

Faith, Flesh, and Words

A retrospective was announced, but it is not a retrospective. It takes on the (more or less orthodox) outward appearance of a contemporary art project, but deliberately positions itself on the margins of this format. Although critical in nature, Núria Güell's (b. 1981) discourse is always tangential, because she limits herself to asking question (with no pretensions to teaching or providing answers) and to pointing out and problematising some of our many contradictions. Participating in the cultural world in order to subvert it (along with the institutions that culture whitewashes) seems to be what drives this artist from Vidreres: "I don't see artistic practice as a cultural practice. On the contrary, I see it as a socially and politically necessary practice in which the cultural world and the status quo are at stake." So let's play.

Naturally, the title of the exhibition at Fabra i Coats is not to be taken at face value: what does Güell mean by *All Order is Required Pure*? Order, obligation, and purity are three of the old dreams of humankind, which is to some extent nothing but the heterogenous sum of countless communities of believers. Güell says: "To form part of any community, you must have faith in something. Even the most progressive individuals must have faith in abstract entities, such as the idea of good or justice. Distinguishing between friend and foe would also be part of these shared mechanisms..." It seems we have a perfect storm: nobody is outside a system of inherited values that ultimately serves to ensure community ties endure. In this sense, religion is merely the clearest (or most visible) aspect of this phenomenon. In fact, when Güell decides to change her legal status as an artist to that of a member of a religious order, what she is actually doing (aside from providing an easy headline for the more predictable press outlets) is drawing attention to an imperfect symmetry: both cases (the artist and the member of a religious order) require large doses of trust in an imaginary entity (art or god) in order to keep moving in a certain direction. That's what faith is: a strong belief in the fidelity, veracity, and capacity of someone, in the truth or the effectiveness of something...

Another definition proposed by philosopher and theologian Patrick Vandermeersch can shed more light on this matter: "Believing, having faith, consists of a set of very complex psychological processes that have been preconfigured for a given context." The idea is counterintuitive: Vandermeersch is saying that believing is not optional. Hegel said something similar: "no matter how nobly and perfectly portrayed God the Father, Christ and Mary seem to be, it is no use; we no longer bend our knees before them." In short: brilliant or mediocre, banal or transcendent, pious or irreverent, revolutionary or courtly, festive or tragic, art always ends up accurately reflecting the society that produces it. Perhaps Socrates was the first to see this with absolute clarity: in an imagined impossible genealogy, his maieutic method (consisting in drawing out consciousness through difficult questions) would be distantly related to the strategy adopted by Güell. And like the Greek philosopher, Güell has to live with the unease stirred up by her work. Joan Maria Minguet explained it perfectly in an important text ("Ending the Consensus of Art. On the Catalan Donkey"): "There are some artists who believe that art must be understood as conflict, if it is not to become privilege. That if art is not understood as a question, it immediately turns into an innocuous answer." It

goes without saying that Núria Güell is possibly our most genuine representative of this small group of artists capable of revealing the emperor's foolishness, using only real but perfectly invisible clothes.

Be that as it may—and as Joan Maria Minguet also points out—legacies always contaminate. So then, what kind of retrospective can disprove this maxim? How can an artist negotiate the risks involved in talking about oneself? Again, Güell's strategy is Socratic: to shift the burden and responsibility of coming to terms with the most difficult questions to someone else, to the interlocutor that we all need in order to become complete beings (Aristotle's "heteros autos" or "alter idem"). In Güell's hands, the retrospective exhibition becomes a new form of expanded art that acknowledges the author's irrelevance compared to the message she seeks to convey. Perhaps this is why she is closer than it first appears to the nun and the numerous priests she spoke to: she is "only" a mediator, a medium who can be replaced by someone else if necessary, provided the essential elements of the message she seeks to transmit remain. Güell's guest artists (Levi Orta, Rosa Casado and Mike Brookes, Lía Vallejo, Democracia, and Habacuc) are therefore in the exhibition for at least two reasons: firstly, to draw attention to the precarious nature of the artist's identity, that is, to the artist's lack of substance (an artist is only an artist while he or she is working); and secondly, to free the works Güell has produced (which do not always fit in with the traditional idea of an artwork) from their producer. Intellectual property may be necessary, but it is still an illusion created by the market. That is why Derrida could say that language speaks through us, that it does not belong to us, that we are simply its temporary users: like art, we only notice its existence because it appears (or blossoms) occasionally thanks to the sensibilities and well-honed intelligence of artists like Güell.

Nonetheless, one of the risks or possible misunderstandings of Güell's exhibition (which is structured in three acts and an epilogue that speaks for itself) involves her relationship with the religious institution and with matters of faith. Güell apparently focuses on the Catholic tradition for two reasons, which have to do with proximity (the parish priest and the village church being what they are) and with evidence and exemplarity (its structure and articles of faith represent a paradigm that is not exclusive to it). Indeed, contrary to expectation, Güell says, "it is the priests and the church who come out of this best. When I asked them what they thought of my projects, their surprising response (except in the case of the priest from Vidreres, who did rebuke me) was gratefulness: 'thank you, Núria,' they said, 'because the church needs people like you in all areas, and contemporary art is no exception.' I feel closer to the YouTuber nun, for example, than to certain artists." And it is here that crux of Güell's discourse emerges with intensity: the truly dangerous enemy is political correctness. The political correctness of neocolonialism (in the guise of the idea of good), of phony multiculturalism, of justice and order upheld by the monopoly of force, of patriarchal legality (those dismal Spanish Supreme Court judges who look like the implacable prophets of the Old Testament), and of a whole lot more that we somehow blur and make more palatable by means of language and its infinite performative capacity.

As Pessoa said: “Civilization consists in giving an inappropriate name to something and then dreaming what results from that. And in fact the false name and the true dream do create a new reality. The object really does become the other, because we have made it so.” Ultimately, Núria Güell’s proposed journey is an attempt to cover the same ground, but in the opposite direction.”

Eudald Camps i Soler

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