

Stagehand wisdom

Manuel Cirauqui

Revista Lapiz 258, December 2009

Sets, screens, Formica chairs, wood and cardboard elements. Viewers visiting *Fuegogratis* -the show devoted to the art of Jordi Colomer (Barcelona, 1962) that travelled from Jeu de Paume in Paris, to La Panera in Lérida and to Laboratorio Arte Alameda in Mexico City- had to make their way around a hybrid stage set, consisting of heterogeneous references and displaced elements. In all of them, scenographic devices appeared as the principal motif, underlining the lack of neutrality in the exhibition space, but also connoting it: the Formica chairs brought to mind specific "transmission" areas, like primary schools or domestic kitchens, whilst the cardboard screens revealed the act of viewing as an artifice which is both precarious and, at the same time, irreducible. Said act, which ultimately grants meaning to the works, does not conceal its performative validity and the set accommodates the audience inside like a *liminal character*.

By using the videographic medium, Jordi Colomer explores a double space in which the action performed by the character and the viewer pass through parallel fictional planes. The mise en scene of the screening in the exhibition space systematically clashes with the development, in the videos, of an action in a specific context, in another set. Whilst his initial recordings (*Simo*, from 1997; *Pianito* (Little piano), from 1999, or *Le dortoir*, from 2002) took place in a prepared and closed space (a "plateau"), as of *Anarchitekton* (2003-2005), the characters started to evolve in open mediums, be they urban or suburban spaces (*2nd Ave.*, 2007, or *Avenida Ixtapaluca*, 2009) or even deserted locations (*En la Pampa* (In the Pampa), 2008). The characters *act*: the situation replaces the plot and the event, the "story" even. All presence in front of the camera generates an inevitable fictional effect and turns the individual into a *character*. In some of Colomer's most recent works, the *action* of these characters is stripped to the basics: cleaning a car or walking down a road chatting, as in two of the episodes from *En la Pampa*, or walking a *papier mache* doll down a suburban avenue, in the case of *Avenida Ixtapaluca*, the artist's latest production. Rooted in the intersection of a variety of art forms -from sculpture, to architecture, to theatre or silent cinema-, Colomer's artworks evolve based on a constant internal dialogue, using each strategy as a prism to observe the operation of the rest. In the following interview, which took place in Paris last October, we chatted to Jordi Colomer about the whole of his artistic production and a career that started in the mid-Eighties. As in many of his works, there was also something "migratory" about the conversation.

QUESTION.- You had your first solo show in 1986, at Fundació Joan Miró. Do you see a continuity between those works and your contemporary creations?

ANSWER.- Back then I worked with objects and with the representation of architecture, as I still do now. The main difference is that in those times I did not consider the need to put it through the filter of a camera. I recall that discovering the so-called "new British architecture" had a huge influence on me. It opened the door towards the common objects that surround us and the problem of their status.

Q.- You have actually always defined yourself as a "sculptor," despite the different resources you work with...

A.-It has nothing to do with advocating just one discipline. On the contrary, sculpture is actually an all-encompassing setting.

Q.- After working with sculpture for some time, the Nineties were more of an educational period during which you questioned your previous work before you, finally, discovered video.

A.- In 1991, when the preparations for the Olympic Games were underway in Barcelona surrounded by a slightly unbearable climate of euphoria, I moved to Paris and, quite consciously, my work became "colder," in the sense that I progressively renounced to using my own hands... The only things I had in the studio were a chair and a large blank book. I prepared the show *Alta Comedia* (High Comedy) at the Tinglado 2 in Tarragona in 1993, for example, which appeared as turning point in how I approached my art from then on. Using a 1000 square metre-model of the venue, I devised the show as a whole, as an itinerary, as a street. The four pieces that composed it had an architectural scale, a 1/1 scale, and they could be accessed and walked along. The pieces were built based on plans, but I was waiting to savour that "moment after," once they were built, when I could improvise, placing little objects, packets of rice, pieces of carpets, shoes mixed in with the light bulbs... to reveal the presence of an individual that inhabits those settings. What made this work so exciting was the fact that I was working with two scales and two *moments* of the construction. For instance, there was a little conglomerate staircase that three of us made as we munched on chips. When finished, I realised that, in the middle of that large space, you could see our greasy fingerprints all over it, and that seemed really important to me. In any case, it was all about the viewer being able to wander around and confront the two scales. I remember that I had always been intrigued by Carl Andre's metal plates, the contrast created between the coldness of the construction and the audience walking over the plates and "acting."

