ALEPH
Pedro Roth’s Incessant Creativity

José Sanjinés

A new show by Pedro Roth is always an event.

I called him on Skype to Buenos Aires to talk about ALEPH, the show installed in Point of Contact Gallery. The conversation took us on many paths and covered many subjects. The truth is that it was Pedro who did most of the talking. I participated now and then, admiring the display of knowledge of one of the great Argentine artists.

Pedro Roth is gifted with a keen curiosity and an extraordinary capacity to establish correspondences between seemingly disparate subjects. His art is a reflection of his restlessly creative intelligence.

ALEPH is named after the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a consonant really, alef, the divine passage. Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of the Kabbalah, writes that this silent letter (it acquires meaning only when accompanied by a vowel) is the “beginning of all language and expression.”

But it was the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges who would popularize this quiet letter in world literature. In one of his most famous stories, “The Aleph,” a pompous writer, Carlos Argentino Daneri, finds an Aleph in the basement of his house and shows it to Borges. ¿An Aleph in a basement? Yes, an Aleph, a little luminous sphere where one is able to see, simultaneously, all that the cosmos contains.

On the back part of the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realized that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph’s diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror’s face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe.

But how can one express the experience of absolute knowledge — to have seen everything instantaneously? Borges makes use of an ancient rhetorical device studied by Leo Spitzer, that of chaotic enumeration (which, in fact, is not at all chaotic because every selection is determined by subtle correspondences). This is how Borges attempts to express the infinite, simultaneous experience of witnessing the Aleph:

I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw the multitudes of America; I saw a silvery cobweb in the center of a black pyramid; I saw a splintered labyrinth (it was London); I saw, close up, unending eyes watching themselves in me as in a mirror; I saw all the mirrors on earth and none of them reflected me; […] I saw the coupling of love and the modification of death; […] and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon — the unimaginable universe.
When Scholem writes that *aleph* is “the beginning of every language and expression,” he reminds us that verbal language is only one among many systems of expression, of signification. In response to Borges’ verbal Aleph, Pedro Roth builds a painted Aleph, which dialogues with all the connotations of the written one and generates many more in an explosion of color and meaning. Roth’s ALEPH is a model of infinite creativity, of the freedom of imagination, and of its secret compass.

I asked Roth to talk to me about the concept behind ALEPH.

Pedro Roth: The idea was to build a universe made up of 500 images, which I painted on paper napkins of all the cafés in Buenos Aires — to generate a work that means whatever you want it to mean with all the images that conform it. It was first shown in the Jewish Museum of Buenos Aires as part of an event in honor of Borges. I called it the Buenos Aires Aleph (el Aleph Porteño), an Aleph of the Buenos Aires cafés. It is the central part of the show installed in *Point of Contact Gallery*, but ALEPH is much larger, more complex, because it incorporates many other works on paper, works laden with different meanings.

José Sanjinés: A difference between your Aleph and Borges’ Aleph is that to “see” the one written by Borges one has to sit down and read, while to “read” yours (I say “read” because it has its own syntax), one has to move around the gallery. Immobility is, in fact, a theme in “The Aleph.” Borges, the character, has to be immobile to witness the dizzying spectacle in the incandescent sphere.

**PR:** The viewer is the reference. For a spectacle to happen the viewer has to be motionless, seated in the theater, in the auditorium, in the cinema. But since works of art are motionless, to see them in a museum one has to move about, particularly with sculpture. That is why Borges had to be motionless to appreciate the Aleph.

**JS:** When I met you, you were sitting in the Florida Garden. You were working with color markers on a piece that was part of series in an accordion book. A portable paradise you could slide in your pocket and continue to work wherever you went. Now that I think about it, every time I saw you in a café you were always working on your visual art, while at the same time conducting conversations with artists and friends. Ideas about art and social concerns seemed to gather people around your table.

There is a scene in the film *La ballena va llena (The Whale Goes Full)* that benefits from your nonstop creativity to make a point that’s both serious and humorous. It takes place in a café. A character in the film gets annoyed with the project to build a ship in which refugees would be transformed into works of art so that they could gain admission to the safety of museums in Europe and the United States. That rather reactionary character is angry because you don’t stop drawing: “Can I ask you a favor Pedro,” he says, “could you stop drawing a little and pay attention to what we are talking?” “I’m listening,” you respond, still looking down at the piece on which you are working.

You have worked in many media. This time your painted napkins point to the world of the cafés …

**PR:** For me, the cafés are a very important part of my life. They are a place to communicate with others, a place where one waits to find someone, but doesn’t really know
who he is going to find. The napkins are emblems where I link my drawing with all these places and people; they are like links in a chain. I called it the Buenos Aires Aleph because in a way every café is an Aleph, and to fill a wall with all those napkins is a way of transforming the cafés in Buenos Aires into a great space. It’s their representation.

