

Inner Journey

– Álvaro de los Ángeles

30/41

Apparently, what allowed Warburg to find the way to unite all those elements (his enthusiasm for Florence and the dionisiac, the vivacity intuition of courage and the strength for ancient religiosity and the fear of demons) was an external impulse: a trip to America.¹

Fritz Saxl

The cubist experience is not a theoretical question, but a progressive modification of sensations. More or less, like this: probably in America it always existed at the same time as in Europe. Somehow it could have been theoretically constructed, this is to say, the existence of a continent between Europe and Asia could have been taken as a matter of course. It was from a theory —this is the important part—, from the imagination, that America was discovered. It is undeniable that, in order to discover it, an inner experience was necessary, and, on the other hand, once discovered, that America effectively transformed the world and the human being. Exactly the same that seems to me happens with cubism.²

Carl Einstein

I

The parallels between the life trajectory of a person and geography and travels are many. Also abundant when the comparison is established with cultural results: a river novel, a plateau as a metaphor of the roof in any line of learning, a torrent of creativity, or the coldness of a performance compared to a block of ice. Barbara Kruguer's slogan «Your body is a battleground» indicated it without reservations, with action art of the preceding decades, that in a body, an entire world could fit, and we could add, in a mind, an entire universe. The path we make by walking, the journey we embark on when we make a decision or start an enterprise, the crossing of the river to arrive to mythological Hades when we die... It is improbable that these clear

¹ Fritz Saxl, «La Biblioteca Warburg y su propósito» (The Warburg Library and Its Purpose), in Salvatore Settis *Warburg continuatus. Descripción de una biblioteca*, Barcelona, 2010, Ediciones de La Central.

² Carl Einstein, *Correspondencia: Carl Einstein / Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (Correspondence: Carl Einstein / Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler) (1921-1939)*, Barcelona, 2008, Ediciones de La Central.

metaphors are only style resources and they do not imply something a lot more profound and even more intangible: a mutual malleability between content and recipient, between an ecosystem and the beings that it produces, both transforming and adaptable to the media.

In each travel persists the desire of knowledge of the unknown; a colonisation of physical spaces when there were still territories to be tamed, and a political deepening into ourselves while there is still an intention of constructing or *deconstructing ourselves*. *Physical maps and political maps*. «The fantasy of completeness» which implies an approach to the archive as a method. In its desire, it includes an impossibility, but also the generation of a narrative (no less woven into reality for coming out of a fantasy), which appeals directly to desire and to the knowledge of what is intangible or disconcerting. It seems evident that artists generate an entire *corpus of work, each piece guided by the desire to reach a certain aim, never the same, but probably similar among them; a mix of search and encounter, an entangled relationship between reason and desire*.

When something is previously imagined, then it may be realised. That seems to tell us the paragraph/quote where Carl Einstein talks with collector Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler about cubism. The transformation of perception that this avant-garde art movement managed to expand materialised itself in a series of essential paintings, which photography — with its double or multiple expositions — and cinema — with its facility for editing diverse images stitched together by time — had already foretold and practiced. However, also totalitarian regimes, or their antithesis, social and political activism which demand a «radical democracy» in the style of Chantal Mouffe are political ideas previously thought before actions in practice. A warning on that which is thought is that it may come true, but it could also be a stimuli. In art proposals that result in pieces more or less concrete, more or less intangible, it is the previous imagination of something that can become art piece which activates the engine of the desire to produce, that which will end up being an intrinsic part of who produces it.

On May 10th, 1771, young Werther, away from the city, wrote, «I am so happy, my dear friend, I am so submerged in the feeling of a quiet existence, that I do not tend to my art. Now I would not know how to draw, not even a mere line with the pencil; however, I have never been a better painter.» In 1771, Alexander von Humboldt was two years old, six in 1774, the year the book *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published. It would be years later when a bond between their lives would be established; the scientist and the humanist, if these titles for their activities are still valid. As Goethe's

book starts, the main character is discovering a new way to be in the world; instead of chasing what he desires, he seems to be waiting for his desire to reach him. He wouldn't know how to draw, not even a single pencil line, he writes, but it is now that he considers himself a better painter. Praising contemplative life does not imply here only a letting go that would be typical of a dilettant. It also seems to point out that, without such serenity, since that experience in his gaze, without the capacity to stop and analyse what one wants to do, work that deserves being called painting, work of the level of his profession as a painter, cannot be generated. Are these considerations too elevated, around art? Will painting continue to have this transformative function, or what indubitably transforms the work of an artist that paints is their life experience?

