

NOTES ON THE *SPECTACLES OF FRUSTRATION* IN THE WORK OF JOAQUÍN IVARS

On the earthenware tiles of the floor, at the doors of my house, I found a spider larger than usual. It is not one of the animals that sicken me most. [...] The eight legs and hairy bulb only brought about in me the decision to finish it off. [...] I played with its itineraries before I crushed it with my foot. I remember this, first, with slow cinematographic eyes: its articulated extremities started to yield to the weight of my body until its abdomen touched the ground; then, the chitinous crunch started and its cracked shells started to separate and expel some liquid. From then on, the camera in my memory speeds up events. My eyes try to take in the radial explosion, to no avail: hundreds of tiny spiders, thousands, it seems to me, dizzily break away from the previous instant: that of death. It felt easy to be amused by that definitive moment; it feels impossible to follow the itineraries of surprise.

JOAQUÍN IVARS, *Animals* (2001)

Animals is a short story where three random events take on the consistency of a succession of experiences linked by a common effect: the indelible presence of a sort of “helpless and enlarged sense of disgust”¹. Let us take a closer look at the first case, with the spider. The main character has barely satisfied his impulse to kill the disgusting bug, when the unexpected birth of a hundred new spiders takes place; that is to say, contrary to his expectations, the situation is overturned by the arrival of a greater and uncontrollable adversity. The instant feeling of annoyance or helplessness is followed by a faint delight at the sight of such a display of mobility. Thus we find here the hilarious annihilation of will power in favour of fate and of the multiplicity of life. This literary example is brought up because it strikes us as a spectacular image of frustration.

In 1989, virtually at the start of his career, Ivars created a series of black paintings. One of them shows three plates in Braille text, the tactile reading and writing system for the blind. However, after the entire picture was painted black, the artist covered the plates with three sheets of clear acetate so that the raised dots cannot be activated with the fingers for reading. The completely smooth surface of the plates offers a contrast with the jagged and rough surface of the surrounding black marble powder. Due to this, and to the arrangement of the text in three columns, the painting acquires the solemn look of the stone steles of ancient civilizations. Nevertheless, this disappointing “Rosetta Stone” does not seek to become the key to understanding hieroglyphics. Evidently a blind person cannot read these manipulated notations in Braille, but they also emerge as a true enigma for the spectator, who can definitely see the signs that would not normally, in their regular context, be

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These were the words of the author after a loathsome event with a hateful and vicious dog, in the same story. Cf. IVARS, Joaquín, *No siempre (vidas y cuentos)*, Granada, *In-ediciones*, 2001, s/n. “Animales” is also included in *Itinerarios 2000-2001. VIII Becas de Artes Plásticas*, Santander, Marcelino Botín Foundation, 2001, p. 95.

meant for him/her. The paradox is clear: these characters, as part of an instrumental writing system, contain a message to be read, and yet they are indecipherable. The expectation of reading the signs is completely frustrated. Hence the nihilistic literalness of the title: *Ilegible (Illegible)*; for the painting is offered to our gaze, it is displayed, as illegible writing and perhaps as an anticipated frustration at any representation proposal.

In the autumn of 1998, Ivars presented a double exhibition on view in Japan, featuring a number of different installations under the titles *Spaces for banishing*, in Kyoto, and *Spaces for vanishing*, in Tokyo.² For the Kyoto exhibition, the artist placed, as a preamble, the videoinstallation *I can not understand my fortune* at the entrance of a large venue, formerly a kabuki theatre and kimono factory in the textile district of Nishijin. He attached segments of mirrors on one of the walls, simulating the lines of his left hand in a large scale; he then projected a series of performances filmed in Osaka on that same surface. The images show, one after the other, three sessions with Asian fortune-tellers, two men and a woman, in their respective shops, reading the lines of his hand. Although they comply with the requested service, their attitude is somewhat tense: they have to address a Western visitor in Japanese, without any gesture or communicative expression on his part. Next to the projection, a sentence written on the floor stated: *I can not understand my fortune*. In the placard for the piece, the author also explained: “I cannot understand a word and they lack the necessary *feedback* to articulate my impressions in their discourse”³. On the wall, opposite to the projection, the reflections of light from the mirror segments created a random and disorderly “drawing”⁴.

As may be inferred from the context, these “accounts of the future” are recounted and heard in vain, for the person to whom they are specifically directed cannot understand anything. The staging of this language disagreement reads as an irresolvable tension as well as an absurd situation of a certain comical violence. The statement “I can not understand my fortune”, taken literally, raises an impossibility, the demand for *non-power*, offering a contrast against the attitude of *yes-power* to reveal fortune that the palm readers have. In a more metaphorical sense, there seems to be no

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See IVARS, Joaquín, *Documentos de una desaparición. Tokio/Kioto*, exhibition catalogue, Málaga, University Exhibition Hall, 15th of September to 15th of October 1999.

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Cf. The author’s documental archive.

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Any flat surface superimposed on another usually produces a parallax error; this is the case here, since each of the segments of mirror placed on the wall has a slight inclination and therefore, upon the reflection of the light on the opposite wall, everything ordered according to coherent lines in the real mirror segments is now projected as a chaos of segments (all of them suffer alterations in size, geometry and direction).

possible understanding between those who predict the lives of others, by establishing a predetermined path through the procedure of divination -signs that may reveal a particular order or existential meaning- and the man who speaks the language of skepticism, deactivating all safety valves in view of the inapprehensible nature of his own destiny. This bipolar tension between the sense and the nonsense of human existence -or else: determinism and contingency, destiny and transformation, necessity and randomness, order and chaos- is tautological, as it is repeated through the conceptual morphology of both drawings, specular and reflective, on the respective walls facing each other.

