

tos como algo parecido a practicar una contra-violencia simbólica en el público. Son como historias de vida, en las que adoptamos un guión –que no un rol– y lo vivimos durante un periodo de tiempo. Casi todos los proyectos modifican mi vida personal y tienen un impacto sobre la misma.» Sus operaciones artísticas eliminan la distancia simbólica al implicar y poner en el punto de mira, como parte del problema, tanto al espectador como a ella misma. La artista señala la buena moral como protección del *statu quo* –en otras palabras, ella apunta a desestabilizar las reglas establecidas. Su trabajo permanece éticamente complejo y sin resolver, pero eso es porque la realidad de los asuntos con los que trata son igualmente complejos y están también sin resolver. Güell nos recuerda que el arte aún puede suponer un horizonte para la re-politización de la vida, a través de la invocación del olvido y la no-existencia en la que muchos de nosotros nos encontramos hoy.

SHINING A SPOTLIGHT.

by Edi Muka

Núria Güell in practice and related projects

How would it feel should a woman approach you in the street and ask if you want to play hide-and-peek with her? Who, as a child, hasn't played that game, or who hasn't hid from someone either out of a sense of mischief, or out of fear or even to exact a measure of revenge towards parental reprehension. Yet, as we grow older, it feels awkward to be approached by a stranger with such a request. It's as though someone shines a spotlight on you, setting you on stage, and that's uncomfortable. At the same time it feels awkward to simply answer "no, thanks" to the offer. One feels obliged to say something more and try to be receptive to anything else that the person might suggest, as though one doesn't want to upset the innocent make-believe, all the while still feeling uncomfortable. And before long you find yourself engaged in conversation with that woman, sharing her life-story, the story of an *illegalized* immigrant, who day in day out has to play hide-and-peek for real, as she finds her way about the city...

Imagine the surprise that you, as a regular museum goer, would receive in Medellin, Colombia, when visiting the Botero room to stumble upon a guided tour led by a couple of very young girls. Initially, puzzled by their age and appearance you stop to hear with some curiosity what they're saying about the great master's paintings, renowned for depicting daily life on the streets and the society in which he lived. Slowly you're drawn into their account, following them through the works they have chosen to talk about. And again, before long a realization comes upon you: the girls are neither specialists in art history, nor are they Botero experts. What you are hearing

is their personal accounts, stories of two young, very young sex slaves, woven through the imagery of Botero's paintings and sculptures, laid bare in front of you. They are talking about one of the darkest aspects of Colombian reality –the sexual slavery of minors– and doing so by speaking from first-hand experience, and odd as it may sound, you can see that story unfold within Botero's paintings. They speak with passion and commitment; there's no feeling of shame for what they've gone through. They bravely denounce what everybody knows, but many refuse to see. What you're hearing is harsh, leaving you exposed to a difficult, yet simple choice: either leave the room and continue keeping your eyes and ears shut, or succumb to the experience by sharing fully in the pain and life stories unfolding right in front of you, although somehow they make you feel complicit...

This feeling of being under the spotlight pervades many of Núria Güell's projects. Her artistic practice is distinguished by an attempt to rethink the ethics of those large institutions that govern our society and organize our lives, suggesting alternative methodologies. Whether she employs an *illegalized* immigrant to play hide-and-peek with visitors at an art biennial, or Romani beggars in the streets of Stockholm to fundraise for Swedish culture, or marries a Cuban guy to provide him with Spanish citizenship, Güell is constantly taking aim at hegemonic power relationships and its related abuse, trying to subvert entrenched positions and destabilize set conventions.

At the core of those methods Güell puts into practice a direct, one-to-one encounter between subjects. It would seem that for Güell eliminating the distance between the

public and the “artwork” is crucial. She goes into minute detail to set the stage for these encounters, dismantling or subverting institutional mechanisms created to uphold the necessary distance for our gaze to function. Yet, it is exactly this unprotected space of the encounter and the assumed positions within it that is the most controversial aspect in her works. Güell projects often involve collaborations; she has cultural institutions hire people to perform or to act out agreed scripts. Sensitive issues regarding the role of institutions then arise, as well as the role and place of the artist and people-as-subjects within the framework of an art project. A heated debate and reaction ensues, encompassing everyone that comes across the work, be they politicians, institutions, curators, art critics, cultural personalities and even the general public. For Güell, this polemical division is not merely the intended result of her work; it is the place where she locates her work, aiming to provoke engagement by all actors concerned, including the artist herself.

Let’s take a closer look at the issues at hand in Güell’s artistic operations. Although often involving others and herself in her works, Güell’s projects are not what one would label as “participatory” or “relational”. Rather than being interested in certain topical issues and involving people in the “creative process”, Güell shows a keen concern and a direct engagement with the issues she’s working with. To help me speak about Güell’s role as an artist, I’d like to quote from Marina Garcés’ text, “Honesty with the Real”. When introducing the question of honesty, Garcés suggests that:

“Honesty with the real” is the standpoint from which

the theology of liberation inscribes its gaze on a world of both suffering and struggle in which the victims are the key to reading, and index of the truth of a reality that constructs its power of domination on their relegation to oblivion and non-existence. Dealing honestly with the real would be, then, invoking this oblivion in order to combat power. This does not mean speaking *of* victims, turning them into a theme, but dealing with the real in such a way that includes their position and their *outcry*. It is not a matter of adding the vision of victims to the image of the world but changing at root our way of looking at it and understanding it.”

