

# Principles of an active, dangerous installation

Hubert Besacier

On a number of occasions, as an introduction to talks on the body art and performance art of the sixties and seventies, I've experimented with getting to the heart of a question with a video of Jordi Benito's action in September 1978 at the Georges Pompidou centre in Paris, which was called *La desesperació de l'intèrpret de llaüt* (The desperation of the lute player).

This film is of interest because it presents the whole of a short piece in real time, *a priori* without aesthetic design. It allows an audience unaccustomed to this art form to experience its effect without reserves, to react totally spontaneously, and, in a second stage, in the light of their own reactions, to grasp its essential principles.

Ten years later, this piece's power of provocation remains intact. The action is still disturbing, even on the screen, and causes great discomfort, which the audience try to dissipate in a number of ways: noisy laughter, whistles, untimely applause.

It shows Jordi Benito trying hard, with the help of a musical instrument, to apply the contents of some barrels of black paint to a large white sheet extended vertically as though it were a stretched canvas.

It is, in fact, a fight we are watching, in which everything resists, everything goes against the artist, who ends up splashing around naked, repeatedly slipping and falling into the black mass that stains his body.

The uneasiness each of us feels before this scene comes first of all from a total refusal, a total inability, voluntarily assumed, to save appearances:

—neither that of the pictorial result, which no criterion, even if it were taken from the most gestural, most informal expressionist register, could ever justify aesthetically;

—nor that of a theatrically organised act, which could, with the intention of doing something spectacular, deceive us and therefore justify this borrowing.

The discomfort comes primarily from the position and function the artist assigns to us, depriving us of the healthy distance which is normally established by *savoir faire* and by cultural codes, and behind which we can hide, which protects us and comforts us in our status as spectators. In this case, we find ourselves face to face with ordinary, banal actions without the safety of our explicit or tacitly convened criteria.

The artist appears before us completely vulnerable, not as an acrobat, not as someone giving lessons and even less as an illusionist, but as the revealer Kafka speaks of (1), who has of necessity to be slightly less skilful than us to reveal the contents and essence of our acts and our behaviour.

The artist's naked body doesn't interpret: it staggers clumsily through a series of disasters until it comes up against the impossibility of perpetuating the illusionist tradition of the artefact. What comes across most strikingly in this work, quite simply and unstressed, is the total defencelessness of the contemporary artist before the phenomenon of painting, before the legitimacy of the pictorial attitude.

In this extreme conception, the work borders on exhibitionism and therefore puts us in a difficult position, close to *voyeurism*. This is where we see the fundamental difference between an artist's actions and an actor's interpretation. This action's emotionally powerful and memorable aspect merely serves to strengthen the paradoxical evidence of a rejection of the spectacular.

We are invited to watch the real bewilderment of the creator who assumes the same reality of the contents of what had previously been expressed by his Catalan Modernist predecessors through surrealist figuration, by dismembering the image or by recourse to the material, the object of rejection. Indeed, the title of the action and the instrument Benito uses to carry it out are an explicit reference to Joan Miró.

It sets out anew from what for the Catalan master had been a moment of at least equal violence: the series of *Interiors holandesos* of 1928/29, in which, in an iconoclast period inherited from the logic of Dada, Miró —who at that time declared that he wanted to «assassinate painting»— dismembered the satisfied serenity of a classical Dutch painting of the seventeenth century (2), disturbing, deforming, dislocating his model, until he made a placid indoor scene the theatre of a desperate struggle between the lute-player and his instrument.

With this action, Jordi Benito sets against the assassination of painting by the modern artist the crucial situation of the contemporary artist assassinated by the problem of painting.

The art of the sixties and seventies was still facing critical problems of the work between artifice and life, between what is simulated and what is real —that is, in the ideological extension of the modernist utopias, in line with Nietzsche and Thomas Mann. Mann, at the end of World War II, clearly reformulated, with *Doctor Faust*, this demand for truth (3) that we find again in the action painting of the fifties, conceived as an ontological expression of the I, and

that was to become established, exacerbated by the social struggles in the leading countries of the West (the crisis of violent decolonizations, the Vietnam war, the fight for the right to racial equality, female liberation, etc.), until land art, minimal art and body art brought about the total intrusion of the literal into the work.

