

Authorship and authority

I

One of the principles of art, and one that has developed like a hypertrophied muscle, has been to place authority before the authorship of a work. Works are valued by the square centimetre or metre, by the weight of their volumes, by the size of the support or by the production of the video or film they present. Even in those cases of actions or performances mounted in order to be consumed by time, in the belief that they would thereby avoid the physicality that was liable to have a value placed on it, the records that bear witness to their existence have been reproduced, creating copies, and hence mass-produced works, that have entered the art market via the back door, which has quickly been equated with the main entrance in terms of prestige and monetary value. Nothing in art can escape being valued. Nothing, therefore, can avoid valuation and, by pure logic, everything has been sold or is up for sale. However, an inherent element of these modes of valuation and value is authorship by such and such an artist. Once a particular artist or respect for his work has been widely accepted, expert opinion on his works is produced regardless of their individual quality and is based principally on size, volume and/or the final production costs. The debate on the output capacity of each artist in relation to the quality of his work is a recent dilemma and has been affected by the market itself and its derivations.

When the former Young British Artist Damien Hirst, also a former Saatchi boy, sidestepped paying his current gallerist's percentage by presenting his works himself at auction, he kindled what one might term a state of anxiety among his collectors. To ensure that the works they had acquired some time back did not suddenly drop in value, he forced them to maintain and improve the exorbitant price of his new works. Hirst presented his collectors with an easily resolved dilemma: to buy again in order to keep what they had already bought at a high price. We are all aware of the experiment, so we will not dwell on it at length. The real question is knowing which artists might be able to do the same and how often Damien Hirst can get away with this, since reprising this tactic would be like turning a spatially and timewise unrepeatable experience into a mere repertory piece.

It is not difficult to determine who is setting the trends, which groups of experts have acquired the power to do so and the target of their attention (and profits in some instances). The cultural sniper Guy Debord hit the mark when he said “All experts are owned by the media and the state: that is why they are recognised as experts. Every expert serves a master, since each of the old possibilities for independence has been reduced to virtually nothing by the conditions that structure present-day society. The most useful expert is, of course, the one that lies. Those who need an expert are, for different reasons, the forger and the ignorant.”

This is not, however much it might seem otherwise, an attempt to settle accounts but rather the confirmation of an impossibility, because even the art most sophisticated in the magic of political compromise has no hesitation in suppressing its most belligerent content when daddy market (or the capitalist heirs of Mao, which boils down to the same thing) suggests that they should eliminate compromising material. Search in Google for *committed* concepts such as ‘democracy’ or ‘political activism’, in Mandarin Chinese if possible, and see what they come up with on the subject. In short, if globalised society has unified anything, it is the ability of each and every one of us working in the world of culture, however large, small or minuscule our radius of operations, to be experts as well. Hence the success of this model and, of course, hence the drama of activating others, which are perhaps possible to theorise on yet impossible to put into practice. This model has, moreover, provided all the right conditions for numerous approaches that have gone unpunished (in view of their incompetence) and many instances of a lack of rigour; it provides a suitable climate for those who subscribe unwaveringly to the notion that ‘anything goes’ as a mark of quality in a mediatised visual culture, in which contemporary art, a cultural ambit in which subjectivity has been taken to fever pitch, has come out very badly.

It is difficult to work out whether the need to use words in art has had the effect of making its navel-gazing possible, though it seems self-evident that the ubiquity of wordsmithery among critics, exhibition curators, gallerists, valuers, collectors, artists, cultural managers and so forth has contributed to a large extent to making art ever more cryptic, distancing it from the public to such an extent that the gap can no longer be bridged. On occasions, contemporary art (and we include here the practice as well as the

theory that comes before or is derived from it) has taken on the guise of elitism; in other instances it has dressed itself up as a trend; and in the best, and rarest, cases it has appeared as a specific language that values the new that leads to ongoing advances and which is also founded on a logical continuity with what has gone before: an adaptation to the contemporary context of the doubts and enigmas that continue to matter. As the specific language that it is, there is a need for greater awareness within society of its real capabilities, but similarly it must shun populism as the principle and premise of its development.

Critics should shed light, in the sense of clarifying content in the ambit in which it is generated; they should contrast and compare, from the point of view of weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of what they are analysing; they should describe in order to make the allegorical abstraction of contemporary art—present even, or above all, in the most figurative photography—readable; they should interpret, that is to say, they should express their views and justify their own subjective and individual opinions. This is what critics ought to be doing, not repeating ad nauseam the simplistic task of putting into the artist's mouth words that he is thought to be incapable of saying or explaining. It is due to the improper use of this apparent superiority of the word over the image—paradoxically in a society mediatised by the dazzling brightness of images and with the credibility of words damaged beyond repair—that art criticism has died, at least as far as its credibility is concerned. Experts in resurrections have been summoned, but it seems that no-one as yet knows what to do or what to say, while some have not even bothered to turn up, including, it goes without saying, the media and their special supplements and specialist journals, at a time when the written press faces a serious crisis in mercantilist, rather than communicative, values and an unpredictable future.

