

A glass serpent, a crackling blue

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There are amazing tales of art overcoming adversity. When Shostakovich began composing his Seventh Symphony, the Germans were already besieging Leningrad. The starving musicians fainted during rehearsals, and trumpeters didn't even have the breath to finish their solos. Many of the orchestra members died before the premiere, and regimental bands were scoured to find replacements. One hour before the premiere, Soviet artillery launched a ferocious barrage to keep the enemy busy regrouping so that their guns would not interrupt the concert. "The people who flocked to the Philharmonia wore their glad rags, perhaps for the last time. The women's stick-insect limbs were hidden beneath their pre-war concert dresses, the men in fading jackets. They were thin and dystrophic [...] I didn't know there could be so many people, hungry for music even as they starved. That was the moment we decided to play the best we could."¹ Less accurate but more amusing is the witticism of Orson Welles's character in *The Third Man*: "In Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace—and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock."

Although we have worked in difficult circumstances, our apocalypse has been less epic and more bourgeois. In the poetry anthology from which the exhibition title is taken, Lorca wrote, "Don't ask me anything. I've seen that things | find their void when they search for direction."² In early 2020, when we began thinking about this project, we had yet to discover how wise the counsel of those lines would prove. They told us to neither submit nor resist, to simply be wide open to whatever happens, with or without us.

The context in which this exhibition was conceived will undoubtedly affect it, though I suspect it will be some time before we fully understand how. Isolation and uncertainty may have inspired more restrained, sober proposals, and perhaps confinement has been a factor in the choice of themes, formats or materials. Who knows? Obviously, the

1 Brian Moynahan, *Leningrad: Siege and Symphony* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2014).

2 Federico García Lorca, *Poet in New York*, trans. Pablo Medina and Mark Statman (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 7.

difficulty (if not impossibility) of travelling forced us to monitor the progress of the works *remotely*, with no choice but to exchange face-to-face conversations for the eminently practical substitutes this century has to offer.

The generational question is a thorny one. When we accepted the mission of curating a show that would illustrate *what Andalusian artists are doing today*, we wanted to dispel, as much as possible, the cloud of gloom and doom hanging over our heads. After reviewing the art competitions and exhibitions of recent years, we managed to come up with a selection of *established* artists (if such a term can be applied to any artist under the age of 40) and others who, though not as well-known, are no less interesting. Naturally, it is a contingent selection, subject to the limitations typical of such exhibitions, which reflects our personal criteria and makes no claim to being canonical or definitive. The *art* created by *Andalusian artists* is, fortunately, difficult to summarise succinctly. We have not devised a genealogical hypothesis that attempts to trace the commonalities underlying the apparent variety of themes and disciplines. Instead, we decided to focus on the richness of the heterogeneous, deliberately avoiding the search for a pat definition of *an Andalusian way of making art*. In this respect, *Poet in New York* proved doubly helpful. On the one hand, Lorca's American experience helped us to avoid folk and regionalist pitfalls. On the other, it gave us a beautiful title in which we found allegories that we could weave into the exhibition: two concepts whose dialectical tension we could put to good use. The refinement of the two verses deserves careful consideration. In addition to the fork "between" the serpent (sinuous, elusive, energetic) and glass (transparent, fragile, static), Lorca uses two different verbs for the actions of "the forms": the former *seek* while the latter *go towards*. There is no hint of opposition between serpent and glass (in short, they are not antithetical concepts), nor between the actions that lead to them. Instead of confrontation, we find openness—and we seized on that idea.

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As most readers will know, the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo occupies the former Pickman ceramic factory, which took over the Carthusian Monastery of Santa María de las Cuevas after its secularization. It would be safe to say that the building's idiosyncrasies are hard to ignore: no amount of aggression can force the spaces, particularly the sacred ones, to stop being what they are. By this I do not mean to say that some deity astutely intervenes to upset plans for renovation and reform; rather, the building forces its new occupants to follow its age-old rules. Sacred structures—buildings intended to consecrate a space so the gods can dwell in it—are essentially symbolic: their elements are not merely functional, for they also contain layered meanings. Even if a staircase "merely" serves to overcome a difference in height, the steps leading up to a temple altar can represent the ascension of the soul, a holy mountain, different degrees of perfection, the virtues, etc. In short, it is "the earthly reproduction of a transcendent model".³

Although the majority of the exhibited works are distributed among the halls of the South Wing, we have also occupied two chapels and the cloister, which means that several artists have had to deal with the space's *resistance*. The Outer Chapel's name is expressive enough to preclude the need for describing its location. Yet the concept of "outer" is in itself significant: in religious mentality, limits, thresholds and boundaries are fundamental.⁴ In this interstitial space we find Álvaro Escalona's installation, which

3 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando: Harcourt, 1959), 58.