Q.- Already back then, when you started involving viewers in your works, you must have immediately realised (as we all did) that in institutional venues or museums, all those artworks that were conceived as open to audience intervention are now, generally, limited and have become untouchable.

A.- Of course, that was one of the issues I considered at the time: how to strain the conventions of the exhibition space. Architecture and theatre require an implicit activation without which they are rendered meaningless: the actors and the "inhabitants-users," that is, the people, who are *inside* the artwork. The performance (of the actors) and the *uses* are, thankfully, changing and uncontrollable factors. In other words, adding the presence of the "viewer" would also involve adding those people.

Q.- From there you went on to develop a series of ideas on video, a medium that allowed you to observe those stages and what occurred on them.

A.- Exactly, at first I worked with photography. I had always obsessed about the percentage of things that we see only in reproductions. I remember that, as a child, I had a book of reproductions of Matisse's artworks at home and I spent hours poring over it because I found it extremely confusing. Years later I found out those canvases were actually painted in colour...

Q.- It is as if, from a very early age, you had realised that the presence of the artwork was given by its photographic reproduction.

A.- Our knowledge of things is, to a great extent, sifted through the filter of reproduction and, therefore, through photography; that seems quite obvious. Photography had also been granted a privileged status in the field of architecture, since it was used to disseminate artworks, for them to be featured in the media. My first series of photographs represented small models of buildings, which, blown up, resembled huge set designs and, consequently, resembled a potential narration. Then, I added "special effects" to those settings, rain or wind, based on photographic sequences. I was interested in the notion of transforming a space. The elements that I featured in my first video, *Simo*, were objects that I had in the warehouse and used to create my sculptures: boxes, bags, models, carpets... They were all fragments of possible sculptures. The key was adding an actress who manipulated the objects for a set period of time, who made everything transform...

Q.- In a way, the sculptural and theatrical material integrates a narration that is told first through photography and then on video.

A.- Let's take a video I made before *Simo*, for instance, although I edited it afterwards. It was called *Abc etc.* (1997-1999) and shows a succession of models as if they were seen from a train, creating infinite outskirts. To make the video with a domestic VHS camera, I spent a month working every night. Each seven-second sequence required hours of work and at the end of each night I was exhausted. What most interested me was that performative part of building those cities; that character who does not appear in the video, but spends his nights building cities out of little bits of wood and biscuits and matchsticks before heading off to sleep in the morning. Then I realised that the video should document that performative process, or should have been about that nocturnal character. In any case, it triggered my interest in the notion of an individual toiling with objects, and that set the grounds for *Simo*, which broke away from the rule I had worked with until then of not involving any other human figure in the works, only the actual viewers. This work was the first to include a character. On the other hand, at the time I was very intrigued by the Beckett-like performances that Bruce Nauman carried out in his studio in the Seventies. Yet, consciously, I wanted to avoid the presence of the artist, or the image of the artist so closely connected to the performance. By using other characters, I built a sort of fictional effect, which I also found fascinating.

Q.- In fact, *Simo* opens up a field in which you narrate something that cannot be defined as a "story": they are actions and gestures made by a character in a sculptural space that work almost allegorically.

A.- In the end, I think *Simo* takes shape as a sort of selfportrait, it is what the sculptor personified for me. Since in my opinion a sculptor is a character faced with the world of physical objects. A present-day sculptor evidently utilises present-day objects: common, industrial objects, loaded with ghosts, and, many of them, able to multiply themselves autonomously. *Simo* tries to order them and in doing so she creates an apparent disorder. The essential aspect is the order in which they are manipulated, the sequence and, above all, the heroic attempt she makes to order them. I think *Simo* can be seen as a sculptor for the duration.

Q.- That coincides with the definition you made of your video creations...

A.- Exactly, "a sculpture dilated in time." When I was preparing *Simo*, I spent a lot of time rehearsing and working with people from the film world. This I

mention because another thing I thought about back then was the fact that a video, as a document- for instance, in Nauman's aforementioned performances-, is, always, contaminated by a fictional effect. Despite the purely "documentary" origins of video art, the status of the document seemed increasingly problematic, and taking sides with fiction, recognising it, seemed like an important decision to make.

Q.- You embraced that field of action in which the sculptural space becomes a "set" with *Simo* and continued working with it in the works you created immediately afterwards, like *Pianito* or *Le dortoir*. In them, you directly address theatrical concerns that have obsessed you from the start. Could you define that intersection between sculpture and theatre more clearly? Or, in other words, to what extent do you see theatre as a sculptural phenomenon?

