

# CONFESSING WHAT?



The title of this exhibition makes reference to a payphone, but the only payphone evident in Claudia Cuesta's installation is the one that resonates in the mind. In the context of making a confession, a payphone signals the moment of slipping a quarter into the slot for a last desperate chance to make contact, to call home, to say what has to be said in the anonymity of a public space that could be anywhere, a space where one is not recognized, and where one cannot be detected.

Confession is, of course, a ritual institutionalized in Catholicism. Cuesta's allusion to it in the installation *Confession [from a payphone]* undoubtedly relates to having been raised in the Roman Catholic stronghold of

Colombia where doctrines of Christianity are deeply embedded in everyday conduct. In countries where religion plays a central role in how society functions, the scope of individual choice is often compromised within the norms of theistic canons. But the practice of confession – speaking of one's sin, expressing repentance, asking for forgiveness – reaches far beyond the specifics of the Catholic faith and permeates western culture, a culture ridden with guilt. Guilt is so ingrained in society's collective psyche that any question as to why it exists in the first place is rarely a topic of public discussion. The preservation of guilt and confession within the social order serves to keep some degree of control on

transgressive desires, and attempts to uphold the stability of an ethical and moral society.

In *Confession* [from a payphone] Cuesta uses death as a point of reference to exemplify a moment when confession is deemed most urgent. It is not unlike the metaphor of running to a payphone to call God to admit that, yes, we are bad, and yes, we are guilty, and yes, maybe, if we confess before leaving this world, we might somehow be saved. Saved from what? We do not know what awaits us in the passage from life to death; if afterlife exists, it is a mystery that continues to elude science and logic. We can only hope there is something. Organized religion around the globe encourages such hope, but

nothing is guaranteed, even with confession. In spite of society's attempts to prepare us for death, it remains the ultimate unknown confronting us throughout our lives because it is, after all, the end, as we know it. Confession may provide the means of making the prospect of death more tolerable – of coming to terms with one's actions in life, in effectively alleviating guilt, even momentarily – but in no way has it abated the level of greed and brutality that has historically pervaded society.

In this installation, Cuesta has created an environment that is highly physical, even sensual, which simultaneously conveys the silent, spare and cold environment of a crypt. It is a contemplative atmosphere suspended between the living and the dead, between the

here and there. The viewer is conceptually placed in that in-between. One enters this crypt-like space via a towering, oily-black steel door that is ominously titled *the gate of hell*. This door is daunting in scale – our bodies shrink by comparison – but it swings open with a lightness and grace that welcomes our entry. Once inside the room, the feeling is oddly comforting, despite the solemn lighting and the centrally placed coffin-shaped steel box, a box that brings our bodies back to scale and acts as a concise icon of death. A sense of quiet is disorienting, yet it is not quiet. A low, rasping, metallic breathing sound permeates the whole space. It is difficult at first to determine exactly from where this sound

emanates, but it is coming from within the coffin. "Death" is clearly there, in the box, but it is not really dead. Cuesta titles this box *am I dead alive, am I alive dead*. Alluding to the precariousness of our existence, it is physically and psychologically at the core of the installation. Its simplicity of form belies the complexity of what it represents, and its title does not discount states of consciousness, even within the idea of afterlife, that are beyond what we know or accept.

Placed on the walls of this room are five other steel boxes, each two and a half feet square and six inches deep. Each box is altered by the addition of objects or by the encasement of various materials: *chastity/martyr* is intersected by an intensely

coloured red zipper; *death insurance* encases Catholic wafers within a cross-shaped opening; *witness* has two holes pried into the surface revealing two staring eyeballs within; *human remains* holds a small accumulation of human ashes; and *the spirit of god* has a copper tube extruding from it which emits a small flame. Outside the room, another box, *imperfect halo*, contains a glowing halo enclosed behind blue glass. Its title harbours a contradiction that does not bode well when contemplating confession: that what we are conditioned to accept as perfect might not always be so.

