

The mole artist and antagonistic attitude towards entertainment

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[...] La crise actuelle n'est pas seulement celle de cette citoyenneté et de ses formes de représentation. C'est une crise de civilisation, une crise générale des conditions spatiales et temporelles dans lesquelles s'exerce la souveraineté, une crise où se conjuguent la dilatation infinie de l'espace (mondialisation et échappées intergalactiques) et l'hystérisation d'un temps accéléré par la ronde endiablée des marchandises." [...]

Daniel Bensaïd

Coming from the neighbourhoods surrounding the big city, small groups of citizens walk to the city centre. Some of them hold in their hands the usual banners and flags that show up in any political demonstration. However, they do not carry any message. There is nothing written down on the supposed pieces of fabric. We say "supposed" because it is not possible to notice any movement caused by the air on the non-messages. Indeed, Toni Giró—who was responsible for making the devices for the hypothetical protest march—not only emptied the portable banners of any legible content, but he also stressed the feeling of disappointment and loss of meaning of a very complex and long political tradition by literally petrifying the actual equipment used in the demand. One would therefore think that the artist attempts to express an uneasiness caused by the apathy and the disappointment from which the political framework suffers in this beginning of the new century. However, the symbolic setting of the political aspect—by means of that spotless white—in a zero degree of sorts, does not entail any option of renounce in relation to the political action. The warning or alarm call that grows from Toni Giró's happening carries implicitly a bond with every initiative that dispute the viability and the effectiveness of politics as it is understood in the Western orbit. That is, the partisan policy of the organizations that, set in a parliament, have a representative role. But, apart from this harsh vision of the established conventional political play, the artistic proposal is linked to a deeper issue—the refounding of the political aspect in order to connect it to the consecution of a new condition that accommodates citizens' autonomy, emancipation and power of decision. Beautiful yet old words, their meaning has been perverted by the historical experiences of the last century. A perversion that, in extreme cases, has become persecution and crime. The hardest of all is that, on the degeneration borderline, beautiful proclamations have been used as crutches to support ideologically inhuman actions heading for a "dark disaster", as cleverly pointed out by philosopher Alain Badiou.

Of course, the artistic action by itself does not provide a recipe to leave this blind alley, a result of a rhetoric parliamentarianism void of any trace of a political thinking different from today's state of affairs. It is, however, full of an economical management whose first goal is pleasing the corporative capital by combining profit for the owners with the search for popular

consensus. This is the recipe of what could be called, according to Alain Badiou, capital-parliamentarianism. Not much to do, then, with an advance conception of democracy that acknowledges an antagonistic vision of the political matter. All in all, a complicated situation that the artist shows with the proposal of a symbolic gesture that takes the form of a performance event and, a posteriori, is left exposed to a postperformance processing. It is, as suggested by the name—*Manidemo*—given to it by Giró, a test, a trial, whose purpose is to burst into the urban space with a real surprise effect. With no spectacular elements, the artist recreates the classical dramaturgy of mass political events that intend to occupy the streets. But we should ask ourselves whether, as of today, that occupation of the street alluded by the artist's work has an actual effect on our lives, or is just one more simulation, which would add to a whole collection of liturgical acts that sustain a society articulated around merchandise and the media—both conventional and Internet-based. This question is a thematic line of the event-act which, with high doses of irony and, paradoxically, from simulacrum, turns into an actual political act as it opens the discussion about the need to redefine political action. Citizens, tired and angry, but not confused, nor as unpoliticized as some would like us to think, keep a critical attitude that is sustained on the spotless standards. Said standards, like the blank page in front of a writer, adopt an inaugural role in a time when it would seem that nothing can be new any more, since any “party” cannot be but yesterday's. In effect, everything around us looks like a readjustment in a continuum of products set in a *déjà vu*, as in William Gibson's latest book, to provide an illustrative example. The political matter does not escape the monotheism of our merchandise either. On the contrary, it sails with no alternative course as just one more element of a mirror world inspired in past stages in order to build a wild hypercommercialization where no critical value can fit. In the past some aestheticopolitical immersions done on the fringes of the political and media mainstream, with the will to challenge the current order. These immersions can, then, adopt a vivifying role from the perspective of the future understanding and organization of the systems around which our existence turns.

