

Art is not what used to be. A text of Juan Botella for the catalogue *The bridges of vision*. MAS. Santander. 2007

Put so baldly, this affirmation can, and should, be taken at face value even though it is often used by those of a nostalgic bent to invalidate the artistic production of the present.

Nevertheless it is worth giving some thought to an observation that, depending on who makes it, can be taken either positively or negatively. Here, at the outset, we must make it clear that we take it positively. But those who take the opposite line have their arguments even though they rarely expound them since to do so would put them at risk, would show them up and leave them without clothes, exposed to the elements, vulnerable to attack and in danger of losing that security that they have striven so hard to attain and which allows them to maintain the distance and anthropocentric authority on which the western conscience has based itself, especially from the Enlightenment onwards. Thus their dislike of the artistic production of the present betrays a line of thought which considers the work of art as a special act of creation, something which stands out above the rest, a superior form of expression which participates in something we could label as "sacred". The work of art is thus cut off from other things in much the same way that the divine is different, and separate, from the human. Concomitant to this, the work of art is treated with veneration as, indeed, is its creator. The artist becomes someone special, a hero with the ability to transcend the limits of the mundane so that the viewer humbles himself before him and meekly accepts that art is what the system says it is.

But the problem arises when the system, and this exhibition is part of that system, puts on work by someone like Juan Carlos Bracho. To begin with, none of the conventional artistic norms to which the viewer is accustomed, since the system has drilled them into him, are complied with: there is no permanence since the wall will be painted over at the end of the exhibition and Bracho's work will thus disappear for ever; there is even ambiguity as to what constitutes the work; is it the pattern one sees on the wall or the act of painting it which happened two weeks before the exhibition opened; again, the pattern on the wall has no meaning, it is merely the results of a combination of certain repetitive movements; there is no canvas, no paper, merely the wall itself; yet the work itself is accompanied by photographs that stretch out its limits and yet beg the questions as to whether they, themselves, have any artistic merit or are mere commentary on what is drawn on the wall.

To settle these doubts, one should go back to the title and recall the positive sense of the expression "art is not what it used to be". In that expression there is a clear distinction between the present as encapsulated in "is" and the past of the "used to be", a caesura or division in the rational approach to assessing reality which allows us to dominate it, understand it and handle it. But a century has passed since Einstein propounded the Theory of Relativity and, in a few more years, it will also be hundred years since Bergson demonstrated that the packaging up or division of time is not so much feeble-mindedness as a lack which has consequences on our perception of things. And, curiously, this concern with perception, which draws the viewer fully into the work, is the key to the artistic development which began in the middle of the past century and which, to a large extent, is still going strong today. Everything began in the 1960s with Pop and Minimal, with the last of the two drawing art from its quasi-metaphysical niche and, paradoxically, bringing it closer to an ever more detached viewer who was addressed with greater directness.

Mearlaeu-Ponty and Bergson are two French philosophers responsible for the deanthropomorphi-

cation of perception. Their approach was to posit a perception that eluded the the psychological subject and his behaviour and, instead, to stress the reflective character of the human being who only perceives in the world. The consequence of this approach is immediate: perception is an action which depends on the world of art, make totally comprehensible the concern for lifting the mask from this situation. Thus, to go back to the more mundane, everyday world or to reality, to the work of art as an object viewed by the viewer, the work of art merely consists of an object perceived in relation to its situation which is to say that it is not a stable, consistent object of immutable characteristics but is dependent on circumstances not under its control and pertaining to the psychology of the viewer. Hence, viewed in this light, many of the definitions of art that we hear at present are not so exceptional: "what the artist does", " what one sees in museums", "whatever the system says about art is art", etc. Thus from the seventies onwards there is a tendency for art to find its way out of museums and art galleries (Minimal, Land Art, Conceptual ...) or to try a different approach, as we find with the work of Juan Carlos Bracho, and rip off its mask. In this instance, the wall of the Gallery is more than a mere support for the work, it, in itself, is the work which come into being through the artistic act that the pattern brings out and that was heretofore hidden, its material existence, the memory of its being built - all this, its imperfections included. In this way we can conclude that the pattern is meaningless and yet it serves to present the wall, to bring out the wall's potential and thereby fulfil completely what Bergson said about representation being incomplete since it cannot deliver the reality of what it represents but merely that of its context.

Therefore, if there is no representation, if what we have left is a presentation of the real, of art which considers itself its own object, which Bracho's kind of art, then all he has to do is to present himself as he really is: a doing, a building, something which takes us back to Bergson and his philosophical thoughts about time. For the French philosopher, being is neither stable nor static, as we have been told from the Greeks down to Nietzsche. Being is becoming, a continuous evolution that kicks off from what he termed "élan vital" the impulse behind all life.

The gestural repetition with which Bracho has created his pattern maintains a profound relationship with this concern about being-as-becoming in that change and difference become the dominant question. And, according to Deleuze, who has bent his mind to the eternal Nietzschean return, it is repetition which constitutes the difference, not habitual repetition but rather one that breaks away from habit and from a self under the thumb of finding similarities. It is that which is free of conditioning, pure difference. We find ourselves, therefore, faced with the free act, with freedom itself, something which Kierkegaard would have said, is pointed to the future, to what is new.