Independently of the affirmative character of the answers to these rhetorical questions, Goethe is pointing, probably not foreseeing the reach of his words, the symbiosis between life and work of an artist, the impossibility of one without the presence — even if in an embryonic way — of the other. The base of modern art, but even more, the essence of contemporary art.

II

Passion for a continuous learning... is the purpose of Nuria Rodríguez when she archives objects, papers, images, traces, branches, stones, books, postcards. In many cases, these do not depend so much on a research in one direction or another of a supposed line of progress or time. It is a prospective search that cannot stop until it meets the bottom, until it checks the hardness — or permeability — of the base that takes in all the rest. Setting the limits of the action, as it is done in archaeological sites, will imply to put all that material in a sieve that will filter but will also limit. This is her method, but not her aim. The aim of all things *archivable is that a great part of what is selected can be painted, or rebuilt again*. *It is to say, a need persists, a need to represent it through painting or drawing, or to recreate in three dimensions, in the case of the pebbles and smaller rocks, which transformed already in their double and buttressed by the structure produced with the 3D printer, become models that redimension their original. Therefore, in those games of reproduction and change of scale or nature, underlies a progression and a development in painting techniques, but also technique is adopted. With it, the obsolescence that marks the double failure of the avant-gardes, according to Eric Hobsbawm*. For the Austrian

historian of Jew ancestry, it is inevitable to admit that «we are talking about a double failure. First it was a failure of “modernity”, a term that started being used towards the end of the nineteenth century. It maintained that contemporary art should be, as Proudhon had said of that of Courbet, ‘an expression of the times’». However, as it has been well analysed from multiple points of view, at the time, «of course there was no consensus whatsoever on what was the meaning of “expression of the times”, nor on how to express them», since «*modernity* resides in changing times, and not in the arts that attempt to express them.»³ For Hobsbawm, «the second failure was a lot graver in visual arts than in any of the others: the technical limitation, increasingly obvious, of the main way to paint since Renaissance — a painting mounted on an easel — “to express the times” or, in any case, to compete with new ways of carrying out many of its traditional functions. The history of visual avant-gardes of the twentieth century is the fight against technological obsolescence.»⁴

It is pertinent here to talk about technological obsolescence and failure. Failure not of the art itself, since it responds to many varied interests and it derives in a series of works which function and result expand in many directions, implying aesthetic experiences, constructions of taste, economic spheres, even speculative interests (are these other ways to fail?). This is to say, the failure of artistic results will always depend on the level of demand and the limits of the expectations, at a time when the market has accepted as valid absolutely everything, including its criticism or the supposed negation of its presence. However, it will refer to the failure of the archive: in the first place, as a «fantasy of the completeness» which will never stop being a fantasy and completeness will never be reached; and secondly, due to the impossibility to have access to territories where time has passed and obliterated what now would be useful for that impossible compilation. Technological obsolescence in this case is assimilated by a continuous present, or even better, a perpetual present. This is why such disparate, apparently heterogeneous techniques and languages stand side by side. Painting acts more as thermometer of this present than as the will to transcend it. This is

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³ Eric Hobsbawm, *A la zaga. Decadencia y fracaso de las vanguardias del siglo XX*. (Behind. Decadence and Failure of the Avant-Gardes of the twentieth century) Barcelona, 1998, Editorial Crítica.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

also why in this work by Nuria Rodríguez, it should be highlighted, the goal is grouping and discordance of it as a set. This is why the technical media and technologies used are but novelty tools, updated, that will attempt to capture what is known, the past, and the unknown that is implicit in all things past.