4 See Eliade, 25.

reproduces processed and recomposed sounds recorded on the bridges over the East River in New York City. Visitors encounter benches forming a triangle that point to the Baroque altarpiece which still presides over the space. The wooden benches are covered in mirrored vinyl, allowing them to reflect (and blur) the pre-existing elements in the chapel and, at a certain point, the viewers themselves. Escalona designed his installation as a kind of limbo, a place one passes through on the way to somewhere else, though that destination may be uncertain. Song and music figure in many mythologies: angels sing and celestial bodies ring in their harmonious progression through the heavens; the idea of *traffic* is an innovation. This “new beauty” of cars and bridges, to paraphrase Marinetti, rather than challenging the *old* beauty of the place, joins with it in alienation.

In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto stated that in the presence of the divine, one experiences “a terror fraught with an inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instil”.⁵ It is no coincidence that the church consecration rite begins by reciting the words of the patriarch Jacob: “*Terribilis est locus iste*”⁶. How fearsome is this place!⁷ The chapel of Saint Bruno still retains traces of its original decorative tiles, a modest grey Calvary scene painted in a niche, the heraldic device of the Carthusian monastery with stigmata in lieu of stars and dragon’s jaws on the ribs of the ceiling vault. In the space once occupied by the altarpiece, Valle Galera has hung a rope made from strands of her own hair. It might remind us of that long-haired fairytale princess, if not for the solemnity of the location and the fact that the rope seems to descend from Golgotha. We know that Federico gave 18 photographs to José Bergamín along with his manuscript of *Poet in New York*. One of them, a picture of a lynched and burnt black man, was never published in the poetry collection. Lorca probably acquired this image as a postcard, given that such grisly souvenirs remained

fairly popular until the early decades of the 20th century. To illustrate the point, suffice it to say that the horrifying images of the execution of Fu-zhu-li in a procedure known as “death by a thousand cuts”, where the prisoner was hacked to pieces while still alive, were also being circulated during that period. The reprehensible circulation of such pictures gives us an idea of the degree to which the *depicted* subjects (objectified, mistreated, fetishized and murdered human beings) were not viewed as *someone* but as an *other*. Galera has reconstructed the image of the burnt black man in a collodion positive, discreetly and spectrally projected on the wall in an attempt to put it where Lorca had originally intended. “Society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable’ victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect,” Girard writes.⁸ These barbaric acts, which horrify us today, are the product of a very elementary propagandistic strategy. Violence relentlessly seeks new prey, and to safeguard *our own* we must divert it “toward the sacrificial victim, the creature we can strike down without fear of reprisal, since he lacks a champion”.⁹ The corpses must be displayed in a public place so everyone knows that *what had to be done* was in fact done. We, in a similar act (but with clearly opposite intentions), have hung a cord of hair¹⁰ in the empty space vacated by the altar: the hangman’s noose, the bonds,

5 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 14.

6 Genesis 28:17.

7 Genesis 28:17 (KJ21).

8 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4.

9 Girard, 14.

10 (“Between the forms that go towards the serpent | and the forms that seek the glass | I shall let my hair grow”). “Return from a Walk” by Federico García Lorca, translated in Betty Jean Craige, *Lorca’s Poet in New York: Fall into Consciousness* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 12.

a falling body, a mooring line or a crevice. “Do not seek, blacks, its crevice | to find the infinite mask.”¹¹

Up until now we have been discussing works that have had to *negotiate* with the space; now let us turn to one that cuts through it. Drawing a meridian, a hollow colonnade marches across the building. *Como un monumento al colapso* (Like a Monument to Collapse) uses the replica of a column capital (kept in the atrium) and its positive and negative moulds to posit an archaeology of what we might call *semantics*. It is not a coincidence that the replicated piece is both a load-bearing and decorative element, nor that the materials used to make it are directly related to the building and its history. Mercedes Pimiento’s project subtly yet effectively alters the spectators’ coordinates: we walk *over the pillars*, but we also glimpse past and future times in them. This temporal reading is manifested in the fact that some of the pieces will decompose in the course of the exhibition due to the effects of the elements, leaving only a vestige or gap in their place. We can *sense* it beforehand (“by following the lines of fragility in the present [and so] managing to grasp why and how that which is might no longer be that which is”¹²), just as we can feel that the moulds, transformed into a new work, are actually an *image of the past* of the piece.

