THE UNSPEAKABLE

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"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world", Ludwig Wittgenstein declared in his celebrated *Tratactus* (1921)¹ on the philosophy of language. Whether we understand language as a device for coding and communicating information or as a tool to give form to our thoughts and to conform human experience, it provides an access to our surrounding world, structuring it, but it also marks the limits to this access, blocking it. What exists beyond the limits of the world imposed by language? Can they be crossed? Does the unspeakable exist?

We live with and through signs and codes that represent reality, overlooking non-verbal representations that, in many cases, we share with other organisms, both human and non-human. Gesture, tone of voice, melody and rhythm are actions that permeate the boundaries between mind and body, that foreground "living" reality instead of "understanding" it, that exist beyond intellectual language and its limits. Elusive and intrusive, sounds and raw non-verbal voices (crying, singing, laughing) penetrate our bodies and create alliances and other dynamics between organisms. Rhythm connects and synchronises us with other beings and elements. Gestures and prosody interrupt and alter the intention of our words, often unconsciously.

Likewise, language is a hegemonic tool that amplifies or silences certain voices, depending on the dominant power structures. It entails an *ethos*, a series of ideas, attitudes and values associated with a specific culture that marginalise other languages, other identities and other imaginaries. Among the discourses and practices related with

the decolonisation of territory, language is one thing that is imperative to undo. In the words of Walter D. Mignolo: "languages that legitimise a certain type of economy, a certain type of state, a certain type of knowledge, a certain type of sexual relations, a certain type of religion, etc., are the languages that constitute the rhetoric of modernity. These languages, or this rhetoric, are the focus of decoloniality."²

The unspeakable also encompasses more abstract concepts, ranging from the micro to the macro, whose experience is incommensurable for the individual and is therefore uncodifiable. It embraces the movements of bodies, which not only occupy a space, like the city, but also modulate it, despite existing psychological or physical blockages, like for instance fear or a simple fence. Although highly different from each other, the works of the eight artists selected for the exhibition Itinerarios XXIV (Irma Álvarez-Laviada, Elena Baio. Josu Bilbao, Felipe Dulzaides, Alex Reynolds, Pep Vidal, Rafa Munárriz and Leonor Serrano Rivas) cut across linguistic boundaries to give form to what is to be found beyond language: what is destructured, silent, inarticulate, uncodifiable and unspeakable.

I. GESTURE, RHYTHM, VOICE

"We can't tell whether her steps are carrying the music or whether the music is carrying her."

Alex Reynolds, Fragment of the script for *A Fox Comes In*, 2017

Unlike our eyes, our ears have no lids. Through sight, we can actively and consciously structure the world around us. We turn our head, we blink or we close our eyes in such a way that, as the essayist and critic Steven Connor maintains,³ we do not interrelate with the world passively, but rather we look at it with intention: we choose the objects that call our attention, we focus on our preferences, and we segment our field of vision within a hierarchy between foreground and background, figure and territory.

Sound, in one fell swoop, causes this this individual and deliberate construction to collapse. Unlike sight, sound is not directional or constant, but omnidirectional and elusive, and above all, intrusive. It penetrates our bodies, it creates affects, movement, chaos and violence, and even if our ears did have lids, it would still filter inside us, perhaps mitigated but still vibrating. In a culture obsessed with the capacity to control, choose and structure, it seems only natural that visual and written representations predominate over sonic ones.

In the film *A Fox Comes In*, ALEX REYNOLDS draws us into a space dominated by sound, in which the voice, rhythm and noise —both musical and domestic— generate a narrative and a series of relational dynamics between two subjects. If, as the US writer Maggie Nelson proposes, a family relationship —such as a nuptial— is an infinite conversation, an endless process of transformation

and becoming,⁴ then, what happens when this conversation takes place outside the linguistic? How can sound be used to invade a space, a body, and create a notion of relationship, identity and home?