Art is not what it used to be but that is because the viewer is no longer what he was. Being is no longer what it was. Being, the viewer and art are doing, an act fixed in time. Note that the gerund (doing) is an impersonal term and if were to prefix it with an "I am", that doing is mine and not the artist's. The artist belongs to the art, not vice versa. Art has its own "élan vital" so it should not bother us that when Bracho creates a pattern he has no preconceived ideas as to how it should turn out, in his work there is no will, no pre-established image.

Thus it is quite appropriate that Bracho should append some photographs to the pattern he has made. Their contents, at the same time, are the pattern and yet they have nothing to do with it. The answer is simple: the photographs give a temporal bracketing, they fix at a given moment in time what was, in fact, a process, they cut and halve time, they are an image. And images, as we know,

are weak and never capture the fullness of reality. The image is an impoverishment because reality is truncated by it, its development blocked.

Setting up this interplay between process, result and image in one way of making things clear, of forcing things to come out in their true colours: art as doing, results as contemplation and image as consumption. And, as Roland Barthes comments, the punctum of the photograph is "this is what happened, one would have to accept that what photographs show is not what is but what has been done and is now in the past, From that perspective photographs are the best type of exhibit for a museum or an exhibition, they are ideally adapted, in a way that a "doing" is not, to the function of the exhibition space. Doing, by contrast, does not fit in well with spaces that lack flexibility and that reduce the doing to a rigid environment and a fixity of coordinates. Doing is change, it resists being boxed it is free - the very moment the hand appears it ceases to be. Admittedly an imprint, a trace is left: the pattern on the wall. But this trace has nothing to do with the doing and neither do the photographs.

Doing cannot be exhibited. It is never there and that is what makes Bracho's exercises intriguing. Because, in his own way, Bracho is telling the museum that it cannot exhibit art, that all that pretentious, temple-like paraphernalia, its sacred precincts, are meaningless and if it retains some meaning it is only because of the rites that make its appearance. And the believer/viewer is told that he has come too late, that the doing has already happened and that what is left is merely the result. He is told that, far from entering a sacred place where he will meet a god, he can expect nothing more than a simulacrum of what is absent. What he will really see is the wall of a room that has become real and, on the wall, a "virtual reality", Bracho's pattern.

This "virtual reality" transcends representation. It makes no attempt to imitate, reproduce or simulate reality. In "virtual reality" there is no artifice, because artifice copies or imitates reality, but rather a simulacrum where the mediatic representation precedes and defines reality and outlines a new topography of surroundings perceived as reality. Museums and big exhibition spaces function as a medium, something which interposes itself between the reality of art and the viewer something which conditions the viewer's perception. They concede recognition, they determine what is considered art. Nevertheless, if we have already demonstrated that art as "doing" cannot be exhibited, we have to acknowledge that in this exhibition, as in many others, we are faced with the paradox that we are presented with works of art which, precisely, reject this definition of themselves. Art enters the museum where in order to expose a lie, as Bracho's work aims to do, it tells us that what we see is not what it seems but, quite simply, a figment of the imagination. And what museums and big exhibition spaces do, what art in general does, is absorb the hostile entity and neutralise it by depriving it of its reality, by making it virtual. By contrast Bracho's work has conferred reality on the Museum, or the room where it figures, by what he has done to a wall. He shows it up for what it is: a space that was built with the sole purpose of enclosing the unenclosable.

Art as doing is escapist and, Houdini-like, it will wriggle out of the chains that pin it down. Thus Bracho's drawings seek to escape from their walls and set out in whatever direction they can, dissolving, in the process, the traditional two-dimensionality that has characterised drawing in the past and expanding into a continuous movement which is resistant to the imposition of limits or to the fragmentation of life that is inherent to measurement. Art as doing defies Newtonian physics which divided time up so as to permit the measurement of the speed of movement. Art as doing is closer to Einstein's physics where time is merely another coordinate of space; together they

form the space-time continuum in which doing happens. We thus find ourselves in a fourth dimension, one of time, which revolutionises everything we had been told about the immutable, and it is this dimension which makes walls move, as Bracho has done in some of his projects, or means that his drawings leave their niches. Doing cannot be put in frames as we see from the photographs of the video where a tennis ball bouncing off a wall draws a pattern, or in the photographs that, on unfolding the design, we find having a life and existence beyond the immediate borders of the work. The image, in short, is not the only reality.

Drawing people out of the mental niches which they inhabit is merely a way of freeing them from their limitations, it breaks down the man-made walls that enclose them and lets them be themselves. For the more conventional, such a liberation seems scandalous, a transgression perpetrated against those who think that things are what they are and that reality cannot be controlled. But we all know that these mental compartments are a danger, that they exclude reality and hamper direct contact with it; that their walls are like panes of glass in a window in that you might be able to see through them but which limit existence to what is visible. Glass protects us against the elements but, at the same time, it cuts us off from reality. It is out there and I am here. In this respect, the room where Bracho has drawn his pattern is well chosen. The exhibition has allocated him a space where he is ill at ease, he is trapped behind a glass pane which his "élan vital" pushes him to break through. Thus the exhibition space tames him into a space and imposes limitations on him that, for some time now, art itself has come to reject. The struggle between order and chance is now out in the open and both have their weapons, their power strategies, their seduction techniques and their cynicism. What the art of our time is truly up against is how to live behind glass without losing touch with the life beyond it.