Irene Infantes’s pieces talk about memory, which is not, strictly speaking, the same thing as the past. People often think of textiles as associated with a certain warmth; think, for instance, of royal ermines or military uniforms. Yet, despite its monumental size, *Equilibrio del arropo* (The Balance of Bedding) conveys a surprisingly cosy feeling. These pieces, made from the wool stuffing of old mattresses, are decorated with a few rounded, colourful shapes drawn by the artist, demonstrating her remarkable compositional skill. There is something amiable about those figures and lines that immediately appeals to

us. Revealing the innards of objects as private as mattresses (is there anywhere we are more vulnerable?) is a cautious act of exhibitionism. The Spanish word *arropo*, for which there is no exact translation in English, comes from the verb *arropar*, meaning to wrap, tuck up or shower with love and attention. There is a kind of affection that is shown through delicacy, because neatly folding and fastidiously storing are not just household chores; they are *domestic* actions. For this reason, the piles of blankets, chromatically ordered and lovingly stacked, remind us of the safety of home. As Bachelard wrote, “Our houses are no longer aware of the storms of the outside universe. Occasionally the wind blows a tile from a roof and kills a passer-by in the street. But this roof crime is only aimed at the belated passer-by. Or lightning may for an instant set fire to the window-panes. The house does not tremble, however, when thunder rolls. It trembles neither with nor through us. In our houses set close one up against the other, we are less afraid.”¹³

In his famous lecture “Des espaces autres”, Foucault used the term heterotopias to describe places that are “something like counter-sites”, places that are “outside of all places, though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality,”¹⁴ such as cemeteries, boats, libraries, museums, prisons, retirement homes or sanatoriums. Although Foucault says that Bachelard’s work (which we have just quoted) primarily concerns “internal

11 García Lorca in Craige, 54.

12 Michel Foucault, “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism” in *The Essential Works of Michael Foucault, Vol. 2, Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1983), 449–50.

13 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994),

14 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, trans. Jay Miskowiec; originally published in French as “Des espaces autres” in *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* (October 1984), <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> [accessed 20/01/21].

space” whereas he prefers to speak of “external space”, I believe that our favourite post-structuralist would be interested in studying an *internal* case. I belong to a *homeless* generation that is forever moving, dwelling in undomesticated spaces where neither the furniture nor the arrangement of the rooms nor the colour of the walls *belongs* to us. In the big cities, where capitalism has imposed its mercilessly fast pace, one often finds spaces that retain vestiges of previous occupants and uses. More than *archaeology*—too grand a word—I would call it *trace*. This panorama of partly tiled walls and exposed PVC pipes is our landscape, what we glimpse from our windows. However much it may dismay those who think nostalgically of the noble savage and read the German Romantics, our habitat does not lie among oak groves, mountains and brooks, but in the midst of steel and concrete. This is the setting evoked by *Gran serpiente pequeña serpiente, presa* (Big Snake Little Snake, Prey), a tiled installation featuring steel sculptures, latex covered in rust and residue, cement pipe casts and a fluorescent light. Christian Lagata’s work plays with the almost contradictory sensation inspired by these materials: on the one hand, the sharp edges and solid elements make them seem foreign and even intimidating; but on the other, we recognise their familiar aridity and insensibility.

Lagata’s sculptural work incorporates devices commonly found in recent sculpture, such as the use of modular structures or the opposition between organic/warm and industrial/cold. Beyond the possible formal interpretations of his installation, this piece invites us to reflect on how the urban environment, which is given to us already *defined*, moulds our lives, and how the city is constantly remaking itself, adding layers to the same skeleton and absorbing that noise (those *traces*) as yet another constructive element.

