

Beyond Latin America,

The Perpetual Quest

for Specificity

GABRIEL KURI in conversation with CHRIS SHARP



sorted, resorted installation view at WIELS-Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2019. Courtesy: the artist; Sadie Coles HQ, London; kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Galleria Franco Noero, Turin; WIELS-Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels. Photo: © Andrea Rossetti

I first came across the work of GABRIEL KURI during the 5th Berlin Biennale in 2008. The work's dry, humorous, and practical application of Minimalism intrigued me. Since I moved to Mexico City in 2012, we have entered into an intermittent exchange about art history, in particular sculpture, whenever we find ourselves in the same town. The extent of his knowledge and awareness of Western as well as Latin American art history never ceases to surprise me. I rarely walk away from a conversation with him without learning something. Additionally, his survey *sorted, resorted* at WIELS, Brussels (September 2019–January 2020) makes it clear that his work is more relevant than ever, obviously influential for a whole host of artists working today.



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thermal optimization (radial rendering) (detail), 2018, Gabriel Kuri: *spending static to save gas* installation view at Oakville Galleries, Oakville, 2018-2019.
Courtesy: Oakville Galleries, Oakville. Photo: Jimmy Limit



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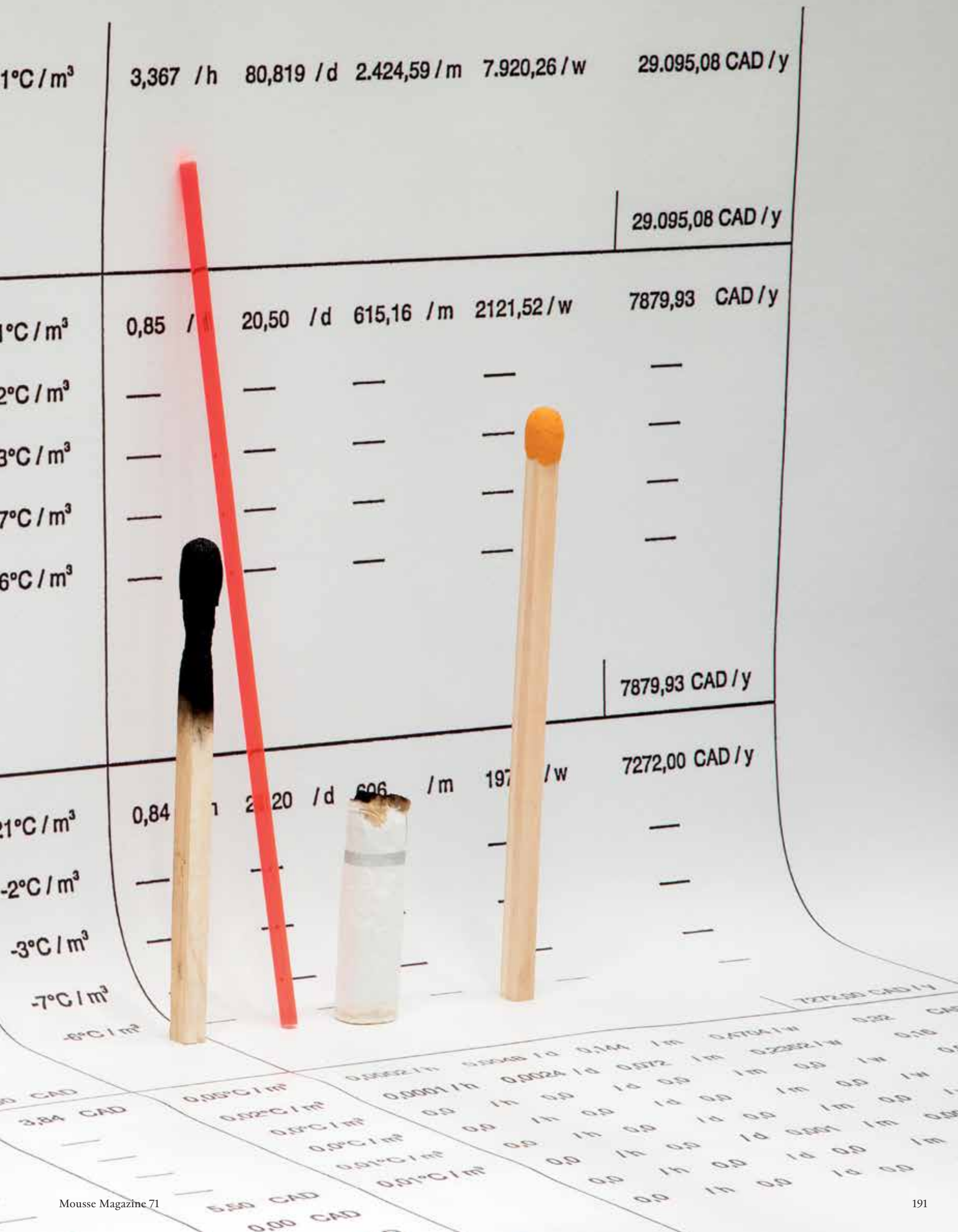
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1	2,512	5	2,103	5,282	m ²	—	0,00 CAD
1	2,411	5	2,997	7,225	m ²	—	0,00 CAD
1	2,952	5	2,438	7,196	m ²	—	0,00 CAD
1	1,645	5	2,997	4,93	m ²	—	0,00 CAD