A year before this trip to Japan, Ivars devised *La madriguera del espíritu (The Burrow of the Spirit)*, an installation that acquired its potential shape within the exhibition hall itself; that is, a given spatial situation met the response of a specific intervention mode. For the first version, at Cruce art gallery in Madrid, *La madriguera* was adapted to a central space which acted as an exhibition area, crossing and intercommunication point with the other halls.

La madriguera has the airy and temporary appearance of a blueprint, something akin to a temporary trial, an “effective simulation” where we find a design (“imaginary” lines traced on the representation space) but, at the same time, a construction in three-dimensional “lines”, disrupting or disturbing the real space, without physically attacking or altering it. The aim is to map the territory itself by carrying out a simulation with minimal shapes and maximum expansion in the body of reality⁵.

More specifically, the extensive “performance” involves the demarcation of the referred transit area by means of a sequence of straight segments of iron. Black dashed lines attached to the architectural surfaces highlight the white walls or continue along the gray floor delineating and reconfiguring the exhibition space, like a “drawing” made of segments projected onto reality rather than traced on paper⁶. There are certain areas of the segmentation on the plane of the walls, or the

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The use of the word simulation here must not be connected to the idea of “hyperreality” in the way that Jean Baudrillard expressed it in his well-known article “The Precession of Simulacra”. The map does not precede the territory here, simulation does not take the place of reality because the tracing is not carried out on the plane of representation but directly on the surface of the territory (to continue with the French sociologist’s metaphor).

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The segment line has been a basic tool used by Ivars in the intervention of spaces since the early nineties. It works as a simulation line, as a fragile guide to demarcate spaces and create possible paths in the existing reality. Passages from Ivars’ essay “*Proyecto discontinuo*” (1997) which I referred to when writing about *La madriguera del espíritu*, and which I consider to be relevant when it comes to understanding his work in that period, follow: *When I use an extensive model, the segment, units devoid of a specific meaning articulated in discontinuous lines, I am actually tracing paths, making maps, imprecisely delimiting spaces and traversing the most varied surfaces with a sign. / The discontinuous line has appeared since ancient times as a representation of the contingent, the secondary, that is to say: of the draft. Having the connotation*

floor, where the iron line becomes continuous and takes off from the surface, literally rising up in the air, ceasing to be a “drawing” to become a constructed threshold instead. This situation causes some astonishment and visual perplexity since, although the sequence of segments (discontinuous line) unfolds as a projection (“drawing”) on a real plane (wall or floor), the line is physically constructed as a threshold (using two or three iron bars) and placed on an invisible plane. *La madriguera del espíritu* turns the space into a perceptual phenomenon that is at once fragile and complex. A shelter, dwelling or home may be imagined there, without having to build any walls, just by parasitizing those that are available in the exhibition space through a minimal tracing of openings and space boundaries. We should maybe refer to it as a kind of *para-architecture*.

La madriguera then asserts itself in the motif of the threshold, as an immemorial image and rite of passage, while the protection space created by a burrow creates is barely noticeable. Three thresholds in different shapes stand out, given their more accessible location. One of them, formed by a long vertical strip and another short horizontal one, leaning against the wall (measuring 210 x 20 cm) is too narrow; only an extremely thin person or, rather, an “intangible being” would be able to cross it. The second (measuring 50 x 70 cm) is so high up that it would be impossible to even imagine how our body could reach it; one would need to be a “superman” or a “superwoman”. The third (measuring 50 x 50 cm) is very low; one could only get through by creeping along the ground like a reptile or a worm. Of course, anybody could easily access the inside of the burrow by crossing one of the discontinuous lines on the floor. But then, paradoxically, one would be running into the discontinuous, imprecise and vulnerable kind of boundary that the project establishes; one would be crossing an “imaginary drawing”.

The phenomenological perception of these three simple threshold-shapes brings to mind a true *biopsychosocial geometry*. With regard to the lower threshold, it would be hard to ignore Nietzsche’s words in the mouth of a Zarathustra feeling troubled by the “small virtues” of the “small people”: “There hath *everything* become smaller! Everywhere do I see lower doorways: he who is of my type can still go therethrough, but -he must stoop!”⁷. Within this speech on “virtue

*of something not definitive, it allows for appreciations of dynamism, probability and variability. Its nature is therefore that of a trial, superimposed to any kind of event, to which it is basted. / The discontinuous nature of the line ambiguously signifies it as contingency, project, probability, transparency, blurred definition, articulation, traversable limit, connection, etc. / The discontinuous line as a porous, permeable border, that allows for the opening of the system: passable border:/ To baste with segments, barely stitching a connection. To devalue the object but not the connections. It is not a matter of soldering realities, but of bringing them together so that each one can continue to be itself. [...] fine and tense lines (discontinuous, as a prompt of their precariousness) tracing constellations, maps of understanding. IVARS, Joaquín, *Esto no es un catálogo (Hilvanando mundos)*, exhibition catalogue, Madrid, Cruce, September 1997, pp. 5-25.*

that makes small”, the threshold that forces us to stoop would be connected to a comfortable and meek human behaviour driven by cowardice and mediocrity. Since it does work as a space that one can cross, one could describe this threshold as an image of the opening, but of an opening that is biologically, psychologically, morally and socially conditioned. (A memorable image of the rite of passage of the crawling human species). As a contrast, the other two thresholds, which are unfeasible for human anatomy, act as the hidden side of any threshold: they are images of an *inaccessible access*. The irresolvable tension between the offer of an access (will) and the impossibility to cross it (frustration) takes shape here. In these cases, the threshold ceases to mean connectivity between two spaces and instead becomes a barrier, a neutral space that is evocative of the separation: in front (of the threshold) and outside (of the burrow); but also -of course- a metaphor of the disquiet of being, oscillating between its psychic or mental activity (thoughts, emotions, yearnings) and its corporal or physical reality. *La madriguera del espíritu* as the geometry of frustration.

