

The exhibition as process. The exhibition as process. A text of Armando Montesinos for the catalog «Arquitectura y «Yo». Comunidad de Madrid. 2019

1

The title of this Juan Carlos Bracho exhibition is *Architecture and «I»*, and what first grabs our attention is this «I», with its quotation marks that place it on a different, more ambiguous, plane to that of the word that sits emphatically alongside it. Who is this «I», and what is his or her relationship to architecture? And what is his or her relationship to the reader who is now reading this catalogue, which has the same title?

Some artists and creators are agents who strip away meanings and content, who alter vocabularies through new ways of looking. Who remove the trappings from forms and show them naked, even if there are still those who see them, like the emperor, as clothed.

While it may seem something of a leap in time, let's consider some of these agents. Édouard Manet, for example, whose letterhead proclaimed «Everything happens», who stripped all rhetorical and historicist content from his work, and who, in his paintings, added nothing –not symbolism, not history, not moral values– to what he saw, simply showing (something that is not so simple) only what was there. Thus, the artwork began to shift from *representing* towards a process of *presentation*, of the production of works that are pure *presence*. Or Donald Judd, who said: «If my work is reductionist, it's because it doesn't contain the things people think it ought to contain». Those elements that were missing were precisely those that had traditionally given art its content: expressivity, ornament, imagery, the manual skill of the artist... Stripped of representation, metaphysics, and metaphor, the work no longer «says»: it is nothing more and nothing less than a *presence* in a space.

A presence. This word immediately puts us in contact with our own body, which is what physically detects it in the exhibition space. Confronted by this presence, we are a body that *-everything happens-* experiences: it is no longer the work that «says something» to us; rather we are able to «say something» about the work. As Juan Botella argued: «Art is no longer what it was, and this is because the viewer is no longer who he or she was. (Bergson: being is becoming, a constant coming into being). Being, the viewer, and art are an acting, an action in time. Note that the gerund (acting) is an impersonal tense, and although it uses an I to be enacted, it is not the act that belongs to the artist, but the artist that belongs to the act».

Thus we now have a clue to identifying this «I», which turns out to be *you*, the visitor to this exhibition, or the reader of this catalogue. *Architecture and «I»* refers then, not to the artist himself, but to each one of us, and to the way in which we relate to these *presences* that inhabit and transform exhibition spaces, in this specific case Alcalá 31. A show that –as could only be the case with Juan Carlos Bracho– is not so much a retrospective exhibition that attempts to pin down his trajectory as an artist, but a work in progress, an episode in the continuous loop that is his creative process, a chapter to which he will return at some point in order to tighten a spring, expand upon a discovery, reconsider a feeling, transform an idea.

The majority of contemporary art practices are not so much multi- or interdisciplinary as adisciplinary. In other words, they are characterized not by a discipline –what Kosuth calls a «typology»– or by a combination of or interrelation between several, but by a discretionary use of any one of them. While Bracho's principal tool is drawing, his work can only be described

as interdisciplinary. When he employs techniques or equipment -whether those of drawing itself, or related to video, photography, or of a performative nature- appropriate to his intentions, Bracho acts like a mere user who, contrary to what was advocated by Clement Greenberg, is not involved in the construction or reinforcement of that discipline in itself, but in his own needs and creative interests.

In place of the directionality implicit in a typology, Bracho sees his body of work as if it were a bush that, lacking the defined trunk of a tree, branches out from the base; and whose boughs and hidden reflection, the subterranean double of its roots, grow simultaneously, increasing its height, its depth and perimeter, and where each new shoot -whose tender colour momentarily distinguishes it from the older leaves- is both unique to and indistinguishable from the rest, part of this living and constantly expanding whole. These reflections and doubles, positives and negatives, this turning inside out of the glove, are a constant in Bracho's artmaking.

Fermin Soria provides a clear description of the features of the «Bracho system': «Distancing himself from a vision of art as a closed work, he moves towards another in which the playful element is understood as a free and never-ending movement, which is repeated over and over again. The receiver is something more than a mere observer since, by participating in the game that is suggested and creating his or her own work, he or she can become part of it. It is a process of constant construction and reconstruction, of which the work is, on the one hand, the result, and on the other, the beginning.»