This attitude couldn't survive long, to the extent that it depended on the notion of the futility or impossibility of the work, which carries within itself the idea of its own destruction. Nevertheless —as recent developments and the twists and turns of the market have shown—, the solution doesn't lie in a return to past formulas, or on the resort to the total artifice, and even less on the rejection of the work to the second or third degree, on the critical distortions of meta-language.

But it is undoubtedly in the problems of this alternative that we must search for the meaning of Jordi Benito's steps and of the evolution of his work since those first actions: to find the terrain of the work on which life can really subsist without becoming simply literal and on which the work can develop a general power, on which it can take on the archetypical or symbolic, or even question the history of popular traditions and the history of art, to which at the same time it makes its own contribution.

This, in fact, is what happens in *La desesperació de l'interpret de llaut*, and this is where the piece's interest lies: in a transcription that is ambiguous enough to be at once as close as possible to the literal, while still reflecting the general, the artist's crucial condition —whether pictorial or musical, since this is the duality chosen by Miró in the work from which this action takes its inspiration.

Because of this literality, because of the introduction of what is alive and, therefore, of real duration and of the precarious, the work of art has at the same time the virtue of carrying within itself its own hesitation, its own doubt. The artist introduces an essential failing into the heart of the work when he makes a point of displaying uncertainty in his trade, a lack of skill, so as not to deceive in the execution of the act, in the execution of the painting, in any representation of the artist's condition.

The artist has understood that the strength of the work resides less in the prowess with which it is made into pictures or objects, than in its capacity to find its own danger, its own risk, and in its development, in the way it is given substance, in the way it is situated in space.

Paradoxically, it is the introduction of what is alive, what is fragile, and of the real danger in the work that also makes it possible to reintroduce a distance: that of the transcription, of the passage through the symbol.

In subsequent works, it is as if Benito were striving to reconcile within a single piece the two most antinomic points that crop up in the question of the work of art: that of the real and that of the symbolic transcription. It is as if he were searching for the nodal point that is at the heart of artistic research and that would act as the link between abstraction and life.

Here, undoubtedly, we have one of the keys that explains the special relationship with music in the artist's work.

Two years later, in Lyons, when Jordi Benito represented «Bajard Jac Impacient opus 1» —a piece that was to see two further versions in 1981, one at the Museu de Granollers and the other at the Sala Vinçon in Barcelona—, we once again find this identity established between music and painting.

The subject here, linked as ever to Spanish art history, is provided by Goya's bullfights.

This subject allows the superimposition in the same work of the idea of musical execution, during which the artist confronts his instrument, and the notion of the bullfight.

At the same time as he revises Goya, he plays, within a live action, with cultural and popular references and connotations, with the commonplaces of tradition on which the most important historical works have been based.

As regards the body, it is still immersed in a struggle which has no way out, but with increased violence. More than ever, we find ourselves trapped in the game of realities and transpositions, between physical commitment and symbol. Thus in the bullfight/concert superposition the place of the bull is occupied by a suspended piano case that the artist attacks violently with an axe and with which he repeatedly collides until he passes out. There is therefore always a time lag between the real risk of the action and the metaphoric transposition of the work, between the cultural and the element taken from what is real (fire, the lime used to mark the sand and the famous horse-cloths that were to become a familiar object in all his subsequent installations and sculptures), between the referential and the organic: especially the blood of the bull that inundates the piano case and replaces on the canvas —first placed on the ground and then extended in the air at the end of the action— the paint of previous pieces. From now on, it was to be the recurring pictorial element in the work (4).

This circulation, this relation of equivalence between paint, bullfight and music, became stronger and even more precise when, after 1982, the artist started regularly to use the term «opera» in his actions and his installations (5).

