

TALKING WITH JESÚS PALOMINO
Francisco del Río

After nearly ten years, “Abajo, sin noticias del otro lado, sin voz” [Down here, no news from the other side, no voice] is Jesús Palomino’s first solo exhibition in Seville, the city where he was born in 1969, where he started his studies in fine arts, and from which he has been absent, except for the odd visit, throughout all these years. In 1989, he left first for Cuenca, where he graduated in fine arts. After that, he moved to Barcelona, Columbus, and Amsterdam, while several projects took him from the Netherlands to China, from Cameroon to Panama. We could then place Palomino in that generation of young artists who for the first time ever are unselfconsciously cosmopolitan, an attribute much sought after but rarely achieved in Spanish art heretofore. And now it seems like the right moment to present his recent work in his home town. Showing it, evaluating it, confronting it in person, for the references we had from Palomino had nearly always been reproductions or, at the most, single pieces exhibited in group shows.

In fact it was thanks to one of these that I first came across his work. That was Figurations, curated by Juan Lacomba in the Convento de Santa Inés in Seville. Included in the show was a series of photographs of his intervention in the neighbourhood of Poble Nou, in Barcelona. What struck me as particularly interesting in this work was the contrast between a desolate, or better still, degraded setting, and the chromatic brightness of a little lean-to which seemed to support or shore up a whole building all by itself, while at the same time magnetising the barren open space around it.

To get our conversation off to a start, I mentioned this impression of mine.

J.P.: The house in Poble Nou came about thanks to an invitation from a Public Art Festival organised in this district of the city as a way of voicing demands for spaces for art, artists’ studios, and a greater attention to culture in general. I conceived that little construction made of wood, painted cardboard and pieces of plastic, to be located in the middle of a vacant lot. The urban speculation before and after the 1992 Olympics was particularly rampant in this part of the city. Old nineteenth century factories of exceptional architectural value were being knocked down overnight, as were whole blocks of houses, whose owners or occupants were forced out with compulsory purchase orders for very low sums of money or, in other cases, simply evicted. Anyway, I don’t want to get bogged down in blind nostalgia, but the truth is that I arrived there at a moment of drastic urban changes. There was no way I could remain indifferent. I don’t know whether the whole project responded to a premeditated plan or whether it was nothing more than unbridled economic depredation which, once again, left the - mostly poor - neighbours without any say in the matter whatsoever.

While talking about this work I took the opportunity to ask him about his relationship with photography, seeing as the exhibition at the Convento de Santa Inés included only photographs, with no installations at all.

J.P.: It basically comes down to a documentary function. Given that the constructions themselves have a limited lifespan, it is important to photograph them in order to have some record. In the case of the house in Poble Nou, I took a series of photographs which I then enlarged and presented as works in their own right. After that, I became more keenly interested in the notion of site specific installations, shifting the focus entirely to the experience of “visiting” the house.

Following his exhibition at Galería Helga de Alvear in 1995 Palomino was to centre more on this kind of experience. Here, while he didn’t create a construction as such, he did make explicit allusions to the domestic through a number of works which functioned as pieces of furniture, for instance benches on which visitors to the gallery could sit, as well as small chairs or arrangements with everyday objects which Palomino composed as in a still life. In another exhibition three years later he used the same type of objects -manipulated gadgets and waste material- to outline a kind of route through the exhibition room and so creating different domestic environments.

J.P.: In my view, what made these works closer to sculpture was a return to the creation of objects at a “human scale” after intervening in abandoned places or derelict buildings. They were autonomous pieces, speaking or referring to the world of the home, of domesticity. The idea emerged unexpectedly, so to

speak. I realized that the home, its uses and functions, is a theme capable of reflecting a fairly universal experience of the human, for all of us need to meet a number of basic requirements of shelter, food, rest and hygiene. I'm not suggesting that we all inhabit or use homes in the same way, but the idea of exploring this site of the "basic human" led me to this field of investigation. How do we unwind at home? How do we eat? How do we wash ourselves? How do we dream and cry at home? How do we put up with ourselves, or how do we create our own idea of the world? and so on. I presented a series of sculptures tackling these ideas. They were lyrical pieces grounded in an evocative yet intimate power. At the end of the day, it was all about an ideal or invisible home! Models of desires, likable perceptions able to reconstruct a landscape once I had moved on from my interest in ruins.

