

A Blinding Line-Drawn Landscape. A text of Óscar Alonso Molina for the catalogue *Juan Carlos Bracho. Drawing as experience 2003/2006*. Madrid 2006

In my opinion, the landscape is the most open form, the least loaded with content, with the possible exception of the monochrome.

Michael Biberstein

Title[s]. (Everything I know — about him).

- A blinding line-drawn landscape
- Collapsed horizon
- Where the gaze is left beyond: landscape
- Reversal of the cyclorama
- Eroded / deleted landscape
- *Rain, steam and speed*
- Deleting vision by breathing

The curtain [intervened wall] goes up and the curtain appears

[Such is the textual paradox that Juan Carlos Bracho's work uses to question with perverse acuteness the limits of the end of the play, driving the text to say its final words from the very beginning. Consequently, the work is a forced confession —although perhaps in a premature, not violent, sense— of something that will, sooner or later, become a manifest appearance on the stage. Here the viewer's eye is eyelidless, it never pauses / rests for blinking, and records everything without the stroboscopy needed to hold the vision in their gaze. According to the classical precept, in its conceptual perfection the idea does not even need to be seen with or by the eyes —drawing. It is enough just to contemplate its intellectual *disegno interno*. Nevertheless, Juan Carlos Bracho has turned his obsessive perseverance and the parsimonious and mechanical execution of his works into an exact, but reversed, reflection of this ideal.

The work is consummated as it is consumed; in other words, it is subsumed in its own development, concluded from the start and determined by an irresolvable destiny from the very beginning of the story. Here, to the viewers' surprise, title and index —first page— coincide intimately, both with one another and with the actual text where the action takes place. What about the actors? The actors are also internal to the language that says the thing itself, like in the visual paradox (*trompe l'oeil* and tautology: Escher, Vasarely, Kosuth), or in the minimalists' fanatical nominalism (Stella's mythical «what you see is what you see» from 1964). Therefore, there are no actors behind the characters; their faces coincide in a brief, barely perceivable, interface that forces us to trace their presence to the minimal gestures of a concept-based dramatisation, remote and ambiguous, full of nuances that are apparently without difference.

Straight without reverse; laminar breakdown of the volume —positive space— of the action, of the story, of time. The inaugural curtain has sliced the plane of the infinite in two —an Annunciation, perhaps?— causing the insubstantial event typical of the aesthetic, reduced to these radically flat, one-dimensional facets on which our comment will *rotate*. Only the desire of consummating an impossible action becomes / makes it absolutely essential.]

Prelude

With these premises, «the artist has to learn to speak the language of Nature» our actor exclaims right at the beginning of the *performance*, with his back to the auditorium, in front of an empty stage, according to Carus' quote:

Not being able to finish
Is what makes you great!

The drama has commenced.

Act 1

The horizon contracts into a point —maybe a suspension point, maybe an ending (perhaps they are not that different: according to Gracián, «Not saying anything can mean everything») — and after such a Big-Crunch the action recommences and time is unleashed once again, as astrophysics suspects. Open to ambiguity, the declarative silence in Juan Carlos Bracho's work also demonstrates the work's openness to continuous interpretations beyond the minimalist literality that seems to fuel it initially (fusion of the performance horizon lines in the dialogue proclaimed by hermeneutics). Like an empty screen on which all sorts of faded images appear, almost about to disappear —dragging the background of the performance with them— form and content are weakened in his work, using the effect to obtain one of its highest peaks of intensity.

On the other hand, how strangely insistent he is on keeping the camera in parallel with the plane of the wall, and on making the latter receive, like an epidermis, endless scratches and bumps, and on making them come from an invisible external world which the main character occasionally escapes from. Even by transporting a building a few degrees from its plan, his first solo work since separating from the team he formed with Julia Rivera since 1995, the movement is conceived and seen essentially through a collapsed gaze (plans, aerial views). *La distancia más corta entre dos puntos es una línea recta* is the title of this work from 2003, not without certain metalinguistic irony and, perhaps, a private comment to his own professional situation as an artist who started a new solo career.

[This parallel mirror trick, where the image is trapped without being able to escape its own circularity —ever more rapidly— could be defined as one of the first conditions of the Mannerist representation that can so often be seen in the artist's works. Incidentally, of that Maelström, only the figure of the *contradictore* seems to escape, turning his eyes towards the space *beyond* the picture, claiming the complicity of a distant world and the viewers —us— putting into practice a strategy that is opposed to that of the characters who appear with their backs to us immersed in the Romantic stage space, which Juan Carlos Bracho has used before in a few of his works.]

