

Review of the tradition

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It is possible that painting has established the avant-garde paradigm of contemporary art not only through its successive transformations from impressionism, but above all from a lucid self-criticism, which has taken it with some frequency throughout the s. XX at the very edge of its annihilation. From the moment the painting came to the conviction that, "a painting, before being a workhorse, a nude woman or any anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered in colors gathered in a certain order" - as I said Maurice Denis in 1890-, this conviction, which radically affirmed his own autonomy, was also the beginning of his self-destruction.

Just twenty-five years later, this self-destruction began to precipitate itself, both in the work of Marcel Duchamp, especially with the execution of his Great Glass (begun in 1915 and abandoned in 1923), and in the Black Square of Kasimir Malevich, also in 1915 "Everything we had loved was lost - wrote the criticism about it. We are in a desert! What we have before us is nothing more than a black square on a white background! " The signs that announced the death or self-dissolution of the painting became more evident thereafter, and one of them was the self-proclaimed "Duchamp's silence" and its apparent withdrawal from the art world.

However, it was necessary to wait until the end of the Second World War so that these signs began to have a real effect on contemporary art. When Ad Reinhardt published his "Twelve Rules for a New Academy" in 1957, his anti-expressionist manifesto that would lead to his black paintings of the sixties, other European painters such as Yves Klein or Piero Manzoni were already working on achromatic or monochromatic experiences, that would end up leading to painting towards nothingness or towards emptiness. It was Pierre Restany, talking about the work of the "new realists", who in 1960 decreed for the first time the "death of painting". Later developments in painting (what Clement Greenber called "postpictorial abstraction"), with the appearance of the Minimal and the Conceptual, would only confirm this tendency towards a painting of the disappearance or even the disappearance of painting.

However, later, the attempts to rehabilitate the painting went through an unprejudiced affirmation of the pleasure of painting or an obstinate rejection of the contributions of the avant-garde and the widespread condemnation of its commitments (both formalistic and political). It was the golden age of the return to the painting of the eighties that, as if nothing had happened, reaffirmed even the most traditional forms of figuration and the return to the old distribution channels, the museum and the gallery. It was the time of the Italian Transvanguardia, of Madrid Figuration or of the New German Savages, artistic movements that in general repudiated the conceptual tradition and abhorred Duchamp's legacy. Two other tendencies opened, however, alien to this reaction, trying to establish the lines of a possible painting. Some were the postpictorial experiences of Daniel Buren and others, the experimentations of "painting without painting"

Of the three painters chosen by Ana Serratos, we could say that all of them have tried to face the problem of survival and continuity of painting, trying to find their specific solutions. The first of them, Jonathan Lasker, with a procedure that we could call "systematic", with which he tries to articulate a conceptual possibility for painting, to the point that we could consider him as a species

Born in 1948 in New Jersey, Jonathan Lasker studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York and then moved to the Institute of Arts in Valencia (California). From his first exhibition at the Landmark Gallery in New York in 1981, he attracted considerable attention because of the atypical nature of his orientation, at a time when the most unprejudiced figuration returned with force. As a critic wrote at the time, "his paintings were seen by many as the work of a reactionary, a traditionalist or a misfit, ignorant of the problems of painting, who stubbornly swam against the current, which at that time irremediably towards the representation, the narrative and the pastiche ". However, that work was little by little reaching its recognition throughout the eighties and for that reason, at the beginning of the nineties, it began to have already large exhibitions in important museums and international art centers. Jonathan Lasker has exhibited at the ICA of the University of Pennsylvania, at the Witte de Witt in Rotterdam, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and in 2003 at the Reina Sofia in Madrid.

In an interview granted to Santi Olmo for the magazine *Lápiz*, the artist affirmed that "the atmosphere of hostility toward painting, dominant during his time at the California School of Art, had been the most reaffirming experience of his artistic purposes, enabling a very interesting place to start being a painter ".

Without a doubt, the manifest hostility toward a certain type of art was a good reason to assume the defense and renovation of said art. But it is also true that, in this defense and in this attempt to renew, Jonathan Lasker was not alone. On the contrary, the whole contemporary history of painting is in some way a repeated attempt

to defend it. In fact, that was what happened with Pop-Art in the sixties, as opposed to the nihilistic tendencies of Abstract Expressionism. It was also what happened again when Supports / Surfaces appeared in the mid-1970s. And of course it was also what the Italian Transvanguardia, as well as the New German Savages, as well as the New Madrid Figuration, tried in all the media in the eighties.

But it should also be noted that, except for the attempt of Supports / Surfaces, all the other rehabilitations of the painting were not only skilfully designed mercantile maneuvers, which once again legitimized the old art dissemination channels (the museum and the gallery), but that they also openly renounced all the political and emancipatory commitments acquired by avant-garde art, reaffirming simply the pleasure of painting and condemning without further conceptual art and other avant-garde practices, as if it were a kind of patchadas that had led to art to an impasse.

