

Creating images/ Feigning objects*

Dialogues between the artistic projects of
Isidro Ferrer, Sean Mackaoui & Chema Madoz

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As a tribute to the opening of a new exhibition space, the present text traces the common thread that links together three contemporary artists, active in the Spanish context —Chema Madoz, Sean Mackaoui and Isidro Ferrer— tightly linked all of them to visual poetry, from photography, collage and objects. Close existing connections between images and texts, according to the double direction which, on the one hand, creatively relate texts with images (hypotyposis) are also studied and, on the other hand, descriptively linked images with texts (ekphrasis). Both strategies are two fundamental ways for the explanation and interdisciplinary interpretation from the current aesthetics, referring to the art of our time.

Key words: Ekphrasis, hypotyposis, artistic-aesthetic object, visual poetry, collage/assemblage, objet-trouvé

Dulce est desipere in loco. Horacio

1. An approach to a certain implausible every-day life

There is, in fact, what we could call an implausible every-day life, although such particular correlation of terms and the intersection of their semantic fields —“the current” & “the non-credible”—may seem to contain a surprising oxymoron. For, if every-day life is “what happens daily” and implausible is “what does not seem to be true”, could we possibly infer something that, in a repeated way and every day presents itself as something surprisingly incredible, after the action of a poetic approach that is incisive and intentional?

In this respect, the opportune advice that Horatius gave Virgil comes to mind, which I found appropriate to set as a motto for the present text—, recommending him to add a few grams of madness to prudence, when creating, along with some implausibility, even inventive extravagance. Certainly, departing from sensibility can be healthy for art research, if we understand sensibility strictly as normative and habit. Let us then, accept such Horatian recommendation when approaching, precisely, the creation of images and the fiction of objects, that await us. *Dulce est desipere in loco*¹.

This is, after all, a reconstruction of every-day life that may even seem utterly foreign to us, in as far as it demands — for its implausibility — our maximum attention in order to become the opportune focus of our interests and consequently, be adequately interpreted —always temptingly seductive and different—thanks to the interdisciplinary interventions of art.

Such implausible every-day life, directly linked in this case to art creation, to which we refer, may be selectively comprised by an entire gamut of possibilities. These possibilities may manifest themselves in a subtle way from (1) the action of taking what already exists as a complete novelty, foreign to us, to (2) the task which implies the pure or succinct action of transforming something in its given parts, thus changing it, through such intervention, into a number of unusual realities, or (3) the radical and intense task of building/inventing devices (images, objects, backgrounds, ideas...) that are different, in this way, highlighting unexpected areas of surprise and contributing valuable innovations.

Here is, therefore, a triple process that —let our insistence be some sort of summary— can reach from (a) the set comprising all things casual, random or simply found and selected/admitted as such in the new universe of the discourse (as an eloquent example let us look at the possible options of the ready-made, of objet-trouvé) up to (b) those objects and/or images that are minutely caused/designed; this is to say, differentiable from (a1) the intervened reality/astutely transgressed, although it may only be in some minimal detail, altering a relationship or strategically introducing/certain contrasts in juxtaposition with the parts or among the elements of such objects or images, and (b1) made-up and constructed reality, with the minute attention to detail it entails and the creative imagination it requires.

Such is an overall view of the program—ever a matter of boundaries — that we here layout, as a concise set of guidelines, previous to our reflections. Could we refer, by way of guidance, to that kind of no-man’s land through which we move, to “contextual poetry”, the “poetry of every-day events”, to “object-poems”, linked to visual poetry as a fully interdisciplinary dominion, as a true meeting space for the arts?

A name will have to be given to the aesthetic contents of such interdisciplinary dominion, open and fertile, in which we want to move.

Indeed, in this implausible every-day life it is pertinent to speak of all the mentioned levels and aspects. Our guest artists, all three hard to classify, —photographer Chema Madoz (Madrid, 1958), illustrator Sean Mackaoui (Lausana, 1969) and designer Isidro Ferrer (Madrid, 1963)—have chosen to participate in it, freely, creating images or feigning objects... Their solid, versatile will of intervention is set in a generic duality of options posed by the object and the image, from the very proposal for this exhibition project, devised jointly for the occasion.

Here they are, one travelling with the photographic image, another with collages, and the third dreaming objects from their design. Thus, diverse universes, yet extremely close, when not parallel; clearly specific but indubitably interacting.