II

The concept of the expert may be associated, depending on the circumstances, with the Latin notion of *auctoritas*, which did not literally mean 'authority' as we understand it today. Rather, it was used to define the status of those representatives who possessed a socially recognised knowledge, as opposed to those who had a socially accorded power to make decisions (*potestas*). In the present-day context, and in the particular realm of

culture, this distinction is remarkably similar to the debate between the practices of cultural policy and those of culture, this being understood as the series of creative practices carried out in the sphere of social, political and knowledge-based relationships that are a feature of contemporary societies. The distinction comes from their two main functions: on the one hand, the realisation of cultural works; and on the other, the cataloguing, management and dissemination of these works through institutional bodies. On occasions, and as an evolution in these perhaps excessively primitive models, certain bodies install their own internal experts: advisers who may take on both roles and who, in effect, lead to professional recognition of their work. It is these new—more subtle and superior—modes of management and decision-making that we must insist on in order to understand what can still be done in the sphere of contemporary cultures and what changes should be made in order to improve them. Should anyone still be in any doubt, I would like to point to another obvious requirement: contemporary culture in general, and art in particular, needs to arrive at a complete demarcation of the boundaries between itself and the political powers-that-be that manage its resources from time to time: it should be founded on the principle of respect for the paths travelled so far, for the knowledge acquired and produced, and for the independence shown. Mindful that it is dealing with a living, active organism that needs space in which to breathe freely, as well as constant vigilance against backsliding, which occurs fairly continually and is generally due to the uncertain climate surrounding much of culture.

In his project “Saber estar” (2003; “Knowing How to Be”), Joxerra Melguizo photographed himself wearing a balaclava in the main places of art. Faced with the *no-place* of globally mediated culture, equipped with the same artists, works and curators across the five continents, the identical outfit of the protagonist succeeded in raising the debate on the credibility of their functions. The artist stands forth as a person who assumes a role: questioning the whys and wherefores of these sacrosanct spaces of art by assuming an interchangeable personality, mutating physical identity into another that is symbolic. The hooded man remains mostly outside museums, whose façades and sweeping halls are easily recognisable, turning himself into a Wally whose whereabouts are known because he inhabits postcards aimed at the cultural tourist sector. A burgeoning sector which, rather than attempting to reflect critically on the content on display, usually

finds visiting the building and engaging in a desultory encounter with the works on show more than enough. This feeling of *déjà vu* is a common occurrence when you visit museums such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao, in which each new visit ends up producing a sensation very similar to the one before and you find yourself looking at the selfsame science-fiction spots and spaces designed by Frank Gehry, with the subtle difference that a *new* sculpture by Richard Serra has appeared. In any event, “Saber estar” raises other dilemmas concerning the attitude of the artist to his own work and, mainly, to the dissemination of his work. Is this *knowing how to be* the predisposition to a certain submissiveness to the web woven by the cultural industry? Are these places the *rooms of knowing*, just as libraries in their day were storehouses of knowledge which radical alterations in the concept of the archive have turned upside down and altered for ever? Will those artists who know how to be get to be in the right place, since in this life, as in everything else, there are skills of a very different stripe that serve for the same purposes? Plus, is it possible to acquire this *knowing how to be* without having the slightest inkling that you have left behind a *desire to be*?

Joxerra Melguizo’s series entitled “Auctoritas (landscape)” sets out this dichotomy between creation and management in a more or less explicit manner. Added to this is a constant in his artistic career: the questioning of the artistic medium, in other words, of the infrastructure that has traditionally served (us) as a way to represent reality as a translation or simplification of a complexity that cannot easily be contained or assimilated, now turned into a sign, symbol or allegory. These questions are posited from the standpoint of the credibility of standards on taste, beauty and education concerning what it is acceptable and necessary to know.

An important characteristic of this series is the range of the media and techniques used. Oriented towards a particular end, they confirm the artist as an expanded sculptor who employs different materials and artistic languages to analyse the same concept as if viewed from the different sides of a prism. In this series, we find photographs, video material, a mural—which is sculptural rather than pictorial—the recreation of an artist’s workbench and a series of sculptures that are the signatures of masters of painting made out of coloured neon. This trans-disciplinary use of techniques can, in an interpretive manner, be organised by theme. Always present is the landscape as a major concept to be

analysed and one that is returned to repeatedly. It is, in fact, an essential element of Joxerra Melguizo's artistic career. The inclusion of a word in English as the subtitle of the project marks a territory, widens a margin, rethinks a mode of presentation. The attempt to grasp the sublime, intrinsic in the idealisation of the landscape, is here exposed, registered and, at the same time, questioned by the bit of an arm and the hand holding the signature. The artist rethinks the object of his study through his representation of it, knowing that however he puts it into practice, it is distanced from reality as soon as it has become an object (or photograph, film or action). In his project *(des)medidas, entre volar y medir* (2000; disproportions, between flying and measuring), the artist measured the vast expanse of the landscape using wooden folding rules, as traditionally used by carpenters, and others of a smaller size made by himself, in a clear confrontation between nature and culture. The construction of the landscape, not just its transformation, is an intrinsic part of our gaze at the world and our perception of it. It is plausible to suppose, then, that in this playing field that is the constant modification of the medium, one can continue to throw out questions and try out possible answers.