That is why Jonathan Lasker assumes on himself the problems of the tradition of painting and those of the conceptual avant-garde, trying to give them a new solution, which is not a mere step back to the illusionist figuration nor an abandonment of the conceptual demands. Lasker, however, is not a conceptual artist.

His work is not interested in the problem of the sensible representation of the idea. On the contrary, it focuses exclusively on the conditions of possibility of painting, after the exhaustion of the painting itself. That is why his work is only in this conceptual sense. Because it assumes as essential for painting basically three elements, to which it adheres in a scrupulous way.

These three elements, purely pictorial, to which he refers for more than twenty years, are: the background, the plot and the drawing. Thus articulated, his paintings in general seem simple geometric compositions, on which occasionally a chromatic distortion is introduced, always seeking strong contrasts of color, between complementary colors. In this way all his paintings always have the appearance of three superimposed surfaces or three levels of reading, with which surprisingly reappears all the pictorial illusionism of the old background / figure relationship, a certain visual movement and even a certain perspective reappears. Although the painting of Bernard Frize can present certain formal analogies with that of Jonathan Lasker, especially with regard to the reiteration and persistence of his schemes and patterns, nevertheless his procedure is radically different. In fact - despite its beautiful and fascinating finishes - Bernard Frize is more interested in creative processes than in plastic or aesthetic results.

For him, the creative process is so important, that he establishes a kind of compositional rules for his paintings, which the performers then have to follow, as if it were a kind of mechanical ballet of painting. Some paintings by Frize are painted so that they have to be executed by four hands, by four different participants (normally the painter and three other assistants), who follow determined compositional rules.

Sometimes, the stroke unfolds on the canvas not with four hands, but with four and sometimes up to seven brushes, each with a different color, caught in a bouquet and dragged by the canvas, until the pigment completely vanishes. Bernard Frize was born in 1949 in Saint-Mandé and lives and works between Paris and Berlin. In addition to the best European galleries, he has exhibited at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, at the Kunstverein St. Gallen, in Switzerland and at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Nîmes, in France.

In the third place, Katharina Grosse, the youngest of the three painters, was born in 1961 in Freiburg and lives and works between Düsseldorf and Berlin, the latter city where she is currently an art teacher at the Kunsthochschule in Weissensee. Although his work fits perfectly into this postpictorial tradition of painting - a tradition with which he could link it with his male colleagues, such as Bernard Frize, Jonathan Lasker, Juan Uslé and especially with the great master of the post painting, Daniel Buren-, however his painting is presented not only as an expansion of the painting to lands beyond the painting, but above all as a kind of angry protest against the immaculate purity of the museums, against the white box and the perfect container.

Container to which ultimately the paint slips. As his own work demonstrates forcefully. She stains, dirtifies, contaminates all of paint, producing an overwhelming explosion of color and pigments, of lands and surfaces thrown over the museum room. Surfaces that sometimes are canvases, sometimes they are large spheres, like large balloons hanging from the ceiling, saturated with pure paint. And yet, as often happens in museums, when the exhibition ends, everything is painted again. Acquiring in this way the museum its fascinating quality of immaculate container, oblivious to any type of content, both the one who affirms it and the one who denies it. For this reason, the painting of Katharina Grosse presents that aggressive, violent and disrespectful appearance with the traditional space. His paint stains, but stains with excess. It seizes floors, ceilings, walls and stairs and impregnates everything of its color, reminding us that, until very recently, the museum was the

sacred space of painting. Therefore, unlike the restrained and respectful style of his colleagues, the painting of Katharina Grosse also has the appearance of a desecration.

If we can say something that is common to these three artists is the fact that they present a persistence in the painting that tries to escape what we could call the linguistic paradigm. That is to say, theirs are not narrative paintings, in the sense of the old figurative painting, but neither are they an illustration of ideas. That is, they are not conceptual paintings either. Undoubtedly, they take into account the minimalist and conceptual tradition, accept their demands, but do not limit themselves to reiterating their results. That is why they suppose one more step, within that contemporary search for a possible painting.

Although contemporary sculpture has not suffered the repeated crises of painting, perhaps because it did not embody precisely the paradigm of the fetishized objectification of art and the privileged object of the consumption of the market and galleries, neither its paths and their contemporary problems are radically different. In fact, this parallel path, like the arts of a common destiny, is exemplified here by one of the best and most interesting contemporary sculptors, Erwin Wurm, in his jersey painting, entitled *Mental Green* (2007), which being as it is a sculpture, however, has all the appearance of a painting.

But, although the sculpture was not subject to a crisis of legitimation similar to that of painting, however, in some way the offensive of Conceptual Art also radically affected its waterline. Because sculpture was also forced to question its objectual past and radically rethink its conditions of possibility and its concept. In this sense, Erwin Wurm is possibly one of the most interesting and most innovative artists on the international scene of contemporary sculpture. Born in Austria in 1954, he trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, the city where he lives and works. He has exhibited at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, at the Kunstmuseum in St. Gallen, in Switzerland and at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Lyon.