The first Wittgenstein —the one who wrote *Tractatus*—said that it is language —words and silences— what is capable of creating worlds. Therefore, the limits of my language are also the limits to my world². Daring to measure his words for myself, I risk saying, that it is images, and objects when transformed in images through their design, what can advance entire worlds. Thence, *mutatis mutandis*, the limits of images are also what define the limits of our worlds.

What compels us to write this text is no every-day happening, given the critical circumstances that define us currently. As a matter of fact, the deed is no less than opening and launching a new art gallery (frankly, an unusual happening), and we support this initiative with our text, becoming all of us, in effect, fully committed parties, of a certain every-day life in crisis. We take our place next to our friends Reyes Martínez and Joan Montagut, whose reflection can be perceived in the background, all enterprising and enthusiasm. The paradigmatic effects of Horatius' advice could be applied to them too: putting, every now and then, next to the ever necessary prudence, a few grams of splendid madness. *Dulce est desipere in loco*.

For the opening, they asked, in a very persuasive, enthusiastic way, for our pondered, literary collaboration. We accepted, thinking what the joint adventure could mean and that it could contribute the necessary conditions to allow possible interactions in the context of an exhibition. This is to say, we have considered the clues to follow, on three sides, to activate possible dialogues among the territories marked by the three noted participating artists with their projects. A matter of open borders with visual poetry, equidistant, placed in the centre.

This is how every-day reality of our life can be —implausible every-day life — subtly prepared/discovered to deceive, to transform itself and cheat, to teach, to delight through unusual selections/interventions — on a number of images originating from diverse objects — to surprise, seduce or amuse (*aprehendere animum*, the classics suggested, underlining with full and clear intention this “new” function of art that is added to the “other” normal historical aims of *docere*,

delectare o movere). Surprising in a continuous way and achieving —with images and objects — more, perhaps, than the literary fiction strategy, narratively programmed for it can do.

In fact, with regards to such implausible every-day life, to which we refer once and again, we could say, cinematographically, that its figurative intensity is such that it is only fed by exceptional frames, or by a string of isolated strange objects. We are not offered, then, possible sequential narratives, nor group scenes in this trebled show. These would be excessively dense, in the case of sequences, while they can move with greater ease —their instant contributions—through counterpoints, nods and occurrences, juxtapositions or disfunctionalities, suspensions and sudden visual games, preferably isolated, enigmatic, precise in their studied operational insularities.

Moreover, those instants of intense poetry, that the three guest artists —Isidro Ferrer, Sean Mackaoui and Chema Madoz—systematically exercise in their repertoires, to the highest limit, cover an ample path, astutely woven with implicit texts, objects and intentional images, directly linked to every-day life, but also always suspiciously distanced from it, through the powers of art: therefore its radicalised implausibility.

Images and objects are on the one hand extremely familiar to us, at the same time they present themselves in an intensely alien way. All this happens in a simple, sudden instant, in/with the unexpected encounter, that both three —at the same time—seek to invoke with/in our gaze.

This is the genuine moment of recognition: that of the pertinent aesthetic experience. It is the “*fiat*” of the distinctive occurrence and the characterising finding. It is the “*punctum saltans*” that marks the parallelism or the suggested difference or proposal between its finding and the normal reality. Even, in some cases, they can give way to *boutade*, which —as it is well known— moves subtly between irony and comedy, with the utmost, exquisite elegance, seeming to rigorously respect the rules.

We are moving beyond the simple “seeing”, travelling with the artists in the dangerous, changing space of the “knowing how to look”, in an implausible every-day life, whose essential context is always the intense poetic quality of the visual.

2. Tic, tac, toe

Starting off with the images, I have to underline an important activity, which, ever from the exercises of rhetoric itself, the ancient Greeks and then the Romans knew how to co-ordinate directly with the tight interdependence that they could always detect in images and texts. I am referring to the powerful rhetoric figure called *hypotiposis*. This, a highly efficient strategy, that very often has produced an impact on me, seducing me and that, however, we have nearly managed to completely forget, in our slanted current culture³.