Act 2

[The whole play is performed using background voices. The movements, gestures and positions of the body are declined from the powerful diction of the characters, who are dubbing actors more than actors as such. The performance is unique, the voices travel in the theatre's currents of air, nothing is left in writing: this transcription stems from «the shadow of the breeze on the grass,» from the most beautiful drawings imaginable (Duchamp). Juan Carlos Bracho's mural interventions based on a myriad of lines, rebounds or corrections are another type of imaginary notational system. Do they tell micro-stories? Come and see these whispers.]

— *The Draftsman* [Alone, before the white wall, back turned to the stalls. His tense hands have initially dropped the pencils and the set square]: We are melting, we are melting! Take cover! We are running out of time...

— *The Architect* [From afar, with *The Philosopher* and *The Woman*, standing apart from *The People*]: He is still in the middle of the battle...

— *The Philosopher*. He will be exhausted; someone should erase that drawing from his mind.

— *The Woman*: Let's find *The Wizard*; he will be able to return sanity to his eyes, clarity to his head and steadiness to his hands. I had never seen him like this before. He has been like this for days; that diabolical drawing feeds off his body and will be the end of him, and of us. I cannot stand to hear him scream for a minute longer.

— *The Draftsman*: Do not step back! Attention! Attention, I said. [Pause] Bellona? Victoria? Oh God, it will swallow us all. We are melting! Wait a little longer...

— *The Philosopher*. Go and talk to him, dear Architect, he no longer wants to even look at me.

— *The Architect* [Walking slowly towards him]: Master, listen to me. Please, you should rest at least for one night. That drawing of yours...

— *The Draftsman* [Taking his hand and dragging him to the ground with him]: Take cover, you fool! Be careful! Do you want to lose your head? Here it comes, back again...

— *The Architect*: But master, please, listen to me. You have to forget those chimeras and return to the world where you have always been loved and admired. You are wasting away; you are melting in front of this undying piece. Look at the faces of the people that surround us, the sadness of your best friend, the tears of the woman who loves you. Where have you been living for so many days now that you do not even need a drop of water or a friendly smile? Let's go home to rest, I beg you.

— *The Draftsman* [As if suddenly remembering something, turns towards his interlocutor, offering a medium close shot of his face for the first time; whispering, almost inaudibly]: Did you say water? Did you say laughter? You want more!?! Is this tempest that ruins us with its fury and the dreadful cacophony that accompany it not enough? Nature as a whole has exploded into pieces, the buttresses of the world are falling on our heads and you are asking me to drink and laugh under the shelter of my house, of that miserable pastry you erected for me one day. You have lost your mind, Architect, or perhaps you have given in. Join me; help me resist this superhuman force. Your technical brain will be of much more use than that of the speculator of chimeras. Bah! Verbose philosopher, vacuous parrot. I do not need him, his interminable words hamper everything I undertake. I have to reach white from white, the outside from the outside, I have to contain the whole fury of this ungovernable Universe..., but my body is minimised with each attempt, dissolving between whirls of steam and sparks. [Sobbing] Give me a body of guidelines, Architect, not of words. Give me a true formal reason for my own form, and I will add to it a perfect style in the fight; I need no more. A maniera, that's it, but I become consumption, aphasia... I dissolve until I disappear in front of that scene I foresee. I want to dominate the world with my hands [He looks for and gathers the pencils and the set square that have fallen at his feet]. This is not madness in a Draftsman, is it? Or are you also going to say I'm crazy? [Pause] Look, listen...

— *The Wise Girl* [Playing among *The People*]: Ring a ring of roses, pocket full of posies...

— *The Draftsman*: Is the chorus to that song also madness? That child is flooded with water as passionate as mine and yet she brushes past you bringing nothing but a smile to your face. You say you want more water, more laughter, is that so? Leave me, if you are not at my side, I would rather be without you, leave me alone [He stands up brusquely, and turns his back to the viewers once again]. Call the garden maker, quickly, I need him. He is essential to my plan.

— *The Landscape Painter* [Stepping away from *The People*]: I am here, sire.