thermal optimization (with error bars) (detail), 2018, Gabriel Kuri: spending static to save gas installation view at Oakville Galleries, Oakville, 2018-2019.

Courtesy: Oakville Galleries, Oakville. Photo: Jimmy Limit



CHRIS SHARP

After spending some time in your recent survey at WIELS in Brussels, I realized something very special about your work, and that is its peculiar “Latin Americanness”—a point of apparent contention in your practice—and how it is so. Apparently, what you produce has been taken to task for not being “Latin American” enough (whatever that means). But I would disagree. I think your work is very Latin American, perhaps just not in the way that people expect. It is so in the way that Jorge Luis Borges or Roberto Bolaño are Latin American, by which I mean that the work of both writers contains an all but encyclopedic frame of reference with regard to (world) literature. Your work is marked by a similarly encyclopedic frame of reference, but with regard to art, or, more specifically, postwar European and American sculpture. Without being merely citational, what you make is self-consciously embedded in, and aware of, a very specific network of references. The question is, why or how is this Latin American? Is it about creating context and tradition? Or is it so on a case-by-case basis?

GABRIEL KURI

I take this as an observation, a welcome one, rather than a question. I would begin by agreeing that there is a way in which works of art can feel Latin American without having the immediacy of a certain narrative, aesthetics, or thematic. It should not have to be a question of the aesthetics of the explicitly political, for instance. Latin American art can be rooted, as you point out, in a way that the work is conceived, contextualized, and pitched. It may be a frame of mind, a place for oneself beyond the dependence on direct reference to conventional cultural specificities. I appreciate that you do not find my work citational, because it is not. I would hope that my work looks and comes across as Latin American in some way; it would only make sense if it did, although I have developed a lot of my most satisfying work outside of Mexico. I came of age on the threshold of globalization; I feel distinctively privileged to have substantially experienced life in Mexico before the embrace of connectivity that came with globalization and the internet, and I saw what this new potential started to do to questions of identity or its appearance. In my formative years, we were constantly discussing our concern with the limiting effect of the exoticizing gaze coming from abroad, but I don't think it is any easier for the younger generations to begin by operating in a field that is seemingly so leveled and connected, where everything seems to be possible, and so promptly. Difference, specificity, and exception—never mind appetite and desire—have a harder time brewing in a leveled terrain.

CHRIS

This is very interesting, because I see your work, with its penchant for standardized formats and streamlined, industrially produced objects, as prototypical for a lot of art that was made in the last decade, what with its fetishization of nonspecific corporate aesthetic and industrialized modes of production. What you make is explicitly embedded in the history of Minimalism and the history of the readymade, while I feel like a lot of the younger generation you mention reject or maybe dismiss these histories altogether. Whatever

the case may be, the specificity in your work is not so obvious but is even, at times, almost surreptitious. Can you talk about the tension between the specific (or maybe the particular) and the general that seems to run through so much of your work?

GABRIEL

I am glad you mention the standardization implied in the conception of the object from the Minimalist perspective and, along the way, back to the historic readymade. I don't want to sound reiterative, but while my work is not citational—as you rightly pointed out earlier—I am routinely drawn back to something in the readymade and how its canon runs through Minimalism, and that is this notion of the given. The fact that one could think of a purposeful, functional, industrially produced object as something that is just there, like a given object, circumstance, event... like a point of departure, with the intuitive simplicity of a primary color or a simple shape like a cylinder. Not something that was necessarily—arbitrarily—fabricated, but something that has always just been there. I often find myself in this point of departure, or rather striving for the specificity of it. It is probably in alignment with the legacy of the readymade or the specific Minimalist object. I don't believe in the need to create fantastical or improbable scenarios. It is also in familiarity that I expect my work to resonate in its (always intentional) social commentary. Whereas I never intend to speak for anyone else's experience—my work only ever speaks in the first-person singular—I would certainly hope that it provides the spectator with the direct familiarity, or on a good day, that specificity. If there is anything I am out there for, it is to convey meaning, and this is a constant quest for specificity.

