

## **The Smiles of Clay: The Eco-Poetics of Agua, Sol y Sereno**

Pedro Reina

Agua, Sol y Sereno (Water, Sun, and Dew), the Puerto Rican art collective founded by Pedro Adorno and Cathy Vigo in 1993, is celebrating its 28th year of multidisciplinary work with a wide-ranging exhibition that takes us down paths of creativity and memory that allows us, with them, to interpret their career. Present since their very beginnings in many of the island's social scenarios, offering aesthetic answers to the constant collective challenges we face, the group has sowed handfuls of seeds in the streets, which today have become a leafy forest of floating trees growing everywhere and incorporating marks of joy, denunciation, and imagination.

Using every sort of performative strategy imaginable — music, movement, drawing, and painting — Agua, Sol y Sereno ventures out time after time to invite us to a banquet for the senses, in their passage lifting up the entire cultural pantheon in a repeated celebration of life and history. We all walk with them in this community procession. Mounted on stilts, wearing wonderful costumes, and accompanying the parade of heroes and heroines symbolized in papier-maché “big heads,” they hark back to and remind us of our origins, and we celebrate life in a sacred rite that takes place under the open sky, fearlessly, intentionally.

This exhibit is structured as a tour that presents and contextualizes fundamental elements of the group's work, in categories such as Afro-Caribbean, urban-sound, carnival, and memory, among many others. Each section highlights the communitarian element of each work, the spirit of collaboration that characterizes each aesthetic production, and the dramatic breath that gave life to each step the collective of creators took in its path to becoming a fundamental entry in the annals of the arts representing Puerto Rico.

### **Agua, Sol y Sereno**

Mareia Quintero Rivera

Within its name is the seed of a poetics rooted in a sense of place, and of an ethics committed to the democratization of art. Founded in 1993 by Pedro Adorno and Cathy Vigo, Agua, Sol y Sereno (ASYS) is renowned for its wide-ranging cultural work, in constant dialogue with the island's social reality. This collective has explored a broad spectrum of the arts, from theater (and acting) to the use of masks, stilts, dance, live music, film and video art, producing a vast stream of spectacles, processions, rituals, installations, film and AV productions, and on and on.

ASYS has a repertory of more than twenty original pieces, some of which have been performed in international festivals in Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Uruguay, Spain, France, and several cities in the United States. Its works emerge from a profound interest in creating a theater that contributes to the social dialogue. Their point of departure is an introspective gaze at personal and collective wounds, at the fragility of human bonds and the need to strengthen them. Its creative processes are based on historical, socio-cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical research into the subjects it addresses and it produces works that narrate our social experience from its own perspective. This approach allows the group to delve deep into issues such as ecological destruction, social violence, coloniality, food shortages, and the deaths after Hurricane Maria, using as its starting point the life experiences of the members of the collective and the communities with which the group has worked since its inception, exploring the nuances and complexity of the human condition.

What especially distinguishes Agua, Sol y Sereno is its unrivalled dedication to community-oriented and educational work, as it performs its repertory and offers workshops and residencies in communities of limited economic resources, rehabilitation centers, and schools throughout Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Employing principles of popular Latin American education, ASYS has created a pedagogy of the imagination, which goes beyond teaching artistic techniques and opens a path to participation in creative processes that are born of observation and conversation about personal, family, or community experiences. This work is not just an invaluable social contribution; it has also nurtured the group's artistic creation by providing it direct contact with the realities and collective imaginaries of the majority. This link has allowed the group's artistic work to dialogue with broad audiences in Puerto Rico, employing a logic that has little to do with the dictates of the market or "show business."

Harkening to the call of the island's Afro-Caribbean musical and spiritual heritage, ASYS has sought to probe the depths of Puerto Rico's popular culture then to use that knowledge and experience as a foundation for developing an artistic language of its own that connects us to cultural memories of long duration. From this Caribbean eco-poetics, the group has made art its way of acting in the world, reinventing traditions to make them relevant to the challenges of the present and wagering on the construction of new imaginaries for the country we dream of.

In its day-to-day practice, ASYS has nurtured fellowship, the quality of human bonds, the possibilities born out of the nearness of bodies, the honesty of dialogue, an openness to co-creation. It has been a space of confluences, of artistic, political, and spiritual concerns and desires, a crossroads of expressive languages, creative quests, friendships, community, extended family, tribe. Beyond articulating a political discourse through artistic creation, ASYS constitutes a space in which alternative modes of relating to one another can be explored, always on the basis of a policy and ethics of solidarity.

Making it possible for this labor to continue is perhaps the most valuable gift that the group has given our battered communal self-esteem. In a context in which people thought it was impossible for non-commercial theater to survive, ASYS has developed a practice of self-management that has allowed it to be financially sustainable without risking the aesthetic and political autonomy of its contents. A workshop, a space of creative development for dozens of Puerto Rican artists of several generations, ASYS is a fundamental referent for artists, cultural promoters and empresarios/as, and emerging collectives. Its career is an affirmation of the potentials of collectivity without avoiding the dilemmas and challenges of navigating our complex social reality.