

THE SCARS OF ART OR THE LOGIC OF DESIRE

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cón*, *Flash Art*.

A quick look at a few global phenomena which have characterised the art scene during the eighties brings to light a sort of radical change—both in terminology and in concept—in our appreciation of a wide range of artistic production. First of all, a vigorous shake-up in our rigidly activity-defining categories has led to certain works being requalified, in such a way that the names they were given in the seventies have been replaced by other, more up-to-date names, in keeping with the events of the last few years. Secondly, this shake-up has also taken place in the work itself, and has given rise to a complex game of interrelations which has allowed remarkable linguistic and syntactic variations, as well as others of a more strictly formal type: the field of objectual and sculptural operations has also made itself felt very strongly in the sphere of painting, some of whose principles of line and colour have, in turn, invaded the world of three dimensions, without losing any of their basic characteristics. But this speeded-up taste for three dimensions has aroused disproportionate interest in and a generalised feeling for the *real* inclusion of much which until then had only been represented.

This situation, which is very noticeable in that part of the contemporary art scene closest to us—so clearly influenced by the recent boom in sculpture—, has led to such a drastic semantic and terminological upheaval that it has sometimes allowed us to speak, somewhat licentiously, of *new sculptural behaviour*, in the same way that new esthetic and generic qualifications and considerations have allowed us to speak of sculpture when, with the misgivings and prejudices that characterise the field, we have found ourselves up against work whose precise definition did not come under any of the headings in common use: a simple formal comparison with work from abroad has often helped legitimate these new terminological considerations applied to work which saw the light of day under the sign of incipient change.

However, in a scene which is still far from normal and which is traditionally unwilling to forgo its frugal post-minimalist inheritance—unwilling, for example, to accept concepts such as that of Beuys referred to social sculp-

ture and all its implications for life and ideology—, a scene without any real outside contacts and one totally lacking in opportunities for any effective comparison with what was happening beyond the most immediate border, in this context, then, adopting new initiatives or new interpretations which, while also new, were applied to work from more or less remote moments in time was an uphill struggle, a process which has become generational and chronological, which has based itself on the fact of contemporaneity and, going beyond the problems of the moment, a process which, for about the first time, has joined in the international debate on esthetics, even if it has often done so rather sporadically and erratically, a debate which, in the last few years, has crystallized around the question of postmodernity and its thematic contributions and ramifications.

As regards his own prolific production, and especially in his work of the last few years, Jordi Benito has been affected—sometimes, perhaps, *malgré lui*—by the two aspects mentioned earlier: a requalification on the basis of essentially terminological changes of definition and a reconsideration resulting from the new events taking place in the world of art. And in the mid-seventies, paradoxically, his work had already been labelled as what was then called "new artistic behaviour", a general term which has later allowed convenient interpretations: at all times, consideration was given not only to the esthetic differences but also, as is logical and indispensable, to the whole conceptual charge which hinged on the idea of the artist and the way he gave expression to it—or didn't—, although this doesn't seem to be the moment for ideological and cultural criticism or for a historical review—much-needed after almost twenty years of activities linked more or less closely to *conceptual art*. At the same time, the late eighties have once again witnessed the use of the *conceptual* label, applied in a way which is inevitably paradoxical, for certain activities which originated in the field of painting, in what seems to be a more than praiseworthy attempt to escape from the paradigms and formulae imposed by the Central European neo-Expressionist avalanche. Al-

though speaking of "conceptual painting" is in fact a contradiction in terms, it at least adds a new chapter and provides more information for the whole process of change we will have to face up to in the field of artistic production in the nineties.

But what will be of the essence of the debate, what will be, especially, of the link between the artist and society, his surroundings and his context, if the relationship between the media is to be maintained, if contemporaneity is not to become a synonym for conjuncture, but also if atemporality is to remain for ever an acronym of achronicity? What will be of the artist's career, seen not only as poetic but also as political? What will be, in short, of "the two tongues given the cat"?

The usual approach to Jordi Benito's work takes the form of inevitably oblique, tangential and very fragmentary reviews. In a way, this characteristic *actually* defines his own work: the complex esthetics of the fragment and the episode, not approaching the subject matter too directly, that is to say, taking refuge in side issues rather than using the front door, as though conceding less importance to the content than to the realization, focussing on the work's *presentational* qualities rather than on its function as a discourse with a certain narrative element, valuing the object more than the concept and assimilating object and act. Paradoxically, especially as regards this aspect of the presentation, of his work, Jordi Benito had already foreseen all the present trends which have made this idea central to his work.

