

conversation between Marta Gili & Jordi Colomer

Living in the set

(catalogue FUEGOGRAFIS)

Marta Gili: When I'm getting ready for an interview, I always think of the distance, the autonomy of a work *vis-à-vis* its creator. I remember, in some animated films taken from tales or traditional narratives, the objects rebel: they think for themselves, do things their own way, go beyond the initial function that their human creators intended. At night, they come out, cups meet spoons, lame toy soldiers fall in love with princesses without castles, etc. Can an artist's own work rebel against him or her in a similar way?

Jordi Colomer: That's fascinating, yes, toys coming alive at night, museum statues descending from their pedestals, or objects becoming human and starting to speak..., like Pinocchio or the Golem. This revolt against a supposedly all-powerful master or creator is obviously seductive, although also a little hypocritical. It's generally just at night: in the morning, all order is re-established... Inanimate objects coming to life, this is related to the idea of "disturbing strangeness." It's entirely different from that Pirandello-like concept of characters determining to live their own destinies. It seems to me that one wields a great deal of power from one's position of hidden author... I remember a sort of nightmare in a text by Jacinto Benavente: one night while at home, he hears voices in the room next door; he gets up and discovers all of his characters in full discussion...

MG: Yes, I think that it's in *El príncipe que todo lo aprendió en los libros*¹ ["The Prince who Learnt Everything by Reading"]. Can you imagine your characters talking amongst themselves! What would they talk about? About you? Themselves?

JC: I think that all my characters are linked to a specific situation, place and/or action. They aren't "psychological" characters, even if they are very defined characters. In fact, for years, I avoided making my characters talk, or in any case, I wanted them to express themselves in ways other than words. And even when very recently, in *En la pampa*, I suggested that the actors improvise their dialogues, I still gave them a concrete action to do each time; for example, washing a car in a cemetery in the middle of the desert, while talking.

MG: To be sure, in that last piece, words don't figure as a central element, or even as accompanying the action. They are almost like any other prop on the set—like the sponge, the soap or the car.

JC: The dialogued text comes almost naturally out of the situation. We're in a desert land, in the north of Chile, where it's nearly fifty degrees Celsius. Imagine a boy and a girl, each walking from opposite directions, meeting at an intersection, the only one for 500 kilometres around. Obviously, they'd talk to each other: "What school did you go to?" etc. The pampa then acts as a grand stage, where the text becomes matter for experimentation, improvisation, play... I had already worked on this question of dialogue, but in a very different way, in *Babelkamer*.

MG: In *Babelkamer*, the dialogue is undeniably constructed by means of a complex system of "intermediation," interpretation and multiple translations...

JC: It takes place in Brussels, in a shopping centre inside of a small caravan/cabin. Two people sit facing each other, each one below a screen showing *Sunrise* by Murnau, the last major silent film production. It's a situation conceived of to encourage dialogue (the sub-title is "Babble Room"). The two people—one a Francophone, the other a native Dutch speaker—who don't know each other, engage in the discussion game, without any pre-established scenario, while watching the film, which is the common theme for discussion. One essential detail, they speak in signs, not the "universal" sign language—which is practiced as little as Esperanto—but each in his or her own language. Yet, through signs, the dialogue unfolds from the fiction's silent images. Simultaneously, by means of speech, interpreters translate, translators transcribe. The result is a written text, a film sub-titled with the dialogue, shown on the screens at the shopping centre—it's also a form of improvised exegesis of Murnau's film. What I found most interesting was the idea of experimenting with live television in a very open way. Once again, considering speech as extendible matter that can be transformed by various filters. Each unique gesture of the speakers'—as the entire body entered into play—turned out to be, in this ultra-artificial setting, the most powerful thing.

MG: One finds this extendible quality in the narration of *Un crime*. Here, the narrative of a news story is embodied by a group of characters who each carry a piece of the story, each thus participating in its construction, in its enactment.

JC: It always follows a pattern of displacement and chain transformations. These are the facts: at the beginning of the 20th century, near Cherbourg, a couple commits a very violent crime, cracking their victim's skull with blows from an axe. To get rid of the body, they put it in a trunk at the baggage checkroom, intending to then throw it into the sea. A journalist gives his version of the story in *Le Petit Journal*

—a paper chronicling daily news, which is in itself a literary genre. In *Un crime*, this is the text I rework *literally*: the letters made enlarged are distributed to a group of anonymous residents, a sort of Brechtian chorus, who restore the sequence of words in several areas in the town that are related to the crime (the train station, a boat in the ocean, etc.). The chorus does not do any acting, nor does it reconstitute the actions. It simply holds the words transformed into objects, physically carrying the scenario. Yet, through this alteration into three dimensions, the words return to the scene of the crime.