In this exhibition, Reynolds presents the first scenes from her film. In them, a man and a woman meet in the middle of winter in a house that does not belong to either of them. The landscape is snow-covered, a blank page on which the characters negotiate the limits between when something happens and nothing happens, between synchrony and diachrony, between gesture and violence. Porousness to invasive sound affects their bodies as well as the house and the spectator, all of which are caught up in an ongoing soundtrack which is at once gestural and evolving. The woman, played by a professional actress, follows a previously written script, incarnating the narrative conventions of traditional drama: the search for conflict and subsequent resolution. The man, played by an artist and musician more influenced by John Cage's anticlimax events, improvises and boycotts this logic, avoiding conflict.

As Derrida argued, hospitality, hostility and hostage all share the same etymological root. In his essay "Of Hospitality", he defines a conditional and effective hospitality, in which the owner of a home (or territory) takes in a stranger as long as the latter defines himself when entering (who are you? where do you come from?) and accepts the established rules and language (language entails an ethos). But he also proposes an infinite and unconditional hospitality, without questions or demands, despite the danger that this complete openness to the other, this bonding with the unknown, can entail.

Eventually, in the following scenes of *A Fox Comes In*—a work still in progress— the steps taken by one person will set the rhythm of the breathing of the other while asleep, and a sudden blow by one

will make the other one fall. As such, the roles of host and intruder, reception and invasion, are alternated until the characters understand the power that their rhythm can have on the other, and that they are caught up in an inevitable process of the dissolution of their selves.

"It is with represented space that the drama becomes specific, since the living creature, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally *no longer knows where to place itself.*"

Roger Caillois, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia*, 1935⁶

The bond between background and figure is dissected in Roger Caillois's essay on mimicry. Studying the biological reactions of certain insects, the surrealist writer concludes that mimicry entails the dissolution of the organism as a distinctive entity within the space. In consequence, the insect succumbs to the charms of the surrounding environment and is ultimately assimilated by it, losing itself in the process. This quality of spatial dislocation provokes a condition of dislocation within the organism itself, which at the mercy of the environment, prepared for involuntary and inevitable mimicry. This also happens, for instance, with the blurring of the physical contours of figures at nightfall, making us permeable to darkness. According to the author, this condition can also be found in human beings with the label of "legendary psychastenia", characterised by a disturbance in the relationships between personality and space.

In the video-installation *The Dream Follows the Mouth (of the one who interprets it)* by LEONOR SERRANO RIVAS we come across two intertwined sculptural movements that, as they unfold, overlap

figure and background through dance and humming. Consisting of a projection in the foreground, and in the background, a behind-the scenes populated with objects, the juxtaposition of the two creates a plot from a series of small performative actions enacted by a group of women. The choreographer, or perhaps we should consider her a "puppeteer", slowly and methodically reconstructs a modular scenography. The gestures inevitably provoke a kind of mimetic behaviour in the three dancers that make up the chorus, the "puppets". Similarly to classical Greek theatre where the chorus responded to the main character, the dancers move about somewhat mechanically, as if sleepwalking, hit a wooden construction, rotate blown-glass sculptures and hum to themselves or play the melody of Siboney on the strings of a classical organ.

The dance's mechanicist aesthetic, which distances itself from traditional dance conception as a natural expression of passions, strikes a chord with the theories of the German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist. In his essay On the Marionette Theatre, 7 the author claimed that puppets move with more grace and freedom than humans because they can "never slip into affectation." According to von Kleist, affectation appears when the soul locates itself at any point other than the centre of gravity of the movement, which is the point that the puppeteer can control. As such, given that the puppeteer controls the centre of gravity, "the limbs are what they should be; dead, pure pendulums following the simple law of gravity, an outstanding quality that we look for in vain in most dancers."

The characters in the video *The Dream Follows the Mouth*, whose title is borrowed from another essay by Caillois on the dream state (*The Dream Adventure*), become more plastic, and like insects, involuntarily blend in with the ground and become objects. Their actions are interrupted by moments

of darkness: at a certain point in time, the video pauses —the screen turns black, like the night that blurs and camouflages bodies— to give way to the objects and physical structures located in the background, the behind-the-scenes of this stage setting. The blown-glass objects and wooden structures correspond with those activated by the dancers in the video, and are projected like a shadow theatre on the paused screen. In this way, the audience enters the stage: ground/figure, actor/spectator; stage/choir are ultimately reversed. After the pause, the video continues; the melody of Sibonev feels like a fictitious script, uniting the actions of the characters, each lost in their own tasks, absorbed in their usual daydreams, merging with the space.

