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A PLACE CALLED DIGNITY

Once upon a time there was a vague smudge of land surrounded by Ocean everywhere, except in one place called Dignity. A spit of land, partly rocky, partly sandy, that, like an umbilical cord, kept it joined to Necessary Reason, a precise location that others called Terra Firma. The rest of the smudge of land and vegetation –that materialized in the shape of Island– lay, a disillusioned survivor, under the obligation of knowing itself to be in the wide area called Humiliation. Forgetful that its ancient and honourable mythological name applied equally to the whole Island and all its inhabitants, it retained in its most feverish dreams some remnants of those omens, superstitions and nightmares from the Golden Age.

In a far-off time humans were fond of trying to find evidence of the foundational exploration myths somewhere in the unknown Ocean. And they set out to pursue them, emulating the most famous seafarers: Jonah, Odysseus, Jason and his Argonauts. They set sail with provisions and weapons of war, sure that they would always find stubborn defenders of any shore on which they landed. Sure, too, that wherever they were they would fall to their knees on the beach, amazed at the exciting sensory pleasures of Paradise and – perhaps for their own good – they would awaken from the trickery of the classic tomes.

They won battles, felled trees to encircle their emplacements with a secure stockade, said mass on the bank of the stream, sitting down forthwith to mutter foundational thoughts. Among them the layout of plazas and streets was in a straight line, in imitation of the settlements they knew. For there existed an order decreed upon Terra Firma to provide inhabitants with dwellings, churches, convents, market, pasture, fulling mill, cemetery, warehouse and arsenal. This type of establishment originated as a rustic fort, rose to settlement, village, town and –over time– to the status of large city.

Although in the rest of the country they swallowed the humiliation of colonialism, in the increasingly village-like fort they experienced the full euphoria of dignification, which is the desired path to aspire to Dignity. For this reason the new settlers brought their old family carpets, items of their household furnishings in which high theocratic virtue had been made to dwell. The foundational triangle took regard as “high” the powerful group which amassed money from gunpowder and incense, and as low the supposed unworthiness of the barefoot: the masses, the common people, the plebeians, as they were called in their lowness with respect to the highness of the powerful.

With the arrival of the ox carts at their urban destination the carpets were unrolled and spread out in the chief ancestral homes, in the few palaces, and in whatever administrative or ecclesiastical building was in need of a mark of distinction, of remoteness and honour. Essential was the red carpet, deified as it was as the password of Dignity itself, signalling its metaphorical password, claiming from a distance the exclusive purple of its royal estate; a material representation of the highest, the *autoritas*, of the supreme, in a first degree of symbolisation based on an evocation of the circulation of the blood and the royal purple.

Its length, width and excellence of quality, laid down from the main entrance to the inner corridor and the main rooms, had to maintain a density proportionate to the real power of its owners and fitters. Always red, and perhaps not from the blood spilt to obtain it, but by reason of the linked polysemy that denoted its Arab etymology (*al-jumra*: palm leaf matting, measles, redness) The splendour of red which, shared with the yellow of gold and the lustre of swords and lances, in a way marked in a way the development of the civilisation of those who conquered territory, set foot on the vague blotch lost in the Ocean, and laid carpets to walk on, almost flying—in danger of levitating—over the unworthiness of the floor, its poverty and dirt.

Of course the simple folk used their own carpets: simple mats of palm leaves, hemp fibre, esparto and savila, rags in all styles and made in a variety of ways. But they bore no marks to proclaim their unworthiness, their baseness, placing them in the extensive catalogue of their historic humiliation. They were used only useful domestic items, aspiring to their dignifying quota, which they called comfort, habitability, decorum.

To deal with that forced inequality the ordinary folk settled for sharing with the triangle of the powerful the carpets and the floral corridors that the latter installed for their most important ceremonial feasts, held on the public highway. Carpets of flowers, corridors of heather, basil and rosemary, clouds of petals falling from the noble balconies. This sensuality contributed to a certain dream of happiness, if not to a servile withdrawal, the basis of a submissiveness that nothing could change, because since their origin, the carpets contained an ideological knot unlikely to be replaced by egalitarian aspirations of status and social condition.