In 1994 -three years before *La madriguera*- Ivars produced an installation named *Terreno de juego*. The author recreated a full scale tennis court in a former warehouse in Madrid, reconverted into an exhibition centre -El Ojo Atómico- that aimed at “creating an autonomous context” in management⁸. In order to do this, he intentionally recycled 300 m² of gray industrial carpeting which had been used for ARCO 94 -an international contemporary art fair held annually in the same city, usually inaugurated with some pomp by the King and Queen of Spain. He composed a rectangular surface of about 10 x 23 m with the carpet, then painted it green -using a hand roller, traced all the lines for the court in white and placed a standard tennis net. Unlike a conventional court where the demarcation lines of the different areas of the game are continuous, the lines here are discontinuous, that is to say, they are traced using a discontinuous line formed by a series of white segments 40 x 10 cm each, approximately. Four foldable chairs (as the chairs of the linesmen) and, placed on their respective seats, four slide projectors with autofocus system complete the installation. The beams of light emitted by each of these projectors that take the place of the judges illuminate four different areas of the court: the centre serviceline, the singles’ sideline, the doubles’ sideline and the net. There is no slide to focus on inside the projector, so the operation of the automatic device is completely distorted: the lense in each projector keeps rocking back and forth, absurd and wildly -in Duchampian lingo, the projectors would be activated as solipsistic masturbatory machines.

Friedrich, *Thus Spake Sarathustra. A Book for All and None*. (Thomas Common, Trans.).

An established legacy of contemporary art as the extension of post-Duchampian objectuality and conceptuality, the post-conceptual and post-minimalism experiences of the process, a sensitivity towards specific sites, situations and contexts -including critical behaviours towards the art institutions and the cultural strategies of the spectacle-, will help us fully understand the veritable complexity of this art installation of the nineties decade. Let us briefly discuss *Terreno de juego*. This piece of industrial carpeting holds powerful connotations, as opposed to the literalism found in the new material from the factory, with its specific features. Although the new coat of paint left no trace of its previous condition, the power to evoke the impregnation of residues, stains or footsteps from its first use as a floor covering for the kind of mass spectacle that a contemporary art fair represents is still floating in its, so to say, psychosocial visual imaginary. *Terreno de juego* provides a metaphorical wrinkle linking the world of sports entertainment to the art scene with the full weight of the parody of “détournées” situations -since this replica or simulation of a tennis court can be read, in the manner of Debord, as a “deviant tennis court”⁹- or with the irony of all the overlapping layers of palimpsest -in the words of Borges, which is clearly how the reused industrial carpeting works here¹⁰. The projectors on their chairs, taking part in the paraphernalia of the entertainment industry -just like the carpeting- work as “main actors” exhibiting their “skills” within this spectacle of the spectacle, playing the part of “expert controllers in artistic-sports events”. *Para-cartography* -that is, the substitution of the lines in the court for discontinuous traces- reinstates the ambivalent, provisional and deterritorialising nature of the space where the game takes place -a game where competition doesn't matter but the difficulty involved in the construction of the game itself does¹¹, transforming the site into a project with all the implications assumed in

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See DEBORD, Guy-Ernest et WOLMAN, Gil J., “Mode d'emploi du détournement”, *Les Lèvres Nues*, 8, (mai 1956). http://sami.is.free.fr/Oeuvres/debord_wolman_mode_emploi_detournement.html

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The term palimpsest, from the Greek “palin” (again) and “psao” (scrape), refers to the manuscript engraved on a parchment that retains traces of an earlier work which, in turn, was erased by scraping or washing with the intention of reusing the material later. In “Pierre Menard, author of Quixote” by Jorge Luis Borges, the figure of the palimpsest takes on a new dimension: both writings, the original (scriptio inferior) and the new (scriptio superior) coincide in their external appearance, word for word. On this topic see GENETTE, Gérard. *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, 1962. Spanish edition: *Palimpsestos. La literatura en segundo grado*, Madrid, Taurus, 1989. (Translated by Celia Fernández Prieto).

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With regard to this issue, the author said: “Es la complejidad del juego lo que interesa al sujeto, y no la simplificación victoria/derrota” (“It is the complexity of the game that is relevant for the subject, and not the victory/defeat simplification”). Cf. “Jugando, jugando. (“Cinco cartas entre Joaquín Ivars y Fernando Castro acerca de la instalación *Terreno de juego*” in *El Ojo Atómico, Opus Cit.*, p. 105. From a more elaborate philosophical point of view, one may read Joaquín Ivars' reflections on the game aunando a Gadamer, Rorty and Deleuze-Guatarri in the essay, based on his doctoral thesis of 2009, *El jugador, el ironista y el artesano cósmico. Máscaras bajo el rostro imperceptible del inútil transversal*, 2014, pp. 19-37. <http://www.uma.academia.edu/joaquinIVARS>. And also the following articles: IVARS, Joaquín, “Artesanía cósmica”,

this form of foreshadowing that is superimposed on the plane of reality: “appreciations of dynamism, probability and variability”, free flow of the contingent, etc.¹² Such para-cartography disturbs the lines-rules that previously operated either as insurmountable barriers or clear and safe limits. Above this, the beams of light from the projectors pointlessly perform their swinging movement -dilating and contracting just a few centimetres, over and over again-, so that the voyeuristic and controlling function of the game, which is characteristic of mechanisms of power, becomes a paradoxical and frustrating practice: these “masturbatory lenses” emit a powerful but completely useless light because they can’t focus on what they are illuminating. Their machinic compulsion remains in state of *impasse*. It is needless to say that we are attending a *spectacle of frustration...*