II. DECOLONISING LANGUAGE

"Our struggle is to re-appropriate our word, our spaces, to defend our Zapotec culture and the autonomy of our people. We DECLARE that we are a community radio project, that we exercise a constitutional right to freely express our original word, *diidxazä*, that we believe it is possible to regenerate our ancestral culture." Internal documents from Radio Totopo⁸

On 16 July 1799 the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt landed on the coast of New Andalusia, present-day Venezuela. In Western literature on this tireless explorer he has been attributed with countless discoveries, but his most enduring legacy —and one he shares with his soulmate Johann Wolfgang von Goethe- was to reason and promote a vision of the natural world as a vast chain of causes and effects in which "no fact can be treated in isolation," thus perceiving nature as a network in which everything is interconnected. Convinced that the only way of understanding the natural world was through the emotions and lived experience, Humboldt warned against the devastating influence of humans on climate change, and above all else, he criticised the greed of colonial powers, relating colonialism with the exhaustion of the environment and indigenous societies.

Three centuries later, his words —amplified thanks to his privileged social and family circles— still echo today and are solidified in terms such as the Anthropocene, ungraspable for our collective imagination. Meanwhile, the European economies of exploitation in Latin America continue to exhaust the local land and communities. It is against this backdrop of constant struggle that the artist ELENA BAJO has explored the voices and strategies of

resistance employed by indigenous societies to decolonise not only the territory but also language and thought.

Urania's Mirror (The Owl of Minerva Only Flies at Dusk) focuses on an (intellectual and emotional) investigation of the impact of a (Spanish) wind power megaproject in the Istmo de Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, Mexico, the land of the Zapotec people. Submerging herself in their cosmology and customs in order to connect the roots of their ancestral knowledge with current-day strategies of resistance, the artist interviewed academics and activists; she took part in shaman ceremonies, she sowed noncontaminated native wheat with Nauatl families and visited the steel and cement giants which impose themselves —visually, sonically and chemically—on their once fertile landscape.

The end results capture, on one hand, the violence inflicted on all kinds of life that surround the wind turbines: owls and crows, the sacred birds of Zapotec cosmology, literally explode as a consequence of the noise emitted by the turbines; the cows "dance" on their pastureland in order to avoid electrical currents; subsistence agriculture is wiped out. On the other hand, they question the optimism that surrounds projects which call themselves "green": dirty energies like oil are used in the construction of wind farms, their engines require radioactive components, which sometimes leak into the land, and the steel blades are rendered obsolete in fifteen years, ending up in toxic cemeteries.

Using industrial materials recycled by local communities and found in street markets, the project includes oil drums with the feathers of imploded birds and paints made from reject textiles, randomly stained due to manufacturing errors, like an oil spill. Other works dialogue with the indigenous processes of resistance and the

decolonisation of knowledge and of language. Preserving the land also means being able to protect its rituals and beliefs —which can generate empowerment by affecting the collective consciousness— and seeking ways of amplifying their voices and taking back control over their own language by means of community radios, like the local station called Totopo. Fragments of conversations broadcast by this local station circulate on an electronic LED sign on the ground: "They will not silence voices that are as free as the wind!" The video combines scenes of imposing wind turbines and fertile landscapes with an animation of drones piloted by cosmic shamans. Their mission is to disperse clouds of hallucinogenic drugs to alter mental states and thus be able to imagine other possible futures outside the "spell" of capitalism.