I wondered whether these themes had anything to do with his own experience of living outside the city, far from his home turf, and whether they expressed some sort of uprootedness... With the paradox of being finely tuned to what's going on in the international scene, and at the same time attempting to preserve a place for his own work. This took us to other issues about his training in Seville, the need to leave it and go somewhere else to study, to acquire information; and then to precarious dwelling places decorated with just a couple of things. (I reminded him of his comment about the walls of a house being raised by objects without the need to build it as such.)

You need to mix together a series of not always compatible ingredients: hard work, an interest in the activity you're engaged in, and a keen sense of balance for walking a tightrope. Otherwise, I don't know how you could sustain a professional artistic activity at a certain scale. And going back to what you said earlier about uprootedness, despite the fact that I have travelled and pursued my interests outside the city and the country I was born in, I don't see myself as a particularly uprooted person. I can sense what uprootedness involves and leads to, but I don't personally identify myself with it. On the other hand, I was only able to visualise the invisible house after having built it. You have to get really deeply involved in processes before you begin to detect subtleties. That is what I found out when I made the sculptures alluding to the domestic world; how the affective and the functional are closely related in a house. After building those pieces, I noticed that their arrangement on the gallery floor was governed by a physical and affective itinerary. It was as if you were walking through a house with invisible walls – walls not perceptible to the eyes yet which seemed to have a bearing on reality.

The Ruins

Palomino intervened in huge monumental spaces from 1992 to 1995. In Cuenca, he produced works with grease and actions with flour in derelict train depots belonging to Renfe, the Spanish National Railway Company, some with only the walls standing. I saw a large stain of grease on the wall of a huge roofless warehouse. I sensed a connection between this intervention and some comments Palomino made about Gordon Matta-Clark and his interest in Matta-Clark's work. I noticed the dark form opening a hole in the façade, altering perception and restoring the building with its original solidity.

J.P.: Ruins have always interested me because they are inseparable from the very notion of architecture itself. As a child, myself and my brothers used to play and have adventures in old run down buildings. Among the ruins on large vacant lots, we would build our own constructions (huts built to last one day), and we often came across unexpected treasures, mainly old domestic objects, lots of broken glass, mirrors, sanitary ware from bathrooms, porno mags, that kind of thing. We always had a great time playing in these places. I suppose that was because they were like oases, a form of cessation, physical interludes in the middle of the city. When life departs from a house, a process of destruction sets in. Ruins are a discovery, and always manage to stir up an immediate and unconscious curiosity in me, making me wonder things like: What happened in this place? Why is this building now out of use and abandoned? What will happen to it in the future? Ruins obviously have a lot to do with memories, sometimes silent while other times hugely eloquent. Memories of a city. Ruins are directly associated with memory and time, because in these abandoned spaces the city is seen as a lifeless extension, as a dead space. Life and the living gradually seep out of these places and abandon them to the mercy of the elements, to almost certain devastation. But even when a building is recognised as a ruin, a number of uses will still be found for it. It becomes a debris-space, a periphery accepting anything and everything. And so, in my experience, ruins are peopled by junkies, by mothers in search of their junkie children, cops keeping an eye on junkies, piles of garbage and debris, beggars looking for scrap metal, couples having furtive sex, dead animals... It is no

accident that these places provide the perfect backdrop for these marginalized people and situations. Well, the truth is that I haven't specialised in architectural ruins as a theme, but, let's say that I've visited the odd one at some point in my life. Particularly ruins of collective architectures, prisons, factories, old railway stations, train depots and vacant lots, many vacant lots.

We move on to the meaning of these remains, a theme at once old and new covering questions of time, its fugacity, and a nostalgia for all bygone golden ages. Places to meditate about the human condition, somewhere art finds room for the big issues of time and death, and the power of the imagination on the other hand to restore life. Palomino leaves that monumental stage behind him perhaps because its sublime scale still maintains a hint of the aesthetic which he is interested in transferring to the everyday, to a social context critically updating the meaning of the artistic in its human dimension.

The mark, the emblem that was solemnly guarded on the wall in Cuenca, fostered by speculation, fades away in the waste ground of a big city where big machinery transform spaces of anachronistic industrial activities into others, removed from collective decisions, becoming symbols of a point of no return for the social.

