

## FRAGMENTS, RUINS, REFLECTIONS IN THE GLASS

RICARDO FORRIOLS

One can paint with whatever one wants, with sunflower seeds, with postage stamps, with postcards, with playing cards, with chandeliers, with scraps of oilcloth, with old style collar reinforcement, with painted paper, with newspapers. It is enough for me to see the work, the value of a work is judged by the amount of work put in by the author. Delicate contrasts, the parallel lines, a workman's craft, sometimes the object itself, sometimes an indication, with others an enumeration that individualises itself, less softness than simplicity.

GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

After trying different ways of approaching the work of Juan Carlos Nadal, thinking about what and how this test should be, I have wasted time without realising it, making notes here and there, organising them without coming to any clear conclusion. However, after a prolonged rest, in the best of cases, certain ideas remain; singular ideas such as that pointed out by Sigmar Polke when he said that it is necessary to "chastise art" through the dispersion of genres and styles.

In reality, the forthrightness of Polke is only a trigger that always leads me, through the words of Apollinaire<sup>1</sup>, to refer to collage, a word of French origin that alludes to gluing and, in a broader sense, to the whole range of materials of different nature and origin that are adhered to, mixed with and superimposed on a support in which painted and glued elements are combined, in an amalgam of paper, photographs, fabrics and brush-strokes that is complicated by the inclusion of woods and three-dimensional objects making an assemblage of painting.

Along this route, that of collage, objectuality becomes an affirmation of painting transformed into "piece" from the hybridisation of disciplines, materials, of painting with everyday objects that are re-contextualised. A displacement that consolidates itself throughout the 20th century and reaches radical extremes with the overflowing of the perimeter and the occupation of space, with the definitive rupture of renaissance representation: the Proun of El Lissitzky, considered to be "the transfer between painting and sculpture" or, in a similar sense, Kurt Schwitters and the full development of the idea of Merz in his own house in Hannover (the Merzbau), on the walls of which he deposited diverse materials until he shaped an extraordinary construction, "a great abstract grotto"<sup>2</sup>.

But before that, collage acquires its sense with the appearance of certain details -textures, typefaces, stencilled numbers- in the works of the cubist painters, a strategy to recover the representation of reality, short-cutting a process of analysis that had led them to the threshold of abstraction. It was about signs of reality that, around the summer of 1912, were no longer painted but were incorporated directly into the paintings, painted paper, printed oilcloths, newspapers cuttings, labels, etc. are stuck on, leading to the first *papiers collés* of Braque and Picasso<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, and the words of Apollinaire resound, in a work of art, there is room for everything, having assumed the parameters of an obligatory interdisciplinary that in large measure is due to the provocation of the historical avant-garde - especially Dada-ism and Surrealism-, to its political and social commitment aimed at formulating a revolutionary change<sup>4</sup>, even to a certain notion of the hazardous based on the introduction of automation to new procedures, more or less unconscious, that replaced the academic recipes for creating master works. Provocations that materialised themselves in an aesthetic of "vulgarity" that responds to the other avant-garde utopia where everyone is or can be an artist and, why not, to a certain implantation of do-it-yourself, where one can discover one's often capricious manual (un)skilfulness, the imperfections and improvisation, in home-made works that propose a rupture with the finished, with the very process itself.

What underlies this practice is also an accumulation of direct questions about the nature and purpose of art, camouflaged questions, metamorphosed by experimentation with artistic processes, with their limits. This limit that draws on its edges an apparent rupture with the history of art, hopefully emphasising the process of

liberalisation and autonomy of the plastic values that had begun in the previous century, through determined and radical confrontation -anarchistic- from this supposed abandon, impelled by the need to reach the limits of representation, of art itself, of its very idea<sup>5</sup>.

The *objet trouvé* then makes its appearance as an attempt to raise everyday things, discarded objects, to an aesthetic category that seeks conciliation between art and life, demythologising reality. The paradigm, continues to be found, after and, however much we may not like it, in Marcel Duchamp's ready made -his little things-, in which craftsmanship and the creative, unusual gesture fuse together, simplifying the artistic and voluntary denomination of an "already created" object which is treated minimally, intellectually.