MG: This circulating of people, words and landscapes, is it just a matter of physical displacement, or also, in a larger way, cultural, social and political?

JC: First, it's a matter of displacement in time. The medium used for a one-hundred-year-old text is altered. I update it just by adding a short epilogue, a sort of moral to the story; the famous sentence that you hear in train stations and in airports: "Unattended baggage will be removed and may be destroyed..." This is really another way for me to talk about found objects. In the post-9-11 world, the object without owner is a potential threat, a disturbing reality. It has a new status: it is no longer the object put aside to await identification in the Lost-and-found Office ("*objetos perdidos*" in Spanish); nor the found object described in Art History; that is to say, it's an object that is, finally, transformable. From now on, this found, or lost, object, becomes just a danger that must immediately be destroyed, even without looking at what's inside... I've also always been enthralled by that almost mythical, primitive moment when object becomes word, to eventually result in the invention of writing. Rendering text into the form of object also allowed me to find another space for the text, beyond the image printed on a page, in the tradition of Mallarmé, Broodthaers or Brossa... Here, it is inscribed in the city and in movement.

MG: In many of your works, emblems or signs occupy a significant position; these objects look like travelling or wandering sculptures. I'm thinking of *Un crime*, but also *Anarchitekton*, *No Future*, *Arabian Stars*, *En la pampa*...

JC: My impression is that the objects, despite constant attempts at dematerialisation, are multiplying more and more. The "all-for-a-euro" stores say a lot about this trend. The character in *Simo* illustrates this almost unhealthy relationship with the object very well. She has to physically struggle to try and put order into the things she has accumulated. In a similar way, in *Père Coco*, his drifting is linked to the succession of objects that he finds in the city, and in *En la pampa*, María is constantly hanging onto a pink

handbag. Generally speaking, there is always a performative element in my work, often linked to the object. But after *Le Dortoir*, where the accumulation of objects is voluntarily excessive, where the actors themselves are immobile, I wanted to open up the doors of the set—the air was becoming almost stifling—and go out into the street. You could say that after that, my characters started taking fragments of the set outside as they wandered, to see how it transformed the perception of the city..., or of the desert. The text, having become a portable object, functions in exactly the same way, like a collage on the city: enlarged letters in *Un crime*, the neon sign in *No Future*, or the painted cardboard signs in *Arabian Stars*.

MG: Objects seem to express an identity more than serving a purpose. Even if you say that your characters aren't "psychological," that they don't verbalise their emotions, the fact of "needing" these objects, of hanging onto them, in a way, creates a space for exchange in the symbolic universe. Is the difficulty in constructing oneself as subject a question present in your work?

JC: One character who I find fascinating is Simon in the desert, who Buñuel made an extraordinary film about. Simon is a recluse who has lived on a column in the desert for thirty years. The column helps him in his aspiration to be closer to the skies, to cease contact with the material world, reject earthly things. But paradoxically, in this territory where there is nothing, the column takes on enormous importance. This sole object conditions all of Simon's existence and sums up the conflict he is going through, taken as he is between his asceticism (he doesn't move, almost doesn't drink or eat) and the temptation to abandon his mystical path (he wants to come down, run, kiss his mother...). One can see the character of Simo as the antithesis of Simon: she binges, amidst the objects that she compulsively accumulates. Later, she also tries to leave the set, which has become hostile, slipped out of control...

MG: The sets your characters live on seem circular and never-ending, although they do produce a feeling of being locked in, for the audience, like in *Simo*, or of emptiness, like in *En la pampa*.

JC: The characters we're discussing have a hard time living in the spaces where they are, seem destined to allow themselves to be carried by the object. But some characters also suggest a transformation of these spaces, and thus of their perception, through image: there's a critical demonstration like Idroj in *Anarchitekton*, or an attempt to awaken consciousness, like the heroine in *No Future*. The *Merz-Bau* by Kurt Schwitters impresses me: what is at first a simple object leads to a model of transformation of space, clearly expandable to infinity. This space is a private space, but one with no borders.