Etymologically —*hypo*, *tipos*—the rhetoric device to which the classic figure refers, is linked to that which

* This text was elaborated for an exhibition, as a parallel acknowledgment of the effort that means opening an art gallery in the middle of a crisis. It was incorporated to the catalogue of the show that opened the new art gallery *SE7 Espai d'Art*, in Valencia, Spain. October 4th, 2012. Nit de l'Art (Culture Night). The text also gave the exhibition its title. Now it is revised, with notes and bibliography, thanks to the efforts of the people behind *EME, Revista de investigació en il·lustració i disseny (EME, Experimental Illustration and Design Journal)* Faculty of Fine Arts. Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain. A round table on the exhibition took place in the Auditorium of the Faculty of Fine Arts of Valencia, on October 5th, 2012; it was attended by the artists, lecturers and students collaborated in it, co-ordinated by Vice Dean Prof. Ricardo Forriols.

01

HORACIO, *Odae*, 4, 12, 26.

2

LUDWIG, WITTGENSTEIN (1889-1951). *Tractatus logicus philosophicus* (1922). Alianza-Madrid, 1989, Alianza Editorial. Bilingual edition (German-Spanish) prepared by Jacobo Muñoz and Isidoro Reguera.

03

Cfr. DE LA CALLE, R: *A propósito de la Crítica de Arte. Teoría y Práctica. Cultura y Política*, Series *Creativitat & Recerca* nr. 3, Valencia, Universitat de València, 2012. Chapter “*La Crítica de Arte como paideia. Más allá de la imagen. Más acá del texto*”.

is “under the trace”, meaning that which is hidden and stays behind “the represented”, below the origin of what became the image. Therefore, the matter of the image would be rightly brought to question/find out *what is under the image that is presented? What game are we playing under the skin of the constructed object that is offered to us?* Knowing that “under” the image (hypo/tipos) would also mean asking yourself “where did it come from, where does the image come from? What is in fact, beneath it...?”

Basically, the enlightening, emerging answer is to expose in a concise way that, behind certain images and/or certain objects, there are always powerful, suggestive specific types of texts. Because it is actually the initiation texts (which orient images and pre-announce objects) the ones that, luckily, can formulate functions, expose intentions and determine goals. This is, strictly speaking, the founding keystone of *hypotiposis*, which here and now we shall talk about, weaving it with our present considerations, on the exhibited work of our three *visual poets, ad hoc* guests.

Strictly speaking, the rhetoric strategy of *hypotiposis* would mean that recurring to a set of texts that are *vivacious*, boasting imagination and displaying their flagrant pregnancy with regards to what they are describing and/or narrating, make it possible for the reader/listener that, when facing such words/texts, they would find their minds filled with images, directly linked to the expressive strength of the contents carried by such texts. This is to say, that if when reading some texts their intrinsic images take me completely, perhaps I could suspect that if I indulge in the contemplation of certain images and certain objects, creatively formed, the foundation texts that may have intervened, *mutatis mutandis*, in their respective processes of creative generation, could be incorporated to their hermeneutic game.

In fact, “that which is beneath the images” (hypo-tipos) is what potentially vivifies them, gives them virtual strength and dynamism, prior to their extrinsic existence. By then they only still exist as figured images, they are only operative energy, objects/images only existing in the active mind of their creator, that kneads, studies and prepares them. They are strictly “mental/dreamt images”, as we would now say.

We are thus dealing with the *images* potentially incorporated to the texts themselves, comprising their dense existential texture. That is what is underlying (“what is beneath” the graphic images and/or the invented objects): this is to say, the *effective presence* of the texts/ideas, even if they are only there originally as mere cause of other iconic or object realities.

This is why I would like to differentiate methodologically now between (a) the effective presence of certain texts, integrated, forming part of the images themselves—this being an efficient composite strategy, also very frequent in our culture—and that, in parallel, may be so denominated (b) the *virtual presence* of certain texts (to which, precisely, the old rhetoric procedures of the Greeks, *hypotiposis*, referred, and

which we would like to incorporate in the explanation of our discourse). We would like to point at “a presence in parentheses”, as a game that certain texts, when it comes to understanding the origins and effects of a whole series of images and/or conformed, suggestive, enigmatic objects. Understanding such objects runs parallel to those fundamental specifications of secret traces of texts (“what is beneath”), that, at the end of the day, encourage and accompany the fruitful interpretation of such versatile images.

I would not like to miss the chance now to remember, one more time, that the Greeks used, surprisingly for us, one word and the same verb, to refer to the fact of “painting” as to the fact of “writing”.