[Ivars submitted another project named *Autofocus-Autofocus*, which never materialized, since it was rejected by the management of El Ojo Atómico. This piece meant to draw attention on the modes of art territorialization by confronting, in the manner of a palimpsest, the series of temporary exhibitions that had been on view in the venue -with its purportedly “autonomous” selection system of authors and works. Each artistic gesture, embodied in a unique moment in the past, took up a space and its traces, despite all the setting up-dismantling and painting-repainting of the hall, could still be followed to some extent. The author put forward a “detective work” performance: once the spaces taken up by previous exhibitions had been identified -by tracking small physical marks (holes left by nails, worn surfaces, glued and unglued areas, etc.) and documentary images- the spaces taken up by previous exhibitions would be marked again with segments of discontinuous lines, in the manner of the forensic techniques that mark the exact position and posture of the corpse in a crime scene. Some six or seven projectors activated in autofocus mode would be scattered around different points in the gallery. And, while their beams of light illuminated the segmented areas of the walls, floor and ceiling, their lenses, in their clumsy swinging movement, would never manage to focus those common places, those nexus of union, intersection or juxtaposition, densely occupied by art. The rest of the hall would not be illuminated by the projectors, would be a negative designation of the territories still not occupied or controlled by absurd and faulty power mechanisms (institutional, private, alternative or “autonomous”). Despite their veiled presence, we realize that these large *artless* gaps find their power in their potential as art that is *yet to be seen* or

Suplemento 4 (Estética y hermenéutica), *Contrastes. Revista interdisciplinar de filosofía*, Universidad de Málaga, 1999, pp. 99-112; IVARS, Joaquín, “De rerum natura, oraindik. Y+Y+Y artea eta konplexutasunaren zientziak / De rerum natura, aún. Y+Y+Y arte y ciencias de la complejidad”, *Zehar*, 67, Arteleku. Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, 2010, pp. 3-25.

imagined, as opposed to the blinding light of the areas that are more hackneyed by the spectacle of art.]

After this limited and partial sketch of the author's work, meant to establish a basic but necessary context, it is time to introduce some notes on *Impasse*. To this end, I stand at the beginning of the exhibition itinerary, bearing in mind the fact that, as is the case with most of Ivars' works, the art installation -formed, in this case, by three pieces chosen by the artist- completely engulfs the exhibition space, which means that the author is in charge, takes responsibility for his own public presentation.¹³

On the black wall at the entrance, a vinyl text in silver colour, with a mirror effect, warns the visitor of the "show"; the words are legible but appear and disappear according to the reflections caused by the spectator's movement. The author announces, as a preamble, the preparation of the operations stage with three *Spectacles of Frustration: Ladder of Mirror* (Japan, 1998), *Europe's Swing* (Austria, 2006) and *Show-Pendulum* (Spain, 2017). "In the manner of a three-ring circus" - Ivars explains in the vinyl- these three sculptural installations, made of mirror segments and fragments, are aligned one after the other, spread across the ceiling and the floor of the hall to form a tripartite construction and a total environment.

Upon entering the exhibition and perceiving the musical ambience, the spectator will attest to the use of a circus metaphor. A constant drum roll can be heard and, from time to time, intermittent and sudden bursts of a popular circus melody: cheerful, crazy, bustling. We must add to this the light stridence emanating from the diaphanous black space¹⁴: twinkling flashes of small strobe lights and the reflections from the surface of the mirrors, in all directions.

In the arts of the rings, a drum roll precedes the "even harder" performance, an astounding technical feat that will take place, in silence, before the eyes of an expectant audience. However, the drum roll in this case does not culminate as is to be expected: it starts over and over again, infinitely signalling that the show is about to begin but never develops or makes progress. The tiresome sound of the drum marks the suspension of time, the freezing of that instant in a present with no outcome; therefore prefiguring the arrest of all acrobatic movements: the game of *impasse*.

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In his article "Politics of Installation", Groys reflects more profusely on the subject, though we do not necessarily share all the views developed in his arguments. See GROYS, Boris, "Politics of Installation", *e-flux*, journal # 2, january 2009, s/n. (<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/>)

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The exhibition space, housed in a regionalist-style industrial building built between 1921 and 1925 which served as the administrative headquarters of Italcable – an Italian trans-oceanic telegraph company – is a rectangular industrial unit of about 200 m² surface with a wooden gable roof more than 7 m high (on its rotational axis). The walls are painted black.

