

Un autre type de généalogies, liées aux études culturelles, est celle que restitue Francesc Ruiz (Barcelone, 1971) dans sa pratique, la bande dessinée mise en espace. *Cairo Newsstand (Kiosque Cairote) (2010)*, qui se veut une représentation exacte d'un kiosque à journaux du Caire, a en réalité été complètement revisité : c'est un système relationnel dans lequel les couvertures des magazines et les pierres qui les émechent de s'envoler parient de manière prémonitrice de l'actualité de la place Tahrir à la veille de la révolution.

Le cas de Juan Pérez Agirregoikoa (Saint-Sébastien, 1963) est particulier. Résidant à Paris, formé à l'Énsb-a et ancien élève d'Aïain Badiou à l'université Paris 8-Vincennes-Saint-Denis, cet extraordinaire aquarelliste investit les moyens de rapprochements, symptomatiques du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, entre l'art populaire et le grand art au travers de thèmes qui vont de la critique aux médias et à la caricature politique. En 2012, il présentait au Museo Reina Sofía l'exposition *¿Queréis un amo? ¡Lo tendréis!* (Vous voulez un maître? Vous l'aurez!), dans laquelle il opposait en deux frises picturales des images de chiens sauvages à des personnes âgées en chaises roulantes, comme Margaret Thatcher ou le fondateur de la droite politique espagnole Manuel Fraga.

La dernière voie de cette exotisme est représentée par une génération plus jeune à laquelle appartient le galicien Rubén Grilo (Lugo, 1981), récemment en résidence à la Rijksakademie d'Amsterdam et basé à Berlin. Cette même année, dans le cadre de son exposition intitulée *The Need for Speed* (Le Besoin de vitesse) au Circa Projects (Newcastle, Angleterre), il s'appropriait au format monumental les chutes de tissu coupé au laser dans la production en série de jeans de la multinationale Zara, créée dans sa région natale—une façon de réfléchir sur le destin d'un matériau industriel conçu pour durer, à l'usage de la nouvelle classe ouvrière au 18<sup>e</sup> siècle. Comme un clin d'œil de l'histoire, l'exposition a eu lieu dans le bâtiment de l'ancienne usine de Georges Stephenson, l'un des pionniers de la production industrielle et inventeur du chemin de fer. Ces attitudes critiques font écho à la phrase du théoricien de la littérature Frank Kermode : « La crise est une manière de réfléchir au moment de chacun, et non à quelque chose d'inhérent au moment en lui-même. » ■

Traduit par Frédérique Destribats

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Asier Mendizabal. « Figures and Prefigurations (Drivers, J. Polinski, 1935) ». 2009. Collage, coupures d'impression offset sur papier, 84 x 59 cm.

(Court. ProjecteSD). Collage, offset prints on paper. Page de droite/page right: Rubén Grilo. « Pattern Free. Ripped from Zara, indigo version I ». 2013.

(Court. de l'artiste et Noguera Blanchard)

## Art and Society in a Spain on the Edge of a Critical Emergency

**At global art events lately it's common to hear people say nice things about the Museo Reina Sofía, as if by unanimous acclaim it had become one of the Western world's most outstanding contemporary art museums. This is paradoxical at a time when the country has been devastated by an economic crisis whose ravages have extended from social services to cultural and governmental institutions, political parties and even the royal palace.**

An understanding of today's Spanish art scene needs to begin with some genealogy. Since the Spanish Pavilion at the 1937 International Exposition in Paris where *Guernica* was debuted to the end of the Franco dictatorship and the transition to democracy in 1978, Spanish contemporary art was associated with the political left. Then came the revelation of the Movida in the 1980s, seen from abroad as rather exotic, and in the 90s the establishment of an art infrastructure at various levels of government, from local and regional entities to the central state, with the intention of advancing toward normalcy, a cultural situation similar to elsewhere in Western Europe. The desire for an internationalist opening and the use of contemporary culture as a popular form of political currency led to the construction of major art venues. This was facilitated by the expansion of the Spanish economy, which grew to be the fourth biggest in the EU. The well-known "Guggenheim effect" led to the development of

macrospace instead of programs. They proliferated throughout the landscape, meant primarily as international showcases rather than local content generators. The absence of an overall guiding cultural policy combined with the model of a decentralized state and regional nationalism produced symbols such as the CGAC in Santiago de Compostela (1993) and the MACBA in Barcelona (1995). From their peripheral position they challenged the more conservative official culture. Their programming brought out the existence of a socially engaged, contextual conceptual tradition closer to that of the eastern European countries than the rest of metropolitan Europe.

