

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE

EDUARDO PÉREZ SOLER

In recent years a number of incidents have taken place that have cast doubt on many of the political, cultural and scientific paradigms prevailing in the modern age. On the one hand, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the defeat of so-called "real Socialism" – a system that in some countries managed to reduce social differences but was unable, however, to guarantee individual freedom – have called into question the possibility of establishing political régimes based upon total equality among people. Similarly, Neo-Conservative theses existing in most countries, based on economic standpoints over and above all other social considerations, have led to the dismantling of public social protection systems in Europe, endangering the welfare state. To this we should add the consolidation of a globalised economic system – based on new forms of information technology and on unrestricted circulation of capital – that has undermined the ability of national States to regulate economic activity and effectively defend the interests of citizens. All these facts have led to the loss of legitimacy of democratic systems as we knew them, forcing us to redefine our forms of political action and our strategies to defend the political and cultural conquests of modernity.

On the other hand, the uniformity of habits generated by globalisation, the redefinition of sexual rôles as a result of production requirements and the accomplishment of the demands made by sexual minority groups such as feminists and homosexuals, have given rise to new gender strategies and to the decline of patriarchal society. Such phenomena have been accompanied by the arrival of hitherto unknown forms of religiousness and to new value systems. All in all, the patterns governing family ties, interpersonal relations and approaches to the transcendental world have suffered a radical transformation.

Finally, the new forms of technology have even called into question the very concept of subject. A number of theoreticians declare that the generalisation of new forms of computer technology and of genetic engineering is shaping a type of being halfway between man and machine. Disciplines such as nanotechnology, bio-computer sciences and biotechnology have opened up the perspective of generating hybrid subjects, subjects in which natural features are combined with artificial components, thereby making inevitable a new definition of the patterns affording meaning to the concept of mankind.

**THE DECLINE OF MODERN ART**

The crisis of modern society has also been expressed in the remarkable transformations experienced by art over the past few decades. These changes have been so radical that they have led many theoreticians to consider that the paradigms that granted meaning to the artistic production of the nineteenth century and a good part of the twentieth century lack validity in our day and age. The art of today is the result of the abandonment of the values of modernity, which began to be questioned in the sixties, although not until the last two decades of the twentieth century was awareness of the magnitude of the crisis of modern artistic values fully reached.

The crisis of modern art can be interpreted from the point of view of the failure of its political objectives, and from that of the loss of interest in its stylistic explorations.

Consequently, if we bear in mind political considerations, the discredit of modern creation is determined by the inability of the latter to become the appropriate instrument to establish the emancipating

ideals it had advocated. As is well known, one of the main objectives of most avant-garde artists consisted in creating an art that would release man from alienation and servitude. Modern art was essentially a revolutionary art, inasmuch as it was guided by a will to improve the living conditions of all individuals. In order to accomplish their intentions, avant-garde creators used a wide range of resources: while Dadaists and Surrealists appealed, respectively, to irrationality and to the unconscious in order to free subjects from the constraints of an increasingly planned society, Constructivists and Productivists believed that the technification and rationalisation of reality would become the most appropriate tools to attain an egalitarian society. Even though they employed very diverse and often opposed strategies, the different avant-garde movements shared the will to build a Utopian world where men would find redemption.

Nonetheless, we can establish that the ideals of transformation of modern creators remained far from being accomplished. We now realise that avant-garde art was unable to fulfil the objectives that prompted its inception. Conceived with the intention of producing an effective influence on society, it finished up being confined in a museum, far from where the events of real life actually take place. Created as a liberating instrument, it ended up becoming one of the main fetishes of the alienating universe of the society of spectacle. Generated by a revolutionary impulse, it became a pure commodity. Such is the irony of fate: seen in retrospect, modern art has become a parody of what it truly wished to be, a powerful resort for the transformation of reality. Unburdened of its transgressive potential and totally trivialised, it has become a docile instrument for the legitimisation of present culture.

