

TO BE DIZZYING CHANGE AND TO BE LANGUAGE

Mayday. Emergency call from the other seashore. The answer takes time to come. There is a lot of background noise and they are certainly too far away.

Distance has become institutionalised, merely as double standards of morality. We have become “adepts of proximity without risk”, imposing eumetry, that is, the right personal space or distance that protects us from others. We are living in a time of selective globalisation, in a world characterised by asymmetry. Everything can be turned into goods or appearances, into affected, shallow and trivial simulations. We have got into what José Luis Brea called the “aesthetics of the pseudo”, which produces “pseudo-knowledge” and “pseudo-critique”. They have tried to convince us, and we have become a community of convinced people –of defeated people– so as not to take risks. At the same time, our synaesthetic system – obstructed by saturation of external stimuli and sensorial invasion, together with subsequent narcotic effects– “has become [...] one of anaesthetics”. This has made us a bit more unable to feel, blocking our possibilities to react to others’ pain. Faced with the abdication of a reality that is hyperrealised in all kinds of spectacular simulations, the conceptual territory of action seems to be one of the most suitable ways to re-establish reaction capability.

Mayday. Pedro Déniz lays red carpets at different locations, which are all charged with deep symbolism: a graveyard of patera boats and a convent in ruins (both on the island of Fuerteventura), and a fishing village and a luxury area (both on the banks of the Niger river in Bamako). The red carpet –the reception space par excellence– traditionally marks a selective path that is reserved for important dignitaries and celebrities only, a path leading towards the very centre of the show. Nonetheless, artist Pedro Déniz has chosen to place himself backstage in order to problematise the show, creating settings for those who usually are offstage or for those living at the back of the frame. Pedro Déniz’s carpets dyed red subvert the hierarchies in order to celebrate the encounter with the Other, to dignify the passage. His unique cartography draws in the landscape a sort of suture lines composing a damaged surface, and this is probably so because in order to break the anti-trauma protective shield the wound must be shown. The genuflexion made by the artist –a gesture of prayer and reverence that is common to the major religions– becomes a wellcoming sign and, above all, an emergency call for human dignity. Similar to a mantra, Pedro Déniz’s gesture warns about the harmful effects of indifference.

Society tends to neutralise the otherness; to destroy the Other as a natural reference in order to turn the Other into a threat. Baudrillard says: “Where the Other was, there has the Same come to be”. Nevertheless, the Other is precisely the one who makes it possible for us not to repeat ourselves to infinity in the hell of the same. That is why there is a need to reinforce strangeness, to explore it, to intensify it. Pedro Déniz is well aware of that. In performances such as *The Japy New Year*, the artist stresses the so-called estrangement effect by creating a conflict between what is sensitive or familiar to us and the unknown, which is subject to prejudices towards and fear of the Other. Perhaps he does so in order to show that it is maybe up to us to look at things from a different perspective. According to García Canclini –who draws inspiration from poet Ferreira Gullar’s verses–, the artist’s task is precisely “translating that which within us and between us remains torn, belligerent, or incomprehensible”. Our inner self is always a broken, split and multiplied self. “Je est un autre”, stated Rimbaud. Everyone is another, as Pedro Déniz highlights it in the course of his action. Either alone or

together with other artists and groups of artists from different latitudes, generations and contexts –the main performances to be highlighted in this regard being those made in cooperation with Mounir Fatmi, Lina Auyanet, Silvia Antolín, Gabriela León, Analía Beltrán i Janés, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña and his troupe called La Pocha Nostra–, artist Pedro Déniz considers art practice as a mixed race territory, both formally and semantically. The artist does so assuming a nomadic and changing identity; an identity penetrated by different cultures, by three continents; an identity that is always in progress, inhabiting inclusive geographies made of permeable borders and hybrid spaces for co-existence between the ‘I’ and the ‘We’ (the self, and the self and the others); and, by extension, coexistence between the visible and the invisible, the centre and its peripheries, art and life.

