

Perspectiva Manrique



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FUNDACIÓN

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For a Pedagogy of Beauty and the Landscape: César Manrique

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César Manrique returns at the right time, his centenary takes place precisely as sensibilities are awakening to the alarms of this new century and we are faced with the dark night of climate change, neoliberal excess, and the decline of the island tourist model; precisely the foci that motivated his advanced environmental activism and his precious proposal of bringing together art and nature. The ignorance of his visionary and pioneering figure in the Archipelago is disappointing, and can be seen tremendously in the scarce knowledge of his exceptional character by our youth, including university students. On the contrary, the empathy, curiosity, and wonder with which they respond to César Manrique as soon as they have the opportunity to learn about him and delve into his proposals and thought is also bright and stimulating. It seems to me that we have ignored a comprehensive education that would incorporate important references of island culture, those who have been able to explain our circumstances, putting it in tune with global culture,

and elevating our level of sensibility and commitment to the space in which we live. In the midst of the standardizing maelstrom being raised by contemporary mass culture, technological fundamentalism, globalized prejudices that intensify the dangerous disjunction between the particular and the universal, as well as the accelerated dismissal of humanistic knowledge, the voices that remind us that we have a deep connection to the space and that insist on the value of beauty, art, education, critical thinking, poetry, are crucial in these times. Valuing a pedagogy of beauty and the landscape seems essential in the urgent task of raising awareness, which is the first step to putting into practice an ethics of care and protection of the planet.

With enormous clairvoyance, César, in his time, perceived what others do not see: the poetry of the island, its plasticity, its metaphysical beauty, its artistic quality, a vision that in itself was already a challenge to the image projected by Lanzarote in the collective imaginary. Only four years after the artist's birth, Canary Islands intellectual Domingo Dorest *Fray Lesco* would open his chronicle of a trip to Lanzarote with the following phrase: "Except for necessity or convenience, I think that there are few who would go to Lanzarote without a reason" (*Por Lanzarote. Viaje entretenido*, 1923). Manrique himself would endorse this marginal character:

Nobody knew about the island of Lanzarote and within the Canary Islands, Lanzarote was like Cinderella. [...] People would laugh saying that there nothing except for camels and rocks on Lanzarote, and that it was the ugliest daughter of the whole archipelago.

Taro. El eco de Manrique, 2012

In those circumstances, an act of faith and persevering commitment were needed to change the narrative, elements that César had at his disposal and that he provided to the island with a beautiful and natural pedagogy:

I, however, was aware that Lanzarote was an exceptional island with a visual beauty that people did not understand. That is why I wanted to return and highlight [...] so that people would realize the island's great visual and beautiful power. And I have been able to do so. People have been able to understand perfectly the enormous beauty of a stone, of a prickly pear, even the beauty of a camel. Or the beauty of a farmer ploughing the land, or of its popular architecture that was looked down upon and totally misunderstood when people believed that it was old, ugly, and anti-functional.

Taro. El eco de Manrique, 2012

The celebrated public spaces conceived by César respond to this pedagogical script. He believed he could spread art in a more comprehensive and didactic sense, incorporating painting, sculpture, and gardening to the natural spaces in which he intervened, with clear results: "I have verified the educational success of the numerous visitors to these suggestive places, which I have called: Art-Nature/Nature-Art symbiosis" (*La palabra encendida*, 2005). Indeed, in the trips that he took every weekend with José Ramírez – then president of the Council – Jesús Soto, and Luis Morales, to identify possible spaces of intervention and design future projects, his companions were fascinated by César's enthusiastic explanations about the richness of popular architecture, the beauty of its volumes, and the profound beauty of its humility. It is this desire to make an inventory that would serve as a reference for builders, peasants, or architects, which would lead him to work on the book *Lanzarote. Arquitectura inédita* (1974), a photographic

