

## **CUAUHTÉMOC MEDINA**

### **La perversión de la Spanish Doll. PILAR ALBARRACÍN**

#### **1. A ripped omelette**

**Amidst the gleaming equipment of an ultramodern kitchen, Pilar Albarracín makes a 'Spanish-style tortilla'. The industrial character of the place is crucial: this isn't a nostalgic representation of the family home, an implicitly female territory, but the aseptic and controlled laboratory of a haute cuisine chef. Or, perhaps we should imagine ourselves on the ever-Utopian set of a television cookery programme, in which the presenter, ablaze with passion, affords herself the luxury of wearing a crimson dress. All this apparatus may seem a little excessive in order to make a humble omelette, but the fact is that the monstrous hygiene of this kitchen is necessary in order to magnify a desecration: the transformation of the omelette into a metaphorical act of cannibalism. The artist breaks the eggshells, leaving the yolk and white in a container, and dramatically pulls out a pair of scissors. With skill and energy, Pilar cuts out a number of strips of fabric from her dress, shreds of crimson material which she then beats together with the eggs. An act of mock cannibalism-which tangentially evokes Yoko Ono's legendary Cut piece (1964), in which the Fluxus artist delivered herself to an audience so that they would rip her dress in a symbolic rape-imbues an ordinary dish with allusions to death and brutality. What in Spain finally amounts to the most commonplace manufacture of the everyday, the reproduction of the simplicity of an omelette, explodes due to the silent intervention of a fetishistic gesture, where metonymically the artist is cooked (and consumed). A delicacy, which like all Albarracín's work, is seasoned with humour, criticism and rage.**

#### **2. The siege of stereotypes**

**It would certainly seem excessive to even suggest that a culture may succumb to a merely symbolic minuscule disorder: something as trivial as the alteration of a recipe. But this is the lack of moderation which Pilar Albarracín's strategic outbursts suggest to us, without affirming it completely. Part of Albarracín's power stems from the affectation of the symbols which she works from. She systematically invites us to operate from within the stereotype of 'the Spanish women', this fabrication which has its roots in the orientalism of Bizet's Carmen, and culminates in the so-called 'flamenco-Falangism': the (conveniently pasteurised and homogenised) projection**

which the Franco regime made of flamenco and Andalusian cultural traits as the culture for exporting a 'true Spanishness'.

If, at times, Albarracín's game seems to acquire the character of symbolic sorcery (we need only mention the witches' sabbath of her exotic dance in *La cabra* [The Goat]), it is because she takes on board the political thaumaturgy which every nationalism must effect in order to turn the referents of a dominated culture into the domesticated sign of cultural domination. This is an art which intervenes on the territory of representation by means of which States end up repressing social and ethical diversity through the instrumentation and commercialisation of a supposed 'anachronism'.

Although the case of Spain is especially dramatic, the fact that the Franco regime transformed the gypsy 'peculiarity' into a cliché of Spanishness is by no means original. What we have called folklore since the 19th century is nothing other than the scar of hypocritical nostalgia which leaves behind it the violence of the invention of 'national culture'. From the romantic writers to Spanish artists and modern anthropologists, one of the main functions of intellectuals is to draw up a table of 'cultural roots' which can then be consumed as a frozen repertoire of the popular: the spectacle of survival of peculiarity in the process of extinction, which serves the modern citizen in order to constantly underpin the fiction of a community of origins. However, it is precisely through this passionate ideological value that these very traits become the ideal territory in order to carry out subversive consumption. Just like the worship of 'the indigenous' in nations such as Mexico and Peru, the religion of flamenco and 'la manola' [the stereotypical image of a woman from Madrid\*] can also be the space for a variety of countercultural violations and challenges.

Artists such as Albarracín understand that stereotypes (like myths) cannot be exorcised by means of the mere allusion to their spurious origin. In one of her most incisive works, *viva España* [Long Live Spain](2004), Pilar flees through the streets of Madrid trying to shake off a group of musicians who are pursuing her with the *paso doble* *Que viva España*.

Indeed: the nation belongs to the species of the Furies. The worst thing about its nightmares is that it consists of the ghosts which get in our way despite our constant attempts to avoid being besieged by their daily questioning. Stereotypes are cultural forms whose prestige (like the museum itself) lies partly in the fact that they are not completely alive, but reside instead between a remote past and a nebulous present. Immune to the illusion of an illustrious escape (at the outset

they are the remnants of an inconclusive enlightenment) they are, nevertheless, defenceless in the face of perversion.