Red carpets: a plaiting of power, glory, laws, privileges, luxury and appearance. Such is the significant protocol which precedes the dissolution, subversion, artistic inventiveness, the large smudge where the “performer” poses his watchful eye as a new meaning.

The artist doesn't know how to settle for the mechanical instruction of Kandinsky (point and line on the plane) and asks for a less conventional format. He wants public space, a setting open to others, where he can position himself as interpreter and music stand of his composition/object, in a simultaneity demanded by the canon of modernity. The public is called to attend at the place and hour duly announced: it comes to see what will happen, as free auditors, only browsing, curious to see how the show or work of art will turn out.

“Browse” is the right verb to describe the impulse that drives those most interested in the latest offering of the emerging aesthetic. The artist's desolation like a sugar lump in the entranced saliva of the spectators, his absurdity in persisting on the utopian path is a wonder. For the artist to insist on freeing his conscience by having recourse to symbolisation is still an appealing proposition. So, let's see what happens.

The performer also browses, once he appears on the scene. He tries to concentrate, to give the most of himself, and to ensure that everything turns out as is planned and desired. But some fluids from the public still reach him; he feels the silent expectation like the blades of a certain morbid indifference on his skin. They probably thought they had come to see him as if were a simple show with no ticket or advance payment required, just looking at him through the showcase, in front of the window. He feels that his saliva has solidified at the corners of his mouth, and with such an impediment he is unable to protest, to tell them that they can get

involved, that this is meant for them, dedicated to them, that they are the rest of the cast needed for the theoretical project that the artist is carrying out. At the end of the day, what he will do is to contact with possible consciousnesses that in their turn will interpret the visible action as transcending storylines. He simply communicates in living art a parable about the life of the others, of the ordinary spectator, and of himself as a spectator of his own wilful expectation.

He may not achieve this, because the critical register that envelops the action on stage leaves no margin for understanding or involvement, and hence there seems to be no viability to the simultaneous translation of the ideas displayed. This is because the action, being the idea itself, conceals a sweet that is poisoned with precise intentionality, with convictions that prefigure an aesthetics that is freed from undue narrative punctuation. Perhaps a few spectators will feel themselves reached by the action on stage, as long as they manage to shift to the plane of ideas the primary sensitivity that the proposal's visual and aural astonishment engenders. To move sensory data to the consciousness, to the wide blackboard of combats still pending, to the fragility of many millions of humans in the face of a handful of cruel and heartless ones: the miseries and excesses of imperial globalisation, let' us call it. Some people are bound to find some elemental significance in the display, some excess in the formalisation of the active musical score, a certain symbolic pregnancy at the level of terminal elaboration, and a strong taste for irrationality, blurred and ephemeral as a "message".

The artist has learned to expect this calendar of retraction and communion, which extends from that threshold of receptivity that might be said to be an accomplice to the contents to the notorious boredom that is produced by the sensation of *dejà vu*, so common in contemporary staged provocations. He knows black days and red days, depending on the crossing of the parallel and the meridian where the staged action takes place, the exhibition, the spectacle sanctified as an act, an interpretation, a "performance", in the original Saxon sense of the term, which has always seemed to me the best translation into Spanish, based on the enacting of an existing libretto, script, or synopsis, whether fixed or mutable in accordance with the momentary inspiration of the acting artist.

Other artists draw, paint, sculpt, design, mould, weave, play, sing, speak, photograph, write, or move physically facing an audience. The artist-object wants to do all of this, contrasting fluids of content and of procedures provenant both from the Fine Arts and the Evil Arts that have crossed in the course of his education: the media arts, manipulative and underhanded, advertising, political propaganda. The artist is demoralised, or angered, by the frequent paucity of response, except in the form of surprise, to his rages and raptures on stage; the doubtful Dignity that is turned to him by those summoned, now acting as passive spectators. He hates digestion as a response.