### THE CRITICAL ART FABRIC

The first decade of this century saw the consolidation of a certain complacency in the field of art. There were enough workspaces and a few production models, in the Basque region for instance, that constituted a real art scene. In 2006 the Minister of Culture of that time signed a Best Practices Code with other art world actors to keep political parties from interfering in cultural institutions. It seemed that the advance of this sector was unstoppable—until the massive destruction of art spaces imposed by conservative policies even before the economic crisis. The end of major venues such as Montehermoso in Vitoria, Rekalde in Bilbao, Arts Santa Mònica and the Sala Montcada of the Fundació La Caixa in Barcelona foreshadowed the loss of politically engaged exhibition spaces, venues that reflected that tradition that artistic practice had generated. The crisis, with economic redistribution, simply confirmed the reactionary spiral into which the country had already drifted. In 2012 the sales tax on artworks jumped to 21%, in contrast to France's maintenance of the VAT on the sale of artworks at 5.5%, making it very difficult for Spanish galleries to compete in the international arena. On April 30, 2013, the cultural affairs leadership of the conservative government announced that financing for contemporary art would be reduced by 81% in comparison to 2012.

After having directed the MACBA in Barcelona for a decade, Manuel Borja-Villel became head of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 2008. He was selected in an international competition in which the jury was composed of members of the art sector, just as the economic crisis was beginning to break out. His funda-



mental role has been the development of historical paradigms that explain today's world by means of the singularly skilful way he has worked with the collection. Borja-Villel argues that the modernity appropriate for Spain reflects the subaltern status of the geopolitical South in relation with the Ibero-American world, beginning with the conquest of South America during the Baroque era, with a theatrical tradition based on multiplicity and pleats. In "Museos del sur," an article published in *El País* a few months before he was selected, he asked, "What is to be done in the face of a past in which we do not recognize ourselves and a present we do not like?"

The solution he put forward can be seen in the collection: the construction of a museum based on a heritage considered as an archive in progress, as a place and not a norm, with no foundational grand narrative. Examples of functioning such as the Red Conceptualismos del Sur (Southern Conceptualisms Network) demonstrate that he has opted for investigation rather than spectacularization, the strict obedience to the Tate Modern model prac-

ticed by the world's great museums. At a time when the market rules, his museum functions in the same way as contemporary art itself, by generating spaces of resistance, forms of life and knowledge, despite the difficulties caused by budget cutbacks. Perhaps this is why, when in 2011 *Artforum* asked him to name the best thing that happened that year, Borja-Villel answered: the 15-M (the occupation movement also known as the Indignados).

Like the museum itself, resistance spaces are being invented to use the art system as a base area rising in the form of a social protest movement. The new energy being generated in Madrid can be felt on Doctor Fourquet street behind the museum, which has become the center of the Spanish capital city's art market with the emergence of edgy new galleries such as Maisterravalbuena, Noguera Blanchard, García Galería and Casa Sin Fin alongside veterans like Moisés Pérez de Albéniz, Fúcares and Helga de Alvear. Also, despite difficulties, the long-established ARCO contemporary art fair is being reinvented by its new management to recover its former position as the European portal to Latin American art.

In general, museums throughout the country are experiencing great difficulties. In addition to three straight years of budgetary cutbacks, there is an equally extensive list of wretched political interference. Eva González-Sancho resigned as director of the MUSAC in early June. The ex-director of the Burgundy FRAC had found herself unable to implement her plans, even though they had been approved by an international competition only a few months earlier. The most extreme case of outside interference concerns the IVAM, a pillar of the art scene founded by Vicente Todolí and now in the hands of Consuelo Ciscar, who has been repeatedly denounced by associations of art professionals. There is also the deliberate neglect in fine arts curricula. Most schools are dominated by conservative teachers disconnected from today's modes of production.

Just like in France, the Spanish art scene is marked by a struggle for recognition abroad. There are an impressive number of Spanish artists working in France: Esther Ferrer, Miquel Barceló, Miquel Mont and Jordi Colomer have been living in Paris for years; Marta Gili heads the Jeu de Paume and Dora García is one of the leading people at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Recent exhibitions such as the Muntadas at the Jeu de Paume, Martí Anson at the Palais de Tokyo and Lara Almarcegui at the CREDAC manifest a growing interest in France for the art of its neighbor. Some Spanish art actors have acquired a basic importance at the international level, including Rosa Martínez, Octavio Zaya and Chus Martínez. But this doesn't contradict the situation in Spain itself. Last year Santiago Sierra, one of Spain's best-known artists abroad, refused to accept the Premio Nacional de Artes Plásticas because he considered the government complicit in the catastrophe by favoring the interests of a privileged few.