The first work that the visitor will come across is *Ladder of Mirror*. This sculptural installation was first on view in a Kyoto exhibition hall where Ivars configured *Espacios para el destierro* (*Spaces for banishing*) nineteen years ago, with different pieces and itinerary¹⁵ from the work we are currently discussing. A straight ladder made of mirror segments hangs from the ceiling of the hall, at a distance of about four metres from the floor. Its ten rungs, held by two very thin steel cables, have both sides covered in quicksilver. The ladder is reflected in fragments, on a circular surface of broken mirrors on the floor. Four spotlights on the ceiling and two mini flashes facing towards the piece -one on each wall- make the mirror reflections reverberate in all directions. The strobe lights flank the work at about 150 cm from the ground, so that their incessant blinking, simulating the effect of photography in crowded events, bothers the passing spectator.

It is commonly believed that mirrors are not there for us to look at them, but for us to look into them¹⁶. However, if we build a sculpture or an art installation out of mirrors, it is obvious that our behaviour as spectators may be ambivalent, either looking at it or looking into it. The design of *Impasse* takes into account the fact that the visitor will likely lean in to look carefully at this first piece -or at the other two installations- and see everything that is circumstantially within the reach of his/her gaze: the reflection of a fragmented self, that of other people around, that of the material architectural elements in the site -for example, sections of the wooden ceiling- and, since the structure is formed by segments of mirrors suspended over a circle made of hundreds of broken mirrors, the reflections of some mirror surfaces on others in a self-referential paroxysmal or delirious game. All in all, this specular sculptural theatre was, above all, created to be seen. We can admire the beauty and perfection of the pendant ladder in *Ladder of Mirror*; admire the lightness, the fragility or the geometric iciness of this specular morphology; even be sensitive to the intangible baroque spectacle of its dazzling light reflections. Likewise, the spectator is forced to look downwards, in the direction of the catastrophe of broken mirrors, to discover the falling movement

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For example, the visitor had to cross the lobby where the mentioned videoinstallation *I can not understand my fortune* was located, before he could find *Ladder of Mirror*. In that exhibition, one piece interrelated with the other: one made reference to a kind of pseudo-scientific popular belief or superstition, whereas the other -let us say by compensation- made reference to the belief in a superior or transcendent order beyond what is strictly human. Some -Japanese- visitors identified the ladder as Buddha's thread. However, the piece was not isolated nor lent itself to silent contemplation; while the visitor admired the almost sublime presence of the specular scale and its light projections throughout the atmosphere, the worldly remarks of the three fortune-tellers were clearly audible. Both pieces countered the prospect of an order or belief with its disorder or failure.

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LLEDÓ IÑIGO, Emilio, *Las palabras en su espejo*, Madrid, Real Academia Española, 1994, p. 47.

instead of the upward vertical march.

Back to the sound. The drum roll marking the beginning of the show pairs with the ladder and its ten unblemished, shiny rungs, still new. It announces that the scenography is ready for the impossible exercise that should make us marvel, in principle. We feel attracted to the magic of the circus, the logic of this kind of show: the technical prowess that will allow for the bodily sublime, that will display human perfection. Some equivalences are intuited only from this perspective: openness, vertical access, expectation, will power, human ambition, ascent, lofty perspectives, etc. But, as we know, the drum roll will start again, heading back towards its own past, and its repetition predicts immobility. For its part, the time of the ladder is that of a frozen instant, of a perpetual present. However, the round bed full of fragments accounts for the past while sending us back to the future -predicting what will happen over and over again. If the constant threat of a broken neck constantly haunts the acrobat¹⁷ in the popular theatre that the circus represents, the bad omen of a broken mirror is fulfilled in the specular ladder. The sculptural tragicomedy, in the end, is perceived with a swinging motion, as a fatal attraction. Up there, a dream of perfection: the airy acrobatic lightness that would allow a graceful transport on a ladder made of mirrors; down here, the clairvoyance of reality: the threatening fragility of the mirror that is shattered by the force of gravity and the weight of the bodies. The spectator perceives how the performance will begin and end at a single glance, even when the tragic spectacle of human action has been omitted. (There is no “decisive event” with a walk on actor who will stain the service sheet of these *sine macula* mirrors in red.) The wonder of the circus show vanishes at the resounding realization that the impossible is actually completely unfeasible.

But, should we imagine the heaviness of bodies or the heaviness of souls when we look at *Ladder of Mirror*? We all know that a free-standing ladder is an immemorial and mythical image of man's vertical connection to the celestial sphere. Christian mystical thought offers multiple versions of this archetypal figure, all of them derived from the ladder dreamt by Jacob in the biblical account: the ladder of the humility of Benedict of Nursia, the spiritual ladder of John Climacus, the secret ladder of contemplation of Saint John of the Cross, etc. The number of the ladder's rungs - whether ten, twelve or even thirty- adjusts the difficulty of the ascent, from the first step to the last, symbolizing the rite of passage to the afterlife. However, in its form and function, the ladder is a binomial of opposites, a vertical tension to climb or descend. Some mystics noticed this disjunctive

Barbey d'Aurevilly stated that the circus is not only popular theatre, the most popular of shows. It is also the most aristocratic and heroic, the only theatre where perfection is the rule. Other theatres allow omission and God knows that much is omitted. But in the circus, where art has all the dignity of danger, should the actor or actress -whose person is the whole role and even the whole play- be unsure, make a bad move, be distracted, have an instant of forgetfulness, a lassitude... ;they could break! The body, just like the spirit, has its own involuntary mistakes and pays for them in a terrible way... In the circus, mediocrity could break its neck... what a delightful prospect! See BAILLY, Brigitte, “El circo: mezcla de géneros”, *Folios*, Segunda época, nº 29, Primer Semestre de 2009, p. 64.