Another contemporary trait is the almost complete disappearance of traditional academic drawing, and its replacement by *personal* drawing, ungoverned by any rule. An understanding of the practice that is no longer associated with realist representation, but with other ideas, as illustrated by the words of the German artist Rosemarie Trockel: «Drawing a line is dividing the world in two». Very early in his creative process -«the starting point for my work is the idea of space understood as a mental development»- Bracho discovered a totally personal method of drawing: the systematic repetition of a stroke.

«In my works,» Bracho stated, «I don't start with any physical or mental reference... well, maybe apart from those first drawings in my sketchbooks... but the final drawing -which takes the form of a large scale «translation' of these strokes on paper- is an image that is generated through a process, through a system and certain pre-established rules, which in this case is a repetition and concatenation of a few minimal signs that unleash an outpouring of meanings.»

In the words of Óscar Alonso Molina -who has written extensively and cogently about the artist, as can be seen in the text on the adjoining pages of this catalogue- «Bracho reveals the essence, the core, of drawing concepts in a contemporary idiom. The preeminence of the idea, then, which in his hands tends to embody a fragile yet extensive corporeality, one that is subtle yet clear, monotonous or discreet in appearance yet imbued with nuances and great potential.»

These methodically repeated strokes -free from any personal expression, something that is absent in his work- are a manifestation of his understanding of drawing as something performative, an action that can be carried out on any support and in any space. Bracho understands time as volume, as malleable architecture, and as he does with the imaginary space of the models in which he often prepares his projects, he modifies it with changes of scale. Whether condensed or extended, the time in which his performative actions were executed continues to exist in the videos and photogra-

phs that record and document them, often giving rise to new developments in his works: «Sometimes this change of perspective, this shift, is a reflection that emerges after analysing the material that documents the work, expanding the original idea (...) Sometimes it's the tests, the mistakes (...) that motivate me to develop the work along alternative lines. It's about being aware of all parallel narratives, and of the transformative possibilities that ideas can have when they are put into practice.»

Without a doubt, Bracho -in this awareness of parallel possibilities, in this generation «through a process, through a system and certain pre-established rules»; in this end result that «belongs to the process itself»- would identify with some of Sol LeWitt's famous «Sentences on Conceptual Art»:

«The artist's will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion. His wilfulness may only be ego.»

«Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works.»

«The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with. It should run its course.»

In his text *Oh!!! Donald Judd*, which is included in the exhibition and in this catalogue, Bracho expresses an understanding of the work of the minimal artist as something warm and enormously beautiful, a far cry from the severity and coldness usually attributed to it. In fact, the removal of the traditional attributes that give a work content is not transferred to the viewer, who can continue to confer not only his or her ideas on it, but also emotions and feelings, yet no longer at the dictate of the work. Those of the artist, meanwhile, are merely suggested. through his titles. «I usually choose titles of songs, books, films or phrases that I come across. It's a way of connecting emotionally with them, of somehow detaching myself from the actual process. My drawings for me involve many hours of work, of planning, a timetable that I must stick to, a physical effort in short. I do enjoy drawing enormously, but I don't have the perspective to project emotions that aren't related to the act of drawing (...) I can spend hours drawing, which I find a fantastic exercise and one which I enjoy a lot, but it's a personal experience, which is hard to extrapolate, because it's a very physical task. But my experience is not transcendent. It's simply work, that is its value».

Bracho's aim is to observe, perceive and produce beauty by looking carefully at things. Perceptual emotion and conceptual depth. This care -which is also playful, as can be seen in the wealth of materials that sediment in his sketchbooks- has something animistic about it, a knowledge that «everything happens». And it is also what enables him to reflect on the conditions that govern his profession: «Art is not or should not be only evasion and worlds full of fantasy, but a useful and vital tool that helps us to be conscious, to be alert, and to be critical about what surrounds us and about ourselves.»