Together, the congregation of all these components – the door, the coffin, the zipper, the ashes etc. – forms a collection of symbols. They are familiar

symbols that are entwined in the social structures and fabrication of myths that organize our desires and fears, and thus our perceptions and sense of identity. What lies behind the zipper and what are our intentions in any inclination to unzip it? What do we really become when we are transformed into ashes? Do we have a soul after all that flesh and blood is reduced to crusty blackened vestiges? Just how do the wafers offer insurance of salvation? Do they assist one in facing death? These fundamental questions emphasize our fear of the unknown. However, Cuesta's intention is not to instill fear or guilt, but to ask from where it originates, to potentially transform our socially conditioned responses to it, and to encourage one to move beyond it.

Steel is the unifying material for *Confession (from a payphone)* and acts as its framing device. As a material, steel signifies strength and immovability, perhaps a parallel for the social structures that Cuesta considers so rigid and so difficult to divest. Indeed, she has presented an environment that is visually structured, yet it is, at the same time, ambiguous. The seriality of the wall pieces and the complementary forms of the coffin and door, all surfaced in steel, create a visual harmony. This seemingly integrated environment, spare in its design, is disrupted by the symbols embedded and attached to the works on the wall. These symbols do not comprise a narrative but function as singular emblems laced with potent social codes.

Their meaning within this context is neither precise nor directed, but open to various readings that are determined by the viewer's own experience of them.

Material and form make content evident. The clean geometric forms that comprise Cuesta's work seem to be aligned with a minimalist aesthetic, and she was likely exposed to the tenets of Minimalism during her training in England at the Slade School of Art. Historically, Minimalism as a practice had a conceptual agenda focused on the independence of material and form rather than their associative properties. While retaining an economy of form, artists working with a minimalist language today, Cuesta among them, are often

more interested in the latter, where both materials and form function as loaded signifiers with a variety of relationships to our understanding of the contemporary world.

Irony and contradiction also function as vehicles to aid in the broader understanding of often serious issues. At times operating in tandem with humour, irony provides a means of breaking habits of perception, of accommodating critical perspectives, and even of subverting the sanctified. In this installation the title *chastity/martyr* suggests purity and virtue, but the colour of the zipper could be that of a sleazy party dress, and even if it could be unzipped, the sheer inflexibility of the steel would not reveal what lies behind. The eyes in *witness* are not

really focused on anything, so why do we feel we are being watched and what do we have to hide? *The spirit of god*, of authority, exposes its copper tubing like a feeble phallic erection and its eternally burning flame coming from some mysterious source, could be extinguished with a small puff of air. The coffin, for all its signification of the finality of death, is but a clean sculptural object. Even the idea of a payphone is ironic; it is so completely mundane while at the same time mimicking the private and reverent space of a confession booth in church.

Claudia Cuesta's work is not a didactic critique of the systems and structures that so often determine our lives and actions. Instead, she provokes questions about how these systems and structures limit

our potential for experience and the true expression of our individuality. It is accepted that our social and cultural systems in large part govern our sense of self and identity, but Cuesta is seeking deliverance from this order to explore where the self might truly exist. The utopian place for this to occur in society might be found in anarchy (or what Cuesta has referred to, in a more universal sense, as chaos). Anarchy is anathema to those desiring a society where established structures are to lead to an imagined harmony. This harmony has never been achieved, and it does not appear as though it will be in the foreseeable future. Anarchy in its pure form can be benevolent; central to it is the belief that individuals are

good, and that they are corrupted by the artificial institutions of government and bureaucracy. By trial and error, individuals will create order that best determines what will be of mutual benefit for all. This philosophy is opposed to other beliefs that declare us as inherently evil and needing to demonstrate that we are otherwise. However, anarchy has not proven to be workable either, and Cuesta is not trying to convince us of one system over another, but rather, proposes a reading of her artwork that will hopefully lead to introspection and questioning on the part of the viewer. The confession, finally, might be that we do not know the answers, and that this conundrum can be liberating.

*Keith Wallace*