— *The Draftsman* [Without looking at him]: Tell me, what do you see here?

— *The Landscape Painter*: Where, sire?

— *The Draftsman*: Where? Here! [Raising his hands slightly and moving the open palms of his hands in front of the white wall] In front of me, surrounding me; rotating in front of me as if the whole orb were draining into a fixed point, immensely huge, astonishingly small, deep and brutal and fascinating and necessary. For the love of god! Your eyes, more sensitive and educated than the rest, do they not want to see anything either? Here, here! Right here! [He points to a place on the wall at eye level] And up there, above our heads, dilating its folds, showing infinite facets, overwhelming us with... [Pause. Sobbing again] It's useless... How could you conceal it, or look away, if the tip of its wing rested on your head! That is how I see it. And the weight is unbearable. Everything that exists has to be manifest, and it is manifested through shapes and their mutations; your gardens should be enough proof of that. Is the physiognomy of the mountains not reduced inside them, capable of reflecting everything everywhere, like each of the shards of a broken mirror? The paths that cross them, don't the pedestrians find them expressive? Strolling through the formations, do they not recall the scientific and artistic gaze, the civilised position of their presence in the middle of them, like a landmark in reference to that «classical landscape» that nobody has managed to crystallise? The arches and flowerbeds that you distribute there like a «small mysticism,» do they ever fall silent? Say, gardener, does the «Church of Nature» only speak to you through its visible face, and never before?

— *The Landscape Painter*: Before, sire, the canopy of heaven, with everything it contains, tells me in miniature about the arrangements that are possible, unprecedented and comforting, favourable to adapting its core to accommodate mankind anew. Yet thou terrify me with an unmanageable flow of sensations, battles without spheres with centres that are permanently outside the plane of the drawing. Your technique frightens me and escapes my understanding as it would my sensibility were it to reach my feelings, and the reflections of its effects on thee are enough to disgust me. I wish I spoke the language of lullabies... of nothing. «I am starting to desire a minor language, like the one lovers use with one another. A language of broken words, which are barely articulated, like the sound of footsteps on the pavement» (Jabès).

— *The Draftsman*: «Simple is the labyrinth in the simplest letter...»

[*The Architect*, visibly saddened, stands up and leaves]

— *The Landscape Painter*: It is, I know, but my trade also erects them for the solace of those who enter their core, wanting to rest in the conch, in the shade, like on a cheek. I myself enjoy certain fame in the bizarre design of their entrails. Yet inhabiting the labyrinth is to lose the reference of the

horizon, to live in a collapsed world. Your gaze slams into that immutable, impenetrable wall. You're experiencing the end of the world and your aesthetic is totalitarian: emphatic in its weakness; exaggerated in its infinite repetition of the humblest gestures; grandiloquent in its openness; pompous in its accumulation of nuances that cannot stop being looked at; distant despite the appearances..., self—engrosses, without genuine references, dramatic. I look down on thee and pity you, my friend, nothing of your genius has been able to make this world more habitable; your life is superfluous, like your ornamental rhetoric: empty.

— *The Draftsman*: [Still with his back turned, now with his arms hanging down at his side and his head low, stammers]: I..., but I, I... «I am the mistress of my dreams.»

Intermission

As an interlude, *The Jester* appears on stage reciting a string of happy quotes, although only two of the first ones will be remembered, like a critical methodology and a warning, respectively:

«Metaphorics is no longer regarded primarily as the leading sphere for experimental theoretical conceptions, as the front line of concept formation, as a makeshift in situations in which technical terminology has not yet been consolidated, but is seen rather as an authentic way of grasping connections, one that cannot be limited to the narrow nucleus «absolute metaphor».»

«Above that climax there is nothing else. Consequently, showing the extreme and the ultimate means clipping the wings of imagination, and, since it cannot rise above the sensitive impression, it means occupying it in images that are paler than the one that appears before it.»

Consequently, the *Witz* is imposed even in the gravest spirits, emotional density is diluted gradually. We forget the reason for our melancholy.]