Some time later, in the mid-fifties, it is Robert Rauschenberg who insists on this idea from the neodadaist operations of his combined paintings, a mixture of paint, mechanically reproduced images and objects. Rauschenberg said: "When I have used real objects, I have never tried to transcend their own sense or make them appear to be something else. I displace the usual way of looking at an object by means of a new context, but I don't try to transform it into something else. If the objects or images I use possess a symbolic charge, this must be different for each of us. I don't try to wake the conscience of my own art in my audience, but try to make it aware of its life"<sup>6</sup>.

To sum up: a reasonable amount of that said up to now gives us valid, perhaps marginal, arguments to contextualised and approach a branch -that of Juan Carlos Nadal, returning to painting- that appears with apparently hard, strongly structured works, in which the supporting iron merges with the photograph, with insistence on the look, on the motif of eyes that demand our attention; that then changes the rusted iron frameworks for geometrician compositions of painted and stuck-on remnants, once again woven together with photographic images of the body; and which matures, designed for landscape, architecture, in a heterogeneous proposal where black and white photographs, wood, glass, and any fragment flow together, all threaded together by subtle but effective brush-strokes, that re-frame and complete the images through gesture.

So, passing along its banks, the same doubts, it can be seen that the strategies wielded by Juan Carlos Nadal are none other than a certain "chastisement" of art -as Sigmar Polke said- from a restrained, profound dispersion, against the appearance of images that see themselves as overcome, already done; on the other hand, collage, the assembly of diverse materials and supports, as well as the mixing and corruption of languages in making up pictures-objects; even, faced with the potential presence of photography, the latest incorporations of "found objects" and the assemblies of three-dimensional pieces that would also have to be related to the hybridisation processes defined in the late seventies<sup>7</sup>.

Hoarding fabrics, photographs, papers and pigments, wood and odds-and-ends, of the traces and remains that at any one time end up making up part of a work, it seems that we have forgotten one of the arguments that were noted down at the beginning and which help to focus even more, if possible, on a second facet of the work of Juan Carlos Nadal: the of the poetic -those gargoyles in the night, the gothic architectures, their worn filigrees- through the political, with a certain social commitment that is materialised in the reflection of that other reality, that of the immigrants, the excluded, the victims of conflict of any type, extracted from the woven newspaper pages.

These images have been chosen for their crudity due to emotional ties, between the gaze and knowledge of reality, of what is happening<sup>8</sup>. The paradoxical emulsion of the final result -the incorporation of these photographs, enlarged, in the paintings -reveals anonymous, blurred characters which Nadal stains and outlines, perhaps rewriting their story, appropriating it to return it to our "world gone mad", impinging on a symbolic sense of one who participates, in turn, in the same images and objects: abandoned to their fate like the immigrant boats in the Straits of Gibraltar, recovered from any beach.

However, in the more recent works, the exercise of drawing takes pride of place in this attempt to recover the pictorial qualities, replacing photography with its insignificant but so essential materials. A drawing, a sensitive piece of graphic art that call our attention with the warmth of the stroke, the expressiveness and body language of the line, of the stain and rubbing-out that, when all is said and done, remembering the works of Arnulf Rainer, perhaps do not manage to impose themselves over the almost ghostlike presence of that which is photographic, still a sketch, as a documentary reference and starting point, fragmentary, subjective, over which scenes, frames and formats are tried out.

Photographic figures or drawn silhouettes, Nadal's characters appear to denounce the plane we occupy as

spectators -the position of the camera-, they call for and spy on us like those eyes cut off by the iron plates. And, perhaps the hardest gaze to withstand is that of the children who insult us from behind the barbed wire, in their mother's laps or alone, in the middle of the street pointing their wooden rifle at us. The children -meninos da rua-, their faces and expressions forced to look older, adult and hard, because of the violence, the conflict, because of so much abuse.

The child, once more, who "feels immortal; more exactly, he is outside of death and immortality immortal: he feels eternal. He feels eternal because he lives the fleeting moment to the full. He hears people talk about death, perhaps he sees death, he kills animals, but he does not understand death. If he talks about it is in the same way as he talks about so many other things that he does not understand either"<sup>9</sup>, the child is also present in the montages with a style that is povera and shanty-like<sup>10</sup> in which, to my way of thinking, Nadal's production becomes most attractive, furnishing space like the ruins of what never existed, or perhaps did.

Juan Carlos Nadal has been working intermittently over the last two years on these "pieces", symbols of the overflowing of painting, of his contaminated painting. They were a way of opening up the parameters of this work, before the appearance of the drawing -perhaps at the same time-, and we can see his materials and strategies strengthened: this way of chastising art, this use of collage, this premeditated objectuality.