The artist feels that they have changed his act: he is not acting, but actually living before strangers a fragment of his life, before the twilight: his expected public show of grief. It is only a matter of only twenty minutes of metamorphosis, as banal as the ten he needs to shower and shave, or the two to drink a coffee, or the thirty-eight seconds to walk up the (uncarpeted) stairs. Too bad that his quarter-hour of ethical-aesthetical amalgam comes to so little: a curiosity that people mention to each other in passing, scarcely a press release, a video for the next show, and a couple of two pages for his “book”, or résumé.

The artist will insist that it is just another everyday action, even though the costumes and instruments are striking. But nobody listens. It is well known that a the fate of a “performer” is to be knocked down again and again by the rote attitude of the “spectator”, who refuses to see himself in anyone else, or to feel wide, open, and shared. Ready to levitate on the red carpet that separates him from stupid submission to what he has learned.

The “performer” is a runner of forms: he runs in desolation, seeking a place called Dignity, where finally people let him be and ignore the way he acts.

When the artist is called Pedro Déniz the assumptions of the action undertaken –which is extendible as a long-duration project—invariably stand on a path that can be traced to his his previous works. To be exact, since he calls his present work “Welcome Project”, indicating that in it he “analyses and reflects upon concepts of the dignitary and of dignity”.

It all begins when he erects the proposal in an open field. This is a steel sculpture more than five metres tall and weighing six tons. Painted red, it resembles an arch or a gateway with a predictable interior silhouette like a bottle. The colour invades the memory before the shape can prompt thought, since red is the colour of the boundary of mixed and free humanity, raised above any imposition of frontiers that limit the inherent equality of all individuals in the human race. It continues to be used as the instrumental colour surrounding the artist's central idea: that of personal and universal dignity. Pedro Déniz seems to have decided to establish a visual password that represents the intermediate colour of earthling ethnicities, the colour of the friendly/unfriendly fire that warms bodies, cooks food, and that devours and destroys like volcanic magma. A naturalist pattern pulls along such a format, but only to lift primary literalness to the infinite degree of universal understanding.

Under this arch, installed in the la Finca de Osorio (Teror, Gran Canaria), during the 2003 “Espacios Mestizos” exhibition, passed all the people who accepted the invitation to the opening. They assumed that by following it they would be symbolically enjoying the honours reserved for the sort of dignitaries for whom such monuments were erected, a triumphal arch for shaking up the human commonality of indignity. It would also work without this induced protocol: it is instinctive for whomever approaches to walk through the arch. That is why it was placed outdoors in a splendid natural reserve, to reconcile a civilised objective –educational, urban, and theoretical—with the most natural: an open space where it is easier to look than to see. Open air, open space –the idea of a normalising expansion—this is the very definition of the proposal.

Three successive actions, each taking place in the same rural setting, include red carpets, always to represent opulence and the privileged, and also the exclusive use of a conceptual territory that has been subjected to harsh criticism, and promoting in all instances tolerance and co-existence. The second action was performed by the artist at the “Encuentro de Arte Contemporáneo de Esles”, in Santander). This third comprised a video installation entitled *El viaje de las botellas vacías* [“The Voyage of the Empty Bottles”], which was shown in Oviedo, Asturias, and Arrecife, Lanzarote. Also in 2003, for Déniz a year that was both fruitful and full of opportunities.

Made up by four plotter images also showing a red carpet advancing on a coastal location, losing itself in the sea. From the images there come four lengths of the same red carpet, prolonging the virtual situation furnished by the photographs. This installation, which include variants – objects on shelved cushions with the same red carpeting—was repeated in the installation called *Conciencias*, shown at the Bamako Biennale in Mali that same year. The artist was lucky enough to show his creative reflection at the other end of the rope that sustains the tension of the dominant storyline (in this instance, illegal immigration), and this greatly enriches the phenomenological understanding of his creative wager.