A.- My first sculptures already evoked set designs. I remember that at one point I was heavily influenced by a text by Tadeusz Kantor which explained how constructivist theatre had managed to do away with the set designs used by bourgeois theatre and show the audience the stage machinery. It put an end to the *trompe l'oeil* and to the deceit, turning the space occupied by the machinery into the new quintessential setting... That twofaced idea of the set design and the importance of the structure behind it -like the billboards we drive past on motorways- seems fundamental. In that sense, theatre has constructed an alphabet that makes a lot of things understandable. Is that a sculptural problem?... On the other hand, speaking of that "stage machinery effect," I am lured towards the characters that appear on stage by surprise, who are not part of the play, who suddenly break the convention of "Italian" theatre by appearing on the stage. The stagehand changing the set design between acts, the *monosabios* cleaning the blood from the sand in bullrings, the person who places the score on the piano... Joan Brossa incorporated some of these characters into his theatre. Those fragments, those moments of pause that take place in the space of the performance, but are considered "outside" of it, are highly charged moments. The stage is a privileged location to summon this sort of things.

Q.- Funnily, that obsession also appears in works you devote to revealing the theatrical dimension of everyday life. I am thinking of *Le dortoir* and the stage with different floors where all the objects were made of cardboard, where everything was simulated, but which inevitably created the illusion that people were actually living there.

A.- *Le dortoir* depicted a paradox in which actors did not act. The camera travels vertically outside twelve apartments the day after a grand "global" party. The only thing moving is the camera; the actors are sleeping, immobile. In fact, most of them actually were sleeping, quite deeply, in fact, because the preparations took forever. Although the set was completely "false," representing twelve cardboard apartments, the inhabitants were "genuinely" sleeping. So that answered a question I sometimes asked myself: Can a set be inhabited?

Q.- You resort to moving images, in videos and films, to bring together architecture, theatre and sculpture, elements which you had been addressing in your work in an almost "structural" manner. Furthermore, at the same time you open the way towards a fictional dimension, since as we said above, there are no actual "stories," narrations, in a novelistic, and even less psychological sense. Take *Pianito*, for instance.

A.- I almost always work with a situation that takes place in a specific space and time unit in which things occur. Everything is very theatrical. There are no flashbacks or ellipsis... I use lots of sequence shots, some genuine some false. In a sense, the creations resemble performances, to the extent that the performance is always "genuine" (the more false it is, the more genuine it becomes). There is hardly any editing, I only use it to grant the pieces that idea of temporary continuity. *Pianito* is actually a performance and focuses on the quintessential performative object: the piano (from Fluxus to Beuys or Carles Santos). First I built the cardboard piano and then I asked Carlos Pazos to take part, since in the Seventies he had also created that image-of the piano star. My intention was not to document a performance, but instead to insist on the elements that build fiction, exaggerated dust, the false piano... I suppose my videos are connected to the storytelling format: "There was a man in a house playing a piano..." Consequently, one does not judge the verisimilitude of the creation. As in all film phantasmagoria, I think this approach is also closely linked to dreaming, an act whereby we create endogenous fiction every night as we dream, creating image capsules that form the dream... In all, I always say it is about "situations."

Q.- As of the work *Anarchitekton* you shift the action to open, urban contexts; you set it in a public, almost generic, space. Could you tell us about the characters that appear in these spaces? What type of identity have you given them?

A.- For starters, I do not work with a psychological idea of acting like they might have in the "Actor's Studio." I try to build a direct relationship between the actor and the character. The character is based on the actor's personality, gestures and presence. The actions are usually simple and are always slightly performance-based. The characters speak for themselves. In *Anarchitekton* or *No future*, the character responds to the action he or she carries out, be that transporting models-banners or playing the drums at dawn. We could debate whether they are performers or actors. I think they are both. In *Un crime (2004)* twelve people travel around the city with words narrating a crime that took place in the locations they visit. They are anonymous "handlers;" the characters are taken from the text and we have to imagine them. For *En la pampa*, the characters incorporate dialogues. When they are washing their cars by the cemetery, the characters are improvising. The woman talks about her nursing exams, she was actually preparing them in real life, and the man mentions his social concerns, since he was studying sociology and was in the middle of a strike when we were shooting... In other words, the characters actually play themselves, albeit in a specific location and performing precise actions.

Q.- What instructions do you give the people who are required to improvise?

A.- I tell them to continue come what may. For instance, in *No future (2006)* we started at dawn and we wanted to wake all the neighbours but we did not know what was going to happen. On the other hand, for *En la pampa* the characters try to remember a fragment of *Theory of the Derive* [Guy Debord]: "Wandering in open country is obviously depressing," that I had read to them five minutes before, so they were genuinely trying to remember the text. It is about watching the stagehand be the stagehand, or a student going over her exams in the desert...