Art, we have already seen, is not what it was, and neither is its social value or its economy. The work of an artist was once manifested exclusively in the objects he or she produced; today, in many cases, it is the artist's ideas, research and time spent working that are valued -sadly little in comparison with other activities that require the same high level of specializatio- by the contemporary market economy.

«We live,» says Bracho, «in an age dominated by impatient capital, in which there is a constant and compulsive desire for quick results and in which error and chance have no part, or are eliminated or separated from every vital process. Art, unfortunately, is not immune to this trend. It is engulfed in a great commercialized wave that sweeps away, into invisibility, everything that is not new, vibrant, brilliant, saleable and assimilable in a fraction of a second. (...)There is no doubt that advertising and all of its imagery exude an appealing and unsettling magnetism. Nevertheless, the difference in terms of art is, or should be, very simple: it is not about influencing or creating differences but about proposing a space for free thought.»

2

*Architecture and «I»* presents a group of works that address relationships with architecture, produced -or planned, but not realized, for various reasons- between 2003 and 2018, as well as a number of works created specifically for this project.

The exhibition comprises three major groups of work: pieces produced specifically for the gallery space; those projects that take the form of drawings, photographs or scale models; and those that have come into being once more -the loop again- in a new incarnation or variation. These are supplemented by the artist's sketchbooks, shown for the first time in public, and whose mode of presentation -what is now referred to as an exhibition device, a number of specially designed tables- provided the seed for a piece that only exists as a possibility in the exhibition, a kind of hidden form such as that which has to be revealed in certain games: the work *AYYO*, which will only acquire a physical form after the exhibition is taken down, through the collection and recycling of all the vestiges and residues of materials from the works produced in situ, the sketches and installation plans, the informational material, catalogue proofs, etc. It is thus the first consequence of the work in progress that, as said earlier, this exhibition is. The in-gallery texts are handwritten by the artist. They contain only succinct descriptions of the works, in the desire not to mediate each viewer's own experience and thoughts, thus emphasizing the «here and now» materiality of the presence of each «I» in the exhibition space.

This catalogue, the temporal and spatial prolongation of the exhibition, conceived as such -«an ordered record that includes or individually describes books, documents, people, objects, etc., that are related to one another», according to the Real Academia Española dictionary- contains the full descriptions, chronologically organized, of the exhibited works. These descriptions are written in the second person, in a displacement of the «I» of the artist that generates a dialogue with the «I» of the reader, who is put in the place of the artist. «This other, speaking to me, and to everyone else», Bracho says. It also includes working material and plans for the exhibition design, which due to the complexity of the installation and the timings of the institution are not reflected in the usual gallery view photographs. As a complement to the descriptions and the plans, we hope that a brief written tour, while not including every work, will -in the manner of the stills once used to advertise films in cinema foyers- allow the reader to imagine some of the characteristics of the installation.

The first work we encounter on the ground floor cuts diagonally across the room. *Regreso al hogar* [The Homecoming] is the third take on an idea previously addressed in *Here, There and Everywhere* (2004) and *Ahora y siempre* [Now and Forever] (2006), both of which are present in the exhibition as documentation or through pieces based on them, that considers the relationships or boundaries between architecture and sculpture. When the American sculptor David Smith was questioned about the considerable size of his work, he replied that he hadn't wanted to make them as big as

architecture nor as small as sculptures. Thus the work functions as an element that organizes the exhibition space, like architecture of the room without being so.

Perhaps the most striking intervention, due to its size, is *Pastoral*, whose subtle ranges of colour occupy the long walls of the side corridors. It consists of a number of laborious and delicate large monochrome frottages, produced with pastels that –as in a delicate drawing by Ingres, in which both materials, the soft down of the paper and the graphite, each barely caressing the other, amalgamate to leave a chromatic trace– reveal the invisible terrain created by the traces left on those walls by the succession of previous projects and exhibitions.