The former train depot of San Jerónimo, where Palomino made an intervention in 1995, was also abandoned, no longer in use. A few years previously, more or less around the time of the Universal Exposition Sevilla 92, such an amount of new works had been set in motion in Seville, that the city was temporarily turned into a sort of quarry, offering rich seams of images and actions. (I'm thinking of the photographs of sites by Alejandro Sosa, and the stage designs by Schnabel in the old army headquarters of El Carmen, on the symbols of a former convent turned into a barracks.) In San Jerónimo, Palomino used paper impregnated in oil and, if we take a look at the existing photographs we can see how he achieved almost pictorial luminous effects, transparencies and reverberations on a different scale and in a different context –bringing to mind the curtains and tunnels of minimalists and conceptualists- similar to the materials later used in his installations. Materials as ephemeral as light. Materials associated with actions. I ask him about their use and meaning. (At the Sala Imagen, flour is sprinkled next to the entrance of the tunnel, and there is another photograph in which Palomino uses this same substance in the best tradition of the “pioneering artists” of land art.)

J.P.: Actually, the choice of some materials was quite intuitive. In the works for large spaces and in the ruins, the place itself usually dictated the material to use. In this sense, it seemed only too right to use engine grease to make a large format drawing for the wall of an old abandoned train depot. The grease was absorbed by the wall, with the effect of the infiltration leaving an indelible mark. We could say that it was the most suitable material for this kind of place. This same idea of using an “appropriate material” appeared again in the large blue paper curtains soaked in oil that I placed in the depot. The oil-impregnated paper becomes translucent. When the light passed through the paper, the effect of luminosity was doubled. I covered part of the walls of that architectural element with the curtains, and the effect produced a peculiar levity which heightened the very architecture they were concealing. There was also an unfeasible project –something which doesn't bother me- which consisted of filling the extremely large ditches of that train depot with flour. It didn't get beyond an ideal proposal because it would have taken 1000 tonnes of flour to “purify” the place. Again, I looked for an “appropriate material” to counteract the ruins. Putting flour -a substance for nourishment, for making bread- in a derelict place such as this, was an attempt to re-establish life. But it is impossible to bring a dead body back to life! Well, since then, I've found out that art does not have to resolve unsolvable questions, but discover symptoms, link relations, and contribute to the awakening of consciousness.

Working on form

I tell him that I'm very interested in this relationship. Awakening. Elucidating. Unveiling. That perhaps with the ruins he has attempted to unveil –Matta Clark again- places of rupture, of social discontinuity, in everything architecture is able to symbolise. On the other hand, I believe that his actions produce a number of transformations in things and changes of substance in the wake of Duchamp and Beuys. I ask him about the role of colour in his works. Mariano Navarro associated the colour of his houses with the pictorial, as if the constructions were expanded paintings... Today, the confluence of painting, architecture and sculpture (what Gerhard Merz used to call archipittura) does not surprise us. I remember what

Palomino told me recently about his admiration for American painting, how much he enjoyed browsing over and over again through reproductions of Rothko, Pollock or Noland's work when he was a student. I remind him of the house he made in 1998 for the Alejandro Sales gallery –blinding reds, yellows and greens, and a way of arranging them reminiscent of colour fields... I tell him I'm especially interested in his comments on the notion of the house, of what it represents, that is, to bear in mind that idea of awakening... Colour is not something merely formal or added!

J.P.: My use of colour is primarily based on two ideas. The first has to do with the ability of colour to arrange spaces, to provide places with a tone, a sonority. The second is that colour can provide luminosity, hygiene and character in a very simple and non expensive way to houses inhabited by people with little or no means. When we paint something, we instil it with a presence. Whether it is a wall or a piece of furniture, we are paying attention to an object which will eventually enhance reality with its presence. Sometimes, the poor only have colour to fall back on!

I suggest that perhaps without this transformation, the waste of today's world, that of the consumerism of the first world, does not provide any kind of nobility, unlike before: just an image as kitsch as that of the self-satisfied initial owners. That perhaps this resistance he talks about is sustained by an ability to see things we are used to through new eyes, similar to that of the old avant-garde artists. I bring up the rereadings of the modern movement that have been mentioned when analysing his work, for instance, of the splendid architecture of the Dutch, although "deconstructed", like a sort of design which has come down in the world, of a vague rationality... Acknowledgement of the failure of utopia or, on the contrary, a reading in positive of the ability to adapt to adverse conditions...

