

COLLECTIVE PEDAGOGIES FOR MISTAKEN ECONOMIES

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Under the title “There must be something wrong between this economy and me”, Jesús Palomino presented a serie of works in The Netherlands during his residency in 1999 at the Kaus Australis Stichting in Rotterdam. For me, the sentence continues to be the axis of his artistic activity: an awareness of the central problem faced by the contemporary artist, that is, the critical close-examination of his/her social role through his/her artistic performance.

José Luis Brea has recently written that what makes differentiates the contemporary artist from other producers of images would be that the former “provides the citizen with critical materials, which would allow him/her to reflexively confront the contemporary image bombardment”, performing thus the role of an “active switch controlling the transference flow of the imaginary”. These words were an answer to a survey on art education in Spain, but they seem to be a most appropriate definition for Palomino’s program.

His practice is constructed from ethical reason: it is reflexively born, it demands exemplariness, and it becomes educational in the sense that it provides critical materials, as indicated by Brea. In the process of writing this text, I tried to define the spirit behind Palomino’s work; I owe the precise term that I was looking for to Carles Guerra who, in a lecture at the Art School of Cuenca where Palomino studied, spoke about Peter Weiss and his little known trilogy (albeit a masterpiece) *The Aesthetics of Resistance*.

In his impressive fresco of Europe moving towards the Second World War, Weiss explores the birth of the opposition to fascism (the first part is devoted to the Spanish Civil War) and the question of exile. It does not matter how intense repression is: the point lies in the reluctance of the people to renounce to resistance. He reflects on the affinity between political resistance and art, and concludes that it is in art where new models of political action and social understanding should be found.

In his lecture, Carles Guerra made also a reference to the prologue of the American edition in which Fredric Jameson insists on Weiss’ notion of collective pedagogies. In Guerra’s words, these pedagogies are those in which nobody is forced to learn and nothing is taught, but they allow for a reorganization of the responsibilities of representation, suspending assigned roles, and giving people “expanded responsibility”.

And, I would add, these pedagogies arise from an ethics of necessity and they feed on sharing, since any pedagogical process can only be termed as such when it is based on a shared experience. Art seems like a perfect example of expanded responsibility. There is, of course, passive reception and indulgence once one has read the name of the author and, thus, admits he/she is in front of a work endowed with cultural value. And yet, the active, productive relationship with the artistic proposal is not only a concern for the creator, but also for the spectator. Such a relationship can only materialize in the continuation of the open reflection, of the task proposed by the work which, in turn, is simply and crucially a testimony of the task and reflection of the artist. “The concept of testimony that I try to describe implies certainly a mode of revelation does not give us

anything”, in the words of Lévinas, who continues: “The ethical testimony is a revelation that is not a knowledge”.

If, unlike the usual appreciation, the work of art is understood as active interruption of the flow of transference of the imaginary, then it would not operate like knowledge, but like revelation: the revelation that culture, insofar as it is an enriching transformation of the set of social practices, is a collective responsibility. Culture gives nothing because we are the only ones who can bestow upon ourselves, and do so collectively, the capacity to reorganize representation, or the imaginary, as Brea and Guerra point out, and to find the new models Weiss referred to.

During the last three or four years, Palomino has presented complex and pataphysical “machines of desire and home low tech” in places and contexts as diverse as Serbia, Texas, Caracas, Madrid, Burgos or Montréal. The titles and intentions are also diverse as the mentioned places, and they aim at “filtering real historical situations loaded with a deeply negative political signification”. The problems tackled are linked to the experiences of the inhabitants of those places. From a democratic willingness to build certainties, Palomino investigates the history of the opposition to barbarity. This a history with no official record, generally constructed with the tale of epics, values and eternal identities, often ideologically perverse. Immersed, as we are, in the urgency of our daily demands, and driven by the idea that salvation will only come as something extraordinary, alien to us, these pieces demonstrates, with honest simplicity, the necessity to activate our creative consciousness to provoke a change of the situation. However, since the themes and implications of these works are explicit, allow me to speak about how they are executed, how the artist elaborates his critique contributing with a human dimension the dehumanized system.

