

In praise of the insurgent architect / Jordi Font i Agulló

LA PORTA ALS NASSOS

CASTING

But these people remain compelled
By the highest, compelled and subdued.
The vileness of those above has no limits
And even though they wanted to improve,
Nothing would change.
The mistake is their system.
Oppression and disorder. A brutal system,
incomprehensible.

The character Joan in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*
by Bertolt Brecht

After the learning and suffering she acquired from the descent into the abyss of labour exploitation, Joan Dark, already ill and about to be canonized as a martyr – and, therefore, assimilated – by a political system which made her lose the innocence of the well-meaning Christian, expresses in a transparent manner – in the quotation that heads our text – her clear disenchantment by describing the amoral principles which activate the functioning of the capitalist economy. The confirmations which Brecht's unfortunate Joan arrives at coincide, to a large extent, with the best outlined analyses of what is for the present called neocapitalism. Certainly things have changed, but the old habits are maintained in essence if we set up our judgements of value in the world stage. There are even sufficient indications for considering that we are submerged in an instability which could constitute a sign of the degree of senility¹ which affects the established order. A juncture of these characteristics implies that politics acquires a great importance and that culture is not left out. In fact, politics is always present in all fields, and it is obvious that kingdoms of pure arts² do not exist. Toni Giró, with *La porta als nassos*, becomes, in fact, this model of artist-intellectual who, by a careful use of methods, creates a work which contains the critical elements that are valid for questioning this pretended normality that overwhelms us.

As far as the evolution of the planetary economy, it is evident that asymmetry is imposing itself day after day, and as a result it is not surprising that certain clairvoyant writers question the ideological ambiguity of concepts such as globalization. Fundamentally, a terminology which says very little about the consolidation of an unequal geographic development³ of incalculable dimensions, the result of the design and (re)design of the geographic and social space in the image of the necessities of the

incontinence of capitalism. Without a doubt, the liberal prophecies of Adam Smith⁴ have come true, but with unexpected results. If we do not forget the global perspective, nowhere is it seen that the general good is associated with the expansion of markets. Despite this, the political and economic ascendancy exerted by the centre made up of the main capitalist states – not without explicit violence on many occasions – has made it possible that certain circumstances, which can only be qualified as cruel, have been accepted as being inherent to society. As Pierre Bourdieu⁵ pointed out, every established order tends to naturalize its arbitrary nature. In this way, the self-regulating market theory becomes the core of the much celebrated neoliberal (anti)Utopia⁶ in the present-day world. And the media attention this formula of the hypothetical redistribution of productive resources enjoys is so great that an idea has set deep in the social sphere, an idea which in its time was so well-loved by the neo-Conservative Margaret Thatcher, and that can be summed up with the simplicity of the words: there is no alternative.

And so, we are faced with a failure – that of the neoliberal paradigm as a creative source of welfare and riches for everyone – which, paradoxically, presents itself as an ultimate triumph, as if it were a happy end of history. A situation of these characteristics arouses an alarming bewilderment which requires the intervention of critics from different fields. In this line, as some writers endorse,⁷ the exhibition space can also be a place in which to present and construct completely new images that are capable of opposing the hegemonic narratives. Without a doubt, Toni Giro's work *La porta als nassos* includes enough components to act as a constructor of a relevant and revealing counter-narrative of the world in which we live. In this sense, it must be noted that he creates an admirable spatial display with an unusual metaphorical use for the daily urban element which is the revolving door. An extremely efficient visual synthesis of what we could qualify, in terms of Immanuel Wallerstein, as the contemporary world-system. In the video installation everything is perfectly balanced and that allows us to refer directly to the poetic capacities of Toni Giró when he confronts unmistakable political aspects such as those related to the codification of the most important mechanisms which make late capitalism work. In this work there is no unduly dramatized gesture, nor is there any representational excess, nor any irresponsible celebration of nomadism. At the same time, the trace of the artist's role as an ethnographer,⁸ so frequently repeated during the past decade and not always in a sufficiently convincing manner, is barely perceptible. In this case, starting from the photographic and videographic capturing of two opposite poles in the urban scene, this is the figure of the immigrant, as an archetype of the excluded, and of the revolving door as a symbol of the omnipotent power of the transnational capitalism of the last generation – but also of state requests –, Toni Giró presents us at a desired distance with certain daily images which appear almost irrelevant. The coldness is broken by the invitation, on the other hand not at all forced, which the artist makes to the viewer to physically come through the door of real dimensions, crossed over in turn by photographic impressions which become an optic spiral when the mechanism is switched on. It is a game of superpositions of different real and virtual planes – the images of the displaced immigrants with an attitude oscillating between resignation and expectation are interpreted with the corporeality of the visitor – in which there stands out the possible interchange of identities between the bodies involved like a reminder of a social context in

which insecurity reigns; without any manner of a doubt no one is absent from this historicity packed tight by inequality.