"If ordinary language or meanings lie outside essence, what is the position of that language game which I have named *the language of the body*? For bodybuilding (a language of the body) rejects ordinary language and yet itself constitutes a language, a method for understanding and controlling the physical which in this case is also the self." *Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body*, Kathy Acker, 1992⁹

Entering a foreign country, trying to learn a new language, to the point of forgetting your own one and to find yourself, one day, without a language. This process of unlearning of verbal eloquence manifested for Kathy Acker in the gym, where the American writer began to wonder whether her own body was "a foreign country." Through bodybuilding, the repetition of exercises focused on an arm or a leg; of getting lost in the labyrinth of her own physique, the meaning became one with breathing and the body. This "language of the

body" which resists ordinary verbal language, places us face to face with the chaos of the material, of the body, of the plastic, which changes constantly and unpredictably.

The Basque word asàska —a term used by JOSU BILBAO to name the series of intuitive processes that have guided his recent artistic practice—could be defined as a kind of emotional release that refers directly to spatial notions. Understanding processes of sculpture as a series of relationships and openings or "a gymnastics of space in expansion," Bilbao gradually gives body to the form, by organising on the ground objects and remains of found objects that help him to realise "what the problem is made of." Pieces of rusted metal, bits of plastic, MDF boards, canvas, plants, clumps of earth, cement or sand, are all co-opted into the task of enquiring about the capacity of artistic forms to negate the current Western paradigm, which the artist sees as a loss, or cession, of space to convention, literalness and destruction.

Conscious of how we are subjected to an internalisation of the hegemonic through ordinary language and the normative artistic discourse, the artist undertakes an affective and intimate exploration of the exhibition space in dialogue with the material he introduces in it. In this way, the improvised sculptural whole outlines a process of unlearning, of decolonisation of the space and finally of oneself; giving a place to that which, up until then, did not exist while giving space to himself. Following on from his interest in the individual reality that makes each language current, Bilbao experiments through sculpture with the potential of the dying languages from oral traditions to contribute to the global panorama.

In his own words, "sculpture as access to the unbreakable bond between the worlds of thoughtspeech and material-energy." A problematic and unresolved bond that enables him to advance without forcing formalisations, inventing the methodology to suit what he is after. Trusting to haptic learning and to a rejection of sophistication and the commercial, the various sculptural elements create a sculpture that appears like a chaotic plastic whole, a dismembered body, an unspeakable language that embodies the experience of travelling to the unknown, to the pre-linguistic.

III. ARTICULATING INCOMMENSURABILITY

"First, it is necessary to study the facts, to multiply the number of observations, and then later to search for formulas that connect them so as thus to discern the particular laws governing a certain class of phenomena." Augustin-Louis Cauchy, 1789–1857

Six inflatable white PVC spheres are lying on the gallery floor, with diameters of 100, 120, 180, 200, 250 and 350 cm, respectively. They are arranged in a row, from the largest to the smallest, or vice versa, depending on how you look. The title is *El árbol y las vacas* [The Tree and The Cows], by PEP VIDAL. Due to the size of the spheres, the installation is appreciated as an incommensurable experience, a game without apparent rules that exceeds our everyday scale of measurement. The neutrality of its simple form (the sphere) and colour (white), coupled with the intriguing title, suggest a process of abstraction on behalf of the artist, a search for tools to generate knowledge and measure reality following other logics we cannot reach with language.

How many cows are needed to equate the volume of a given tree? Starting out from this question, the artist began a process of exploration based on his own experience and underpinned intellectually by his knowledge of physics and, more particularly, the possibility of measuring or controlling a system, understanding "system" as a space or situation in which something can happen: a conversation between two people beside a plant, or the spatial interaction between a number of cyclists seen through a window.

Searching for systems of measurement and interaction in which there is a relation of causality

between different elements, in an *ex situ* context, in other words, outside a sealed or controlled space, over the span of one month Vidal took daily measurements of the interactions between elements (humans and non-humans; organisms and environment) he could observe from a window in the Museum of Contemporary Art of Zagreb, where he was on a residency; he acquired a florist's stand —with everything from the potted plants to the bouquets— and installed it in his studio to observe the interactions between the plants and the environment, and to measure the changes taking place in them; and he collected all the olives from an olive tree and obtained from it exactly 752ml of oil.