If we bear in mind stylistic considerations however, we can also corroborate that the values of modernity in art have lost validity in our times. For many theoreticians, one of the most typical features of modern creation was the will to define the specific and distinctive traits of each artistic genre. Operating within this logic, the modern artist abode by the rules employed and imposed by each medium, striving to avoid contamination from the resources employed in other means of expression. Guided by an ideal of purity, the modern artist endeavoured to produce painting that was essentially painting, sculpture that was essentially sculpture and photography that was essentially photography. This search for specificity required a task of purification, of suppression of all elements foreign to the creative genre one was working in. Therefore, following these ideas, the history of modern art is governed by the search for purity of the different artistic media and their clear-cut separation from all others. In this sense, Arthur C. Danto declares: "The history of modernism is the history of purgation, or generic cleansing, of ridding the art of whatever was inessential to it."<sup>1</sup>

This essentialist will is clearly thrown into relief in the theories of the American critic Clement Greenberg, chief theoretician of Abstract Expressionism, the last artistic movement of modernity. For Greenberg, the evolution of modern painting was marked by a tendency to abandon illusionist effects in representation in order to obtain works that emphasised the pictorial plane itself. The idea was, in the views of this critic, to do away with all sense of spatiality so as to achieve a totally flat painting – the essence of the pictorial reality. Thus, the development of painting from Impressionism, Cézanne and Picasso to Jackson Pollock, was marked by a gradual exploration of the literalness of the pictorial plane. For Greenberg, painting would only truly be painting when it had freed itself from all the elements polluting representation

and illusion. And it is precisely according to these radically strict approaches that we can understand works such as Pollock's drip paintings and Ad Reinhardt's monochromes.

It is important to stress that this essentialist task draws us closer to an aesthetics of the sublime. Following the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the tendency towards refinement characterising avant-garde creation was related to the need to seek everything that previous art had been unable to depict. Modern artists gradually abandoned narrative and representation, convinced as they were that it was possible to depict the transcendental reality lying beyond the ever-changing visible world. As a last resort, they addressed their efforts at representing all that which is initially non-representable, using art in their attempts to portray a reality that is non-portrayable. According to Lyotard, "To make believe there is something that cannot be either seen or made to be believed: this is the realm of modern painting."<sup>2</sup> To try and reveal the non-representable is a paradoxical task. For this reason, avant-garde art gave rise to stark proposals and question marks, the meanings of which became increasingly incomprehensible. In this way works such as those by Pollock or Reinhardt, extremely refined from a formal point of view, were always on the verge of non-sense, of the absence of meaning. Such works were on the brink of inexpressiveness, that is, of silence.

For some authors, silence is closely related to sublimity. In this sense the British philosopher Edmund Burke included silence among the great phenomena of privation, the source of the feeling of the sublime "All general privations are great, because they are terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence*."<sup>3</sup> This is precisely where the sublimity of modern painting resides: if the absence of a phenomenon is the vehicle of a horrific experience, modern art, in its journey towards the annihilation of meaning, ended up becoming an instrument of the sublime. In the final analysis, the beholder could only experience a painful feeling when facing a form of art that led him to the privation of language. Founded on constant denial, the art of modernity cancelled out the experience of meaning and thereby became the vehicle of this terrible and fascinating experience of the sublime.

However, this radical purification of painting was doomed to failure. Proposals such as the gestural works of the Expressionists or Reinhardt's monochromatic surfaces stood for extreme experiments marking an impassable limit. It was no longer possible to remove any more fortuitous elements from painting, just as it was no longer possible to grant artistic creation a more insignificant nature. The emergence of movements such as Pop Art in the sixties entailed a radical change of direction in creative practices and implied the abandonment of modern artistic tradition. Artists washed their hands of the rigorousness and essentialism of their predecessors and, at the same time, ceased to show an interest in the sublime – or at least for the sort of sublime feeling that concerned modern artists. Far from venturing in search of the specificity of the various creative media, the art that followed Abstract Expressionism, an art we could call "post-modern", was characterised by the tendency towards hybridism and contagion between genres. Similarly, this art abandoned the will to occupy the borders of silence and so resume the search for different forms of expressiveness.