JS: The ALEPH in Point of Contact exhibits the 500 napkins, as well as 300 other of your works on paper, a framed series that belongs to the gallery’s permanent collection, and a livre d’artiste you did with Pedro Cuperman, La mujer del río (The Woman of the River).

As in cinema, the principal, the most recurrent sign in this constellation of more than 800 pieces is the representation of the human face. When I was walking through the streets of Saint Petersburg this summer, seeing so many and so different faces go past me, I felt that all the glances were a single glance, that all the faces were a single face. I feel something similar when I transit with my sight the images in your ALEPH.

PR: In Hebrew there is no singular form for the word “face”. “Panim” — due to its gesturality, “face” is always in the plural. One connects with someone else’s curiosity. Absent faces produce absence.

JS: Hands, too, are often present in your ALEPH. Hands, as Pedro Cuperman wrote, “with extended fingers that point at nothing, that is, they don’t carry any symbolic load, they simply stand for what is seen, simply.” But your hands, elongated and mythical, skillful and extraordinary, are also indexes of what they do, signs of certain forms of work.

PR: My hands are signs of resistance. In this world where almost nothing is done with the hands, to oppose the disappearance of manual skills is linked to the representation of what I draw. To realize that, at the end, the most complex of tools does not replace the one who uses it. Hands are the connection.

JS: In one of the gallery’s walls we read a text that seems to be a commentary on the phenomenon of screens. Luminescent computerized devices appear to be taking over the world; they are in our houses, we carry them in our pockets. This, in part, is what you write:

Before we were the Aleph, now we are transporters of the Aleph.
We become dependent, enslaved by this invention.
We trust in our memory to it, our knowledge. We fear something may happen to it.
We talk about viruses in our systems, something that is out there, which may contaminate us.

PR: I say that in “The Aleph” Borges invented the internet — but he stayed in the library. At the end of the story, Borges destroys the Aleph, much like rabbi Loew destroys the Golem.

JS: To have access to infinite knowledge doesn’t mean that you can make something beautiful with it. In “The Aleph,” Carlos Argentino uses it to try to write a meandering and pretentious opus magnum, which Borges despises.

PR: All that character could do was to make lists and descriptions. He wasn’t prepared. He represents so many people.
JS: There are a few visible words written amidst the images in your ALEPH. One of them spells the name of Estela Canto, a woman closely related to Borges’ life and work. She is, in particular, linked to an autobiographical aspect of “The Aleph” that Borges considered very important.

PR: Estela Canto was Borges’ lover. But she got together with him not because… how can I put it? As a Hungarian friend told me when I was coming here on the boat, “young man, stick with people of gold, at least you’ll end up golden.” You see? So Borges writes “El Aleph”, which is the most marketable, sparkling, and wonderful thing he did in all his literature and he dedicates it to Estela Canto. But in it, he confesses his love for another woman (Beatriz, in the story). He offers the manuscript as a gift to Estela and asks her to please type it up for him.

JS: Canto would later auction the manuscript at Sotheby’s and sell it for thirty thousand dollars to Spain’s National Library, in Madrid, where it must be resting in a basement. An unseen Aleph.

PR: And well, after Borges’ death Estela Canto takes revenge and writes a book in which she says that Borges was little less than impotent.

JS: What you just told me is an important contribution not only to the meanings sparked by your ALEPH, but also to the criticism surrounding one of the most studied and discussed texts by Borges. And this contribution is a fruit of your friendship with Borges, whom you often visited in his house. In fact, you were a friend of many of the great Argentine artists and writers: Xul Solar, Biyo Casares, Antonio Berni, Federico Peralta Ramos …

PR: I had the privilege to know and to be close to almost all the most important people of my time in Argentina, from the sixties to today. My work gave me the opportunity to achieve that. I think I was a gear and a witness of the cultural scene of Buenos Aires. The number of people with whom I related is endless; it’s impossible to go over the list because there is always someone I’m going to forget. I moved along them looking and listening, and I listened. I built myself with all those bricks. It’s a world — the world of Buenos Aires culture.

JS: Talking about friendships, your show is dedicated to Pedro Cuperman, with whom you collaborated many times. In fact, images of two of your collaborative works of verbal and visual art are part of the exhibition: La mujer del río and Storytelling. In the latter, the two of you constructed a story in which to tell is to show and to show is to tell.

PR: Pedro and I were twins. We basically had nothing to explain to each other as we worked. There were only endless conversations, which resulted in works. I was like a door to help carry forward that work/conversation and to shed some light on his work as well. This is how we carried on our friendship, doing.

JS: There’s no vacation from a vocation.