In order to build those filter machines, he gets his materials and objects from the One-Euro stores. These stores sell basic equipment: clothing, flowerpots, sets of dishes, perfume, buckets, school materials, toys, tools, etc. All these materials have been conceived as necessities for the daily life of a whole community, those with less buying power. We should remember that while these products are displayed for us to see, but what is not shown is the conditions in which they are produced. Their superabundance is clear evidence that the problem with Capitalism is not to satisfy one’s needs, but how to resist its globalized exploitation and its predator skills. Palomino works manually with those objects produced industrially; he connects them and assembles them regardless of their function and use, with freedom, humour and, also, an aspiration for beauty. His idea of working with his hands does not have anything to do with expertise; it has to do with the capacity to find solutions by combining basic knowledge with urgent needs. This means that he does not only use the product itself, but also all resources of the popular economy which require risky and temporary decisions due to the precariousness of means and materials used. This is the way in which those spectacular artefacts coming to being. They are connected in different ways to a meticulous and revealing documentation: books, newspapers, photographs, documents, everything related to the theme or situation which every project tackles; these materials take us through fantasy and play from the familiar terrain of everyday life to a place where critical commentary is possible, and in which unusual aspects of our own experience are displayed.

Although present throughout Palomino's production as an artist, the best example in the use of those resources is to be found in the project "Big Favela", at the Museum Patio Herreriano of Valladolid in 2005. The Favela was piled up in the corner, making the most of the existence of different shapes and forms on the wall, making the most of the environment, as popular architecture does. The Favela appears to turn its back to the roomy Gothic ruins in which it is installed. The room felt empty. The contrast between the colourful simplicity and power of the favela – which lies in its own fragility--, and the luxurious updating of the space carried out by the institution seemed altogether extremely revealing. The humble dwellings, born out of a respectful relationship with the model – another world, called the third- occupied the renovated ruins of the past centuries leaking out the drama and positive energy of a popular culture, that ground in which the verticality of high culture – the notion of "authority"—is replaced by the horizontality of the community.

If there is something strange, mistaken, between this economy and I, it is logical to inquire into the possible existence of other economies. Some installations have expanded themselves beyond the assigned display area. This has been made possible through thanks to peculiar radio programs.

The format of those programs is based on talks, but mainly on interviews, on dialogue. Palomino activates in each city a different community, one which probably did not exist before and who gathers professionals of diverse origin who reflect upon their own practices and disciplines, and rescues the use of the word as generator of civic culture. Radio is a communication technology highly useful for the transmission of ideas. Today, when visual bombing is permanent, radio possesses a characteristic which becomes essential: it does not transmit images. The user is not a spectator, so to speak, but a listener. That is to say, his/her eyes would be released from the vanishing point of our contemporary system of vision: the impenetrable and unavoidable monitor. The body would thus become potentially active. As we know, this is one of the classical demands of art practices that fight the dictatorship of the eye. In this audio-economy, the work is also alien to the hegemony of the object. Let us insist in another practical aspect, that answers many of the ideological discussions about such hegemony: Palomino's works are perishable. This way the artist's goal is achieved: the absence of product emphasizes the importance of shared experience. Palomino accepts and provokes an entropic situation, where the energies materialize in the set-up process, they accumulate during the exhibition, and they vanish when dismantling the artwork.

The dismantling of the work – this dematerialization, heiress of the conceptual art and of similar importance—entails the materialization of another consciousness and another economy. Nothing remains as a "product" because it is no longer possible, as it was in the past, to maintain intensity by the sheer quality of the materials, or to pretend that value resides in permanence, in the capacity to transcend time and moment by means of a mutation in "market value". The artist has become a worker on the go, triggering processes and situations in order to reveal the ideological and economical frameworks in which artistic activity takes place. The work of Jesús Palomino is an evidence of his own reflection and his own task; the attempt to construct a suitable reading of reality that will enable us to take the right actions for its fruitful transformation.

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