Reinforced with wood and glass, with photographs, drawings and collages, halfway between painting and sculpture, between assemblage and installation, in these "pieces" we conscientiously find, the remains of a waste paper bin covered with childlike motifs, the dusty satchel for going to school or the desk, that desk, the setting for so many stories, support and "world" of a good part of our lives.

The repeated presence of the ladder around which everything is organised stands out in the scheme; of this compartmentalised, geometrical structure, that acts as the support on which to compose, against the wall, vertically or horizontally, the different elements and certain fragments of paint -ever more frequent-, all visible behind successive layers of glass held down with nails that press to the point at which they could break of superimposed glass, with its effects of transparency and fragility, with its protective nature -almost like a final coat of varnish, uneven-, that returns our image in a play of impossibles that once more incorporates us into the work.

In this sense and to finish, let's pause in front of the evidence of that desk standing on broken glass, trapped between sheets of glass, in the special prison of an impassable space -who knows if it is the one that we do not understand as children-; a space empty of images, presided over by the eye, that eye that is now only a dark, black outline that observes us, painted, all-seeing.

So let's stop then at that desk, the "Great mother", and, in this space into which we introduce ourselves even with our reflection, theatrically, like ghosts; and into that eye with its fragile, evocative and violent gaze. Undoubtedly, one of his most refined compositions, in which real meetings take place, where in its own way much of what has been said here about Juan Carlos Nadal flows together.

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- 1 Guillaume Apollinaire, *Meditaciones estéticas. Los pintores cubistas*, Visor. La Balsa de la Medusa, Madrid, 1994, pages 43-44.
  - 2 See Javier Maderuelo, *El espacio raptado*, Mondadori, Barcelona, 1990; and A.A.V.V., *Kurt Schwitters*, IVAM, Generalitat Valenciana, 1995.
  - 3 See Douglas Cooper, *La época cubista*, Alianza, Madrid, 1993; and Herta Wescher, *La historia del collage. Del cubismo a la actualidad*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 1980.
  - 4 *Collage*, but above all, photo montage, since the twenties, have had a significant component of social criticism from its special view of the environment. As Hans Richter wrote: "*The governing style and a conventional presentation are not right for the magazines, manifestos, book covers, posters and printed media. Something new was needed: everybody cut out photos to join them together to make aggressive collages; drawings (also cut out) were added to them, scraps of newspaper, old letters or anything that came into their hands were hung on... and all this was aimed at making a world gone mad swallow its own image*"; in *Historia del dadaísmo*, Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires, 1973, page 119.
  - 5 Esteban Pujals Gesalí offers us a vision of the works of *weekend avant-garde* artists, as he calls them, in which

"nails and not screws appear because it was nighttime and the ironmongers were closed, where the work registers in the cutting of a strip of wood, in the paleness of a board, that the author did not have the time or inclination to acquire a saw or apply a second coat to give it more depth." Prologue. *Decir contra los fantasmas*", in Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Papel marmolado (33 sonnets)*, Ediciones Libertarias, Madrid, 1992, pages 11-12.

- 6 Quoted by Fernando Huici in "Robert Rauschenberg, la ruptura", *El País*, 9 February 1985; article reproduced in *Libertad de exposición. Una historia del arte diferente*, Ediciones El País, Madrid, 2000, pages 183-187.
- 7 See Mau Monleón, *La experiencia de los límites. Híbridos entre escultura y fotografía en la década de los ochenta*, Diputación de Valencia, Institució Alfons el Magnànim, Valencia, 1999.
- 8 Even, taking into account this condition of photography that often returns reality to us a shameless fashion, pointing out that we are looking at happened, showing the evidence that forces us to recognise the *natural* fate that which has been photographed is/was/has been real and alive; as Roland Barthes rightly pointed out in *La cámara lúcida. Notas sobre la fotografía*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1992.
- 9 Miguel de Unamuno, "Recuerdos de niñez y mocedad", en *Recuerdos e intimidades*, Tebas, Madrid, 1975. Page 43.
- 10 The term is taken from the text by Juan Ugalde -"Del bloque a la chabola... (and back again)", published in the catalogue of his exhibition, of the same title, held in the Galería Soledad Lorenzo, Madrid, October-November 2000.