

DUEL IN THE SUN

Conversations between María Peña Lombao and Suso Fandiño

What do you reckon is the most boring work of art of the XX century? An example that comes into your head or an artist whose work puts jellyfish to sleep, in your opinion.

A few years ago I worked on a set of works laterally related to boredom; it was a series of videos called "*still life*" in which apparently nothing happened. One could see a face in close-up and only after watching for a boring length of time could the spectator notice a slight blink. This micro activity alerted the spectator that this was not a static image, a still. With these proposals I was trying to provoke a doubt in the spectator about his own expectation and therefore a reflection on artistic objects, their potential for meaning and interaction.

If we are talking about boredom in that sense, we should go further, transcending this formal limit as a feeling of conjuncture that changes according to our state of mind, the circumstances or the mere context of expectation. Personally it seems more interesting to me to centre on the weariness and boredom that are produced in me not only by the works themselves, but also certain approaches that due to their dogmatism or wilfulness are born with a clear redeeming vocation.

Speaking in terms of boredom, these types of approaches achieve the highest levels of tediousness in me as a spectator. Cyclically there is always a tireless generational renovation for this type of idiocy and militant ingenuousness, more accustomed to the containers than the contents, stunned and obsessed about breaking away from the framework of legitimization of the artistic of which they are in turn a luxury article and cannon fodder.

So I suppose that the types of approaches that interest you as a spectator are related to the frame of legitimisation of art, then how would you define this in relation to your work? What do you mean by "cannon fodder"?

Of course, most approaches are around these frames of legitimisation as material and meaningful material. On the other hand it is not a position of the introspection of this same context; this approach transcends the scope of the artistic and sets up second and third debates that far from understanding these proposals as mere questionings intrinsic to art itself, but lead us towards a much broader deviation of debate, both on the social and political level. Precisely part of what I loathe is that literal nature in the political, the technological, the sociological and a long etcetera followed by a long queue of artists fascinated by the melody of that musical pipe from *Hamelin* that stands out as an official discourse nowadays within the framework of legitimization of a considerable number of institutions.

This cannon fodder I was referring to earlier is condemned at birth due to its own ontogeny, being extinguished due to a lack of nourishment. Except for the case of the United Kingdom, over the last two decades we have suffered a process of the

disappearance of the author as a social being, witnessing a phenomenon of expiring and posterior continuous generational replacement. The diffusion of this process of ephemeral life has increasingly prevented us from distinguishing concrete authors among the new generations of European artists. On the contrary, the highlighting of this social being falls more upon the person who carries out the curatorship in such an event rather than the artists who are going to give a form to the event.

...literal nature in the political, the technological, the sociological... I don't understand. What deviations do you mean?

In relation to the political what I fundamentally mean is the naïve belief one may be natural by eliminating all traces of position, of a stance from our artistic productions. What lies hidden behind this is the intention to cover up any approach that is not literal, eliminating the possibility of interaction on the part of the spectator. Something similar takes place with the technological when one understands that it is a value in itself and not a container or tool at the service of the content. On the other hand, the technological is seen as an unavoidable bet, with it erroneously being thought that the use of devices or supports is more suited in relation to their level of technological advancement.

This hypertrophy by the political and the technological starts from the same initial lack, although its origins come from different mythical conceptions. In the case of the literal nature in the approaches of a political kind, we now find ourselves either consciously or unconsciously facing a deep idea about the need to turn the artistic object into a productive and reactive object. This attitude that sees the author as avant-garde and his production as a tool for social guidance and modification, and is thus a modern myth that derives different sub-genres from the setting of the artistic such as the sociological or the ontogenic, seen as an approach towards the dialectics of identity and of gender. This contemporary revising of the *Hesiodic* turns the author into an updated seer.

In relation to the technological, its origins are found in the setting up of the author as a craftsman (*Deus Artifex*, creator of magical, incomprehensible and supernatural acts); obviously the elements of the properties have been replaced, but deep down we are facing a new postindustrial and agnostic version, thus suited to today's moment.

I am thinking about two works of yours. In a work like "Own Brands", in which the text of *Soap pads*, appears in all the modules, or in "I will not make any more art", in which the sentence is repeated on a blackboard as a school classroom punishment. Could you tell us why they do not belong to that hypertrophy of literal natures, just as you define them? If as spectators we cannot relate these two works to that political, technological or sociological literalness from which your work flees, what literalness do they allude to?

One thing is to establish elements of reading of the work which are solid and defined when being related to the context of the exhibition or of identification of the artistic object itself, and another very different thing from my point of view is to establish the literal nature in the final result of reading the object. The spectator no longer finalises the proposal given that a closed response is offered, not an open

one. Unfortunately, on the other hand, we have become used to a hermeticism and an encrypting in the message that is sometimes closer to guessing or to an instructions booklet, referring in most cases to the personal mythology of the author than to intelligent observation. I am thinking of something so apparently simple as *"Five words in orange neon"* by *Joseph Kosuth* and about a whole tradition established through the clarity of the message and the improvement of the question, not through its closing and conclusion.

For improvement of the question ... What question would "Five words in orange neon" and "I will not make any more art" be stating?