Our experience of the world is limited by our biology and by language, or our ability to articulate what we perceive. And particularly so, when interacting with micro or macro information it seems that only from science and scientific language we can approach certain elements As the French mathematician Cauchy explained, only from established formulas that connect numerous observations can more general rules applicable to diverse phenomena be articulated. The problem is that these mathematical formulas, similarly to most scientific language, seem dehumanised and ungraspable from our lived experience.

The spheres in *El árbol y las vacas* propose —following constant daily observations by the artist— in his own words "a key to knowledge, a set of calibrated kitchen spoons, but for big, very big volumes." In this way, they humanise the incommensurable, offering a neutral tool to approach our surrounding world. Together with the installation, an ink-on-paper drawing called *Domingo en el parque a las 10h10* [Sunday in the park at 10:10] shows the spheres interacting with humans. Like in a science fiction scene, the gigantic spheres have become part of the ordinary

landscape, normalising and giving form to our interaction with the indeterminable.

"A kind of work we have called 'veiled', because in them a key part is inevitably concealed from the eye and can only be un-veiled through spoken or written speculation."

La cara oculta de la Luna, Galder Reguera, 2008¹⁰

Every work of art possesses dimensions hidden to the gaze of the beholder. This concealment can be the result of a conscious gesture on behalf of the artist, inherent to the very nature of the work. These works, which the writer Galder Reguera calls "veiled", still have a certain openness insofar as the artist can uncover these invisible layers through text or word, for instance a title or a label. However, the burying of information in an artwork can also take place through processes of restoration independently of the artist's initial intention: parts that are covered up or corrected over the course of history either by the artist or by restorers, which are in appearance irretrievably hidden.

Processes of restoration are able to uncover these gaps in information, whether it be through removing or adding material —following a methodical process with a scientific appearance but generally driven by a chain of subjective decisions taken by the conservator— or by means of articulating the cultural, moral and environmental motives that induced certain additions or concealments. For the project *Reversibilidad y Utopía* [Reversibility and Utopía], IRMA ÁLVAREZ-LAVIADA GARCÍA, undertook an art residency at the Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural de España (Spanish Cultural Heritage Institute) chronicling the process of restoration of José de Ribera's *Ecce Homo*.

Operating in the terrain of the micro, the conservators —equipped with microscopes, scalpels

and chemical products— eliminate everything that "is not Ribera" from the canvas, thus affecting the unity of the work, conventionally understood as inalterable. Through a number of works in video, photography and installation informed by this process, the artist created a series of pieces giving visual form to the recording, cataloguing and erasure of information and in consequence articulating, in the artist's words, "the necessary unfinishedness of works of art." This ranges from the need for the beholder to complete the work to aspects intentionally "veiled" by the artist, or the lacunae and the processes of transformation the work has undergone during its conservation, which affect its integrity, which seems like an utopia.

Charcoal, ochre, calcite, white zinc and white lead pigments are some of the organic residues scraped from the surface of *Ecce Homo*. In the six-screen video in loop *Descomposición del Aura: Ribera* [Decomposing the Aura: Ribera] one can see the hands of the restorer sheathed in blue latex gloves going about this aggressive process. The residues —added layer by layer during successive restorations of the painting— range from brownish-grey to earth colours or bluish tones and are presented inside urns in the exhibition hall, reminding us that these added materials were once contemplated by the spectator as part of the "original" Ribera.

The term *mise en abyme* suggests the introduction of a copy of an image into the image itself, creating an endless sequence of infinite images. Using this term as the title, Álvarez-Laviada presents twelve digital photographs resulting from the chemical analysis of elements of *Ecce Homo* (this time originals). Captured by a camera connected to the microscope, these abstract images of vibrant colours and reminiscent of the mineral world, evoke an atomised representation of the work in which the composition of the original is made up of thousands

of new works. In the photographic series *Sala Capitular*, a number of wooden easels hold paintings with their backs turned to us. If you were able to turn the easel around, the paintings would still be veiled by the white silk paper used to "consolidate" them while they wait to be manipulated and returned to an impossible original.

IV. THE REWRITTEN CITY

"The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language".