### WHAT YOU SEE IS NOT WHAT YOU SEE

The identity crisis affecting modern creation is still evident in the oeuvre of artists today. The objectives of contemporary artists are clearly quite different to those of the avant-garde creators. This does not mean, however, that the art of our times is a denial of modern art, but rather a de-sublimation. The impurity and irony of current creation replace the rigorousness and sublimity of modernity.

The oeuvre of Toni Giró is a good example of this idea. Even though many of this artist's works reinstate elements related to avant-garde experimentalism, his works throw into relief quite different intentions. They are not the result of a desire to take avant-garde premises to the last extreme, but rather represent an attempt to analyse their paradoxes.

Toni Giró performs this task by means of a reversal of the stylistic strategies of modernity. In *Conversation Piece* (1999) for instance, he appropriates several of the resources employed in avant-garde tendencies to elaborate a proposal that is diametrically opposed to modern formal refinement. The main element in this work is a large sphere with a dark green polished surface. At first glance the perfection of this piece, of an elementary shape and homogeneous colour, could be taken both as a reference to Brancusi and to Reinhardt's monochromes. So, in accord with this first impression, *Conversation Piece* would belong to the tradition of rigorousness characterising modernity. At the same time we would be facing a work that explored non-sense and the destruction of meaning.

Yet Toni Giró introduced a few elements that question the modern attributes of *Conversation Piece*. To begin with, the sphere is placed above two iron chairs that stand face to face and function as a sort of plinth. Furthermore, the surface of the sphere presents two holes, placed on opposite ends, in which the artist has introduced the same number of plastic cups. These cups are united by a thread – invisible to the beholder, as it passes through the sphere's interior – just like toy telephones that children would build for fun.

Far from modern refinement, *Conversation Piece* presents a hybrid character: we are unsure whether we are facing a sculpture, a painting or an object of ordinary use. Similarly, it includes a variety of stylistic references such as Minimalism, the ready-made and assemblage sculpture. Toni Giró has chosen to step back from the purity of styles and genres in order to produce a piece that is, in the final analysis, the crossroads of multiple referents.

The lack of formal rigour in *Conversation Piece* is accompanied by a tendency towards the de-sublimation of the work of art. This proposal is far removed from the will to draw the viewer close to the terrible experience of the dissolution of meanings, such a characteristic feature of modern art. On the contrary, the piece throws into relief a playful spirit that intends to parody the premises of modernity. With a distanced attitude, Toni Giró restores certain elements of avant-garde art – such as the use of monochrome and the apparent formal rigour – only to subvert their meanings. If at first glance *Conversation Piece* seems close to the idea of the dissolution of language, a more prolonged contemplation reveals that the piece is highly charged with metaphor. This proposal by Giró could be interpreted as a subverted modern artwork, in which the wish for silence is ironically inverted by the appearance of a toy telephone that enables viewers to communicate between themselves.

Be that as it may, *Conversation Piece* is not the only work in which Toni Giró displays the will to transgress modern values. For instance, in his series of photographs of 2000-2001 entitled *Ditifet* (Said and Done), the will to call into question the premises of modern photography is quite explicit. Starting from several popular Catalan expressions, the artist produced staged photographs that reproduce, literally not figuratively, what each set phrase means. The result is a series of images that, in most cases, represent disconcerting even ridiculous situations that acquire a surrealist air. So, the image inspired in the phrase *tocar el dos* presents a character climbing up a wall and placing his hand on the sign that numbers a house, while the work stemming from the phrase *fotre el camp* shows a woman making love to a field. The phrases in English that accompany the photos – ‘touching the two’ and ‘fucking the field’, respectively – emphasise the absurd nature of the representations.\*

The images in *Ditifet* are diametrically opposed to modern photography, directed at the objective representation of reality. If twentieth-century photographers such as August Sander and Edward Weston, to name but two, believed that the camera was the most appropriate instrument to reproduce the different aspects of the visible world, Toni Giró reveals the contrived quality the photographic image is susceptible of possessing. In this artist's proposals, photography ceases to be “the most realistic, therefore, facile, of the mimetic arts”<sup>4</sup> to become the vehicle of a reality mediated by language. If modern photographers believed that photography's specificity resided in its ability to capture different aspects of the world in a direct objective way, the works by Toni Giró prove that the camera also enables one to manipulate, deform and falsify reality. By showing us a staged reality, that is to say a represented reality, Giró seems to verge on to disciplines such as painting or sculpture rather than photography, or at least photography as it was understood in the twentieth century.