It may be because of this duality of extremes that come together in a very particular type of work of art —the

extreme artifice of the ritual in popular tradition and the commitment of the body confronting real risk— that we ought to understand Benito's use of these two models so singularly called together in the field of the plastic arts: the bullfight and the opera.

I shall not repeat here the arguments that make the bullfight an art in its own right. This has already been demonstrated by more than one author and I shall content myself with a special mention of the masterly *Miroir de la tauromachie*, published in 1937 by Michel Leiris (6).

The opera and the bullfight share this extreme distancing between the most stereotyped ritualization and the most dramatic vital precariousness.

The very nature of music brings about this distancing: it is doubtless the branch of art in which the purest abstraction and emotion coexist. Because in it abstraction communicates and communicates itself through what is most immediately and incongruously concrete: noise, the fact of drawing the bow across the catgut and also carnal friction, the intimate contact of the voice. With the voice it is an abstraction that circulates directly from sense to sense, between two physical senses, from organ to organ.

Opera is often presented as the marriage of theatre and music. But no-one is taken in by this. The formula is too simple and there is no case in which it responds to the specific reality of opera. The voice is an essential element of the theatre. But the interpretation escapes the actress's voice. From the moment she makes the first sound, she gives herself up to her corporal reality, the organic prevails over the interpretation, over the fiction of a character and a situation. The reality of the sensual vocal event prevails over artistic convention. At this instant, neither syntax, nor logic, nor the meaning of the words manage to hide the carnal nature of the physical act of singing.

The oscillation resides in this: the distance of the artefact is suddenly suppressed in favour of direct confrontation; we have to confront the naked reality of this action.

Opera is fascinating —and sometimes irritating— because theatrical convention, so often primitive, merely serves to underline the live, precarious nature of the exhibition.

Theatrical convention simply assumes the part of the ritual. In performance art, in opera, or in the bullfight, the ritual is not true distancing; it is, in contrast, simply the execution, the accomplishment of agreed acts that socially lead to the unstoppable crudity of the act, that bring us into the direct presence of the unheard, of the unnamable, that open a legitimate access to indecency: that of nudity —of the body or the voice— that of the blood, that of pairing or murder.

As regards the music, Jordi Benito's relationship with Carles Santos is decisive. They have almost twenty years of creative exchanges behind them.

Since 1973, on the basis of political and aesthetic affinities, an informal working group was set up in which the two artists took part. Within this group, though, their relationship was clear. They never fell prey to the ingenuity of the moment that at that time claimed so many groups of artists who rediscovered the Wagnerian utopia of the «total work of art» (*Besamtkunstwerk*) and the traps of the *multimedia* work.

By nature, the two artists have a lot in common in the way they work —elements taken from reality, *collage* technique— and their subject matters also meet, even if only because they both turn to popular tradition in the composition of absolutely modern works —I would mention in passing that the close links between bullfighting and music also concern Carles Santos, as we can see from his latest symphonic work dedicated to Belmonte.

But in each of the pieces that bring the two creators together, the specific nature of the work, whether musical or visual, is respected. First it is the musician who intervenes a propos of a sculpture or installation —and the music then becomes the work's constituent element—; *Nits* (Caixa de Pensions de Barcelona, 1985), *Escena per a capvespre* (Barcelona and Perpignan, 1987), or even *Les portes de Linares* (The Gates of Linares) (Barcelona, 1989 - Valencia and Saragossa, 1990), then it is the artist who creates the stage elements for the musical work and places himself at the service of the composer.

Recent developments in this exemplary collaboration, with the presentation at the Galeria Taché of *Piano Track*, says it all about the evolution of Jordi Benito's work, since it is conceived and delivered, both in the material and the form, as an instrument from which the composer and musicians, with their repeated interventions in the object, will really produce the sound.

And so we find in the practice of the installation the style of the first actions, this preoccupation with always going in the direction of a work closely tied to life, while continuing to multiply the game of transcriptions.