However, the difference lies in the indication of what motor is not only behind the ideas, but also the ideal means of carrying them out, bearing in mind that an apparent contradiction seems to arise as a result of some of his most impressive and complex work: his spectacular *mise-en-scènes*, the use of a wide range of different elements—musical, theatrical, literary, historical, personal, emotional, cathartic, sensorial, erotic, dramatic, poetic and political—and the more or less obvious allusions to episodes from culture, put through the sieve of life and seduction themselves, contrast with their intentionally fragmentary and residual nature, as if trying to achieve a particular *Gesamtkunstwerk* by dismembering its components, transcending the limitations of his own presentation so as

to undermine its clarity, exhibiting the signs of its referentiality so as to arrive at an interpretation, and knowing intuitively that the aspects of contemporaneity as a current chronological event, though one without figurative time, lead the apparent rhetoric to change under the weight of its own excess, like an attempt to cure through overinformation, or through overabundance. As the artist himself has pointed out, there's an Arab proverb which says, "blood has flowed: the danger, then, is over", which illustrates his almost homeopathic will to fight: overinformation against information, danger against danger, pain as a cure for pain.

Both Jordi Benito's extensive overall production and the various episodes he has been through over more than fifteen years provide a clear explanation of the idea and the theory of the fragment, a fragment which is linked to the preceding stage and which foresees the future, with all the implications that this involves for the temporal factor—an idea akin to the abolition of time itself—and a chain of fragments which, put together in more or less explicit chains, form a global sequence in which it is difficult to identify the beginning and of which nobody can imagine the final stage, thereby forming a segment which is isolated in time and which lacks excessive narrative continuity.

In a somewhat hasty and highly lineal account, the sum of the many fragments provides us with the opportunity to take an overall look at his career, a journey which hinges around a series of consecutive turning points, starting some time around 1969-1970 and so far leading up to this very moment: his paintings and objects (1969-1971), the actions (1971-75), the happenings (1976-78), the performances, [grouped in three main series, combining what we can properly call performances with a few installations which, as testimonies, vestiges or else detritus, are directly related to some of them: *TRASA V=B.P.L.W.B.78.79.* (1978-79), *B.B.P.* (1980-81) and the long series of *ASSAIGS PER A L'ÒPERA EUROPA* (1982-84)] and, finally, the specific installations, in which, alongside the use of highly suggestive and symbolic materials and forms, the musical element acts as a thread which ties them all together, as well as the theatrical component, which is intensified by the insistence on totally artificial illumination, from none other than a stage spotlight.

This sort of correlative enumeration—which is the only way it should be read—shows up not only the continuity and the links that run through the artist's work, but also, as well as its highly sequential nature—mentioned above—, an interior process in the work, by which elements appear and disappear and new ones take their place, creating an evolutionary chain which fully reveals the activity of its own processes, although it should be mentioned that, beneath the formal or scenic evolution, a single idea lives on as a constant, though it shows itself in different ways. The first actions and happenings, at the beginning of the seventies, in which the use of the artist's body as a vehicle and as a significant substance brought him close to the concept of "body art"—in an indisputable identification between object and body—, eventually led up to a progressive complexity in both concept and execution, in which we find aspects borrowed from other spheres and in which the symbology of the materials and instruments used hint at what will later form the nucleus of his best-known performances: ritual, sacrifice, mystery, pain, fetishism and a sort of appeal to our collective unconscious so as to provoke the participation of the soul, beyond rebuke, showing that the artist's imagination, as Mapplethorpe has so often remarked, is really no coarser than anybody else's. The artist's ultimate objective was to take possession of life through an action, acting on the spectator beyond the level of fiction, precipitating all sorts of images and becoming, as Cirici notes, "the artist as the instrument of death".

While the first actions eventually led up to the performances—which were of a far more complex nature—, these, in an almost parallel process, led him to the installations, returning to practices which he had already developed earlier but which at the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties took on a more characteristic nature. The installations often ran parallel to the performances, feeding off the materials used in them: they were their vestiges, their remains, their detritus and their ruins, presented alongside other, graphic material, such as video films and collections of photographs: it should also be remembered that much of his work from this time appeared with such titles as "action-installation", in a reference to the later reconsideration of the material remains of the action.

What we could call the independent installations were first linked to some previous performance, as in the case of those based on significant episodes of the series *Barcelona Brutal Performance* (B.B.P.), in which *real* sacrifice became a metaphor for personal sacrifice, an idea which parallels Goethe's *suicide* of his characters, or reflects Camus's idea on the myth of Sisyphus, when he deduced three consequences of the absurd: rebellion, freedom and passion. "With conscience as his sole means, to turn what was an invitation to death into a rule for life", says Blanchot of the writer's idea. The two or three installations carried out with materials taken from work of this period already functioned fairly independently, but they still made use of the idea of the vestige of an event which has happened in another place, at an earlier time.