At the end of the corridors, their chromatic gradation contrasts, despite the works' identical size, with the pair of diptychs –one white, the other black- *Preludio / Interludio, Idilio / Romance* [Prelude / Interlude, Idyll / Romance]. Both are made of velcro tape, like the series of works that Bracho / Rivera –the partnership he formed, until its break up in 2002, with the artist Julia Rivera- made while still studying at art school in Cuenca. Those pieces were very much three-dimensional, a hybrid of painting and sculpture in the manner of Donald Judd's specific objects; these newer works, in contrast, with the tape stuck directly to the wall, function like another skin added to the layers of paint that have covered the walls after each exhibition. Both diptychs consist of the confrontation between the different textures –hook and loop– of the velcro on each wall, creating an almost magnetic pull between them that seems to announce the inescapable imminence of their union.

*M sobre M* [M on M] also considers the layers of time and the skin of the gallery. Returning to the idea of *Poni Aloha*, an enormous wall drawing in black graphite produced in 2007 in this same gallery for the group show *Aquí y ahora. Tiempo y espacio* [Here and Now. Time and Space], Bracho now returns «to the scene of the crime», to the same wall, to produce a new wall work of the same size, this time multicolour and produced in tandem with someone close to him. Yet, in fact, that ephemeral drawing continues to exist beneath the white, repainted epidermis of the wall, and making it visible again is, as in an archaeological excavation, also making the dermis of time visible. The original idea was, through a restoration process, to salvage parts of the original drawing, thus bringing past and present into coexistence and enlivening the symmetry of the new work. It wasn't possible to do this within the time available for installing the exhibition, but, in another loop or twist in the «Bracho system', in a kind of reverse archaeology, the artist decided that if it was not possible to uncover the layers, it was possible to add another: the planned excavations are now fictitious, recreations –the artist copies himself, and is copied by his partner- of the original drawing.

*Hole No. 1 (For Adam)*, another frottage, placed high up on the second floor like an enormous blind rose window, calls to mind Lawrence Weiner's famous statement:

- «1. The artist may construct the piece.
2. The piece may be fabricated.
3. The piece need not be built.

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.»

The work has a permanent existence –in the form of an embossed print and a text with the contract and instructions for installation and conservation- and another possible existence as a wall work, which in this case has been executed by the person to whom it is dedicated.

Another piece which has been altered for the current exhibition is *Todos mis amigos me parecen guapos* [All my friends seem good-looking to me]. The original work from 2014 consisted of a stack of 132 sheets of polyester on a plinth. On the sheets Bracho had recorded, on a 1:1 scale, the floor of Cruce, the Madrid cultural association founded exactly 25 years ago by a number of enthusiastic and dynamic cultural agents, including the painter Manolo Quejido. On this occasion the floor is spread out in its entirety over the gallery floor, with the fragments cut where necessary to fit its particular features, thus translating the presence -that word again- of one space to another. Bracho: «What is interesting is the challenge involved in adapting a work to a space for which it is not designed, or with which it does not establish an easy relationship.»

The layout of the first floor is conceived as a timeline that presents, chronologically, the various stages of the production, evolution, formalization and dissemination of Bracho's artistic project. The timeline is marked by the work *Yo también lo haría* [I'd do it too], a piece consisting of 272 small images, encapsulated in perspex, frozen stills of the video performance *Felix y su amiga F* [Felix and His Friend F], that transform the time in which that performance was enacted into a physical space, which unfolds along the entire perimeter of the first floor. Around it are placed everything from documentation of his first collective works with Julia Rivera, to his most recent work, the four *Horizon* prints and the pair of cut-out «drawings» *Churrete I / II* [Stain I / II]. In between are both finished works -drawings, photographs, interventions- as well as reproductions of diagrams, sketches or preparatory drawings, taken from the sketchbooks that are displayed on the tables, specifically designed for the exhibition, that will be the basis, as mentioned before, of the work *AYYO*.

In the words of the artist: «What you see is what you project, the intensity of your experience will depend on your aptitude when you stand before an image that asks you questions about your particular way of looking and of interpreting your visual or emotional baggage. Ultimately, it is about revealing the mechanisms by which we codify images». The exhibition, as a work in progress, does not shut out any reading, but rather is open to the experience of the viewer, of this «I» that is each one of us.