Other stages of *Project Welcome* reiterate an identical poetics of the red carpets advancing over the pebbles of the tide until touching the first breaking waves in the surf. This occurs in the installation entitled *dulce-sal* [“sweet-salt”] (Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), which called for interaction with the public. The latter, responding to rote, functional and irresistible stimulus, construed as ashtrays some of the bowls of sweet and salty water deployed on the baize, where they were featured as a symbolic trousseau with more elevated aims.

According to the literature supplied by Déniz himself to his project, this project is “an attempt to comprehend the differences of *the other* and a wager on the receptiveness of multi-culturalism, to irrigate the thought of Utopia”. The aesthetic discourse hinges decidedly on humanistic notions, as soon as it names Utopia, meaning: “no place: an optimistic plan, project, doctrine or system which appears as unrealisable at the time it is formulated” (says the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy). It is taken for granted that the egalitarian dignity of human beings belongs to this idealistic system, and that Déniz’s discourse is centred on the visible indignity in which most of the world’s population lives. The artist longs for a happy world, criticises existing reality, and proceeds to roll out the red carpet for the trembling masses, tired and hungry for bread and justice, fleeing Africa in order to stay alive, an objective which, as we in the islands know, they do not always achieve.

Other video actions from that same year of 2003 show footage of ruined roofless houses under the skies of the island of Fuerteventura, and on the western bank of the Niger River where it passes through Bamako. Thus is completed the artist’s receptivity to metaphorising his obsessive theorem by means of long red carpets that penetrate those old houses, without roofs,

reaching even into a cemetery of small boats used to carry illegal immigrants, the Fuerteventura town of Antigua. In a way this closes the significative cycle of the action posed as *Welcome*, since the carpet laid in front of the fisherman on the waters of the Niger could easily be the one unrolled for the sub-Saharan Africans who reach Fuerteventura in boats. The performer's aesthetic resource is a weapon loaded with societal purpose; and this is why one is appalled by the gratuity of those who look without seeing. The world is in such a bad way that unless artists get on the bandwagon of protest and creative activism and subversion to try to change it, then who will?

This is how Pedro Déniz's collaborative project of "irrigating the thought of Utopia" operates. His thought is limited at one extreme by the ingenuous lyricism of the hard-core idealists, and at the other by the concentrated dialectical severity with which the problems he alludes to are debated, subject to the current choice between the development of the few and the survival of the whole, or even of the planet. The contrast between this zero degree of naturalistic inspiration, intelligible and direct, and the rhetorical nomenclature which, as a body of theory of the current artistic activism, overwhelms the digestive receptivity of the audience, does not prevent the message from getting through to it in all its simplicity.

Déniz tends to activate his decisions with a theoretical correlate that includes the healthy reflections of contemporary thinkers. The profuse textual support that illustrates his own thought contributes but little to the situation of aesthetic combat among today's most advanced ideas, which are those embraced by a possibilistic and regenerative humanism, although one that is now being strangled by the power structure's indifference to its proposals. A new type of humanism subscribed to by scientists with a conscience, not the ones prepared to serve as mere waste products of the invasive technology of consumption, or as opaque agents of selective globalisation, but those who speak openly of their analytical findings.

Atop this contrast floats the "performer", wearing a smile: his contradictions are our own. We must tread on the carpet of no-place that he unrolls for us, and step into normality, like someone starting a game. That game is called Dignity, but it is played this time without the marked cards or loaded dice that so abound in the institutional, repetitive fairytale with its sectarian "moral", that puts us to sleep every night.

Far behind lie the times when oxcarts brought the carpets from the wharf of the foundational centre of the emerging city. Now comes that item from the symbolic trousseau that confers authority with Pedro Déniz's hand: many yards of carpet, so that there is enough for all. Enough to carpet the narrow streets that lead to the current venue of his *Project Welcome*, in the distinguished Vegueta district of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria).

The artist asks himself a thousand questions about how everything that he has programmed can come about: the laborious installation, the reception by the public and passers-by, the transmission of the ideological correlate that he insistently upholds. The agitation that can overtake the artist has nothing to do with the serene concentration that preceded those actions in which he displayed himself as object/score of the performance. It will be quite a show, the team of promoters says, but, even so, everyone trusts that it will go beyond the visible presence of the forms. It is hoped that passers-by will fall into the allegory and find reflexive and evaluative corollaries linked to the event in progress, the naturalistic *pathos* that the proposal to be presented appears to embody.