As a matter of fact, the artist proposes an interactive step, similar to a snare, towards the centre of the two already mentioned poles, which has a kinetically disorientating and spatially decentring effect on the user at the same time as it facilitates the entrance into a sensual and visual field prepared to articulate a body of complex and suggestive thought.. This ranges from the misery of the most dispossessed to control in the most authoritarian manner, passing through nuances such as social exclusion, otherness, the persistence of tangible frontiers and others which are not so evident – but not for that reason less determinant –, despite the deterritorialization of capital and the work force, the bureaucraticization of administrations, the routine of daily life, the spectacularization of the urban landscape or mystifications such as the society of transparency and the generation of agreements by means of the instruments of representative democracy among others. After all, the video installation is a metaphorical element of the different camouflages which adopts what makes up the core of the prevailing order; that is, the exploitation among those who compose it and the growing tendency towards the parasitic action of the strongest on the weakest.

It is true that Toni Giró takes on a great responsibility and works as if he were an “insurgent architect”⁹ who takes charge of the articulation of a project directed towards the enrichment of the critical perception, of both our most immediate context and – with a solid telescopic examination – of the more global framework in which the contradictions of capitalism are visualized with greater intensity. If we focus on the characteristics of the work, it can be deduced that the artist does not agree with the present order of things, and no trace of maximalism can be glimpsed in his political-aesthetic view. On the contrary, it is noticeable that he realizes the way is tangled and is conditioned by restrictions which make it improbable that his work should rapidly have a direct echo¹⁰ in the public sphere. However, this is not the reason why we should underestimate the erosion that these artistic discourses can cause to the neoliberal rhetoric, at the same time as they foster a criticism which makes it possible to achieve an extension of justice in detriment to the strategies which give priority to the acquisition of material benefits. For example, while this degenerated Utopia (the “hope zone” as defined by Toni Giró – also efficiently cristallized in another work present in the exhibition, entitled *Casting*: a cry of alarm against passiveness and indifference –, unemployment will not be considered a result of the dysfunctional behaviour of individuals; in other words, that the “excluded”¹¹ will dispose of the tools to interpret their unfavourable situation based on a theory of exploitation which requires the establishment of a relation between their luck and that of those more favoured or privileged. Or that the concept of freedom is not outraged by individuals such as Silvio Berlusconi¹² who, with his negative understanding of the term, converts it into an alibi for cementing a brakeless individualism; a short cut straight towards reckless competition.

La porta als nassos makes obvious the deficiencies in a way of organizing the world which does not allow a moment of tranquillity. Unfortunately, the logic of the continuous movements of capitalism is that of the scorched earth. When faced with so many blows in the face, we can end up thinking the

same as Joan Dark, when she discovers the truth about what the world in which we live is founded on. It is necessary then, as Alex Callinicos maintains,¹³ to go in search of the breaking up of an order that imposes disorder and cares little for general human necessities. It is doubtless a question of the unrenounceable and indestructible objectives of the deepening of democracy. In a vehement manner Toni Giró brings an ethical dimension and remarkable poetics against this injustice.

1. See Samir Amin, "El capitalismo senil", *El Viejo Topo*, No. 173, December 2002, pp. 49-63.
2. See Edward W. Said, *Representaciones del intelectual*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1996.
3. See David Harvey, *Espacios de esperanza*, Madrid, Akal, 2003.
4. See Giovanni Arrighi, *El largo siglo XX*, Madrid, Akal, 1999.
5. Quoted by James C. Scott, *Los dominados y el arte de la resistencia*, Tafalla, Txalaparta Ed., 2003, p. 118.
6. See Serge Halimi, "Notre utopie contre la leur", *Manière de voir (Le Monde diplomatique)*, No. 72, December 2003-January 2004, pp. 94-95.
7. See Sven Lütticken, "Secreto y publicidad. La reactivación de la vanguardia", *New Left Review*, No. 17, 2002, pp. 99-117.
8. On this matter, see Hal Foster, *El retorno de lo real. La vanguardia a finales de siglo*, Madrid, Akal, 2001.
9. We take this concept from David Harvey, *op. cit.*,
10. See Antoni Llena, "Artistes i museu (2)", *Avui*, 27 November 2003.
11. See Luc Boltanski; Ève Chiapello, *El nuevo espíritu del capitalismo*, Madrid, Akal 2002.
13. See Paul Ginsborg, "Las ambiciones patrimoniales de Silvio Berlusconi", *New Left Review*, No. 22, September/October 2003, pp. 34-75.
13. Alex Callinicos, *Contra la Tercera vía. Una crítica anticapitalista*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2001.