I should also mention here a rather unusual event which only came about on a very few occasions: the inclusion in some of these works of a series of paintings with large black crosses (the idea of sacrifice transmuted by the symbolism of the crucifixion: the form that brings to mind the Man who has been sacrificed, Rembrandt's slaughtered ox, religious imagery, the floor plan of certain churches, but also the cross that appears in Malevich and in Beuys, in Nitsch, Rainer or Tàpies) or with Romanesque church floor plans, or with lines and brushstrokes of great expressionist intensity and used quite simply as a sort of backdrop surrounding the space where the action takes place. Apart from the subsequent mystification of the setting, apart from its emblematic value, it would not be out of place to speak of these large canvasses as a link, though a strange and certainly an isolating one, with the neo-Expressionist movements that swept Europe at the beginning of the eighties, whose Central European and Germanic ingredient was known to all. In the case of Jordi Benito, these singular alliances could be a result of his particular fascination with all things Germanic, as shown in the actions of that moment: forests, Wagner, a certain poetry of leafy darkness and a clear need for expression which could become violent, awkward and terrible. Another example could be the large canvas the artist painted for the exhibition *Sis Pintures* (1982), totally devoid of any references to performances and one of the few examples of the artist's work that

can be considered as no more than a painting with absolutely no other spatial references.

But in the series of *Assaigs per a l'Òpera Europa*, installations begin to appear which, while linked to the general discourse of the whole, no longer stem from any specific performance, and therefore function and live independently. At that moment, a terminal phase of the process, a new ingredient was added to the analyses of his work. To conceive of the installation completely divorced from the action means accepting that only one link exists: the link with space, with the arrangement of the different elements considering their particular characteristics and those of the frame which has to take them, and taking for granted the significant charge which is carried by everything within the frame. There emerged a notion of the work which was clearly linked to the discourse of sculpture, which both connects with an abundance of examples of *arte povera* and occupies a place within the context of the sculptural phenomena which played such an important part in the art scene of the eighties, while keeping well away from problems of form and adopting the intention and the interpretation expressed by Bernard Marcadé when he spoke of "Histoires de sculpture": "to revolve around the *idea* of sculpture". And so we find ourselves before the reconsideration and the requalification mentioned at the beginning.

On earlier occasions, and especially with regard to some of the installations from the mid-eighties, such as *Murmur del bosc* (1984), I have spoken of Jordi Benito's work in terms of still life and landscape; no longer is it that "landscape after a battle" which can be recognized after the reorganization and re-presentation of the elements used, nor a sort of landscape of cruelty rooted in Artaud; its autonomy makes one think more of a mental landscape, a particular arrangement of ideas, "a way of thinking that gives off signals", as Blanchot would say, that joins in the reference to nature for its horizontal properties and in the resort to culture as a place where certain events take place which are presented more as a symptom of themselves than as a strictly physical arrangement, to which must be added the great quantity of metaphoric materials and the symbolic objects and elements present in the pieces, an ideological and cultural link with his poetry and with the conception of objects as carriers

of messages, all immersed in a particular logic of desire in which the subject emerges as the centre of a system understood as the place where the event is produced, a system which is dense but which awards its interpretative keys to the interactions and the need for the cicatrization of the artist's working world.

In a way, the temporal content of the work of Jordi Benito can be understood in different ways, according to what kind of work it is. In the case of the performances, a quite remarkable phenomenon takes place: in them can be found a particular notion of time, almost in tune with the three unities (action, time and space) of the classical theatre, as in a strange updating of the synchronization of the event itself; the superposition of the real time of the duration of the act on fictitious time gives rise to a curious "intuition of the instant", as Bachelard would say, an emphasis on the contemporaneity of this act and, by extension, of the performance in general: as Germano Celant pointed out recently, "it's an attempt to make the present coincide with himself, with his *nowness*". This initial idea of real time is complemented by imagined, metaphoric time, which is present in the installations; a time which, however, flaunts its lack of chronology and which takes refuge on the thresholds of myth, giving rise to an esthetic and emotive situation whose position in time is always a cause for a troubling and unexpected suspense.

If we can now start to look on Jordi Benito's work as a particular extension of the idea of sculpture—with the elimination of all references to actions, whether corporeal or mystic and sacred—it is in part thanks to the definition of the expansion of the field of sculpture, formulated by Rosalind Krauss ten years ago. At the same time, though, and while maintaining this hypothesis as valid, we must not forget the stages through which his work as a whole has passed, since everything anyone does not only provides information which helps in the understanding of present states, but also constitutes a clear penetration on the part of characteristics which have been picked up over the course of time. As a result of the situation of our art scene, many artists have seen their work relegated to second place by the increasing importance attached at a given moment to an exclusive devotion to pictorial work. Although, as I said above, we

still need a profound revision of the meaning of the conceptualist movement in Catalonia, of which Benito was one of the most active and, at the same time, intuitive members – a typical loner who was atypically out of touch –, who was connected with the famous *Grup de Treball*, it is nevertheless true that the hasty recoveries that have been taking place over the last two or three years have

contributed little to a clarification of the situation and a lot to the most absolute confusion. But what is important at the moment is to show that nothing can come out of nothing, and that fifteen years of unquestionable coherence and remarkable progress have led us inevitably to where we are now, without forced reconversions but also without a continuity of any significance.