

On the Possibility Contained in Failure.

From a Fragmentary Conversation with

Pep Agut

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Since the late 1980s, Pep Agut (Terrassa, 1961) has been working on a project that challenges the place of art as a space in which knowledge is produced and distributed, by means of a reflection on questions such as authorship, the figure of the spectator, and the notion of exhibition. The project may be described as a form of resistance to the "super-merchandilised spectacularisation of the means of production" that is imposed in the territory of contemporary culture. Emerging as a sort of antihero, opposite to Baudelaire's definition as "someone who doesn't have fun alone," over-exposed and maimed—a prestidigitator, a clown, a supporting actor, an invisible presence, or even a Herculean mercenary—Agut makes frequent use of his (self)portrait as an element of representation—incomplete—of the figure of the artist, but also as the one that represents others, and the craft itself: "I don't see myself as 'self-portrayed', and I have the feeling that it is someone else who is there, that it is 'the other' that becomes present in that place which, in addition, belongs to him."

Such projects move through a mute autobiography, construction as an imaginary complex of structures that shows the fruitlessness of artifice and trickery in the sphere of art, and their transformation almost into a grimace. The protagonists of the images are paradoxical characters that fill their space "gesticulating, acting, referencing a place that to them is pure exteriority but without which they do not exist and which constitutes them, then, in this showing of success and their failure". With their presence the figures define the limits—now disabled—of the exhibition space, protagonists of those *empty places*

where the asserting of the impersonal is announced, as Maurice Blanchot demanded of the art work, and from which there begins an abrupt journey through inherited territory, now usurped: "Post-modern scepticism has rested upon a certain idea of 'counter-faith' set in opposition to the utopian faith of the modern age, but it has failed to escape from that same path that, *malgré tout*, is defined by belief, positive or negative, to spawn a genuine alternative space. Perhaps we must epochally accept that one always dwells in the idea of tradition, in mummy's bedroom". Demystified places, populated by lack, by absence, saved from their cultural potential, pointing towards are works such as: *La expulsión del Paraíso* [Expulsion from Paradise] (1991-92), a little room made of painter's canvases in which an image is projected of the expulsion from paradise in the stained glass of Chartreuse; the installation presented at the 45th Venice Biennale entitled *Persona* [Person] (1993), two methacrylate and canvas showcases that construct uninhabited spaces, "taking something forbidden to them and that leaves them out of scale, off centre, blind in their excess of light"; or *Región del error* [Region of Error] (2006-08), a series of photographs printed on cloth showing the artist's feet as he wanders—for 12 consecutive days—on the remnants of paint accumulated over the years on his studio floor, and which document the action of someone who is absent, turning the spectator into evidence of an impossible action.

Crude, direct gestures and shared actions, that draw the attention of the public to that fracture operating in art—like an open fissure—



Mur/Escauari, 1989-90. Wall of canvases, clay bricks and wooden stage. Installation. Mounted in *Als actors secundaris*, MACBA, 2000. MACBA Collection.

Hércules espectacularizant-se, 2007. Digital print from a transparency of 4x5". 180 x 230 cm. Various private collections, Barcelona.



from which the artist proposes the rehabilitation of his critical capacity; precisely by means of a strategy of identification and re-inscription of his activity in the process of failure, that crisis in which he is immersed. "The genuine existence of that 'venue of failure' imposes the presence of witnesses that make it effective beyond the secret of personal action. The opening that is constituted in such a place, a place of sin or of failure, is thus that of a shared place, the Foucaultian opening or wound". A rhetorical action of occupation of these spaces of non-belonging, awaiting a new gesture that bring forth something more, to which the artist subjects his pieces: "at the end of the day it is the gesture itself that is expected from the artist; it is the gesture that makes the magician, it is the action that enables him to begin to be what he is before the others who, also at that instance, begin to be what they are." It is a process of identification, of persistent affirmation, in which "the text coats the writing, and voices embrace the voice".

Avec tes yeux, avec ta voix (2003) is to be one of the pieces starting from which the artists explores that appearance of the audience's voice as a text that is imposed on the writing. A work made up of interviews with anonymous individuals in the city of Marseille and whose answers—which turned out to be practically identical—were processed randomly by computer to form, in simple grammatical units, terse assertions that triggered the poetic sense of the spectators: *C'est avec tes yeux que je vois* (2003). Words that are uninhabited spaces, hollows in shiny surfaces, and mirror reflection, structures and platforms like those made later in *¿es legal tu mirada?* [Is your Gaze Legal?] or *Hablo/miento* [I speak/I lie], from 2005. Fragments of a text to be completed—from silence—use references from literature, philosophy, or even the domestic sphere. Games in which language is suspended and interrogates those places from "where to exercise that voice, and accept the gaze, our own and the other's, by way of a dialogue. To speak and to see, to produce voice and gaze, is the construct tools for discussion of for living; it is the path travelled in the production of knowledge, in the production of a collective wealth that art should distribute among everyone."

It is an ongoing probe of those spaces that include "the other" as sole possible interlocutor in the construction of any political project, via works like those presented in recent shows: *Hércules. Autorretrato en devaluación económica y plusvalía cultural* [Self-Portrait in Economic Devaluation and Cultural Capital Gain] (2005-07) dealt with a legal contract that assured the collector or museum of the start of a process of depreciation of the work as an exchange value, simultaneously with its appreciation as a cultural production, whose rights were delivered to the public, and an ironical action—and its documentation—taking place on the day of the opening, in which the artist remained stationary in shoes that were screwed into the floor of a room in the Àngels Barcelona gallery, where he



Avec tes yeux, avec ta voix, 2003. Sheets of glass labeled with enamel and wooden structures. Mounted at Red District, Marseille, 2003. CAM Collection, Alicante.

Mago, 1996. Sequence of slides for *Als actors secundaris* at the MACBA, 2000. Colección MACBA, Barcelona.



received and was photographed with visitors. This way of acting was also present in works such as *Sobre la idea de hablar o mi nombre es tu voz* [On the Idea of Speaking, or my Name is your Voice] (2006), in which the exhibition goers could erase the definition they chose in their language and replace it with their own name in a Castilian/Basque/Castilian dictionary produced by the artist, and in which the sum of the names was used to construct an anonymous text.

These are collective artefacts in which the spectator is associated with the notion of the supporting actors Agut developed in works like the fake retrospective (1989-2000) presented at the MACBA in Barcelona in 2000, with the title *Als actors secundaris*: a critical reflection on the notion of the show space and the institution as a public space for "the circulation of artistic productions and modes of production of sense in the framework of a history falsified by the market and by those who hold power". It was a hugely complex show in which the public was taken to a critical position in relation to the museum and the artist's work. "The public doesn't complete or produce the work, but rather it realises it, it makes it real, in a literal sense; the audience tells itself and constructs itself in the place of art, of culture, which is the public's place *par excellence*."

Almost like a hostile territory inhabited by a future community in

a state of emergency as described by Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* –in which a group of wise men memorised the books that were being burnt by the firemen to free citizens of the "anguish" of knowledge– the landscape described by Agut reflects upon a dystopian society for which he produces artefacts of "resistance" and that belong to a space, that of art, which "must be capitalised on, used in the democratic process from which we govern ourselves, to welcome again the modern figure of progress. An ethics that should make up a whole political process, possible only with the warmth of the other's hand. Hence the importance of developing our critical capacity, the real window open to knowledge and social development." A project of conscious confrontation of his incapacity to determine anything, but that, in his successive gestures, reactivate an unusual commitment in a period in which the written word is not banned, though it seems to have been neutralised until it becomes an empty space.

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1. All the quoted material is from Pep Agut.

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