It is true that the displays seen, for example, during the time when the workers' movement was the centre of public life in the West, are unrepeatable. Occupation of factories, victorious strikes, streets full of people walking defiantly. A splendid moment that lost its brightness as, during the last three decades, the objective economical situation changed. All in all, a progressive decadence of the Left—both the parliamentary Left and the more radical and heterodox one—that became worse, after 1989, with the confusion of that self-proclaimed real socialism when, in fact, it was often an actual aberration. In spite of such a negative dimension, we should not forget that the revolutionary myth of the brightness that came from

the East since 1917 often outshone the sad existence of shortage and disillusion that dominated the countries of the Eastern Bloc. With the death of myths and the crude reality of the events, discredit has been brought upon the latest currents of opinion that challenge the capital-centred predominant system. Marxism, and not just its vulgar and stalized version, has been the main victim. After it have come other theoretical corpora tied to the idea of change and revolution. It is, however, a curious decadence, as pointed out by the aforementioned Alain Badiou, if we consider that what has ended up happening was foreseen in the most catechism like work ever formulated from the Marxist field. In any case, the catechistic dimension is due to its use rather than to its more than brilliant content and writing. The *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in effect, contains the idea that, roughly speaking, economy and economical behaviour would end up occupying the most intimate corners of society. And that is really what has happened. The present order of things has turned economy into its *raison d'être* and from the authorities in the think tanks of neoliberal thought it has been expected to turn political matters into a mere technical issue that would depend on some chosen experts. On this line of thought, Chantal Mouffe has written some excellent paragraphs with the purpose of denouncing this impoverishment of the political culture.

When the political aspect is subject of a depoliticization maneuver—obviously an affected and selfish one—in order to be presented as a neutral and aseptic issue, any possibility of a discussion risen from different points of view is eliminated. As a consequence, the survival of heterogeneity within the public agora is affected. This concept inherited from classical Greece actually disappears, since democracy—according to the intelligent assertions by Chantal Mouffe—can only be conceived as truly vital and authentic as long as there is an acceptance of a battle between opposed projects in permanent negotiation, and in an uninterrupted controversy. If there is consensus, then there has already been some type of exclusion, since Jürgen Habermas' demanded rational conciliation involves the subjugation of some of the factions. In the path of domestication of politics, a part of the “democratic life” is assaulted.

If there is a consensus, that is because there has been some type of exclusion, since both the demanded rational conciliation of Jürgen Habermas, in part, always implies the submission of one of the sides of the sides in battle. In this path of domestication of what is political, a part of the “democratic life” is assaulted. Jacques Rancière characterized it in a perfect way when he ironically pointed out that the government that gives itself the title of a democratic performance is usually the government that also gives itself the merit of controlling the “democratic life”. Thus, control is deemed necessary from the conservative ranks that hold

power in order to avoid the hypothetical crisis in which their markedly selfish government could be sunk if the democratic profile of society increased. A strange paradox, if we look closely at the discourses with good intentions projected by neoliberal and socio-liberal thought systems. The operations is not neutral nor naive. It has consisted, as historian Geoff Eley has smartly pointed out, in the identification of democratic assets with the most limited forms of parliamentarianist liberalism, and the loss of prestige of the popular struggles that had achieved so many democratic conquests during the last two centuries. What is more, any doubt about the debatably democratic intentions of the hegemonic liberalism fades when we go back to the ground, or even lower, *dans les caves et les souterrains diaboliques du capital*—in the precious words of Daniel Bensaïd. In that extreme, what seemed paradoxical loses strength and the exclusivist behaviour of the elites becomes overwhelmingly clear. Their goal is to mask what everybody already knows or should know: the relationships on which our world-system stands are based on inequality and injustice. Otherwise, today's economical montage at a planetary scale would be unfeasible.

These general digressions are relevant in order to get closer to Toni Giró's work. A work that, with no doubt, challenges us to talk with the aforementioned lacks that surround us. Indeed, with *Manidemo*, he takes once again the issues tied to the almost three decades of liberal counterreforms and restorations that were already there in one of his former works, *Zona espera*, in 2003. The atrophy of the project of modernity made itself clear in a wonderful way in works like *Confort* and *La porta als nassos*, where he showed the depth of the unbalances and parasitic action that affect most of the population of a world ruled by a market order. The figure of the immigrant as a paradigm of exclusion could be found all over the display. In a way, he proposed to us to see our own lacks through the mirror of “the other”. Now it is directly us, citizens of the wrongly called First World, who become representative figures of that civilisation crisis that affects our streets and places—after all, a whole public sphere loses day by day its public nature—and that does not leave untouched a cultural imaginary harmed and stripped of its transgressor and revolutionary potential. In this sense, it would be right to claim that it portrays a political and cultural dispossession that is bound to an underuse of democracy and a corruption of words. A corruption that takes shape in the photographic work—that had previously been a video performance—*Kidnap messages*, and appears in the unmythologized and displaced presentation—with a very salient formalization that reminds of a simple craft work—of what he considers kidnapped messages. What is more, there is a process that gathers a will to vulgarize, which increases with the combination of political messages that are a part of what would be the modern imaginary of the revolutionary avant-gardes—“L'imagination au pouvoir” / “ne travaillez jamais”/“Action must not be

reaction but creation", etc—with others that could be self-created or spontaneously gathered. This fun work, which does not lack sense of humour, is a warning about the political sclerosis from which we suffer, kidnapped together with the messages by this hellish dance of merchandise. A negative conjuncture where dreams of progress and great historical promises fade in a circular and present-centred dance, where businessmen are the main dancers.