#### HYBRID ARCHITECTURE, DISENCHANTED ARCHITECTURE

Toni Giró's photographs seem to be contaminated by painting. Daniel Chust Peters, on his part, usually makes sculptures with features typical of architecture. Over recent years this artist has been producing in a constant fashion reproductions to scale of his studio, located at 41 carrer Massens, Barcelona. Instead of copying it literally however, he has taken it as a starting point for the creation of sculptures which very often require the participation of audiences. These are varied proposals that adopt the forms of cut-out figures, jardinières, playing areas or dolls houses, etc. Such spaces reveal the possibility of creating architecture in which individuals project their desires or fashion personal micro-utopias.

Daniel Chust Peters' interest in micro-utopias betrays a subtle critique of the maximal claims made by twentieth-century architecture. Before the aspirations of modern architectural movements such as Functionalism or Rationalism to radically transform the conditions of life of all men through the imposition of an impersonal and stark architecture, Chust Peters offers architectural models that seek to establish a relation of proximity between the spectator and the work. Aware that the cold rigour of modern architecture – which appeared in response to the needs of the population swarming into cities as a result of industrialisation – led to a reality that had banished all forms of subjectivity and difference, this artist strives to create spaces designed to satisfy concrete needs of individuals. In a clearly playful spirit, Daniel Chust Peters seeks minimal keys to the crisis of twentieth-century architecture.

In point of fact, many creators have extended their reflections to the crisis of recent architecture; Domènec is one of them. This artist has created several reproductions of emblematic buildings of the first half of the twentieth century with the intention of throwing into relief the paradoxes of modern architecture. Domènec has been inspired by constructions such as the Hospital Paimio by Alvar Aalto (1929-1933) or the Unité d'Habitation Le Corbusier in Marseille (1947-1952) when making sculptures and installations that refer to a severe and calculated world from which almost all traces of pleasure and sensuality have been proscribed. His architectural models, transformed into uninhabitable absurd spaces, betray a form of architecture that is unable to satisfy human needs: his works bear witness to a failed Utopian model. In the last analysis, Domènec's oeuvre appears as a reflection on the historical paradoxes thanks to which modernity's renovating project – initially driven by the will to liberate the whole of mankind – gave rise to a form of architecture designed to perpetuate the alienation and subjection of individuals.

Of all the aforementioned artists, Domènec probably betrays more explicitly his political concerns, as his oeuvre reflects directly on the social Utopias generated by certain avant-garde movements. Nevertheless, the three creators share the will to revise the foundations of the art of modernity. The three of them acknowledge the historical importance of modernity, yet they are also aware that its values must be subjected to revision. In order to perform their task, each one follows a different strategy. While Toni Giró confronts modern sublimity with irony, and Daniel Chust Peters generates micro-utopian spaces as opposed to avant-garde maximalism, Domènec strives to demonstrate the totalitarian values lurking behind the social project of modernity. Far from offering totalising solutions to reality, such variable tactics are intended to provide us with clues to further our understanding of the complexity of the world in which we live. These artists are fully aware that art, in itself, may be unable to transform reality but it is susceptible of offering us answers to the questions posed by the identity crisis affecting our era.

#### NOTES

- 1 Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1995, Bollingen Series XXXV: 44, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997, p. 70.
- 2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*. Translated by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, 1992.
- 3 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste, and Several Other Additions*, D. Buchanon, 1803.
- 4 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1989, p. 51.

T. N. \* Equivalent expressions in English would be, respectively, ‘to clear off’ and ‘to make oneself scarce’.