Q.- They fact that all your recent works (*Anarchitekton, 2e Ave., No Future, En*

la Pampa, etc.) involve some sort of a journey prompts a question regarding the relationship between your production and the notion of travelling.

A.- Nowadays there is a genuine problem regarding the stereotype known as the "gaze of the other," the gaze of the foreigner that looks at a place that is not supposed to be his or her "cultural territory." As regards *Anarchitekton*, I started working in Barcelona, my birth place, and moved to other cities that I had never been to before. Journeying in the sense of seeing a place for the first time is unrepeatable. Despite all the stereotypes that a first glance can involve, it is a unique and inaccessible experience for people who live there. The outskirts of Mexico City [where I made *Avenida Ixtapaluca*], despite the uniqueness, resemble a generic space that belongs to us all. I felt that sensation there more than in any of the other places because it seemed so obvious: its uniqueness is somewhat essential.

Q.- Your characters' behaviour has a certain anarchic constant, which appears both in the disorder of *Simo* and in the derive of the characters from *En la Pampa*, and in the rebellious heroin of *No Future*...

A.- I do not see anarchy as a synonym for disorder... If anything, these individuals act freely, behaving as they like. In any case, there are two large "families" of characters: the "compulsive" and the "heroic." After *Anarchitekton*, the characters walk off the closed stage and act in the public space. They do behave singularly. The heroin from *No Future*, who is called Jeanne, is somewhat of a reference, someone who awakens people's consciences. Basically what I do is choose a place, find real characters that can interact with the place, and work from there, always keeping in mind that everything is going to be built cinematographically. All these characters are individuals that act there individually, as if wanting to show the community something, the possibility of this action.

Q.- When you speak of creating situations that the characters perform in, are you alluding in a way to the notion of "situation" used by Guy Debord, for instance, who you referred when talking about *En la Pampa*?

A.- In my opinion, revisiting Situationist ideas focuses more on the notion of being able to radically change areas and neighbourhoods in a city using specific actions, in other words, of being able to change the perception of the places. Those actions, regardless of whether they are improvised, involve the possibility of inhabiting pre-existing spaces "differently." The Situationist derive involved, as I see it, a group dynamic that was somewhat bothersome or too planned, although it was also, unquestionably, a great discovery. In my case, I first consider the document that is going to result from the action. The capacity to transform the place involves recording images and that might go against certain Situationist presuppositions -although the Situationists made a great deal of cinema. In any case, questioning the mechanisms of the spectacular is something that one must experience forcedly when working with images, to decide how they are going to be presented.

Q.- In your production, the space inhabited by the viewer seems to be have been designed like a theatre set, as if establishing an analogy between the spectator and the characters performing the action in the video.

A.- Things should happen on both sides: on the screen, but also on the plane where we watch the images, in the projection room. There is a feeling of a live event, a theatrical improvisation, an actual *event* in that shared space, which takes place "live."

Q.- In the "set" where the screening takes place there are elements that you use systematically like the chairs that seem to belong in primary schools or kitchens, and old town council offices...

A.- School, like any pedagogic device, is a theatrical device: there is a man who acts, on a dais or a stage, and people who sit in front of him focusing on a specific centre of attention. The chairs refer to that student status; however, the audience tends to move them and wander around the room freely. On the other hand, the kitchen is the centre of the house. Frank Lloyd Wright said that the heart of a house was where the fire was, the meeting point. In my installations, I try to make chairs become more than mere devices from which to watch the images, and make them elements from which one can watch other viewers. In my latest exhibitions I have underlined this notion. I worked with the idea that one could just sit down and look at the other viewers not only in the projection areas, but also in the interstitial places, in corridors or marginal spots. It involves taking the exhibition space as a public space, like a roofed square...

Q.- In our opinion, your latest works do not only connect images and objects granting continuity to your work, but they also transit a new territory: cinematographic recording. They present fixed shots, travellings, panoramic views, etc. To what extent could your work veer towards that field in the future?

A.- I am not interested in "exhibition cinema;" I actually flee from it, in fact. I know that at present the film industry is facing distribution problems that make certain products unfit for a genuinely cinematographic structure and are, therefore, required to find a suitable exhibition space in the field of contemporary art, but that is not my problem. There is also an excess of affected images and technical perfection... I hate those works. The thing that interests me most about cinema is the moment the lights come on and people get out of their seats, put their coats on chat and cough. That boundary is also important, those holes are what actually interest me.

Translation: Laura F. Farhall