testimony of the island's popular architecture that brings together "to start from a truth, to look for the essential roots of its style", to value a heritage that is not only material, but also symbolic. Thus, he accompanies the photographs, which are interesting in themselves, with personal inspiring and poetic texts. He extensively cites the artist who preceded him the task of "artialising" the island: Agustín Espinosa, the brilliant avant-garde writer who, in 1929, published *Lancelot 28º-7º (Guía integral de una isla atlántica)*, where he found in its pages, as he puts it, "a clean vision of the island about which, having so many things to say, still almost nothing has been said (*La Gaceta Literaria*, 1929). The intensely lyrical, original, and creative book indicated the path toward the creation of a "guiding mythology", a conversion of the territory into a landscape through artistic arbitrage, or, in Alain Roger's work, a "metamorphosis, a metaphysics, understood in the dynamic sense [...] Art is the true mediator [...] The historical and cultural perception, of all our landscapes [...] operates according to what I call, taking a word from Montaigne, an 'artialisation' (*Breve tratado del paisaje*, 1997). Manrique picks up the baton from Agustín Espinosa and materializes his "guiding mythology", giving it substance in his work as a whole, infecting his country people with the simplest and most intense pedagogical tool: teaching them to see. He understands that "knowing how to see and not to look is the key to knowledge" (*Escrito en el fuego*, 1988), that the salvation of Lanzarote is not possible without awareness and that it must awaken in the citizenry as a whole, to whom César would instruct in beauty.

The didactic task that he undertakes, from the very root of the people to its governors, teaching all of them that Lanzarote's raw and primitive geology is actually a powerful, attractive scene, a landscape with personality, is, undoubtedly, epic and moving. And it exciting to listen to the testimony of those who were touched by Manrique's passionate teaching. Santiago

Hernández, the master welder who worked for the artist in his *Juguetes del viento*, recognized him directly as "a genius. The little I know, I owe it all to him" (*Taro. El eco de Manrique*, 2012). Luis Morales, who was in charge of works at the Cabildo, talks about the construction of Los Jameos:

When we got here, César said that this would be the best in the world, that there was nothing like it. At least I said, "This man is exaggerating too much, isn't he?" [...] We learned to sensitize ourselves to the idea of him. We also become sensitive of the landscape. César explained so much... well, we learned a little about being artist builders. When César saw that someone building a house that he did not like, that was being newly built, he would go and talk to those who were doing it and he encouraged them and would say: "You are the ones who have made Lanzarote unique in the world, the souks of fig trees, dry stone walls, he talked to them about how to plant with onions lined up, as if everything were so decorative". [...] He often said to me: "Luis, the highways have to be as if you took out a rug and spread it over the landscape. Careful with the borders, clean them, camouflage what the machine damages so that the highway remains with the environment". And we were able to make it look like, the lava flow stopped at the highway [...] In my opinion, César was a person who was in love with his land and he made us be as well. The thing is, he could see them, and we still could not. And what I most liked about César was that I learned to see what I could not see.

Taro. El eco de Manrique, 2012

It is not surprising that faith in education would be prioritized in Manrique's existential journey and he militantly accentuates this idea when Lanzarote is handed over to urban speculation and he gives himself over to ecological public activism. In the face of the proliferation of massive constructions "without the slightest responsibility to style [...] with a standard, vulgar, international architecture", César sows from below. Through his talks in

educational centres, he invites students to "acquire greater sensibility [...] that is very important in youth, since one of the things that generally is not taught tends to be sensibility" (Taro. *El eco de Manrique*, 2012). Putting into practice, with magnificent coherence, the recommendation of the collective task of the artist, that, in his opinion, should be to apply their talent to life and to save the environment that we inhabit, Manrique finds the thread of meaning in his personal and artistic trajectory and assumes his destiny: "Because of all the things that I have started to understand" he says, "I have been destined to work for beauty".

For a long time, the teaching of the artist from Lanzarote managed to penetrate very deeply in the island, granting it unprecedented international prestige. The miracle had been wrought in the moor, the artistic rain raged in the desert, and its visitors, among them a multitude of illustrious personalities, could not escape the seduction exercised by its apparently stark surface. In the badlands, of tormented and violent beauty, an irresistible and suggestive lyric sprouted. Later, it is true, we forgot the lesson and turned our backs on beauty. César's death, almost three decades ago, also ended up burying a project that urgently needs to be updated today to reconnect ourselves with nature, with the deep material and symbolic meaning of lived space, learning to see and educating our eyes and consciousness to sensitively appreciate the beautiful, the authentic, the artistic. Everything indicates that major changes and turbulence are coming on the planet and the teaching of the one who gave Lanzarote a future, reputation, and dignity, creating a symbiosis between art and life, can indicate routes and resignify our path. Albert Camus already said it one of his most relevant books, "Beauty, no doubt, does not make revolutions. But a day will come when revolutions will have need of beauty" (*The Rebel*, 1951).