The piano, which takes the place of the bull, is itself replaced by its own image, by its own duplication, of which only the volume subsists. Initially loaded with materials, with the ballast and the nuisance of stone blocks and horse-cloths, of vestiges of history or of telluric elements, but now also pure, monolithic form, fresh from the mould or the sculptor's forge. It is from him that the new reality of the sounds emanates.

## Reality + Fiction = Truth

Carles Hac Mor

At a time of increase in those practices —often inspired in conceptualist approaches— that seek legitimation in the play of rhetoric or the cold ostentation of the object staged, if Jordi Benito's installation still conserves its full meaning it's because it has never been severed from its roots: action art.

The action comes from its internal logic. Of this physical experience he has managed to preserve the tactile sense of the material, essential in the unique practice of sculpture. From it also he gets that sense of space that provides all the event's theatrical value and that special attention to the visitor's visual and physical movement in the field of the device. And especially, in spite of the necessary developments, he has lost none of his insistence on truth in the work.

By introducing and maintaining the dangerous presence of life and the real density of time, he continues to assume the fragility and precariousness of the creative act.

Thus Michel Leiris, in his unfailing demandingness, searched, so that literature would be art, «even if it were only the shadow of the horn of a bull». (7).

This risk, in Jordi Benito, is the very condition of the work.

- (1) Franz Kafka, *Josefina, the singer*.
- (2) *The Lute Player*, by Hendrick Martensz Sorgh, painted in 1661.
- (3) «The work of art? A trap. Something the bourgeois wishes still existed. It goes against what is genuine and what is serious.» «Appearance and play collide in the conscience of art. Art wants to cease being an appearance and a game, wants to become a lucid appearance.» Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faust*. 1949.
- (4) When it is just an installation, the large canvases involved are produced earlier in the bullrings, as was the case in Barcelona with *Les portes de Linares* at Metrònom in 1989, or even in the bullring at Nîmes, for the 1990 Arles installation *Enterrat a la sorra* (Buried in the Sand).
- (5) See especially the series of pieces titled *Assaigs per a l'òpera Europa* (Rehearsals for the Opera Europe) of 1982 and 1984.
- (6) Michel Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie*, illustrated by André Masson and re-edited by Fata Morgana in 1981.
- (7) Michel Leiris, *L'âge d'homme*, preface of 1946: «De la littérature considérée comme une tauromachie». Gallimard.

The present exhibition is an implicit remembrance of the last —unwritten— drama of the German writer Heinrich von Kleist: at dusk one evening, while walking on the shore of the Wannsee lake in Potsdam with the wife of a friend, the embers of his old obsession with suicide suddenly stirred, and that Romantic —of whom Jordi Benito is a sort of reincarnation— persuaded his companion of the need for them both to die in that precise moment; and without more ado they both took their own lives.

By the same lake, one hundred and thirty-four years later, in 1945, the Potsdam Conference was held to address the problems deriving from the conclusion of the Second World War. For this reason, Stalin, Molotov, Truman and Churchill were subliminally evoked at certain points in the installation, and as a result the spectator was struck by flashes emanating from the macroaction which Benito undertook in 1985, near Sebastopol, in the Crimea, with two hundred thousand Warsaw Pact soldiers on manoeuvres.

To mark the echo of this apotheosis of Socialist Realism, Jordi Benito was congratulated in Camaguey (Cuba) by Fidel Castro, who encouraged him to carry out the now mythical action *La mar de mars* (The sea of seas), which consisted in swimming in the Antilles sea while being dragged by a shark. This feat was by way of epilogue to Joseph Beuys's legendary *Coyote performance*, and to the mountains of fish from the Baltic which Benito piled up in the public squares of Krakow, in Poland, in 1982. And, by its nautical character, the struggle with the shark explains the marine and submarine aspect of some of the pieces in *Die Partituren des Wannsees*, in which the lake of Kleist's suicide becomes both ocean and desert.

This, in effect, suggests to the spectator an existential desert, and this in turn naturally refers back to the Dawson Desert in Canada, and the cataclysm which occurred there in 1974: the demolition of the old mansion of the cobalt mag-nate, Lester B. Graves, by means of the brutal onrush of a stampeding herd of bison urged on by Benito, suspended by a cable from a helicopter.