nature of the ladder explaining it in their own way; such is the case of Saint John who said in *Dark Night*: “We may also call it a ladder because, even as the ladder has those same steps in order that men may mount, it has them also that they may descend; even so is it likewise with this secret contemplation, for those same communications which it causes in the soul raise it up to God, yet humble it with respect to itself. For communications which are indeed of God have this property, that they humble the soul and at the same time exhalt it.”¹⁸

The metaphysical upward movement needs to leave behind the imperfections of the flesh in its *fuga mundi*: the lowly corporal nature ensconced in the world needs to be annulled for the spiritual rising above this world to be able to triumph; that is what the glorious apotheosis of the saints is about. Which explains why mediaeval Christian writers condemned acrobats, dancers and contortionists, accusing them of being demonic beasts, for their body exercises¹⁹. However the Heavens, God and all Saints were finished after Nietzsche, and it was only then that the artistic figure of the acrobat took on a heroic dimension. But the “superhuman” was also born as the new condition of something higher. Despite this historical perspective, the time when men and women sought to rise above their physical and/or psychic capacities has not yet gone by. And we do not need to imagine a top sportsperson pursuing a dangerous activity: we all aspire to achieve some kind of rising or to encounter a stroke of luck in life that will distance us from our final and certain fatal outcome. The apotheosis continues to take place, though the ways have radically changed.

Saints and acrobats did not get along in the Middle Ages, but the acoustic metaphor of *Impasse* intersects with the sculptural scenography, matching physical and spiritual exercises on the same level. Through effort and suffering, both samples of human fate illustrate perseverance in extreme exercises. Didn't both saints and acrobats specialize in impossible feats? But let us not fool ourselves, *Impasse*, the tragicomedy, does not build an image of success in the vertical climb to the heavens, and does not nourish the near superhuman power of history's heroes. The bed of broken mirrors represents the utter failure of the human being. *Ladder of Mirror*, just like the threshold in *La madriguera del espíritu*, is also a representation of an *inaccessible access*. The irresolvable tension between the possibility of an access (a ladder for the ascent) and the impossibility of crossing it (the catastrophe of the fall); in this case, it is the comic drama of verticality.

Beyond the pessimism that helplessness, failure and fatal outcomes reveal, *Ladder of Mirror*

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DE LA CRUZ, San Juan, *La Noche Oscura*, Libro segundo, capítulo 18, 2. /St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, Book 2, chapter 18, 2

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To delve further into this matter see PIETRINI, Sandra, “Los juglares, cornamusas del diablo: las repercusiones iconográficas de la condena de los entretenedores”, *Medievalia*, 15, 2012, 295-316.

is, above all, an image of the inexhaustible human struggle for the impossible. Despite the uselessness of all action, since the number is repeated over and over again by inertia, we witness the triumph of obstinacy and the perseverance of the human being in an absurd exercise. In his extraordinary essay *You must change your life*, Peter Sloterdijk tells us about “the active life” of all times and cultures; a life based on practice, on *habitus*; of the life built through practising. He refers to the *circulus virtuosus* involved in any “autoplastic action”, that is to say, to the idea that exercise based on repetition, resuming the activity to improve it with a positive feedback system would explain “how accomplishment leads to higher accomplishment and success to expanded success”²⁰. *Ladder of Mirror* reveals that *habitus*, the repetition of the exercise over and over again, a predisposition to effort through the unreachable or the eternal return of the rising after a fall, is inherent in the human condition. It is no wonder that Ivars wrote at the end of his story *Two Fishermen*, narrating the tragic death of a fisherman: “In spite of all, we must continue to fish; in the strait, where the currents fight for hegemony, or in the absolutism of the ocean where the waves are worth very little”²¹. And because the training system for self-improvement remains intact in this metaphysical and/or circus ladder, the repetition of success now transmuted into repetition of failure, we could now speak here, paradoxically and in a different way, of incremented incapacitation, that is to say, of *Ladder of Mirror* as *circulus infructuosus*.

I stand now in front of the second “ring”: *Europe’s Swing*. On the floor, a new circular bed of broken mirrors is similar in size and shape to the previous one; but the section that is suspended above this other construction is no longer a structure for transit, but some kind of “ludic” artifact. Both installations use straight segments made of mirror as the basic unit for repetition, and in addition to that use identical illumination -four spotlights on the ceiling and two stroboscopic lights on each wall. From a different point of view, they share the fact that the spectator can mentally project some kind of physical movement on them. Although the structure is fixed, we recreate the human impulse of going up and down the ladder. The apparatus in the second circus ring is, however, more complex: it is a broader, heavier and more visible frame -the ladder is lighter and less perceptible- formed by multiple pieces that would swing back and forth if they were to be pushed. On the other hand, the circus performance represented in *Ladder of Mirror* would have to be practised individually; unlike the scenography of *Europe’s Swing* which would require a group, a gathering of several potential performers...

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SLOTERDIJK, Peter, *Has de cambiar tu vida. Sobre antropotécnica*, Traducción de Pedro Madrigal, Valencia, Pre-textos, 2012, p. 409 / SLOTERDIJK, Peter, *You Must Change Your Life. On Anthropotechnics*. (Wieland Hoban, Trans.)

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Cf. IVARS, Joaquín, *No siempre (vidas y cuentos)*, *Opus Cit.*, s/n.