The truth lies as much in the intentions as in the contrary: non-intentionality. He believes that all aesthetic vehicles possess this double edge: a superficial reading, in this instance centring on the vindication of Dignity –which may be too little for the artist—and another, deeper reading, motivated by the desirable polysemy of the event. It stems from imagining the ambivalence that might arise from the encounter between the proposed score and the improvisation of which the user is so fond, the footfall of the hesitant walker, and that of the decided and defiant one.

The work of art, then, is the interval of time itself. This idea must be kept in mind, since it is fundamental to Déniz's project, which calls for interaction with the lost steps of the collective conscience.

The street carpets will collect dust from shoes, chewing gum, cigarette ends, skids marks from a child's bicycle, rainwater, *croissant* crumbs, a button that fell from the clothing of some pedestrian, threads, pins, lint, dandruff, and the flecks of human skin that are shed at the slightest rubbing. None of this is unworthy of "Project Welcome", accustomed as is this performer/celebrant to allow offerings in such a rite of passage. It is a lay ceremony that may

reach its degree of excellence as long there appear in the harvest the remains of tears, drops of blood, or any other bodily fluid. It will make you think of a level of participation that far exceeded the virtuality of the metaphor expressed.

The welcoming paths lead to the exhibition building, the holy of holies where there awaits the object most deserving of the pilgrimages of the already-dignified. And that fetish is no other than a mandorla symbol with a red background at the end of the narrow stairway that joins the two floors of the sanctuary. In it, like the teeth in a sex-trap of dialectical voracity, there await ten bottles containing messages that are collateral to the canon of the idea being enacted. To read them and examine them will hardly help the pilgrim on new routes, since in the main they contradict the most deeply-rooted historical addictions of the audience. All that we have to do is to transform the health warning we choose (more than one if possible) into a personal challenge, leaving behind the justifiable indignation that can be deduced from the indignity suffered, the dead weight of our herdlike conformist routines upon the scales measuring a genuine liberation.

A panel made up of thirty small rectangles of red felt with white borders will be used to summarise the important notions, the dominant note of the score. They are the melody of *Welcome*: an alternating/internal sound system that combines advertising signage with drawings of mechanisms, the artist's own icons, and key terms of the event: 'indifference', 'thought', 'plurality', and, of course 'dignity' and 'justice', so that everyone can understand. Ranging across this panel are texts with which the artist has found an affinity, amongst the broad critical harvest that normally explores the depths of indignity suffered by a large proportion of the planetary population.

The experiment reaches its end; the senses have received the right quantity of inputs so that the terminal registry may include sensations and contents with immediate functionality, as long as the pilgrim does not enclose herself or himself in stubborn indifference. The cascade of video actions that illustrate the artist's journey round out the experience. The theoretical objective has been achieved: to intervene in a public space, to link the action as an artistic support to the specific architecture of the venue, to domesticate the artistic space, observing the everyday scene from an aesthetic perspective, etc.

This visible action endeavours to shatter the theoretical carapace, leaving behind the experience impressed upon each viewer with a personal stamp, easily linked to other thinking individuals. They illuminate the course of the action, and may be the most important recompense to an artist engaged in a thoughtful rebellion, swimming against the tide of Single Thought. An artist like Pedro Déniz, emerging from his own scars, demanding for himself, and for *the other*, a permanent position in the transparent place called Dignity.

In this way it is established once again that, in the face of the media/institutional discourse, conformist and alienated by its temporal pre-eminence, there exists another that is divergent, defiant, and yet respectable, one that evokes tri-continentiality as a programmatic format, activating its arguments by aesthetic means. This is the case of Pedro Déniz, who swathes himself in in ceremonial purple to lash out with this performance against such widespread submission, digested as indifference.

At last the purple carpet can be shared.

Ángel Sánchez Rivero