Renouncing the purely decorative and purely decorative character of most of the old sculpture, Wurm has developed a work of interaction between objects and the human body, which allows them to articulate each other as temporary sculptures. Some of his pieces, called "Sculptures for a minute" consist, for example, of arranging one's own body (that of the spectator, that of the artist or that of a performer) in absurd or absurd positions, in relation to certain everyday objects, and remaining in said position for one minute, thus realizing a living sculpture. In his series of "Hotel rooms", the artist stacked the furniture of the different hotel rooms in which he stayed, creating small private museum installations, which he then photographed.

Many of Wurm's pieces invite the viewer to make a series of simple instructions by themselves, thus returning art to life and transgressing the usually impassable boundary between the work (to be contemplated) and the viewer (as passive subject of contemplation). In this way, his sculpture fits perfectly into what, without any doubt, we could call "postsculpture". And this is also something we could say about the German Stephan Balkenhol.

Born in Fritzlar (Germany) in 1957, Balkenhol studied at the School of Fine Arts in Hamburg, tutored by Ulrich Rückriem, with whom, from 1980, he worked as an assistant in his studio. Balkenhol has been a professor at the School of Art in Hamburg and in Frankfurt. In 1987 he participated in the Münster Sculpture Project, which made him internationally known. In 1992 he won the Chair of the Academy of Fine Arts of Karlsruhe, city in which he has his studio, as well as in the French city of Meisenthal.de "hero of the resistance" of painting. If Balkenhol is inserted in the tradition of post-culture, it is only because of the seriousness of the minimalist tradition and its strict reflection on what sculpture is.

Far from being his work a return to classical figuration, with which he only shares the figurative appearance of his dolls, insofar as these seem representations of characters of everyday life, the images of Balkenhol lack transcendence, lack history, they do not say anything or pretend anything, but, like the pictures of the minimalist tradition, they are simply there.

As Frank Stella said of his paintings: "Everything I want to say is represented there. The picture is the idea and the idea is the picture". In a similar sense, Balkenhol's sculptures are self-sufficient, they do not refer to anything outside of themselves. They are - as Joseph Kosuth wanted the works of art - tautological. But, being tautological and openly proclaiming what every work of art proclaims (that is, basically the affirmation that "I am a work of art"), Stephan Balkenhol's sculptures are nevertheless also referred to in a specific way to his own tradition of sculpture. For this reason, the first thing that these claim openly is precisely what contemporary sculpture had lost in its transition to Modernity.

That is to say: the pedestal. The Balkenhol sculptures are, first of all, works on a pedestal or even more, they are pedestals to which, as an excrescence, a figure has emerged, as branches or flowers could have sprung

from them. The sculptures of Balkenhol recall the work of the German expressionists of the turn of the century, the coarse and rough style of a Kirchner or an Erich Heckel. And it is true that its wood carvings may have something of that aesthetic, its brutalism and even its color. But it is also true that his sculptures are, as has been said, "German expressionism, but without expression", because in fact - and this is something that the artist himself has insisted on a lot - they do not want to say anything. They have no history.

Without being a conceptual artist either, Jaume Plensa has continued in some way a tradition that we could call conceptual, basically using the word as constructive material of many of his works. And so, just as Joseph Kosuth and Art and Language painted his paintings framing texts, making the text itself or the concept a work of art, in the same way Jaume Plensa constructs some of his sculptures with words. It makes bodies with words, rooms with words and curtains of words. Insisting with it in that philosophical truth of the linguistic construction of reality. But if his textual works are interesting enough for recent sculpture, however, where the artist has demonstrated his teaching, it has been in the transformation of the old concept of monumental sculpture that, since the sixties, had suffered a certain decline, as a consequence of his self-criticism. As Gregor Paulsson affirmed at the end of World War II: "Totalitarian society has always used monuments to extend its power over people; for that reason, democratic society is anti-monumental in nature." Plensa, who is one of the great contemporary Spanish sculptors, born in Barcelona in 1955 and has worked in very diverse genres of sculpture, creating for example sets for La fura dels Baus, has nevertheless achieved a great international projection with his work more important, the Crown Fountain (2004) for the Chicago Millennium Park, monumental work that comes to considerably transform the traditional concepts of monumental sculpture, by removing on the one hand its totalitarian character trying to open the idea of the monument to society and the democratic culture, and by introducing as an expressive resource, on the other hand, new techniques, such as video and the projection of images on a gigantic screen of LEDs.

Thus, his sculpture, actually a gigantic double fountain erected on a pond, becomes a new citizen consciousness, because in it the faces of more than a thousand inhabitants of Chicago, photographed by the artist, appear reproduced. Presenting on the source the image of a society that reflects and recognizes itself. Occasionally, from the mouth of these giant faces a great jet of water gushes forth, which makes them a sort of contemporary gargoyles, for a new democratic monumental aesthetic.