Schwitters is a true character for me, more than the artist belonging to art history. In his case, the distinction between art and life no longer seems relevant. What is important, from my point of view, is the gesture, the gesture over time, Schwitters's private performance of constructing. I see *Anarchitekton* in a similar way, like an attitude, a general model for apprehending the city. A model that can be applied "internationally," and yet one that's adaptable, very localised, attentive to detail, but mainly a gesture. The psychological side of it isn't really what I'm interested in. My characters are simply obsessive, they run around cities carrying models or beating on drums, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

MG: So, there are some characters that adapt to their environment and others that resist it, not politically, but physically, even organically. In that sense, the environment becomes a set, a stage. How do you perceive this space of fiction and its critical transformation? What are its articulations in its space of reception?

JC: In the first videos, the objects and the spaces aren't constructions that hide their fictional aspect. On the contrary, they accentuate it. For example, in *Les Villes*, a young woman in pyjamas is hanging from a fake building front and in the background there is an urban landscape that is in constant transformation. In the past, I have said that in this video, the actress is the documentary aspect of the story, that this entails a true physical effort, a real confrontation between actor and set props. The obvious fictional aspect is reinforced by the simultaneous projection of two versions of the scene: in one, the young woman succeeds in climbing over the window ledge and getting into the house; in the other, she doesn't succeed and falls. In terms of a work like *Les Villes*, one might feel what I call the "paradox of incredulousness." On the one hand, one is mesmerized by what is happening, by virtue of this suspension of incredulousness automatically instigated by all fiction: we like being told stories, we like believing ("Once upon a time, there was a young woman in her pyjamas hanging from the front of a building..."). And yet, in certain conditions, we are bound to take distance, to try and grasp the functioning, to glimpse what lurks behind the scene, its skeletal structure... The tension of this situation, which is my ideal state of reception, is also inscribed in the physical space where images are shown, a space we share with other spectators. From an idea of Benjamin, according to which cinema and architecture are paradigms of modern perception, which he qualifies as "distracted," one can imagine that the ideal spectator would be both distracted and conscious, someone who could dream while simultaneously being able to analyse what he or she is dreaming about.

MG: The concept of distracted perception is, I think, linked to what Freud called “free-floating attention,” which he opposes to “evenly-suspended attention.” Floating attention leaves us in an expectant state, but also in expectation of possible associations, of meaning to come. I am thinking of María, in *En la pampa*, when she goes into the desert, looking for who knows what. There is a sort of meaningful floating that is made possible by the nothingness, the absence of meaning...

JC: María—like Viviana, the actress—was born in María Elena, a mining town of about 15,000 inhabitants in the middle of the desert, a town baked by the sun. The women bidding her farewell, waving handkerchiefs, are the inhabitants who were there one Sunday at noon, in front of the theatre, on the main square. María leaves the city—like Viviana did in real life ten years ago—to go into the desert. She effectively transforms it into a scene space. For *En la pampa*, I needed to place the actors, who are in fact non-actors, in a form of narrative logic that followed a linear development. There are beginnings, the place where they meet, and a drift; all of this is inscribed in a precise geography, associated with the journey. I kept five situations, which don’t necessarily maintain their original narrative aspect and which must stand as autonomous situations. These fragments are presented simultaneously on several screens. The farewell scene, which could be the beginning of María’s journey, is projected above the doors of the exhibit space; the farewell is also addressed to the spectators.

MG: Would you say that *2 Av.* is also inscribed in a narrative logic?

JC: Here, the architect has the main part once again: the 2nd street in a workers’ township, beneath the thick smoke of a chemical plant. The systematic repetition of the same dwellings, modest homes with small gardens in a track shot of two kilometres. I was thinking of *Homes for America* by Dan Graham; *2 Av.* would be the French version, but revisited, full of all of today’s connotations of image in movement: an initial shot, panoramic, showing an idyllic neighbourhood, the place where the action is going to happen, where something will surely invade to trouble the established order. One sees the real inhabitants, the banal gestures, and the small, insignificant differences that define each individual personality. In this case, the real work is done during editing: reconstituting the track shot in its initial time frame from still shots taken from this camera movement. I think it’s the saddest video I ever made. Far removed from the series of photos of the cemetery in *Pozo Almonte*. There, each construction, despite the similarities, shows invention, surprising creativity—whereas before there had been nothing, no tradition. Each house of the dead reflects a unique imagination, despite the

precariousness of resources. The cemetery forms a sort of parallel city, completely alive, peopled with very earthly little homes. It is a space shared by the living and the dead, the latter of whom seem simply to have gone on holiday. But these family architectures also look like sets from another world.