### **3. A descent to the level of representation**

One of the paradoxes of the nation state is that it is aggravated by danger: wars and imaginary enemies are part and parcel of it, as they give it licence to deploy all its aggressiveness. We all know that the everyday violence of the construction of a nation is not comparable with the savagery which accompanies its end. Racism and fascism are the most accurate expression of the fiction of every nation state. If nations had some substance, they wouldn't even have the need for all this violence. We shouldn't be surprised that, due to this potential for destruction, humour and eroticism appear as the most appropriate strategy to avoid the terrorism of nations.

Paradoxically, the eroticisation of repressed identities also usually occurs with the construction of 'the national'. The nation attributes to the odalisque, as it does to the Tehuana, the black woman and gypsy woman, all the dangers of subterranean desire. Deep down, this erotic mythology should come as no surprise to us: as a representation of everything the nation represses and sublimates into the construction process, the female other also becomes (through analogy) the container for the prohibitions of modern society. This fetish is a potential Pandora's box. We would only have to descend to its level in order to liberate metaphorically a sea of centrifugal forces.

In *Musical Dancing Spanish Dolls* the viewer always takes more than a minute to notice that, among the dancing marionettes contorting themselves in front of the camera, the artist, in the flesh, has been placed among them, lost in her own sensuality. Finally, she has moved on to inhabit the world of spells and fantasy of the stereotype, to which she has descended in miniaturised form, trapped in the spell of the cliché. The image eloquently suggests the meaning of the notion of 'intervention': this entering of the territory of signs, in order to breath a new power of seduction into the seemingly inert.

### **4. The invisibility of the parody**

One of the injustices of the late 20th century was the inability of the mainstream to distinguish between the art which sought to regain identities (and, especially, the attempts by minorities in metropolises to express themselves) from the cerebral/visceral/carnavalesque art which 'subverted' identity. Clinging onto the neomodern ideal of the postminimal object as an apparent code for the global/cosmopolitan (which scarcely concealed the desire to bring up to date the old code of the 'universal/abstract'), critics and institutions

were reluctant to bestow full contemporary status on the feast of parodies and autopsies of the ethnic-touristic-national which the 'conceptual' brought with it on the peripheries. Curiously enough, the intolerance towards these 'particularist' battles was able to occur at the same time as specific waves from the north, such as the so-called 'YBA' (Young British Art), occasionally offered us the spectacle of market formulas embedded in the most rampant visual nationalism. So it seems that this first global scene was marked by a dual invisibility: the lack of willingness of the centre to call into question its chauvinism, and the invisibility of the disproportionate tactic of practices which consciously sought to call into question all authoritarian structures of ethnicity.

It will fall to the historians of the future to ask under which conditions the precise causticity of a variety of critiques of the clichés of national, regional or ethnic cultures, could be misinterpreted as forms of 'expression' and 'affirmation'. Even when some of these forms of symbolic subversion had as their specific aim to foster the broadest transnational confusion. Nevertheless, we should put forward a hypothesis. Such a collective deceit may have had something to do with the difficulty we still have in seeing 'our' different states as more or less standard and interchangeable formations. Being 'Spanish' or 'Mexican' is such an extreme burden that it easily succumbs to the self-indulgence of seeing our bolero, tango or personal and incomparable song as unrivalled suffering. Insensitivity towards the operations which others carry out in the face of the imposed stereotypes of 'their' culture, including the supposition that these forms of critical humour will only be accessible to us through information about 'context' which is broad in scope, leave one with the suspicion that we are still under the influence of the worst trait of nationalism: the one which forces us to see 'our' many nation states as if they were truly unique.

##### **5. Humour and despair**

Of course, our acts and discourses against identity do not share in the ingenuous expectation of absolute liberation. Unlike the beliefs of cosmopolitanism, the space they open up is, at most, that of an interruption of identitary myths, and never of their abolition.

It could be said that, confronted by the culture which frames them, works by contemporary artists seek to generate a space of interference: the tremulous criticism which emerges from Pilar Albarracín's erotic, yet at the same time comic attempt to paint her nails with her hand resting on a loudspeaker. It is all about creating a space of imprecision: not about the invention of a new image, but the wearing away of the imaginary, under the influence of desire and imagination.

## **Notes**

**\* Explanatory notes by the translator.**