J.P.: If anything could be read this way, it is not a completely premeditated effect. Although, sometimes, the shapes of my houses may be reminiscent of those of the odd architecture of the modernist movement, my work has more to do with the use of attractive, interesting forms. Anyhow, you couldn't expect me to deny the fact that modern architecture has developed highly seductive forms! I'm also interested in the creation of an object, an image combining poverty and sophistication; something at once basic and complex. I'm interested in that contradiction in the sense that it sidesteps those simplifications tending to classify reality in "black or white" terms. Any action or reaction for survival in the human being is sophisticated from the moment it creates a form of resistance which shapes the conditions of reality. Humans mould their houses in reality; mould their houses in desire. The confrontation is sophisticated inasmuch as it represents an affect and action over the world. I don't believe in the failure of the ideas of the modern movement in architecture, art or politics. In any case, there are no definitive solutions, no solutions legitimised by History or Democracy. Perhaps we don't notice the prevalence of those ideas because, to some extent, they are already assimilated by our current history. In any case, I believe they've played a very important part in arriving at today's historical consciousness.

I put forward other difficulties. How does he hope to transfer that experience of resistance to the context of a gallery or museum? I bring up the controversies of the minimalists surrounding interventions in public spaces, and Crows' commentary about the paradox between the tolerable in institutional spaces and what becomes intolerable outside them.

I don't see it as being paradoxical that these constructions are included in art spaces. On the contrary, I consider this kind of space ideal for absorbing all sorts of images, realities, new proposals or new practices developed by art, although I think that the impact and reactions are more intense when the work is located outdoors. Perhaps because they are easily associated with marginalized social realities. In any case, I am interested in the two spaces –exterior and interior- in museums, galleries or any other architecture.

I ask him to tell me about his recent experience in Cameroon. The project there did not consist exactly of an ephemeral construction. It was not so much an indoors piece as a structure with a specific function – that of working for a radio station. Besides, unlike the houses, it was developed in collaboration with other artists.

J.P.: Well, the proposal was the idea of an artist from Cameroon, Goddy Leye, who invited me and James Beckett, a South African artist, and Hartanto Eko, from Indonesia, to work together in the district of Bessengue, in the city of Douala. There was no clear link between our respective work. What united us was our friendship and the desire to do something together. The project was entirely funded by the Prins

Klaus Foundation and Rain Project, two Dutch institutions involved in the promotion and sponsoring of art projects (in the case of Rain Project, only in countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia). We went to Cameroon without any prior plan. Once there, myself and James, who had proposed the idea of taking equipment to set up a radio station with a reach of six kilometres plus, decided to work together on the radio building. And so, in less than two weeks, we set up the first radio station entirely managed by people from the Bessengue district. Hartanto Eko kept a weblog of the experience, and Goddy Leye recorded video images, which he later used to make a wonderful documentary of the whole process.

The idea of making a permanent, solid construction was very clear, taking into account the surrounding environment of Bessengue, a district inhabited by around 20,000 people in extremely poor housing, food and hygiene conditions. We had to build something solid in order to guarantee its functional continuity as a radio station, a meeting point, a place for social gatherings... In fact, the place we built and liberated was the first community centre in the whole area –apart from the various churches of all sorts of denominations operating in the district.

At Sala Imagen

I ask Palomino about the way in which an inexperienced audience may contemplate a work such as his, precisely because he tries out methods through which art can effectively intervene in the social context through the viewer's gaze. For him, the idea of architecture emerges from the sensorial perception, as a reverberation of the body and of innerness itself. He wants to integrate, without distinguishing objects from their environment; to foster experiences of presence and absence, in which somebody anonymous, voiceless, was there before ourselves. Experiences using one's own figure to return the figure of the other.

J.P.: That's an interesting question! I have no idea how the spectator might look at my work. Basically, what I put forward is a visit to the "house" of someone who lives in precarious social and financial conditions. Let's say that I use fiction to entice the spectator to put his perception to work. The tricky part of this is always the binomials such as fiction/criticism, fantasy/reality –very slippery ground. I have often been challenged with the criticism that it is not possible to critique from fiction, and it is not possible to liberate from fantasy. In my view, it is sometimes possible for fiction or fantasy to describe certain historical social realities, or certain social power devices, unmasking them more easily and with more subtlety. I like what Italo Calvino had to say about Fellini and his films. Calvino maintained that it was not possible to draw a better picture of the historical reality of Italy in the Fascist period than the fantasies created by Fellini. Erotic fantasies, fantasies to ease the conscience of Catholic guilt, fables narrating the most destructive machismo, etc. Why should we have to believe that fiction provides no room or paths for reality? In my case, to present those "huts" was part of a narrative device which I used in order to establish a dialogue with the spectator, making use of perception, and through it, presenting certain features of the human which appeal to me –humour, resistance, ingenuity, the dream of having a place of one's own...

