literally take root: that is, they turn into gigantic plants and roots that, like vegetation from another planet, grow until they hold new embedded formations." *(3)

*(3) Lebenglik, Fabián. *El hombre de la burbuja*. Página/12, Sunday, June 15, 2003

Retracing that idea, we could conclude that that impulse to autonomy is not only manifested in the systematization of detachment that gives rise to new forms and effects a fractual expansion of Harte's sculptural repertoire, but also takes the shape of the work's desire for overall autonomy and for autonomy from its system of exhibition and the social context in which it is produced.

If earth is observed from space, distance becomes insignificant and matter, all matter, becomes evident at once. Matter frozen in time and seen from above appears to have no purpose other than coexistence. Even though Harte has been described as an egg, as a traumatized and frightened outsider, his work entails slow attempts at movement, as if each piece mapped out a daily migration outwards whose ultimate end were that totalizing stellar perspective that can encompass everything.

Harte's operation of distancing is performed systematically: he exhausts material, avoids declarations, moves away from the wall, rejects artwork as artwork, and fantasizes about his work becoming instead nervation, an element that structurally accompanies the space in the form of molding. He does not do all of this to isolate himself in a quadrant of distant loneliness. His encroachment, rather, is constitutive of his relationship to space itself in a coexistence that takes apart the circuit of isolation.

In the context of Harte's most recent show at the time of the writing of this text, he recalled "the first drop of sweat running down my forehead before I was three years old, summers in the river with my cousins, picnics with family amidst tall grasses, my father's friends, [...] the look in my mother's eye, and so forth., [moments] that together gave shape to a very subtle ball made out of everything." This mass of memories effects totalization; in the "ball made out of everything," scenes are joined, infecting one another. In conjunction with this dramatic dimension, then, experience in Harte once again yields nostalgic forms: he does not embrace the idea of utopia as purpose, but rather sets out to use the gallery as the informal setting of his temporal lobes, generally associated with the effort to recall.

In ascending order, his genealogy could include Lucio Fontana's formalization of the vertigo of the pull of interior dimensions; Líbero Badíi's visual decrees on couplings and interconnection; Kosice's spirit of innocent exploratory engineering; Yves Tanguy's collapsing of bodies as formal structures; Otto Piene's protozoic sculptures; Lynda Benglis's merging of genders; Alina Szapocznikow's fleshy extractions.

In descending order, it is harder to say. While it is clear that the pure image to which Harte aspires is outside the social, it could be said to begin in the social and to long to get back to it by means of a circular return. Though he may well be an artist incapable of generating discourse—though we must bear in mind that both Renart and Suárez, his two guiding stars, were artists of the sort that issued manifestos, artists who found it impossible to separate artistic practice from life—Harte does produce disciples of process.

He is the mentor of a variety of sculptors with projects that have received more or less attention from galleries: Dolores Furtado, Martín Osuna, and Santiago Rey, for instance. The Oligatega Numeric collective was the bridge that proved capable of connecting Harte's pulp rhetoric with the project-oriented and multidisciplinary nature of strictly contemporary art.

His legacy, then, entails conveying a way of making that is learned with the hand, not through reading or listening. A lesson more tied to putting on a latex glove than to rules and statement about how to live and be an artist.

Though his work talks about bodies and biologies, the most organic thing about it is how it comes into the world: through a long and gradual process that involves many. Like the gestation of mammals, it may be painful and even intoxicating. If the imagined mechanism of Harte's bodies—the details of their functioning—may lack rigor, that is offset by the artist's willingness to engage in this long process of making, a process both biological and collective .

In the work itself, in the hours spent sanding and inhaling toxins, in sharing the secret of the material, he formulates an utterly convincing solution to the problem of the social as something irretrievable and to the sense of claustrophobia within one's own skin. Work is, for Harte, an attempt to find methods to realign with one's context. For that reason, his friends and assistants are often included in his works as titles in their honor and as material presences, like ailerons that allow the cosmic Harte to touch ground and nail down the poles of his tent. At night under the glimmering Milky Way—which is nothing other than the ceiling of an endless grotto in the burning sand—Miguel Harte, sheltered by space and his friends, can muster the courage to slacken his management of risk: he goes out to hunt creatures and let creatures hunt him.