It is precisely in homage to Lester B. Graves that in one of the exhibition rooms is a metaphor of the interior of a human testicle. This alludes to the fact that Graves was so impressed by Benito's radical intervention in the Kassel-1972 Documenta that he half-castrated himself during the incineration —organised by Benito in 1984, in Venice— of

the mortal remains of a multitude of simultaneous lovers at the last false Döge.

A portion of the cadaver of one of these hours — the piece which has occasioned so many police and judicial investigations since its exhibition, as *Nature morte*, in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1978 — is more or less hidden inside an iron piano, on top of which Jordi Benito, at an unspecified date, will hammer a nail into his right hand.

And another bit of cadaver — of a peasant from the Pallars Jussà region — only visible from time to time, is sprinkled daily with the blood of a bull exactly identical to the one quartered in an historic action in the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona in 1981, where the vapours rising up from the animal, sacrificed *in situ*, very nearly brought about the irreversible asphyxiation of the artist.

All in all this makes a pentagram for the interpretation, by Carles Santos, of the Wannsee scores, a few notes of which have been materialised by Jordi Benito in the form of living human sculptures: men hanging from the walls and, on the floor, naked girls crushed beneath rocks and the ruins of flights of neoclassical steps.

In short, a stage set for an opera in which Lohengrin is no longer a knight of the Holly Grail, but a horse lashed to the ceiling.

## Die partituren des Wannsees

### A. Tàpies Barba

*In the infinite solitude of the bank, under a hazy sky,  
how delightful to contemplate a desert of endless water.*

Heinrich von Kleist

A single moment accumulates all the hours of joy and pain — darkness pregnant with light, impenetrable dream of existence, indelible memory of the heart —, as though life, in bidding farewell, sought consolation in the slightest movement, in the purest colour, in the clearest sound and the subtlest perfume. Water dripping into water, multiplication of images and feelings on the edge of time. The man's figure is reflected on the naked surface of the mirror, but his senses, drunk on so much pleasure, fail to recognise him who has to govern them. Water, music, stone: melody hanging in the air, the centre and dispersion of the image, the front and the back of thought.

The waves on the lake repeat their silvery murmur as they reach the stony bank. Heinrich looks at Henriette, her fair hair dishevelled by the cold morning air, the deep, melancholy gaze, the pale, tired face contrasting with the profound darkness of the forest of firs that stands behind her. Heinrich listens to the whispering wind that brushes the crowns of the trees and the light rustle of the silk of Henriette's dress, sparkling in the sun's rays. Now he's no longer afraid, but his fingers shake as they brush the frozen metal of the weapon, and for a moment he wonders, still, at that obstinate, persistent warmth of the body. Around him, though, the cold and sadness seem transmuted into joy, rising with the breeze like the delicate scent of the woods and meadows. Henriette, like a figure of ice beside him, watches him too with a gentle smile on her lips. When the sun hides for a few moments behind a cloud, a shot is heard and a flock of ravens take flight and pass almost touching the placid waters of the Wannsee. Then they turn, their wings outstretched, and make for the bank again. When the second shot rings out the ravens this time seem unperturbed and they walk off clumsily through the thick grass. On the bank of the Wannsee, the bodies of Heinrich and Henriette lie side by side, each melting into the memory of the other. After the roar of the gunpowder everything has returned to the same measured rhythm: wave after wave striking the bank, the murmur of the wind bending the branches of the trees, the hoarse cawing of the ravens in the distance.