Act 3

Between the work in progress, and still open, *Félix y su amiga F* (2003 –) and the recent *White Horses* (2006), one could say that our Draftsman has brought about zero enunciation by saturation, where the expressive impulse tries the minimum enunciation of the first case, so paused and correct, so fixed to good behaviour. The light graphic rain that soaks the face of his most renowned works, dripping down the surface, becomes denser in the second until it fills and shields the emptiness:

«I have always thought that in a drawing, the black trace of graphite that rubs onto the paper reminded me of a dark shadow throwing itself perpendicularly on top of itself, absolutely concentrated on a single direction. Then, the fine trace of the shadow spreads horizontally until it writes an endless number of labyrinthine paths to get lost in. Black on black, because, how many layers of metallic graphite are needed to shield the insidious presence of the blank, white page?»

In any case, this confirms the excess of graphite that so discreetly threads Juan Carlos Bracho's oeuvre. A very particular way of solving works with enormous technical diversity whilst maintaining a constant disciplinary summary that can even be read in a formal sense, since everything is reduced to drawing parameters, from photography to installation, including more complex approaches with models, or sequence-shots on video and film. Or from the documentary nature of his proposals to the formalist work —closed, autonomous and self—engrossed; from the single piece, loaded aurati-

cally, to his distance from the media; from the environment to traditional arts linked to ornamentation; from decoration to the process, etc.

Thus, architecture, that germinates from the sketch, the outline, dissolves now in its final state into a field expanded inside it. Baroque display where the limits are constantly exceeded between adjoining categories by the hand, incidentally, of the element that is common to all arts: the *disegno*. It is hard to be more explicit than in *Dibujo para una sala rectangular* (2004), as would occur subsequently with *Otra historia* (2006). In both cases, the vicious circle of tautology (the model that reproduces the space that accommodates the model, where the model itself appears, reproducing the space that accommodates that other model...) is like graphic, spiral writing where the tip of the pencil digs into the centre, into a punctum (blind spot of innervation where the eye cannot see (or be seen): that drop of darkness...). There is no point looking for another source for ultimate meaning in Juan Carlos Bracho's drawing: in the eschatology, throughout these works, there will always be a similar vortex, where projects pivot on an ungraspable base which, faced with what is culturally coded, the *studium*, is emphasised to move the viewer.

Friedrich asserted that the image has to «stimulate the mind and allow for the play of fantasy, since the drawing should not attempt to represent nature, only recall it.» The level of acceptance given to said assertion conditions the concept of the modern landscape, i.e. there where the gaze is beyond. The infinite nature of things is a condition that modernity imposes on the subject-object relationship, and reveals the essence of the genre in aesthetic modernity: «The relationship between mankind and Nature is not diaphanous, it is mysterious.»¹⁰ Juan Carlos Bracho is also aware of the fact that this is the point where a good part of the coordinates for the interpretation of his work appear: «All the elements that appeared on stage referred directly to the temporal and programmatic development of the drawing, not to the work as a mystical experience, but to an attitude and a position of rebelliousness and stubbornness when everything that surrounds us points towards a disproportionate and empty acceleration of the experience and the gaze.»

Therefore, should these pieces be considered as a contained impulse of fantasy, a reversal of the grotesque? A completely spent exaltation of the sublime, or more precisely, an exaltation of the completely spent sublime? Traces of the Barthesian «tremor of time»? The hand that writes / draws and at the same time deletes a sign that means something and nothing beyond its own materiality. The fact is that the programme announces that nothing will remain of the arduous process of execution, the result will disappear following the last layer of white on which it grew so delicately and patiently. Everything is deleted: there is nothing to say (Derrida), nothing to see (Baudrillard). Like in the convex mirror of *The Arnolfini Marriage*, that omnivorous internal eye of the scene that snubs the material author and transfers him to a ceremonial category, photography pathetically reveals a presence foreign to the aesthetic event and includes it for its perfection: *fuít hic*. The person who executed it was there, and experienced it—that is, the person saw the scene—and testifies to it in this image... Yet drawing, with its *ideal*, inaugural, eidetic condition, experiences a paradoxical position. It also steps into the unknown, despite being supported, like Juan Carlos Bracho, by a scaffolding of premises and constants. Every draftsman is «blind,» according to Derrida: in art, where the representation has to confront the unrepresentable, «it is less a matter of telling it like it is [...] than of *observing* the law beyond sight.»¹

Act 4

[Empty stage, the wall is completely full of lines, the remains of the execution are strewn all over the floor *Wouldn't Change a Thing* (2004). Shrill sounds of swifts calling from the ceiling cross the air of the theatre, like the sun going down in Madrid in summer. Enter *The Woman*, *The Philosopher* and *The Architect*]