In Western tradition, the city has often been used as a metaphor for corruption and moral decay. Saint Benedict became a monk because, when he arrived in Rome, he was

appalled to see such rampant sin; in the third century, some men who read the parable of the rich young man went out into the desert to distance themselves (spiritually and geographically) from eternal damnation. At least two-thirds of Christian spirituality is predicated on the opposition between the wilderness and the world. I suspect that disorder is precisely what makes the city evil. “The impression of great antiquity was joined by others: the impression of endlessness, the sensation of oppressiveness and horror, the sensation of complex irrationality. [...] *This City*, I thought, *is so horrific that its mere existence, the mere fact of its having endured—even in the middle of a secret desert—pollutes the past and the future and somehow compromises the stars. So long as this City endures, no one in the world can ever be happy or courageous.*”¹⁵ The hyperbolic musings of the lead character in Borges’s short story “The Immortal” reveal the logic behind this reasoning, which is the logic of the transcendental: disorder is neither good, nor beautiful, nor true. The Carthusians are remarkable hermits who live together to economize their efforts. Their lives are devoted to silence and the solitude of the cell: to the desert. Following in their footsteps, Florencia Rojas travelled to the Tabernas Desert to photograph local flora. *Les mauvaises terres à traverser* (The Bad Lands to Cross) is an installation comprising black and white photographs framed in enormous mounts and shelves with bowls of water from the River Guadalquivir in perfect balance. The images show not only the plants but also the environment in which they thrive, surrounded by a vast white expanse that heightens the feeling of isolation. It is impossible not to recall Eliot’s lines:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, you know only

15 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”, in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1999), 188.

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water...¹⁶

The fragile balance that makes survival in extreme conditions possible is symbolically explored in the sequence of bowls, which allude to the monastery's history. If we look closely, we can see a date etched on the glass vessels: a list of years when the monastery was flooded by the river waters, which rose so swiftly that some monks even drowned. The contrasting significance of the desert, the floods and their different allegories is ironic: water and springs are, in the Christian tradition, symbols of the hand of God, which apparently also floods cells and kills Carthusians.

Exegetes believe that the word "desert" does not actually refer to a vast expanse of sand and scorpions, but rather to an uninhabited place, a wilderness. I don't think they would object to including even a glacier like Vatnajökull in this category. Ice cannot be trusted: one walks on or through it with the constant fear that it will suddenly collapse. We might say that it has a factual yet implausible solidity. Moreno & Grau offer us images of this glacier where colours and shapes look quite unreal: there are places that make us doubt their existence. The artists' proposal integrates these paradoxical elements: we see it in the copper line that seems to bend, refracted in the puddle of the tree stump, and in the suspended droplets, frozen in mid-fall (is there anything stranger than motionless movement?). The entire installation has a kinetic quality that is particularly apparent in the series of photographs of a hand holding a chunk of ice. The weight of the ice counters the upward impulse of the raised arm (in that stillness, we can sense the struggle between opposing forces), while the gradual adaptation of the two elements (ice and hand) creates a sensation of progress.

"It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse in certain tortures; or even like those pairs of fish [...] which navigate in convoy, as though united by an eternal coitus."¹⁷ Like those stories with a moral, the great marvel of photography—its technical ability to *faithfully* reproduce *reality*—ended up being its great curse. The close bond between the medium and its object, that lethal relationship which dictates there can be no photograph without *something* or *someone*, made even photographers understand that the only interesting thing about their discipline was its utility. To put it another way, photography has rarely been viewed as an end in itself; more often it was considered a means of taking family portraits, snapshots of current affairs or genre scenes. Fortunately, contemporary practices have gradually dissolved those shackles, freeing photographers from the concrete entities of the world. It is curious to note how the appearance of the camera freed painters from the obligation to paint bourgeois citizens and enlightened men and simultaneously transferred that burden to the man hiding behind the black curtain holding the flash bulb. There is a ghost that haunts Europe: the ghost of figuration. José Manuel Martínez Bellido plays with how things *seem*. The photographs we see in this exhibition, discreetly pasted on the wall, portray fungi that live on photographic plates in such a way that they look like vegetation, yarn skeins, algae or the shapes we glimpse when flying over a city at night. This threefold alienation of the entity (not the thing itself, nor an image of the thing, but an image of the thing that looks like another thing) would infuriate Plato. In us, however, it elicits the thrill of

16 T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 10–11.

17 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 5–6.

revelation: we see something strange that has been discovered by persistent searching. It is a harmless enigma that confronts us with a disconcerting image of the real (the fungi exists with the same ontological dignity as a minister or a bicycle). Blackness suits these images, denying us points of reference: we long to sink into them, to “enter into the heart of the thicket”.¹⁸