In his as yet unfinished project *Bosque de firmas* (Forest of Signatures), a large area of woodland is marked out by means of yellow plastic tape. Printed on this tape is a group of artists' signatures that are repeated along its five-kilometre length, producing the effect of a cordoned-off area, like a crime scene closed off to the public by the police. The continuity of the tape creates a labyrinth of repetition in which there is no precise delimitation of a space but instead the obsessive connection between trees as the supports that ensure the names are visible. The landscape is a theme that served the assembled artists as material, but at the same time a paradox concerning the death of its function develops.

Corot, Friedrich, Courbet, Poussin, Cézanne and others, the great painters of the 18th and 19th centuries, attained a privileged position in the history of art with their bucolic gaze, the Romantic posture of the artist or man confronting the world, the epic of history, and the landscape and the mountain as a motif and obsession. In the case of these images, signed and thus attributed to these masters, what we see is a photographed landscape that hides or reveals, depending on the particular case, its relationship with the chosen painter. The signature of each of these painters is made and mounted on a card,

most of them held by a hand that appears in the shot: the hand of the contemporary artist rethinking the work of classical artists; but also the gaze of someone who knows that he is part of a continuum that began in the past and will continue unstoppably into the future. The contemporary action of this artist is intended to leave a trace, of course, but it also contains an aspiration to understand what happened (and the moment it happened) when everything turned in a particular direction without any possible hope of return.

The photographs of the landscapes are a substitute for the need to get out of the studio felt by some Impressionist and earlier artists. As if in a symmetrical reflection, Joxerra Melguizo has returned to the studio. Or rather, he simulates a table in a studio with a number of plaster reliefs, a television screen and various other items distributed across the table top and the adjoining wall. You have to capture the sensation as a whole, but it reveals itself as an obsession with a mountain or group of mountains, recreating the variants of Mont Sainte-Victoire by Paul Cézanne, a body of work that has been the subject of numerous studies and interpretations, one of which Peter Handke marked indelibly with his tetralogy *Slow Homecoming*, in which he included *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*. The landscape does not exist without the experience of *travelling* it. Hence, as occurs in singular works such as those of Hamish Fulton, the real motif is the *journey* over and above the *route* or the physical result on return. The action turning into a possible present a search designed, thought, imagined... as utopia: that of the ideal of nature embodied in the mountain in the manner of a symbolic entity charged with content and converted, in this case, into a totem of identity.

There is no dedication without obsession, and art knows plenty about obsessive behaviour. The black wall stencilled with the profile of Mont Sainte-Victoire or the video of the artist painting the painter's signature in the legendary spot in France are clear examples of this behaviour that is simultaneously persistent and ironic. Coming to this legendary place in order to champion the work of the artist through his signature, above the landscape itself, is comparable to the attitude of the tourist who sees the referent before him through the viewfinder of his photographic camera, without breathing the air of the place or considering a culture of memory in a different way, without a possible record. On the wall, the stencil of the mountain is joined by the signature of P. Cézanne done in white neon. Black and white as a tribute to a revolutionary of colour and pictorial

forms, an interesting and controversial knowing nod. The negative of a representation that exists as an emblem of collective memory, or the end of the celebrations concerning the now classic referents.

However, it is through Cézanne's luminous signature, in the manner of a circle, the ends of which meet up and close to perfection, that we come to the signatures of the seven magnificent men of art. Or, at least, seven greats whose works have attained the highest values in the capricious art market at the time this installation was made, arranged in descending order: Pollock, de Kooning, Klimt, Picasso, Vincent, Renoir and Rubens. The neon keeps the flies at bay but attracts the pests of speculation and money laundering; likewise, its attractive colours typical of advertising draw the attention of those who think they see in it the bright lights of modern cities and want to feel as if they belong there. The glow of carnal pleasure and the death of art now turned, here, into a catalogue of commercial brands. This work questions the authority of the signatures as the sole substitutes and representatives of the work of the artists they name, signatures equalised and formalised by the material. The collective unconscious of art, of those familiar with the respective oeuvres of the artists, does the rest. We see Pollock's dripping technique in his signature; the thousand faces and periods of Picasso in his; the madness of Van Gogh and its ravages in his innocent name... It is the cultural industry that rewrites the future of the names of art. The signatures are merely the keys that allow access, their passwords familiar to everyone.

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