When dealing honestly with the real, according to Garcés, there’s a twofold kind of violence –towards one self and towards the real. Towards oneself, because one needs to “let oneself be affected”, and towards the real, because “one has to enter on to the scene”. To be affected, Garcés remarks, is to “learn how to listen to the innumerable senses of the outcry of reality and to the impossible-to-codify richness of its voices”; and “to enter on to the scene” is to “expose oneself and be involved”.

It is from this perspective that I would like to analyze how Güell operates. Although she has a set of references of how to work on her projects, such as engaging institutions and questioning their respective roles, her work often involves collaboration with others. Her starting point is to listen and expose herself to the reality of the issues at hand, realities such as suffering and struggle, both of which deeply affect the artist. So, the process invariably goes through multiple and sharp dilemmas and a lot of questioning. More often than not after lengthy discussions

and dialogue, Güell invites people who themselves are subjected to the abuse of power to collaborate with her in addressing these issues. Regular working contracts are drafted and people are temporarily employed within the framework of the project. In theory, they can be employed to do anything, but in reality they are not. The collaborators are asked to perform specific tasks that in some way refer to, or temporarily expose or even suspend, the power dynamic under which they normally find themselves. And, this is what usually provokes the outrage towards her projects –the fact that people in exposed and vulnerable social positions– in other words, victims –partake in an art project. This has often been challenged as an ethically problematic proposition –even though in essence it’s a moral issue– that reinforces the status quo of the power relationships that it aims to challenge, namely, the (western) artist using “the others, the exposed, the victims” for her project. Since I have argued above that this is exactly the locus where Güell situates her work, I would like to focus on this debate and analyze it.

I would like to begin by reflecting on our understanding of some of the terms we resort to when talking about assumed positions within the art projects. It is important to focus on the notions of *people-as-subject* and *victim* –which constitute the process of the representation of *otherness*. In the debates accompanying Güell’s projects, these notions are often connected to the element of “exploitation” or “use” in the context of the artwork –an ethically (or morally) problematic stance. This claim presupposes two things: that those employed

within the framework of the art project are *subjects in an exposed social position* –in other words, *victims*–vulnerable to dominating power relationships; and, that they as such are being *used* –meaning the power structure is being reinforced.

The mere act of employing people to partake in the project cannot in itself be used to legitimize it. This is because, aside from the formal relationship established with them on a symbolical level, there is an element of *use*. Güell is aware of her position and of perpetuating the power relationships in the act of employing them. Yet, it is important to note that she is making use of the *position* of the exposed subjects, or in other words, *the position of people-as-victims*. Before engaging in the ethical implications of such an act, we should consider this *position* as a relational one, a discursively constructed position, and not something these people are born into. The fact that it is a relational position means that it has been discursively assigned to them. It is this particular construct –of someone who is already assigned the position of victim– that Güell makes use of. She doesn’t pretend “to give voice” to the “silenced”, or to invest these people with “agency”, or to permanently change their lives –despite the fact that in some cases life-changing events have taken place and a strong voice has clearly articulated issues. Güell’s art projects make *use* of the above-mentioned *position* of people-as-victims so as to expose it as a fake posture. Güell first needs to re-enact the power relationships in order to subvert them, or to put it in her words, “to create an analytical replica” of the set of relationships that stand at the root of the problem.

By collaborating with those very persons embodying people-as-victims, the project momentarily eliminates that distance between “us” and “them”, thereby opening up a space for an encounter with the individual. In the larger scheme of things, the power relationships are still present, because it is the artist who is commissioning them to do a job or perform a script. Such performances only become possible through a leap of faith, through trust and collaboration between both parties, and the act of employment serves as a guarantee of this new relationship. Only in this way can the minimal space needed for meeting with the person be created and maintained, while the distance needed for the mechanics of the gaze be briefly suspended. By engaging directly and specifically with each given context in which the projects are created, Güell’s operations avoid a generalizing or an essentialist approach of the aforementioned position of *people-as-victim*. Her projects do not always succeed; some times they fall apart and at other times the process itself has been abused. But as mentioned above, Güell’s intention is neither to create universal formulas of approach, nor to provide ready-made, feel-good solutions for deeply rooted social problems. This contextual difference and the non-resolute character of her projects reflects an honest approach to that “impossible to codify richness of voices of the real” that Garcés refers to.

From this point of view, I think it’s critical that we reconsider the ethical complexity of Güell’s projects. Rosi Braidotti’s text “Affirmation versus Vulnerability : On Contemporary Ethical Debates” might help us to interpret them fairly. When talking about identifying

the object of ethical inquiry, Braidotti writes that, “The proper object of ethical enquiry is not the subject’s moral intentionality, or rational consciousness, as much as the effects of truth and power that his/her actions are likely to have upon others in the world. (...) Ethics is therefore the discourse about forces, desires, and values that act as empowering modes of being, whereas morality is the established sets of rules.”

Güell doesn’t shy away from difficult ethical issues dealing with the “exposure” or “use” of vulnerable social positions. Her projects are developed on the condition that the artist “enters onto the scene”, and on a basis of trust and close collaboration with the person(s) involved. In her own words, “I’m not sure what the adequate term would be but I understand my projects as something akin to exercising a symbolic counter-violence on the public. They are as life stories. We adopt a script (not a role) and we live it for a period of time. Most of the projects have a strong impact on my personal life, they change it.” As such, her artistic operations eliminate the symbolic distance by “shining a spotlight” and by implicating both the visitor and herself as part of the problem. Good morality as protector of the status quo –in other words, she’s aiming to destabilize the established set of rules. Her work remains ethically complex and unresolved, but that’s because the reality of the issues she’s dealing with are equally complex and unresolved. It reminds us that art might still present a horizon for the re-politicization of life by invoking that oblivion and non-existence where many of us find ourselves today.