It is among the younger generation, educated in conceptual and political paradigms, that work formulas are being reinvented. A Barcelona residency space for curators and artists called Bar invites newly emerging figures on the international scene every week. The program is partly financed by public funding and makes use of a downtown apartment provided by a donor. In Madrid, Felipamañuela has established the Sweethome residences program in which international actors come to stay with local artists for two weeks to promote cross-border interchange. These examples have inspired other ways of doing things. Since the crisis, the traditional distance between generations and exclusion of youth from power, and the lack of generosity in the





relationships between actors on the scene, have led to collaborative practices that demand a greater articulation. The new obsession is with networks: the effervescence of a parallel system, like a shadow government, with an unprecedented inventive power.

#### ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

It may be that the level of economic precariousness and an understanding of representational work as a political matter have prepared Spanish artists for production in times of crisis. On the borderline between artistic production and activism, Núria Güell (Girona, 1981) trained in Cuba with Tania Bruguera. *Intervención #1* (2012) centers on home evictions. In Spain, due to missed mortgage payments, the state security services, operating at the behest of the banks, carried out 58,241 evictions in 2012. She founded a cooperative so that people who have lost their homes can hire construction workers to open the boarded-up empty buildings that the CAM, one of the banks most criticized for its unethical practices, bought at auction after ordering

the expulsion of the families who lived there. The contract model guarantees the legal non-liability of the construction workers, following the same strategy used by the banks to acquire the unoccupied homes at 50% of their real valuation. The aim of this process is to make these liberated spaces once again available for public use. One example of international success is the recognition achieved by Asier Mendizábal (Ordizia, 1973) after a 2012 solo show at the Raven Row gallery in London and his participation in the last Documenta. The series *Figures and Prefigurations* (2009) shows images of multitudes at demonstrations projected on a screen made up of classical photomontages associated with historic modernity. The point is to show how these vanguard forms carry deposited on themselves the utopian impulse of the militant left, like a formal filter indissolubly linked to the coordinates of their historical existence. Vanguard once museumized and deactivated return in Mendizábal's collages to their ideological origin, prefigured as political hope.

Francesc Ruiz (Barcelona, 1971) uses his

line of work, expanded comic books, to restore another kind of genealogy, associated with cultural studies. In 2010 he made *Cairo Newsstand*, which at first seems to be a literal reconstruction of a newsstand in that Egyptian city but in reality has been manipulated on every level. It is a relational system in which the covers of the magazines and the stones placed on them foreshadow the events in Tahrir Square just before the revolution.

Another particular case is that of Juan Pérez Agirregoikoa (San Sebastián, 1963). A Paris resident trained at the ENSBA and also a former student of Alain Badiou at the Université de Paris VIII, he is an extraordinary watercolor painter. Addressing themes that run the gamut from a critique of the media to political caricature, he recuperates the possibilities of connecting popular culture and high art that were common in the nineteenth century. In 2012 the Museo Reina Sofía presented a show of his work called *¿Queréis un amo? ¡Lo tendréis!* (Do you want a soul? You'll have one) counterposing, in two friezes, pictures of wild dogs and of domesticated old people in wheelchairs, such as Margaret Thatcher and the founder of the Spanish political right, Manuel Fraga.

A younger generation has adopted a different form of emigration. For example, the Galician Rubén Grilo (Lugo, 1981) has recently had a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and now lives in Berlin. During this same year he had an exhibition called *The Need for Speed* at CIRCA Projects in Newcastle, UK, a monumental appropriation of the laser-washed and ripped denim produced on assembly lines owned by the multinational Zara in his home region. This is a reflection on the destiny of an industrial fabric originally designed for durable clothing to be worn by the new working class in the eighteenth century. Like an historical warning, the exhibition was held in a building that once housed a factory owned by Georges Stephenson, a pioneer of industrial production and inventor of the railroad. These critical attitudes call to mind the words of the theorist of literature Frank Kermode: "Crisis is a way of thinking about one's moment, and not inherent in the moment itself." ■

Translation, L-S Torgoff



De haut en bas/from top: Núria Güell. Exposition « Alegaciones desplazadas » à la galerie Adn, (Court. de l'artiste ; Ph. R. Ruiz)

Lara Almarcegu. « Matériaux de construction, Dijon centre historique ». 2005. Exposition « Ivry souterrain ». Le Crédac, Ivry-sur-Seine. 2013. (Coll. Frac Bourgogne ; Court. de l'artiste et Ellen de Bruijne Projects, Amsterdam ; Ph. André Morin).

"Construction materials, Dijon, historical center"