

What Is Núria Güell Laughing At?

Núria Güell revisits her parasitic resistance in All Order is Required Pure, which you can see at Centre d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona · Fabra i Coats until October 10

Núria Güell lets out a laugh: she has ceased to be a freelance worker for tax purposes and is now a religious member of the Congregation of Saint Joseph. The difference in the monthly fee payable is a joke that makes one want to roll around hysterically for hours. At the start, the journalists who have gathered at Fabra i Coats contemporary art centre—many of whom are self-employed—do not know this yet. Güell is taking us on a guided tour, and we can only suspect that behind her seriously mischievous front she has one of her usual bombs ready to go off. Like obedient militant lambs, we follow her from room to room while we try to come up with the words we will use to explain what we see and help bring about the awakening of the masses. The climax comes with the last piece in the exhibition: hanging from the ceiling, we see an enlarged copy of a document issued by the SEPE (Spain's National System for Employment) certifying that Núria Güell is now a nun. Blown up to this scale, the terminology, the text boxes, and the Tax Agency numbering look like a somewhat disturbing child's painting. Güell smiles triumphantly and informs us that from now on she can claim unemployment and sickness benefits. You're right, Núria: lol.

All Order is Required Pure, which can be seen at Fabra i Coats Centre d'Art Contemporani until 10 November, is this caper and a few more besides. To begin with, the format itself: Güell was invited to present a retrospective of her work... and she has done so without displaying any of her past works. This does not mean that the show does not fulfil its commission to revisit what she has been doing over the years. Which is trolling the museum, and museifying instances of trolling. Two examples: in *Stateless by Choice* (2015-2016), Güell documented her unsuccessful attempt to renounce her Spanish citizenship, and in *Sherwood Syndrome* (2013), she organised an exhibition in which she explored the role of police in democracies through the lens of an MA thesis by David Piqué (the chief commissioner of the Mossos d'Esquadra) describing the methods and theories used by riot police to fight anti-establishment groups, which was eventually censured. Let's just say the tactics weren't designed to serve and protect.

Along with other high points of Güell's career, these two pieces are included in the retrospective without being literally present in it. In Act 1 of the show, ("In the Beginning Was the Word"), there are no actual works: simply a mural full of excerpts from the "mission statements" of the museums and public cultural agencies that Güell has worked with. Reading them shows up the repetition of discourses learnt by heart and the overuse of certain buzzwords. When we come to the second part of the exhibition ("Third-Person Retrospective"), we do see objects and images hanging on the wall: Güell has invited artists she admires to reinterpret five of her works, giving rise to five

new works as a result. My favourite is *Divine Matter* by Rosa Casado and Mike Brooks. Their reinterpretation of Güell's *A Godly Tale* (2018) involved obtaining a copy of a 17th century painting of Saint Agatha that appeared in Güell's original action and asking the painter Pere Llobera to make a copy using traditional techniques. The twist? Not only will Llobera be physically present at the exhibition, working in public (on Thursday afternoons), he will also be working with his back to a wall displaying photos and texts that illustrate the stories of human, animal, and plant exploitation behind the painting materials, from rabbit-skin glue to turpentine. Something like a cross between a lavish banquet and an animal-rights documentary. Lastly, the third act ("The Banality of Good") consists of some videos: in the footage we see Güell's portfolio and CV on the tables of a few priests and a YouTuber nun who the artist went to talk to in a quest to atone for her unequivocally sinful body of work. We can see and hear the conversations she filmed with a hidden camera on several screens scattered around the room.

As in the case of the texts by the museums, when we look over Güell's work we also find recurring themes and buzzwords. The one that crops up most often in the exhibition flyer is "power". Indeed, we could see Güell's career as an exercise in trying to discover what it means, through the methodology of causing mischief wherever she happens to be. Her findings are inevitably ambiguous: power creates asymmetries, but it also creates subjects. For as long as power influences human relations, we will have the sense that something is wrong. But it seems that humans can never be satisfied, we are desiring machines fuelled by power. Lacking a plan for the utopian reprogramming of the human condition, Güell turns her efforts to building a space from which to contemplate the most blatant tendencies, to find out whether artistic lucidity can become political lucidity. But don't expect to find the usual proclamations: Núria Güell's art is an example of what Anna Watkins has called "parasitical resistance", a resistance that does not strive for direct opposition but works within the unequal relations between the host-system—which "gives only as much as required to appear generous"—and the artist-parasite—which "takes only as much as they can get away with." Contrary to the bad reputation of the word "parasite", biology demonstrates that it is better to be a heteronomous parasite, and to be alive, than to be devoured prey. The artist-parasite cannot and does not aspire to overturn the order of things. As such, she does not beat us over the head with a Grand Narrative. The objective is to survive, to suck blood through insistent awkward questions, and to see what happens.

The alternative is moralistic proclamations. Going over the questions she has raised with bureaucracies, governments, and religions over the years, Güell seeks to harness the power of her retrospective against the puritanism that, she says, is disturbingly flooding back into all areas of society. As the exhibition clearly shows, this sanctimoniousness operates right through the spectrum: at the start of the tour, we saw it in the strategically ambiguous messaging of supposedly left-wing cultural institutions—a front of radical openness that breaks down when it is put to the test—and in their central role in the exploitation of the artistic passion they claim to defend. At the end of the show, we hear the same moralism from the mouths of priests and a

nun who, when shown Güell's work, see God's will written all over it. The sermons of the cultural industries and those of the Catholic church are made of the same absorbent rubber that responds to all contradictions with a "in reality, you and I are saying the same thing." It is the familiar scent of capitalism capitalizing on anti-capitalism. This is why the wound of the real can only be inflicted by the sharp edges of the certificate issued by the Spanish national employment system: the concrete economic gap that still remains when discourses no longer mean anything.

The museum laughs because it has managed to exhibit an anti-establishment artist hung like a trophy on its most institutional walls. The artist laughs because she escapes, knowing that no amount of empty talk in the cultural circus will be able to co-opt her critique without something being shaken up. As for us, we do not know whether we are host, prey, or parasite, but we laugh too, because the works cut deep very amusingly.

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