Fear fills the mind's abode and its flame leaves a burning trail on the untarnished canvas of the dream. Fear: a splendid and terrible experience. A confused emotion which, like an aurora, reaches its silvery hand towards the absolute darkness of the night. Fear: a sacred word, a manifestation lighting the terrible path of solitude. All extreme experience leads to silence: apparent contradiction between saying and not saying, between doing and not doing. A terrible and splendid alternative. A paradox, though, that is only apparent: to advance in immobility, to listen to the voice of silence. In this fertile land roots the fear of the man who is up against the limit. Approaching the limit is always terrible. To go beyond, though, is a risk one has to take. Afterwards, when the tension reaches its peak, the light brings everything together in the melting-pot of thought and everything takes on a golden hue that changes emptiness for fullness. To speak of fear, then, is also to speak of light: a final transmigration of the senses to the world of oblivion, the fall of reason into the deepest chasms of the spirit, a joyful rediscovery of the centre in the winding course of life.

## Die partituren des Wannsees

Vicenç Altaió

The Artist stood rooted before the Idea.

Not before the suicidal lovers' lake —cousins, she, affected by an incurable illness, and he, a writer of note but incapable of reading aloud, before the rapture of his devoted public, a single complete verse, a sensitive soul in communion with the spirit of nature and cosmic harmony, not hearing the break in the scan of the rhythm that it exalted because of his stutter.

Neither had he climbed —which of them?— onto the line of the wall that separated political systems, but he knew of the power of the void. That immaterial events blistered the skin of places.

A wall without, without stones, without being built on, on the division of systems or on the fall of regimes. Dumb to reunification, he gave shape to his invisibility.

Far from the din of the people of the town and the officials. The Artist remained silent before the arrival of freedom, the free choice of voluntary death and the pride of the unthought —of collective event.

The Idea was cold and dead like the lake in the frost, the final hour, as warm was the lovers' blood that melted the frozen crust. As inert was the wall in the hands that dismembered it.

The Idea was indifferent to the cry of joy and to the protest, to the euphoria and to the insecurity, to the disappointment and to the merrymaking, to the union of disunion and to the confusion, to the fears and to the hopes, to the anger and to the indignation of the demonstrators of either side, to the shame and to the helplessness of the power of the State, of the police and of the army.

All reports were obsolete in their own lifetime, as impossible to reach as to judge the past, so concerned with interpreting its future.

History remained silent, like the Idea, on its experience.

Only Art by virtue of not taking part, of not giving its word, of not avoiding the confrontation, doesn't ignore because it doesn't know the suffering of the Idea.

The Idea as if affirming the Invisible wall, as if it were a formal reality, conformed the constitution, the Rambla. Various types of beliefs and deeds converged on the avenue. Quite the contrary, at the end, the Argentine parrot and the tulip and the bellow of the bull fell silent before the chatter of public affairs.

And so the organic silence of the Idea declined the things of the republic under the wing of the vicereine.

In the Palace of Culture, only this: a political idea in the Palace of Culture.

Alone the Idea alone in an age of autophagous crowds falling like a chisel on He who embodied beauty with the inaccessibility of immediate understanding because of the unlikelihood of his imagination.

Because that revolt wasn't heading where it had been thought. It said what it took back: the triumph of ideology over history or the horse that doesn't finish. Or the piano that falls or the failure of culture as an ideology within history.

Yes, the power of culture said something like that. It equated the guillotine and the piano. Vice and Virtue. All the precepts and questions seemed unnecessary. And it whispered: Everything is allowed in culture. Its weight only weighed in the void, it didn't destroy the sound that didn't sound, so as to avoid the suffering of the Idea. Not to vary the dirge, not to let the string continue vibrating.

The imperial piano suspended. The imperial piano arms crossed. The imperial piano face to the wall. The imperial piano bound hand and foot.

Suspended, arms crossed, face to the wall, bound hand and foot culture, sculpture, painting. «We hear it, understand?» «For God's sake!»

The wall covered with a bagpipe. The eager guillotine weightless in the resurrection of the stone. Because words are stones for those.

If it was political culture that as soon took on one form as another form on one side or other of the wall, he was glad of the illness of freedom itself. That was the contradiction.

The piano (culture) buried in coal (industry). The stuffed Bavarian goat (nature). In the shadows, nailed on the wall, the canvas (art), a soldier's raincoat (the State).

They were no longer afraid without having anything to be afraid of.