There is also in this exhibition a travel to the America of each one of us. To speak here of America is to pose the challenge of the novelty that the unknown represents, that which is still unregistered and uncatalogued, which exists without our conscience of its existence, which is, also, and of course, all that has its origins in childhood. Imagining America will allow to imagine it or, in the worst case scenario, to discover it. In *Wings of Desire*, Wim Wender's 1987 film, childhood is the territory of narration and viceversa. One of the many secondary characters that populate this story and whose thoughts, as it happens throughout the film, are listened to by the angels who inhabit Berlin's skies, is an elder man who, in his first scene, manages to climb up the steps of a library, the temple of knowledge and site of the archive, here displayed as a transcendental space. We see this professor in different situations while he does not stop thinking and his voice-thought is offered to us through one of the angels, who would be the demiurg between him and us. In a scene, the elderly man takes a photographic catalogue of August Sander, this is a situation for analysis on the national German identity, but also it raises the question of what can be catalogued through images; an atlas, finally, of the human being. A moment before the elderly man was thinking, «The story exonerates me from the disturbances of the present and it protects me from the future.» In the following scene he sits on a chair with the photographic catalogue in his hands. He inspects the cover photo, *Young Farmers*, and starts to pass the pages of the book from the back cover and the final images, the last one of which is a portrait of the mother of the photographer in her deathbed. Is initiating the visual trajectory from the end towards the beginning a significant action? Is this indicating clearly the end of the great narratives and the beginning of an inconsistent, shapeless non-form? As he passes the pages, the movie incorporates some archive material: scenes of a bombed street where regular people approaches the sidewalks, covered in corpses, while German soldiers display their presence and control; close ups of dead children next to rubble, both displayed as equal remains; a woman covers nose and mouth with a handkerchief, to avoid pestilence and contagion. «However, nobody has managed to sing a peace epos. What happens to peace, that does not seem enthusiastic about lasting, and barely lets itself be told about?»

The old man's thoughts are preserved by the angel, whose invisible presence next to his chair the professor seems to notice, shifting uncomfortable. «Should I give up, then? If I give up, Humanity will lose the narrator.» He places his wrinkled hand on the portrait of a woman, while on the right page the photograph of a middle age man seems to look at the camera (Sander's, yes, but also Wenders'). «And if Humanity loses its narrator, then it will also lose its childhood.» End of scene.

Losing one of them implies losing the other. Where does such sentence leave us? Who is the narrator and how can we protect them? To lose the narrative is to lose childhood; not having lived it, therefore, it forces a task of invention, beyond any filter... This is why any story that we manage to brandish, every step in the direction that we understand as correct in that moment will be a step towards rediscovering a gesture in an image, a remembered sentence, or the catalogue of first smells, archived next to the place where they were felt for the first time, but avoiding to tell about it as a loss, this is to say, shooing nostalgia away. Peter Handke, the script writer of this film by Wenders, reflects in many of his books a sort of inner journey, many a time against the background of the sequence of a physical journey alongs a space and time that are not always defined. So it happens in *Short Letter*, *Long Farewell*, as in *The Great Fall*. The contained journey across the United States of the first one, and the drifting of an actor in a day, in the second one, are examples of journeys understood as searches and losses, encounters and disbelief at the job of being alive. In many of his works, Handke places as a main question the presence of the son, the daughter, essentially understood as offspring, thus implying the question of parentage, of course, but also that of inheritance. A non-materialist inheritance, in its need, but symbolic: what to teach, how to do it, what expectations to create, or how to avoid them altogether, what level of rebelliousness to endure... in the end, how to teach that which one does not know. The permanence of certain images in our collective imaginariun responds to this capacity to face great themes with the simplicity of a structural text, or the complexity of a script turned film, that which transforms thoughts into words, and these into images. Cultural artifacts, stories in *abyme*, that manage to make our contour coincide with its reflection.



III

The premise of the exhibition *Sistema Humboldt. Pensar/ Pintar* (Humboldt System. Thinking/Painting) seems to recreate a sort of archipelago of bodies that are connected through different unifying elements. The question at the start, next to the title, shows a certain strangeness, which, logically, does not have a conclusive answer, but tackles head on the essential question. «Why collecting all mountains, all islands, all stones, all plants, all words, every single thing, once and again?» Some suggested ideas along this text reflect on the difficulty of finding concrete answers to complex questions, and to the importance of narratives to generate an approximate map of the situation. If it is a need that goes beyond reason, being as it is a question reasoned and reasonable, this is to say, trying to understand in an exhaustive, loyal to the vastness that surrounds us, its natural mechanism and reflection and our ancestral habit of transforming our environment, the task becomes immeasurable and it tends to the impossible. Perhaps that is the source of its inexhaustible production of desire, the difficulty of

making it concrete, and a sort of limitless that continues to update it. The magnitude of Humboldt's work becomes for Nuria Rodríguez an archival challenge, which unifies nature, culture, transformation, ambition for creating a genealogy, and the journey as the engine,

The magnitude of Humboldt's work becomes for Nuria Rodríguez an archival challenge. It unifies nature, culture, transformation, ambition for the creation of a genealogy and the journey as an engine, encounter and catalyst of yet another beginning.