At the centre of the total atmosphere created by *Impasse*, rises the reconstruction of *Europe's Swing*; an installation first on view in Austria within the context of the *Internationalen Workshop 2006 mit KünstlerInnen der 25 EU: Diversität und Rivalität. Diagonale Schnitte zwischen Multikult und Fanatismus*²², when the country held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. From a circular iron structure attached to the ceiling, suspended by long iron chains about six metres long, hang the twenty-five swings that make up *Europe's Swing*. The seats made of mirror - each measuring 40 x 15 x 0,5 cm- rise approximately eighty centimetres above the ground and the author wrote on the opaque back of the mirror -in white acrylic paint- the names of each of the European Union member countries in the year 2006, in their respective language characters and spelled backwards. Though hidden from the gaze of the spectators, should anyone be curious enough to get closer to the piece, the names would be revealed as fractured mirror images -the reflection of the bottom of the seats on the bed of broken mirrors will let us read the names of countries correctly, but in fragments.

Europe's Swing traces a circumference made of twenty five uniform segments of mirror in the air, which have their seal of identity on the reverse, displaying Europe's multilingualism in the specific graphs of each country. When viewed from above, the said circumference conforms a perceptible discontinuous line demarcating spatial boundaries. The area within, the "European circle" -also in the sense of a club or society whose members meet in a specific place, is offered as a homogeneous and empty space. (An interior that allows free movement, perhaps?) The discontinuous, specular and stabilized geometry of the circumference, with its segments at equal distance to the centre, refers to an ideal of perfection that is very different to that of the ladder; we now find, horizontally and low down, the economic political dream of the unification and integration of Europe. The chain of connotative signs flares up: project, union circle, unity of the multiple, order, balance, harmony, equality, opening, enlarging...; it is hard to avoid the motto of the EU: "United in diversity". But, of course, we cannot stray from the objectuality represented by that same geometry: the segments that delimit the space are also boards to sit on, hung from chains, inviting the spectator to imagine their likely use. (We greatly appreciate the fact that the author refers to the European geopolitical problem without having to resort to the simple and overexposed resource of the "rectified flag" which "communicator-artists" enjoy so much- with a whole showcase of supposedly critical redesigns of the circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background.)

With all those seats set in a circle and the great length of its chains, *Europe's Swing* is

reminiscent of a chair swing ride. It is obviously not a rotating platform, the seats would not move evenly if we started to move them, their trajectory would not be a circumference and they would not be subject to a centrifugal force. In any case, the “fairground attraction” *Europe’s Swing* is ready to start on its possible itineraries. The constant drum roll and the annoying circus music, elusive and merry, play on the background. We recreate the multiple swinging movement system (to the rhythm of a swing?). We can imagine each one swinging according to its own wishes or possibilities within the single geographically unified space²³: the catastrophic collisions between the fragile seats of the countries are inevitable. It all leads to thinking that the playground attraction is a parody of a more serious game, where the internal rivalry and lack of synchronicity between the different speeds in Europe unfolds. This failure becomes blatant at ground level, upon the sight of the frustrating circle of broken mirrors and the images reflected on those destructive and sharp surfaces. A pure spectacle of luminous resonance and chaos takes place whenever we approach this precipice of simultaneity, that is at once cubist and abysmal: lengths of chains, sections of the ceiling, the spectators’ torn heads and, more peripherally, fragments of segments with their national graphs mutilated. But... that is not all! -as the ring master would say. The twenty five swings in a circle form an impressive cylindrical structure with fifty chains hanging from the ceiling, each one of them measuring five metres long. This makes the swing ride look like an “iron cage”, and its chains act as an impassable border, a metaphor of the stringent border control in the EU. *Europe’s Swing* then emerges in all its roughness with social images of sharp contrast; namely: while the members swing legitimately within the Schengen space, illegal migration is taking place all over Europe’s despicable and humiliating recesses; it takes effort to slide in, huddling -as in the threshold of *La madriguera del espíritu-* getting wounded amongst the ruins, with the broken glass; the ruins of frustration both for those inside and those outside.

As a spectator trying to take in this art installation as a whole, I reach the third of the rings and discover that *Show-Pendulum* closes the threefold cycle of this sort of *theatrum mundi* where parody also tempts tragedy. This forces me to reconsider what is at stake in *Impasse*, beyond all one-sided views; that is to say, what these three stagings of bitter circus humour suggest in their interrelations. The first of these three tragic parodies would deal with an *I* inserted in the tradition of a *circulus virtuosus*; the second, with a *we* framed in the paradoxical modernity of the transnational; and the third and last would transform the two previous variables into a more complex copy of the interconnections between the *I-we-world* in the narcissistic space of global capitalism²⁴.

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Cf. FONTAINE, Pascal, *Doce lecciones sobre Europa. Comprender las políticas de la Unión Europea*, Luxemburgo, Oficina de Publicaciones de la Unión Europea, 2014, p. 30.

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In his text for this same catalogue to which I admit I’m indebted, Ivars, Ivars talks about “key concepts” in this same sense,