There is hardly any solemnity or *mystery* in the work of Ana Barriga, who has painted a mural and hung a picture on it. In this colourful, vibrant, ironic intervention, Barriga interprets (or, more accurately, glosses) “Return from a Walk”, the first poem in *Poet in New York*, from which the exhibition takes its title. There is something uncouth and iconoclastic about her use of abundant pop culture elements (Chewbacca’s face, a Wally reclining like an odalisque, little Martians, a cartoon and Lorca dancing the “Macarena”) that clashes with the sombre premonition of the poem (“Assassinated by the sky”), a theme revisited in the canvas, where we find a *memento mori* in the middle. The cheerful hotchpotch of references is at once disconcerting and liberating. Some may disagree, but “taking the piss” has proven to be an effective weapon against the great calamities of this life: we see this in macabre dances, Jewish humour and novels about how the second book of Aristotle’s *Poetics* was lost.

Priests in every religion have always loved burning things to appease their gods, so there is something rather poetic about a cloister full of chimneys. Pablo Capitán del Río’s installation, arranged around the fat belly of one of the old ceramic factory’s kilns, could be summed up in Heraclitus’s famous premise: all things come from fire. The rhetorical exercise revolving around the idea of combustion and its satellites (light, heat and smoke) composes a dynamic visual itinerary, from spark to fuse to flame. Capitán makes good use of very elementary—and therefore highly effective—tensions, like those

between heaviness and lightness, vertical and horizontal, or weakness and strength. For instance, the flimsy curtain strips (sparklers that were lit simultaneously and fused together) stare at the hard, rough, squashed plates of the egg piece; the dismantled stove on the mat seems to be the natural and opposite consequence of the levitating spark of the mother-of-pearl. In these works we sense a frozen velocity, a process suddenly halted so that it can be calmly examined. We might see this as related, by opposition, to Álvaro Albaladejo’s piece, in which a moulding imitating a gate ornament slowly and deliberately decomposes before the viewer’s eyes. The mixture of plaster with potassium permanganate reacts (secretly), changing colour and texture and oozing crystals that oxidize above visitors’ heads. *Dinámica de la descomposición* (Decomposition Dynamic) is a *literal* enactment of the exhibition title: the serpentine form we see on the ceiling will, with the help of heat and humidity, eventually crystallize. It is a work in progress (I think calling it a *living* work would be an exaggeration and an insult to the minerals) that will conclude, or at least come to halt, when it is destroyed and taken down, as the conditions in which it was installed make preservation impossible. This piece seeks a dramatic encounter with spectators, who don’t even see it until they suddenly run straight into it. There is a fascinating factoid behind this (snaking) elusiveness: permanganate is an antidote for snakebites.

Kandinsky wrote, “Like ourselves, these pure artists sought to express inner truths in their work and, in consequence, automatically repudiated all consideration of external

¹⁸ St. John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Cantic of the Soul*, trans. David Lewis, https://ccel.org/ccel/john_cross/cantic/cantic.iv.html [accessed 20/01/21].

accidents.”¹⁹ Looking past Kandinsky’s flowery prose, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* makes a very interesting point about the autonomy of the work of art. Basically, it argues that painting should rely solely on its own intrinsic qualities (colour, form, etc.) so its validity is not contingent upon the ephemeral *things* it represents: “Visualize [...] all the walls of the rooms covered with small, large and medium sized canvases. Through the medium of colour, items of ‘nature’ are represented: animals—drinking water or lying in the grass in light or in shade; next to them a crucifixion, painted by an artist who disbelieves in Christ; flowers; or human figures sitting, standing, walking, frequently naked, many naked women (often fore-shortened from behind); apples on silver dishes, the portrait of Councillor N; a sunset; a lady in Pink; flying ducks; the portrait of Baroness X; flying geese; Lady in White; calves, dotted by the bright yellow sunlight; the portrait of His Excellency Y; another lady in Green.”²⁰ The two large pictures that Manuel M. Romero has prepared for this show also embody this emancipation of painting, offering viewers (*nothing but*) an admirable display of compositional skill and brilliant use of colour, manifested in countless meticulous details and delicate, masterful strokes. At first glance, these two canvases appear to be contrasting monochromes (one white, the other black), but to the careful observer they reveal what has been awkwardly named “the sensuality of painting”, which Kandinsky, who knew one could only roughly discuss the concepts of colour and form (in other words, writing cannot give a precise notion of them), described in musical terms. Pure things, those that are utterly self-reliant, are impervious to language.

¹⁹ Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, ed. Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), 10.

²⁰ Kandinsky, 11–12.