Michel de Certeau, 1984¹¹

If the speech act plays with different elements of language to create new meanings, the act of walking in the city can weave distinct situations that play with the "correct" meaning of the city and disrupt the order set in place by city planners. The city as a whole is reflected in those city planning projects that objectify it through functional spaces, favouring the economic system while ignoring local traditions and community practices. Cities are increasingly shaped by a kind of blockade, routing or impositions — fences, walls, traffic, slopes, security guards, cameras — that generate closed and regulated circuits, controlling bodies, actions and, in consequence, our desires and imagination.

According to Certeau, there are certain urban practices that can operate as a form of resistance to this dominant logic, particularly the act of walking. Among these urban strategies that transform the urban landscape are "desire lines", paths engendered by the impulses of people that arise when, by deviating from the signalled route, the ground is eroded due to our prints: a detour written on the earth, an improvisation that transforms the urban landscape and conventional circuits.

A metal door or shutter measuring 5 by 2 metres and weighing around one hundred kilos levitates slightly above the floor of the exhibition space, creating a tension between heaviness and lightness, blockage and circulation. The starting point for this site-specific project by RAFA MUNÁRRIZ, *Bloqueo relativo* (Relative Blockage) is the urban blockages the artist comes across in the city of São Paulo. In

particular, this type of design for shutters called 'tijolinho' (little brick) is based on a model popular in the 1940s in the commercial areas of modernist buildings. The "brick" design signifies that what is inside is an emptiness that allows us to see, though not reach, what is on the other side.

The door, attached to a steel cable and a pulley in the ceiling, is held by a central load point that creates a balance with the weight, keeping it apparently stable. If it blocks access, we go around it. If we touch it, it swings. If we were to take it down, it would roll up like a shutter. Its imposing appearance is in fact volatile and conditioned by the desires of the spectator. These ambiguities evoke the potential to experience the city differently, in the same way that speech acts can change the meaning of conventional language, thus writing a new network of desire lines.

"When you find your sound at the beginning, it's yours for ever. We don't all have the same sound. Some are longer and others shorter. It depends on the person. For instance, when they show you how to sharpen, you learn how to play the flute at the same time. That's when you find your melody".

Conversation between Felipe Dulazides and the *amolador* Asdiel Ramos Mena

The various textures that characterise the melodies of each *amolador*, the name for scissors and knife sharpeners in Cuba who ply their trade on the streets, are not discernible to non-expert ears. However, among themselves they are a language in itself that, on one hand, identifies them individually and, on the other, responds to the particularities of each street. It is a language in danger of extinction: in Havana today there are only 27 remaining *amoladores*. They live in Santa Catalina, an

improvised neighbourhood of self-constructed houses without any kind of urban regulation. The *amoladores* travel the city streets on special bicycles equipped with a rotating stone for sharpening knives and scissors. They have become an integral part of the soundscape of Havana, intertwining their poetic melodies with the accidental sounds of the sharpening and of the street.

For his project Deja tu tono después del mensaje [Leave your tone after the message], FELIPE DULZAIDES submerged himself in this small community, attracted by its musicality and interested in understanding its working conditions and dynamics. Influenced since childhood by the world of improvised music and poetry —his father was the celebrated Cuban jazz musician Felipe Dulzaides and his aunt and uncle, Fina García Marruz and Eliseo Diego, were poets— as well as experimental theatre and in particular the "invisible theatre" of Augusto Boal, with its focus on the public space and the social, he has always been interested in chance and the unforeseen that can arise at a particular moment or place like the city, which he understands as a space with its own composition and plot.

Through a series of interventions in the fabric of Havana, Dulzaides has created a body of work consisting of photo documentation, video and painting, always based on the experiences of the amoladores. The series of watercolours presented generates a graphic language based on their instruments: the quena or pan flute. The video Lírica de calle orchestrates a musical dialogue between the different ranges of melodies of the amoladores and professional jazz musicians in Havana, interrupted by random street sounds. Amolador and musician coincide at a given moment in a certain street, and then each one continues on his way, creating a tension between the planned

and the accidental. Their melodies respond to the public space and penetrate gently or abruptly, into houses and bodies, interweaving affects between them and the urban landscape.

NOTAS

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