In alluding to the improvement of the question I am referring to the fact that the argument has not been closed, that we have somehow started a conversation in which there is an interchange in the spectator/author binomial. Starting from this basis which if I may say is almost Socratic in relation to the dialectic approach, ("which if I may say is almost Socratic in relation to the dialectic approach") both proposals set out different questions for the spectator, although there is a common denominator in both, an intention for questioning the ecosystem and its preliminaries. Here we understand the term as it was understood by Juan Antonio Ramírez in his book *"Ecosistema y explosión de las artes"* [Ecosystem and the Explosion of the Arts], seeing the framework of legitimization of what is artistic as an ecosystem with a life of its own.

In the case of *"Five words in orange neon"*, one should here make a re-analysis that on the other hand the history of art has already profusely carried out, simply recalling the potential for shared reflection that it proposes in relation to the artistic object and its meaning as such. In relation to *"I will not make any more art"*, the question derives into a third intertextual scope of events given that the explicit quotation to the work of the American artist John Baldessari intends to be more than obvious. Quotation and overwriting have tried extremely hard to open a debate and generate a question that starts from the nuance provided as to the amusing or boring, written as a punishment by Baldessari in 1971. The year which on the other hand happens to coincide with that of my birth. Forty one years later the question simply may no longer be that of how we have to present it, but why.

What does art have to do with the act of asking or answering?

I would rather ask you what it doesn't have to do with this. Taking an analysis from the last century and re-reading Hegel, it would be Martin Heidegger who puts forward, in his work *"The Origin of the Work of Art"*, the cement upon which the artistic object is inscribed. Here I am referring to the overcoming of the conception of the Kantian aesthetic; we are facing a social moment now contemporary to the avant-gardes and other extremely important texts such as *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction*. Heidegger's interpretation deals with what he calls as overcoming of the aesthetic and the assumption of new practical foundations for the artistic. Thus the new work of art, he tells us, will fundamentally be "truth". Since post-modernity the word 'truth' has decreased into permanent doubt; knowledge on one hand or into dogma of faith on the other. Personally I stick to the first one.

Well, I don't believe that the act of questioning or answering always guarantees a degree of artistic nature, neither of a work nor of an artist. I don't believe that it is enough, or necessary, unless it is located within that "framework of legitimisation of art" to which you refer in work. Speaking about "I will not make any more art", you pointed out that perhaps the question should not be how to do so, but why. Do you mean why do we have to make art?

I don't believe so either. The easy thing here would be to state that it is not a question of saying, but the opposite, of what is said. On the other hand, I am not even clear about whether it can be guaranteed or not and in what terms. If you have any solution about this I would like to know it.

In relation to your comments on the work "*I will not make any more art*", the question has been a constant doubt that I have had for some years now; we have questioned the exhibition space, the artistic object, its reproducibility or its uniqueness and an endless list of interferences to the model egoistically given, which have drawn us away from the centre like circumlocutions. We have established ourselves in those outskirts of comfort and complacency in relation to that nucleus, making a virtue out of need. Unfortunately I also do not have a clear answer for this; this questioning or correcting surrounds a part of my works, and I believe it begins to become a *leitmotiv*, which is not new or original for me. After all, perhaps the only thing it may modestly carry is something of silence after so much noise. Unlike Joseph Beuys, I do not think any silence is overrated.

I have no solutions, answers, or questions in relation to this. Ángel González stated something like: "We speak about art so as not to speak about that which art speaks", which would be more committed than the uni-personal solutions on artistic guarantees. I do not think it is a misfortune to be quiet when someone asks you why you do what you do, if the silence is eloquent. What does the author bring when he creates works of art? (If there is any tank fuelled by renewable energy that promotes this act of reflection.)

In my point of view, Ángel González's "speaking" of art refers to enjoyment of the merely formal. Nevertheless, this derivation could be passed on to current artistic productions, supposedly alien to any concern for the formal within art, turning the content into mere ornament and into form, in the best of cases, or someone is still so foolish to believe that he has the gift of asepsis and neutrality. To believe that, to present a simple example, reflection on identity or gender is not clay to be moulded and kneaded with hard blows or the utmost delicateness is at best deliciously naïve, and leads us directly towards a late-modern position. On the other hand, and in reference to the silence, I also prefer the eloquence of quietness as an answer to other alternatives; I was referring to Beuys's outburst in his work "*Das Schweigen des Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet*".

In all of your works there is an attraction towards sentences in the form of titles, or written on the work itself. "Another drawing on the wall" "No pain, no gain" "These pieces are not worth". I have always liked the sentences of silence par excellence, the titles of headstones. I will have to find some way to arrange it so some title remains when I am incinerated. At the moment I am between three options: "From now on in this house we will eat as God wills", "If it sticks, it sticks" or "You would do the

same". My possible epitaphs don't seem to be so different to the sentences in your works. Don't you think so?

... And why would they be different? You can also surely find thousands of urinals exactly like the one used by Duchamp in the Paris of 1917. In a certain manner a good part of the proposals that led us towards our current drift in the last century and have influenced me especially, counted on the written world as a nuclear element. Taking as a starting point the *R. Mutt 1917*, Piero Manzoni's cans of shit, passing through Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, Joseph Kosuth's neons or John Baldessari's school punishments, many artists have gone along this path. Although I would never use the term "*sentence*", due to its nature as dictation and above all because it finishes off the work, and the spectator becomes a mere passive receive. Personally I loathe the work of artists who have used text in this sense, as we mentioned at the beginning of this conversation, referring to the transfiguration of the figure of the seer or shaman into a contemporary artist. And in this I can show you my absolute adherence is in everything that refers to the epitaph presented as Marcel Duchamp stated, "*... it's always the others who die*".