I asked him to explain how that device works in the specific case of Sala Imagen.

J.P.: Well, the first thing that interested me in Seville was to see the space, because that is absolutely crucial when it comes to making works of this kind. The place may contribute valuable information or ideas. Here, in Seville, the stairs is central and has a distinctive presence within the space as a whole. When we go down it we find ourselves in the basement. Is there a secret and unsuspected link between this being underground and the building of tunnels for Seville? Who knows! I wanted to use the transitional space represented by the stairs. I found it both exciting and fun. To use one of the rooms and still leave enough empty space. Anyhow, in this way I found the space quite intriguing.

As a result of this first visit, Palomino prepared a number of collages with a predominance of bright materials. For Palomino, collages are basically a tool, an aid for a previous visualisation of a project, to "show other people what the final look of the installation will be like". A comparison between the collages and the final photographs of the installation shows many differences, something logical enough when you consider we are dealing with a flexible plan, as he moulds the environment in accordance with his experience of the space. In it, the sequence of the billboard was decisive in the part of the gallery which most attracted him: the stairs.

J.P.: The billboards I build don't sell anything; they don't try to convince with messages; there is no slogan, nothing to be consumed. The billboards are just the bare structure, and some of them have haphazardly arranged lights. The billboard is a very simple referent used as a projection screen. The overall project is dictated by a way of life in which consuming products makes us relish our lives more and better-buyable paradises full of promises of infinite pleasure and well-being. I present billboards with only the bare structure. No more projected images, just a rickety frame. Screens are neither good nor bad, smart nor stupid. At the end of the day, a screen is nothing but a window from which to explain, to build a reality. Would it be possible to invert the use of screens towards different uses, towards other imaginations, other imaginative ethics? If the billboard is not guilty, then we may have to put the blame on the images of mass consumerism.

Behind the billboards, over the stairs, Palomino has visually concentrated the tensions converging from the exterior towards the interior, against the partition wall with the almost empty contiguous room where he has created some empty spaces with intersections of wire netting and suspended plastic. This space has a very cold atmosphere, conditioned by the marble floor and neon lights. In it, he has also created a structure of tunnels on two different levels, running virtually in parallel to that same wall and in doing so generating yet another very narrow space. In the early stages of his intervention, the tunnels ran alongside the gallery, filling it entirely; however, the way they were arranged made them more sculptural rather than some kind of refuge.

J.P.: They can be penetrated by the gaze and are lit inside to reveal the presence of somebody who lives there. I was interested in presenting pieces resembling tunnels or industrial-looking pipes, which have been used for shelter or as dwelling places. The image I want to focus on is that of a person who, driven by circumstances, has been forced to inhabit a space which was never conceived to be a home. Someone living under those conditions makes me think that he has been forced to live like an animal hiding in its den. In his book *Masse und Macht* [Crowds and Power], Elias Canetti claimed that "Power tries to turn men into animals". It is a thought I share and understand, and one I have experienced personally at some point in my life, and history has also given us plenty of examples. That's the meaning of the tunnel for me!

Walking among billboards and tunnels, among wire netting, is the best way to round off what has been seen, to return a certain sense to the zigzag of our steps, to the gaze overcoming an obstacle or adjusting to the narrowness of a path impossible to enter. Palomino addresses a conscious subject –and not the public- who in the descent, after crossing the threshold of the street, begins his or her own discovery, an inward passage. The first thing visitors perceive are some neon billboards, and on top of them, writing with non conventional signs, occupation signs which, like graffiti, follow no fixed norm: an expression of the resistance and the

–so often uncomfortable and challenging- singularity of others. Palomino takes the position of an ethically committed art, engaged with himself and with others, and gives it a transforming dimension of reality, unemphatically understood as making, building, creating in a precarious fashion after the image of an absent subject. To occupy the margins and the intersections and, surprisingly, turning the limits into places for shelter, into dwellings transforming everyday waste.

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