encounter and catalyst of a permanent return to the origin). The path among the works, and the documents exhibited generates an S-shaped path, where painting, drawing, reproduction to scale or real objects, along with books and artifacts, comprise an organised body. It is not free from fissure, tangents and symbolic elements destined to display the contradiction of the enterprise. To set limits to the knowable, attempt-

ing to generate a pattern that unifies its own difficulty of uniformity, and trying to do it through classical-leaning painting, with a deep foundation in using elements of great symbolic weight, means an important challenge for the viewer. The viewer would be in charge of carrying out the final, interpretative phase of the work. With this new attempt, a journey in two apparently contradictory directions can be observed. On the one hand, the outward journey, following as a clue some of Humboldt's achievements, although not exclusively. On the other hand, the journey into the artist, which frequently links self-biographical aspects to all of the above, situating herself as a study case of some of the experiences of a social researcher.

At the beginning of the 1990s Hal Foster would define the «artist as an ethnographer», derived also from Benjamin's «author as producer». This definition is indubitably represented in this case, but only half way. The great difference seems to be that N. Rodríguez, beyond employing documents as work, which she does, she uses them as an integral part of the binomy original/copy. This is to say, from a document, a photograph, the illustrated page of a book or an encyclopaedia, the artist paints its double. The act of painting what on some occasions is already a drawing or a painting, interpreted results of a common original, not only upholds the idea of the copy, as it points at a need for the object to go through our gaze, our mind, and to be returned to the world subjectified, through the manual action of reproducing it. The ethnographer artist would return to the realm of reality to explain from their experience the world that surrounds them, the artist here uses narratives and images from reality (maps, plans, synthesised representations of natural history or of art history) to generate another object which becomes model, drawing, synthesis of itself, and which will help to grasp their self as subjectified object. Painting, thus, acts as a language to understand

reality, replacing it, which searches for the possibility of being understood. A sort of intermediate step between understanding a language and its functional use. In doing so, no intermediate steps are added that would speculate on results, but strengthens those that present in another way, linking the traditions of gaze and the translation to a concise language of all that is visible, yet not always understandable.

For instance, next to some rocks found in nature, on very simple shelves, exact reproduction of the rocks in shape and size, but rendered in different material and colour, and including the rests of their production process in three dimensions. The difference between the material and the appearance of being an object being built to scale allows to understand the global work as a sort of miniature world. Models in general help comprehension of that which they reproduce, as an image that becomes concrete and translates the portion of reality that they represent. The world seen from above, the gaze of God, but also the technological eye of a satellite, speak of control and power, of the possibility of grasping what is shown with vastness, and in a wild state. Limiting it within a format, grouping it in a box, listing it in an inventory as in an archive... are the necessary steps to possess it. The relationship between these miniatures and the animal figures weaves this work in symbolic play, typical of learning processes in childhood. It establishes a connection between the work and the realm of narrative and imaginary worlds. It is not a coincidence that the artist introduces elements referencing back to her birth year, her childhood books, Nature or



*Monte análogo
(Analogue Mount),
2019/2020
Rock + 3D reproduction
variable measurements*

Astronomy collection card albums. These illustrated stories seem to be in the origin of this inward search, which is produced extracting outwards as much as possible.

The larger format paintings, on their part, share a very similar structure, to the point they form a complete series. On never neutral backgrounds, not very defined either, a series of figures exist in a state of feverish neighbourhood that seem to be grouped for hieroglyph interpretation. Plants, objects, geographical features, people's silhouettes, or foreshortened figures... try to deduce the weighty matter that they are pondering, the gaze in the mirror between Humboldt's obsessions and the Rodríguez's nightmares, even ghosts. All are attempts, with no certainty, it cannot, could not be any other way. Some of the smaller paintings, on paper, reproduce rocks that have been previously painted with a flat colour in the original. The gesture in this intervention, as in the pictoric action, is double. Painting in a faithful, yet never hyperrealistic way, the stone which has also been coloured imposes a double warning before the real object, and. Therefore, this warning also travels to what is real that we find or obtain outside. In the same way that a Thesaurus are linked to a cloud of concepts; a jump in technology causes the same unrest: what is useful in reality and how can it be used in favour of itself? This is saying in a different way how to start the journey from outside into oneself, if all can be used, but truly, very few things can be of help.

Album de collages (Collage Album),
2014/2020
Mixed technique. 26 x 37 cm



Detail. *Segunda parte- La Tierra (Second Part- The Earth)*, 2018
Mixed technique, 100 x 90 cm