CHRIS

The way you talk about the given and the specific touches upon a kind of universality. As if these universal forms were somehow relatable from a specific perspective—which, in many ways, is a direct contravention of historical Minimalism. All that said, there is a fair amount of narrative specificity in what you produce. I am thinking, in particular, of your woven receipts, as well as, say, other ticket stubs that feature in other sculptures. There is a sense of having consumed, which brings to mind the memento mori, but without any pathos. Can you talk a bit about these narrative instances in your work and the sense of expenditure that tends to accompany so many of them?

GABRIEL

Let's take the woven receipts, for a start. Although they always come from instances of consumption that I have personally carried out—and thus could be seen as entries in an administrative narrative of mine, or some form of self-portraiture—the receipts, the actual physical sources for the enlargements, are in fact printed by a machine. And they are printed in a way that is indifferent to the specificity of my consumption. The receipts or vouchers I choose to make into tapestries are neither signed by my hand nor manually altered by anyone after they come out of the machine. Subsequently, their enlargements are conveyed by hand, knot by knot, in a motion that I do not cease to think of as in a man-machine-man loop.

If we take those other bits of specific narrative—or testimonies of my passage through life—although I would

always own up to the fact that the stubs and tickets have been employed or spent by me, I do intend them not to carry that pathos, as you rightly observe. I would rather conceive of these as a form of affirmation. I am drawn toward their potential to bounce back with new life and meaning. Not in the having been spent, or lost, or no longer being, or that I or we may no longer be. In fact, seeing a number of these slightly older works again that involve used stubs or spent tickets, as I was laying them out for the exhibition, made me feel no sense of the past being foreign or gone... they felt completely in the present tense to me. That said, the narrative or information may never be completely dissociated from the material, from the physical. There is also tactile memory, that physical memory of holding a piece of paper, of folding it or sticking it into a crevice, or finding it as you run your fingers through the lining of your suitcase. This is also a direct memory, a physical narrative that is just as significant as the document or testimony.

CHRIS

Curiously, what you describe as the affirmative second life of these testimonies of expenditure brings to mind Proust's madeleine, or *memoire involuntaire*. For Proust, these forms of memory are less about loss than they are about recovery, even a form of completion (coming full circle). I would have never expected to find a parallel to this mode of affirmation embedded in a post-Minimal sculptural practice. I am interested in your insistence on procedure, so to speak, and the eschewal of the hand or facture in your work. This points to yet another contradiction in your practice with regard to Minimalism (which shared this insistence) and post-Minimalism (which rejected it). Can you say a few words about your motivations for this insistence?

GABRIEL

Well, I am a maker. Let's say I am a maker as opposed to just a strategist. I am happy to seek my discursive language within form. I don't believe that form can be subordinate only to a higher discourse. Discourse happens while wrestling with form: making is formulating, making is thinking. That said, I most often meditate as long and as deep as I can on a certain form and try to keep the crucial process of execution as concise as possible. There is only one right way to formally resolve each artwork, and my practice directly aspires to achieve that instance of precision. I believe the more precise forms are, the more effortless they should appear.

CHRIS

I could not agree more. I have always believed in—and been drawn to—practices that think plastically, in which form is not secondary to content but is actually the motor behind it. I find it really refreshing to hear you say this, especially since I see your work as, if not important to, then certainly transitional to a whole generation of younger artists who are dealing with corporate readymade culture and who are ultimately less interested in form than in the semiotic function of that culture and its materials. I can't help but feel that something is getting lost along the way. (I mean, even the Neo-Geo artists were great lovers of form. Look at somebody like Haim Steinbach—a great formalist.) Whatever the case may be, maybe we are just classicists, but I don't think so...

GABRIEL

There has always been the anxiety that the younger generations are becoming increasingly removed from the source. I believe this is not a new feeling; it has been the case for hundreds of years. The feeling that the shortcuts are only getting—exponentially—shorter is, of course, concerning. I think that while we artists may have a hard time controlling the means of distribution, we can still work to retain the grip over the means of production.

GABRIEL KURI (b. 1970, Mexico City) received his BA in visual arts at Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (UNAM) in Mexico City. In 1995 he completed his MFA at Goldsmiths, University of London. His solo exhibitions include *spending static to save gas* (2018), the Oakville Gallery, Toronto, and the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2018-2019); *sorted, resorted*, WIELS-Contemporary Art Center, Brussels (2019-2020); *Product Testing Unit*, Alte Fabrik, Rapperswil-Jona, Switzerland (2016); *Gabriel Kuri: with personal thanks to their contractual thingness*, Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2015); *Gabriel Kuri*, Bergen Kunsthall, Norway (2012); and *Nobody Needs to Know the Price of Your Saab*, ICA-Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2011), among others.

CHRIS SHARP is a writer and curator based in Mexico City, where he runs the project space Lulu. He is currently preparing *The Imaginary Sea*, at the Fondation Carmignac, on the island of Porquerolles, France.