Action is presented as an antidote and a space of resistance against the canon and fictions imposed by the power as the only possible model. Facing oblivion and indifference, the ethical value of memory is recovered. Pedro Déniz’s working space deals with matters disregarded by the mainstream, such as tolerance and respect towards the Other who concerns us; forced and clandestine exodus towards a distant utopia; unsustainable consumption and homogeneous behaviours in welfare societies; the possibilities of cross-border communication; powerlessness; cultural frictions; personal and interpersonal relationships, and subsequent conflicts and asymmetries. All those matters, which are closely linked, are present in the artist’s poetics. This is a poetics based on sincere gestures that materialise in projects recorded using photography or video; projects such as his *Incursiones y Acciones íntimas realizadas en hábitats privados, públicos, urbanos o en la naturaleza* (Incursions and Intimate actions carried out in private, public, urban and natural habitats), as well as performances carried out in specific contexts, so as to mean that the value of the action is over the potential value. Pedro Déniz deals with a multiplicity of disciplines; very personal signs inhabit his symbolic universe. These signs are almost always simple elements that have in common great visual power and conceptual depth: red carpets, bottles and blackboards that share Beuys’ broad vision of art are used to open new channels of communication; masks and eye masks on which the artist writes down words such as ‘blindness’ and ‘oblivion’, as well as words expressing other people’s thoughts and emotions; sticking-plasters and crutches showing human fragility and vulnerability; trenches for thinking and walls made of paper, reinforcing our memory; crosses and crescents that reconcile cultural antagonisms; and, above all, his body and voice. The body acts as a generating element, as a mobile laboratory, as a centre for semiotic and political research, away from any kind of re-presentation, engaging in dialogue with space. The voice –either spoken or written– conveys meaning through words that do not fear to be meaningful; a voice guided by feelings and poetic imagination –the artist himself points it out in *Ajuy*, an artistic action in which he sends messages to the sun– without losing contact with reality, with no deviations.

In the case of the work entitled *La puente* (The Bridge), which started in 1998 and is still in progress, a single action made in cooperation with other artists has succeeded in going beyond the usual communication barriers. This work is the story of a journey originating from a mail art co-operative proposal. Pedro Déniz’s authorship becomes diluted as the work is done in co-operation with more than 80 artists invited to carry out art interventions on glass bottles. The artist himself was responsible for throwing the bottles into the ocean. That was done from the former zero meridian located on the island of El Hierro, which was a historic node of tricontinental crossings in spite of its peripheral location. Ubiquitous in the artist’s life and work, the sea is no longer a liquid border; it becomes a bridge towards the Other, just as the red carpet in *Mayday*. The strange fleet of migrant objects contained into those glass bottles suggests an entire poetics of fragility that is also related to dispossession and disregard. Without navigation charts, those harragas carry out an invisible diaspora towards an unknown direction, crossing sea currents, but also historical currents, between the new and the old world, providing a reflection about yesterday’s colonisation and today’s economic and ideological neo-colonialism.

Thus, the shipwrecked object –a container of memory– becomes a concept that creates a latency of meanings where potential space and time connexions merge. That exercise is full of meaning; implicit in it there are issues related to insularity itself, distance and communication barriers in a hyper-connected world domesticated by new information technologies and knowledge –Baudrillard notes that machines are without otherness: “the computer has no other.” Faced with instant communication, Pedro Déniz proposes a different tempo. Faced with the tyranny of the visible, he proposes a different way of sailing, away from the panoptic regime of surveillance and control governing us, and rather related to chance and to the magic of unforeseen encounters.

Therefore, demand for freedom and total rejection of any prescriptive or homogenising system are the only limits of an oeuvre that is consistently built; an oeuvre where poetic and political meanings are intertwined; an oeuvre between dizzying change and language.

To be dizzying change. To settle in the present. To survive the present and to live it. To cross borders. To get inside the cracks and the interstices. To look into the creases. To set forth contradictions. To shake them. To delve into the eccentric (out of the centre). To come together. To push the limits of identity, culture, politics, ethnicity, race, gender and class. To decolonise the body. To re-politicise it. To heal wounds in rituals without myths. To deconstruct patterns. To point out points of collision, conflicts and paradoxes. To camp in unstable territories. To expand them. To apprehend other realities.

To be language. To have the courage to speak. To play with the polysemy of words. To take care of words. To give them new meanings. To multiply their meanings. To work with their transformative potential. To dislocate the imposed certainties. To displace convictions and certainties. To combat concepts. To reconsider them. To deprive them of their limits. To replace them with other concepts. To disseminate thought. To encourage reflection. To provide different codes of interpretation. To strengthen our symbolic fabric. To encourage people to adopt a critical stance. To highlight the poetic and political nature of existence.

To translate dizzying change into language, moving between different disciplines. To inhabit the world and to question it; to subvert its hierarchies and to dislocate its centres; to put utopias into action. Pedro Déniz’s artistic actions in transit are the expression of an emergency call for dignity for oneself and others. A call that gives sense to an art practice that is engaged, honest and constantly facing the realities we live in; an art practice that builds new bridges of communication from and towards that other seashore that also concerns us.

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