MG: Perhaps they are the sets *for* another world, linked to the human desire for immortality. It's funny, but the accumulation of images in *Pozo Almonte* made me think of those westerns where the cowboys discover a sacred Indian cemetery, untouchable, because its profanation would only result in awakening the wrath of the spirits... Can we also consider the series of photographs in *Papamóvil* as a form of profanation?

JC: The Popemobile is the protective coach for the Pope when on display, an icon known around the world. I wanted to replace this image in the street, in three dimensions, keeping all its significance but free of the pomp of the Vatican, naked like a prototype, in order to record the reactions of passers-by. The sacred dimension inscribed in the Popemobile is already quite scant; the coach itself had to be profaned, its spectacular aspect, leaving just the skeletal structure. It was first and foremost an excuse to make a portrait of a heterogeneous group, *found* portraits, like the people who walk in front of the camera in the Osaka chapter of *Anarchitekton*. Providing a framework, creating a situation and letting things happen... What did the people look like passing by one day at noon, in a neighbourhood in full transition in Barcelona, la Diagonal in Poble Nou, in the summer of 2005? I remember being very impressed by a work by Ana Mendieta: in a banal street, from under a door, what seems to be blood trailing out, and slides showing the people walking by at just that moment...

MG: About 2 Av., you spoke about a strategy of inventory, accumulation. Can the same thing be said about *Cinecito* and *Papamóvil*?

JC: The devices used in the *Cinecito* slideshow are similar to those in *Papamóvil*. What happens in front of a movie theatre in Havana on an ordinary spring day in 2006 at noon? I imposed one rule on myself: taking “volleys” of photos, at regular intervals, during four hours, without participating in the action. Just as in *Papamóvil*, one sees people and cars passing—a few elements for a possible portrait of the city on that day. But in *Cinecito*, one unexpected event occurs: a person comes up, stands in front of the camera and starts telling his story, does a card trick and leaves. It turns out to be a radio spokesman. He speaks in front of an entertainment palace—the movie theatres of Havana, impressive buildings, a bit run-down nowadays, symbols of the golden age of cinema—but there's no sound. In the exhibit, this

expressive and silent spokesman receives the visitors, welcoming them in.

MG: Several of your pieces seem melancholy to me, in varying degrees. One controversial author, but one whom I very much admire, Miguel de Unamuno, writes at the end of one of his novels:² “I know that nothing happens in what is told in this story; but I hope that this is because everything stays inside of him [...]” Would you agree when I say that your work revolves around this tragic sense about life, this melancholy space where things that stay and go, happen and don’t happen, move and don’t move coexist?

JC: Poor Unamuno, lover of paradoxes, who had to submit to Millán Astray’s horrifying “*¡Viva la muerte! ¡Muera la inteligencia!*”³... Concerning melancholy, I would rather not have answered... Making pictures or films: cameras are machines to produce melancholy, a confirmation of the phantom character of reality. I don’t mean in the possible symbolism of the images, nor of the story told, but the fact of necessarily working from fragments of reality, transitional situations. This fragmented reality is clearly more and more contaminated by the transmission of many other phantom images... In the end, it becomes a gigantic melancholy production, directly proportional to the distance there is with the direct experience. I like the idea of using fragments of filmed situations to create others of another intensity, in real time, in the demonstration space. This allows all means to come into play—ephemeral architecture, pathway, sound, actions of the spectators—and through these devices, producing strong doses of the unexpected. To film *Fuegogratis*, we burned all the sets from the preceding video, *Le Dortoir*. I’ve always been fascinated by this idea of flaming sets; like in the *Nibelungen* diptych by Fritz Lang, in *Kriemhild’s Revenge*, you see all the sets of the first part burning. All exhibits are somewhat related to a “free fire.” In the end, it’s all about organising a huge party, and parties, like trips, always have an end.

1 Jacinto Benavente, *El príncipe que todo lo aprendió en los libros* (1909), Barcelona, Editorial Juventud, 1949.

2 Miguel de Unamuno, *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (1930), Madrid, Cátedra, 1993.

3 In October 1936, Miguel de Unamuno, while Dean of the University of Salamanca, gave a speech defending the humanist values of culture, in front of fascist dignitaries. He was violently interrupted by General Millán Astray, leader of the phalanx, who proclaimed “Long live death! Death to intelligence!”. Unamuno resisted and was assailed by the audience. Forced to resign, he died a few months after. (NDE.)