Near the black walls at the end of the hall, the industrially manufactured artifact that surrounds the third circle of broken mirrors is formed by twelve double full length mirrors -measuring 100 x 50 cm each- fixed on iron tripods. Despite the specular glare of the complex, the piece named *Show-Pendulum* -with the same illumination as the rest- offers a more compact, heavy and somber metallic appearance. At the centre of the circular frame, six metres high, hangs its brightest touch of colour: a ball of mirror, thirty centimetres in diameter, of the kind that is commonly used, for its spectacular effect, in lighting shows for party, music and/or dance events (concerts discotheques, party halls, etc.) or as a decorative element in shop windows and commercial scenography. Without losing its silver tones, the surface has been painted in blue and yellow laquer, with some reddish and green touches, to give it the somewhat faded and informal appearance of a globe. The world-globe suspended by a thick steel cable acts as a pendulum, and although it is presented immobile, as a sculptural object, we can imagine its oscillating movement from end to end, successively striking each one of the full length mirrors on their inner surface. The device articulates a rare space to look on, and to look at oneself, both activities carried out from within -by the “world”- or from without - by the spectators that may place themselves around the enclosure. The mirrors display a list of handwritten words in red permanent marker on each side (in the loving, or perhaps psychopathic style of writing in lipstick?). Twelve metal paperclips crown the mirrors connoting them as notepads or rather as drawing boards, with their tripod-easels. They are heterogeneous lists of trades related to the world of the circus mixed with schools of thought, ideologies, practices, visions of the world, etc., that can partially define the identity of a group of people. In reading all of them we can account for the saturation of specialties that govern our absurd existence. (Even the exchange of words beside the ending of the word in each mirror -“and other artists”- could spark laughter or a somehow skeptical attitude.) The lists are presented in twenty four different combinations: the twelve external ones are read independently and face to face with the spectator who, in turn, is reflected in the mirror with the background of the black wall or the fragments of *Europe’s Swing* - depending on what mirror one is gazing at; however, the twelve internal sides can only be perceived in the mutual reflections of the confronting mirrors that form an obfuscated and multiplied spatial virtuality with the globe, repeated everywhere. In this face to face with the mirrors, we re-do the lists, we search for our own identitary menu, “choose” our predilections and weaknesses; reflective and reflected (object-subjects) we build “our own brand image”.

The spatial organization of *Show-Pendulum* could be interpreted as a sort of inverted panopticon; for that same reason, it is reminiscent of the attraction of a Sex Peep Show, devoid in this case of doors and cabins, with the consequent loss of anonymity in the congregation of voyeurs that can

such as “políticas del yo-nosotros-mundo” and “sociedades de la tradición, de la modernidad y de la postmodernidad” and, when referring to *Show-Pendulum*, uses expressions such as “narcissistic spectacle” and “globalizing spectacle”.

now in turn be observed too. The centre of this spectacle of sidereal contours is the world globe that the assembled I-we contemplate in the manner of a voyeur peeping through the gaps that separate the mirrors from their tripods: original and unique, or multiplied in specular images of instant propagation. All those points of view are equidistant and “offshore”. We may look at the world sphere from any of them: another consumer object offered as the centre of attention in the proximity of the spectacle. (The globe ball “growing hotter” through the ardor of our desires, displaying itself everywhere, at all times... will it finally melt away?). We gaze at the star of the show from “outer space”, small and trite. So fragile. So over-exploited. I imagine (we imagine?) that the surface of this body, saturated with expansionist activities, has suffered an “implosion”. That we have reached the cosmic phenomenon consisting in the abrupt and irreversible decline of the only planet in our solar system that we can inhabit. However paradoxically, the consumer overabundance in this final phase of globalization continues on its crazy course; as insatiable users, we do not hesitate to devour the images repeated over and over again in the ultra-speed that technological ease allows: any point of the globe is deserving of our anxious gaze. Our individual and/or collective selfishness knows no limits (consumers without borders).

The tragedy still sounds like a parody with the comings and goings of the circus tune. The stellar nature of the world globe through the inverted panoptic system of mirror multiscreen in *Show-Pendulum* is also a physical-analogical parody of the global narcissistic hyperspectacle (unlike the “artistic guerrilla” that performs the “activist role” over-identifying with the immateriality of digital codes). Always about to start with the drum roll, stuck in the same repetitive instant, we can still recreate the ellipsis between the scenography of the stationary pendulum-balloon and the trace of the final catastrophe (the bed of fractured mirrors with the broken words). Let us see, then, how the globalized machinery works -after that, the spectator can think it is the “even harder” act that *Impasse* represents...

The movement of the pendulum-sphere is Foucauldian: it would always oscillate in a straight line and, since the earth rotates on itself, the deviation of the ball would gradually make it crash against the twelve mirrors: it would hit any mirror first and then the one located on the opposite end, and so on. (Isn't this “playful experience” hyperstimulating?) The world wants to be metaphorically seen in the foreground: let us imagine that, in its driving force, the globe approaches the mirror that says “tamers, arms races, microspecialists, ringmasters, lobbyists, absolutists, unionists, tightrope walkers, modernists, idealists, strongmen, nihilists, formalists and other artists”. (Again, each list intersperses the expert physics of circus bodies with other specialised trends that can give voice to different human groups.) Immediately, the clash of glass prevents the globe from being reflected on that menu of identities. But the self-destruction of the ball, and the breaking of the mirror that could

have reflected its image, also affect the mirror -obviously- on its internal side where each voyeur could be looking at himself or reading the list of heterogeneous nouns/words/names. (I-world interconnections.) And the world globe in its narcissistic deviation dance will continue the disaster by crashing against all of its specular stand-ins until it reaches its total destruction and that of this fragile glass structure. From the abysmal exterior of the blackest night, in the impasse of the global crisis, we discover, frustrated, the complete cycle of the violent (and very ancient) history of terrestrial globalization, as (eye) witnesses, this time without the reversible interactive procedures that will allow us to stop our great cosmic shipwreck in time.

[Oh, foolish world, you haven't stopped moving! You should have gone to sleep in a padded cage so as "not to shatter into pieces" like those who, centuries ago, fearful of shattering into a thousand shards of glass, suffered the narcissistic trauma of fearing they were made of it. And no, Alice is definitely no excuse.]