— *The Architect* [Taking a long look at the drawing]: Everything has been consumed, and now I can barely contemplate the creation without shuddering. Are our times the sign of a dead age? He often spoke of the advent of a new era from which our civilisation would be judged based on sediments and remains; another time, perhaps a happy one. What strange sensations... I still hear his screams, still see him waving his arms around whilst he held the set square firmly to the wall and drew lines incessantly. It was as if form and content were dissociated, a divided judgement. I can hardly remember when he began, I cannot even say how long this has been completed. [He walks up and touches it] Yet I am still capable of reading his fantasies as if they were written on a brightly illuminated codex; there are whole parts I know by heart. Look here: the sun setting behind that mountain range, the fog rising from the valley to cover that pair of angels whose prayers guard the funerary monument topped by a harp... And here: a sea of ice, right next to this exquisite japonaiserie, where little sailboats fade into a sea without perspective or dimensions. There is no story. What skill, what ability, what control! From a frenetic and disorganised mind to this calm journey along the remotest places on Earth. And I call myself a landscape painter in front of you who saw him? I would give anything to hold a pencil for five minutes like him, to draw a single one of these lines... [He looks at the floor around him, looking for something. He sees the set square, goes towards it and picks it up, placing it against the wall, under one of the lines. He sobs silently]

— *The Philosopher*. Stop, my friend, there is no point in insisting, what we see is nothing but an effect. You are under the influence of his dominion on emotive participation (*Einführung*). Art is not there, the author has died, taking everything he owned with him. He has left nothing but an insane chain of reasoning that limits the freedom of the viewer, your freedom. The sources, go back to the sources, there you will find freedom; everything else means drinking from a borrowed cup and halting the genuine critical judgement. Are you listening to me?

— *The Architect*. I know, Philosopher, but how can I escape this seduction? When I hear the whispers, proliferating stories tear the veils that surround me, I see further than ever before, with unprecedented precision. Looking at this plan, everything around me is transformed incessantly in layouts I will never execute, charming grottos that exceed my imagination, meteors of times before mankind, and futures too, and transformations, metamorphoses, where I am always one of the extremes... My spirit and Nature are amalgamated. In this glacier I do not feel the heat that surrounds me. Everything I desire has crystallised.

«... Smokes in the sun—thaw; whether the eave—drops fall

Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.»

— *The Philosopher*: Life, the elements, sweet sounds... They are nothing but the impulse that has to project us to the matter. How many ideas do you know that are not shaped in language?

— *The Architect*: The idea of expressionless beauty (Lessing), which affects me here. I feel it, it has left a fragrant trace, it is still warm. I even remember when it started to appear. There is something marvellous that cannot be said.

— *The Philosopher*: Neither can it be proven or shown.

— *The Architect*: That is true, all I can remember is the beginning and then... it is now.

— *The Philosopher*: Terrible things live in between, those snow storms during which you draw blindly. Only light sleeps, never wakefulness, even less dream. Death... Perhaps that was the unbearably heavy wing our friend referred to so often in his creative delirium. I do not know the name, and my school has spent centuries proposing a suitable combination that embodies it, forcing it to become a definite presence. Actually, I have to say that I think it is a useless effort. I am starting to tire of it. Of describing, that is, describing to save us from uncertainty. [Pause. Turning back to *The Architect*, who is still captivated by the drawing, face close to the wall] What can you see now?

— *The Architect*: I see us all in a scene full of harmonies: a storm approaches, there are ruins in the background...; vegetation, foliage, dampness under our bare feet; wine and kissing have swollen our lips... The Woman, where has she gone? There she is. What is she looking at? I cannot read it from here.

— *The Woman* [Approaches and curiously observes what he is looking closely at]: Et in *Arcadia* ego...

[*The Wise Girl* crosses the stage humming her song. She stops in silence in the centre of the stage. She stands at the edge of the orchestra, looking at the drawing for a few minutes. Then, moving towards it, she takes an eraser from her apron and starts to rub it out gradually, whilst she starts singing again. *The Architect* and *The Woman* watch the scene, *The Philosopher* exits. The swifts' chirping starts up again, flooding the theatre. The light gradually turns pink, orange and red until it goes black, like dusk]

Curtain falls [white wall] and the performance begin.

Óscar Alonso Molina [Madrid, April-July 2006]