Grafeîn was both the explanatory starting point for writing, and the action of representing painting/drawing. Is it not marvellous to discover this underground, persisting link between those two human activities? We could even dare to say that in the foundation of their creation, behind our three artists—Chema Madoz, Sean Mackaoui e Isidro Ferrer—that genuine *grafeîn* is still latent, with its roots sinking deep in multiform, classic territory, although now subject of new, current turns of the screw. *Photo-grafeîn*, writing with light, but also drawing, free-hand, with scissors, or designing ideas in 3-D, in balance...

Is it not what happens with the secret, suggestive development of all visual poetry? Remote elements are connected to constitute images filled with strength and mystery. Again, the fundamental question comes up: What is behind such images? Aren't certain texts/thoughts pulsating—virtually or effectively—under that high-impact charge of visual poetry? How will we reach creation/unveiling of those images/objects/designs loaded with poetic strength? What is the work previous to words, ideas, to the action of thought with regards to such chain of images/objects “poetized” visually from irony and humour?

Thence, in these games among images, design and objects, if we want to wander among the work of our three artists, all of them involved in these *implausible every-day lives*, loaded with inspiration, substrates of ideas and poetic potential, texts will never be totally absent, even if words are not graphically incorporated to the pieces themselves. In some cases (not always), words, incorporated as mere titles, demand their own rights. This is so, since deep down they are already intensely present, through resourcing—secret, though sometimes explicit, in other cases—to the mentioned *hypotiposis*. Not in vain, for the Greeks, what was “beneath the images”, often operating as their origin and their determining explanatory substrate, were texts (written and oral), the eternal words that make up the indispensable, transvisual and transtextual atmosphere of images and objects formed through the imagination.

This is why, before the pieces up on the gallery, upon my slow study, I have dared to look back, once more, to those historic steps of classic rhetoric, with which our forefathers tried to explain, in such masterly way, the intimate games that exist between images and texts, between reality and words. If the saying goes, a picture

may be worth a thousand words, we must not forget, either, ever, that behind a word/an idea, a thousand images can be formed/stitched together in an endless cluster of associations. *Grafeîn*. Such was, after all, the foundational game in which old *hypotiposis* believed. We wouldn't want to relinquish it, either, under the circumstances.

Tic, tac, toe: a game around creativity as re-reading, as a tribute or reusing, as detour, combination and contrasting. In favour, of course, of an implausible every-day life.

We have started from the basic questions, willing to discover the functions of the texts, beyond/beneath the capacities of invented/designed/built images, and objects. This is to say, we have presented all the possible links between the texts that precede the images and/or objects. However, indubitably, there is one further question up in the air: the presence of possible links going from images to words. Of course, *it is not the same to trace the links between words and images the other way around*, although their consequences would not be less relevant.

In this context, we meet the Greeks again. As ever, their long shadow projects itself over our unforgettable cultural roots... Also in their extensive influence we find another strategy, in the margins of their effervescent rhetoric. We are talking about *ekphrasis*. One more time here what etymology suggests will be decisive: *phraso* is a verb that means the direct action of "putting a stopper or plug to", "containing an open hole in a wall", for instance. However, since it is directly linked to the preposition *ek*, it implies exactly the contrary meaning: "to open", "to unplug", "to allow something to come out, sprout, be free and communicate".

So —referring to a message, piece of work or artistic proposal, an image or an enigmatic object—*ekphrasis* would always imply a special description of all of them, through words. I have always thought that art needs words, and I repeat it here again, precisely, because art provokes conversation and it needs to be talked about.

This is, therefore, the same path, backwards: the one that takes us from the existing images to the texts talking about them, study or paraphrasing them. It is nothing less than an ensuing obvious metalinguistic game. The language of words speaks to us and describes, guides us, brings us closer and penetrates the language of images or of the designed objects. And, with this second viable option, we close a kind of hermeneutic circle, of combined, complex exchange between images and words.

If *hypotiposis* pulls us, in an explanation, from the (underlying) words to the explicit images, *ekphrasis* spurs us on the path that takes us from the presence of images to the appearance of the words able to describe them adequately, with deserved vivacity and strength. With it, —we insist—a circle is closed, linked in its first part, above all to the processes of formation of the works, and linked, through its second intervention, either to the processes of receptive aesthetic experience or to those of critical experience in itself.