In front of this situation, the artist, in spite of the difficulties to articulate an antagonistic artistic discourse—similarities between art and publicity, or artists that are a part of the mechanism of capitalist production—tries his best to erect a critical work. That means working from dissidence in order to bring light to the dark corners and the lacks of a political order that praises itself for being the last stage of History. His is a discreet work without the pretentiousness of the visionary who thinks that his work can modify the course of affairs. However, he is not as disheartened as to fall in an unpoliticized intimist withdrawal that would bring him to the domain of entertainment. The presence of humour in his work does not imply that he dresses up as a “fun” artist. *Manidemo* and *Kidnap messages* place Toni Giró in an unclear place between dissident purpose expressed by some neoavant-gardes during the 80s, and the more modest attitude of relational aesthetics at the end of the following decade, which was more concerned to “build” sociability and to restore the social bond that had been lost in the media and communist stagnation. However, in spite of all the relational echoes, these works are not as unimportant as many of the works of the art defended by Nicolas Bourriaud, among others. Related to that, Dominique Baqué has noted with great sharpness the lacks of that end-of-the-century art. Toni Giró does not organize any unreal dinner or party, nor does he design any TV show supposedly subversive. Luckily, his interests are linked to an important social responsibility and historical depth. Under a certain invisibility, he acts like the patient and stubborn mole metaphorically described by Daniel Bensaïd. It diggs tunnels, avoids all sorts of obstacles in order to get to the surface. It is a work of moleology that would become also resistance as long as it sets its gaze towards a past with the purpose of giving the harsh present a different meaning. Rather than the redemption of an oppressed past, the question is to seinsert into the complexity of today practices and values with a great symbolic connotation from the perspective of struggle and emancipation. Unfortunately, this heritage is often encased in oblivion, a victim of today's nonstop changes—with a conservative nature. We would, then, be facing a contribution aimed at braking, with the purpose of stopping and having more reading elements on a map of the present that does not encourage us to be optimistic.

The painful path that globalization is today is only possible, according to Armand Matterlard, as long as it can dismantle the public rules and set up a juridic framework that

favours an expansion of merchandise. In this context, the production of an art of resistance is especially important. With no doubt, Alain Touraine is right when he points out that the end of a world should not be confused with the end of the world. But the inhabitants of the new world need navigation routes that can save them from the harmful effects of the victory of a chaotic individualism. Even though it is obvious that we cannot go back to the proletarian city—which was not a uniform paradise, as has been strictly analysed by British historian Chris Ealdham in a wonderful work about Barcelona—the melancholic exercise that Toni Giró proposes is not sterile. Maybe, in the white petrified banners, in the sarcastic bump caused by out-of-context sentences or in the peripheral marginality—a place outside the social scene as something conventional, the origin of what ethnographer James C. Scott describes as a hidden discourse, which contains a political dissident culture—of other works by the artist, like *República cadenera* and *Jardinets dionysiens*, it is still likely to find a memory of the remains of what Raymond Williams called “mutuality of the oppressed”. After all, in Toni Giró’s city—Barcelona, the old Fire Rose—there had always been a strong alternative tradition characterized by its organization in neighbourhoods modelled by dense social networks and mutual forms of solidarity. This coincidence of past referents attached to an emancipation heterodoxy inherent in modernity is subtly evoked in a strong antagonistic criticism that aims at a disappointing normality. Also, this order that perceives itself as unchanging and impassive has forgetfulness as its main ally, and the rejection of systems of thought that have a sociological and historical base. It would appear that we live in the kingdom of fiction and of philosophical and literaturizational forms where a sociological reasoning—described as a scientific and reductionist vulgarity, as Pierre Bourdieu would ironically say— would not have a place mainly because there is an effort to avoid a refutation of the established order, especially if it is risen with objective data that could become indisputable. That is, of what is experienced as a “naturalization of the present” that accepts both the mechanism of an incomplete political representation and the socio-economical structures based on inequality, hegemonic as of today. Taking this situation into account, we cannot but greet happily that, from the often misunderstood autonomous reserve of art, discourses and visual narratives are built which tune and complement with a conception of materialist load of the complex socio-cultural network.

As a final note to this brief incursion into Toni Giró’s latest artistic universe, just a few words that, we think, sum up his aesthetic proposal. A heterodox and pluridisciplinary creator, he moves between the ethnographical approach, the documentary simulation, the post-performance action and a freshness provided by a certain mischief, in order to show an unequivocal diagnosis of today’s ills. In short, a rebel poetico-political reformulation.

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