Thus in this game —tic, tac, toe—with Chema Madoz, Sean Mackaoui and Isidro Ferrer it won't be the

same to place ourselves, through *hypotiposis*, in their creative shoes, to explain ourselves the keys underlying that the texts/ideas bring to the development of images and objects, than installing ourselves *through ekphrasis*, in the role developed by the critical, receptive outlook, that may accompany, directly, even, the aesthetic experience of the contemplation of the works that we are already finding.

The duality implied by the circle is evident. Either we — on the one hand—trace the origins of images, the hermeneutic keys of objects, from the underlying, previous words/texts/ideas, through which the artists themselves have already been searching/delving in their activities, and we ourselves dare to gaze through the keyhole of their researching actions towards their work, or —on the contrary—we start ourselves *a posteriori* to describe, clarify, interpret the images with words, as historically the old exercises of rhetoric would advise, essential to learn to read the images, to transform them into words, to penetrate creatively in that impossible, complete, but desirable translation of the images.

In this double vault, inviting us to approach the abyss of the enigmas and mysteries of images —from *hypotiposis* or *ekphrasis*—the aim would be to unveil, if we had the time and space for it, which could be the main hermeneutic categories regulating the effective approach to this kind of work, able to conform this implausible every-day life we are dealing with.

Well, off the top of our head, such aesthetic categories would be the following ones: (a) the mentioned "visual poetic characteristic", (b) the "reductive essentiality of the minimal and simplified", (c) the "humour oscillating towards irony", (d) the "mysterious, surprising and enigmatic", directly linked to the usual, through estrangement, (e) the systematic resort to *collage principle/assemblage*, as "synthesis, plural selection and novel and dissimilar articulation", (f) the "re-reading and recycling" between history and the surrounding reality and (g) the "transvisuality"/"transtextuality" between the images themselves and the underlying text. There is an entire, inexhaustible program for the possible analysis development of reflection, that could be orderly applied in the future.

In fact, every time is more plausible, in the dominion of art, to look for shared keys that would allow creativity to move freely, beyond the aesthetic/artistic established categories. However, it does not imply forgetting the historic roots in which our own "poetic" debts stock up and come together. That is why, talking about *implausible every-day life*, as we have been doing, in the tic, tac, toe game that we are committed to with Madoz, Mackaoui and Ferrer, neither do we forget how they have managed to base the action clues upon a rich historic horizon, after the long influence of dadaists, surrealists or plural conceptualists..., but also with more immediate masters like the coincidental case of the genial Joan Brossa, especially dealing with the dominion of visual poetry, the world of *collage* and/or *assemblage*.

The contemporary artist has available, for his creative activities, the entire history of the preceding art

manifestations, their conditions, influences and developments. All of it is or may be within their reach, like a wide-open book to re-readings. The same can be said of the surrounding reality and the every-day materials, in the face of which the artists have to reposition themselves artistically, to use them, every-day.

Precisely following the line of such constant decontextualisation and recontextualisation of elements of both every-day life and history, they have moved as easily as fish in water, Chema Madoz and his intense, suggestive and impacting photographs, loaded with unforgettable humour and beauty; Sean Mackaoui and his “rhyming images”, of poetic contextualisation, constructed with scissors on the repertoires of visual memory, shared between rationality and intuition; Isidro Ferrer with his playful 3-D universe, also between the object poetry and the imaginary dream, establishing a whole world of metaphors, on this occasion, around the magic, powerful and emblematic figure of the household, as the vital stronghold of the individual.

An implausible every-day life, shared in images and in objects found, manipulated, invented or built, in which, perhaps, their original functions are being questioned, their own nature re-defined, or some of their qualities, either prominent or anodyne, astutely twisted, with the aim of allowing ample control of the exercise of visual poetry, with its surprising syntaxes, its magic semantics and, if possible, conquering a new pragmatic dimension to consolidate a direct, pristine aesthetic communication.

Such have been their unusual powers and interdisciplinary strategies—to encourage the visual dialogue—that, hand in hand with the ever fruitful and risky personal creativity, they have managed to convey. This is why we ask ourselves: How many worlds exist—can we learn to see—in the secretly poetic context of an implausible every-day life? The answers are all up to them now. Surely they will all be ready to make their next move, as soon as possible... with new creative proposals.

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