

QUERELA

It was June 2016 and, contrary to all expectations, it rained cats and dogs in Basel. Marc Nagtzaam and I were leaving the Messeplatz exhibition center to attend the opening of the Liste Art Fair when we ran into Pedro Paiva¹. We had not seen each other since the end of 2014, when I told him that I was moving to Geneva. "Possibly the most boring city to live in," he told me. He was not far from the truth, I guess, but one of the reasons that got me excited on the prospect of living in Switzerland was the certainty that, within a little over two hours' plane ride, there was an opposite context to the one in which I'd always lived in. It was not just another language, another culture and a set of distinct traditions that I would find there: it was a totally different way of looking at the world, of conceiving a nation, of constructing a community, and of thinking of the role that each citizen is expected to perform therein. And here we were, a year and a half later, under a leaden sky, in front of the entrance of the Basel Art Fair, with a perfect example of this contrast in hand: "Where is João? He's in there alone, setting up a work of ours ... No, they will not let me in because I'm here with my daughter and during assembly days no children can enter the facilities ... No children and no pregnant women either!" We exchanged that look of condescendence and disbelief that only two southern Europeans, *too* free and *too* spontaneous, could in this situation exchange. When I left him, I had no doubt that he would continue to try to find a less monitored access to enter the exhibition hall, and I hope he would know that I, too, was walking away thinking in what way I could help him prevaricate.

While we traveled the eight hundred meters between the Messeplatz and the old factory where Liste has set its HQ, Marc commented on how this fair had been, back in the mid-1990s, the testing site *par excellence* for an entire generation of gallerists who are today connected with power and stardom in arts: Air de Paris, Eva Pressenhuber, Maureen Paley, Zeno X, David Zwirner ... Not that this information filled us with enthusiasm, but it at least promised something less aseptic, less expectable and less ostensibly about money than what we found at Messeplatz. We decided to start at the upper floors. The more galleries we visited, the clearer it became that the cutting-edginess that Liste might have had has long ago disappeared. And if this was evident in the safe choices most of the stands showcased, it was all the more remarkable in the fact that the audience that jostled through the niches of the old factory was precisely the same that fluttered, in a more comfortable fashion, in the aisles of Art Basel. The "market" has long realized that "value" and "opportunity" are actually in these less central, less obvious places; and capital, as we all know, is like water: it

¹ Pedro Paiva is part of the artistic duo João Maria Gusmão & Pedro Paiva, two of the most international Portuguese artists of today. They have been collaborating with zdb since the early 2000's. In 2009 they represented Portugal in Venice Biennial with an exhibition curated by Natxo Checa, chief curator at zdb.

always seeks the most direct and advantageous route to travel. And so, the more we advanced, the less hope we had that we could find something that would counteract the widespread climate of financial anxiety and well-behaved proposals that dominated the fair. Just as we were getting ready to leave, and sensing that I had lost him for a moment, I turned to find Marc peering into a wooden doorway, a kind of portal that led to the narrower spiral staircase I've ever come across. Through the openings of the steep stairs we could see something hanging on the lower floor's walls, and none of us hesitated to descend. Half way through we had to negotiate the passage with a visibly amused couple, but nothing could have prepared us for the view we had when we finally reached the basement. In the geometric center of a dirty, shabby room was *Me Princess* – a painted bronze figure depicting a full-size nude woman, roughly molded and painted in an unlikely pinkish hue. Sitting with her legs open, the red spots that tinted her sex, her nipples, and her mouth, smeared like a makeup that went wrong, were the triggers of our initial shock. However, past this initial jolt, what really became disturbing about this figure was her frowned gaze, as if borne out of a latent madness, an untamed schizophrenia, just about to burst. To complete the uncanniness of the situation, a tiara adorned her head, making unequivocal the infantilization of that figure-woman, the contrast between her body already overcome by gravity and her childhood dreams perfectly intact. In the walls surrounding her there had been installed pieces in the form of speech balloons. Over their tile-covered surfaces there were little sculptures of mouths, some displayed horizontally, some vertically, which made them either mute images of potential speeches, or suggestions of vaginas without bodies – the sharpest image of an absolute emptying of desire. Liz Craft, Marc said... the artist's name is Liz Craft, "best thing we've seen, by far."

Fast-forward to 2018. ZDB comes from a long series of exhibitions focusing on a significant range of practices linked to experimentation and transcendence, while also delving on political and associative movements that, somehow, have used visual expression as a means and instrument for their demands and for the construction of collective identities. For a long time, now, zdb's exhibition spaces have not received a solo show by a foreign artist. For even longer, these spaces have not received a solo show by an artist who was not a man. Maybe that's why Natxo reacted so enthusiastically when I told him about Liz. *Absolutely! We should have stopped this fasting of foreign artists long time ago. This Liz you're talking about is the one with the monochrome panels, isn't it?* It was not. I assumed Natxo was thinking of Liz Deschenes and so I rushed to tell him that this Liz, Liz Craft, was completely different; that she was born and studied in Los Angeles, on the other coast of the United States, which, at least in part, can justify the fact that her work is much less analytical and much more instinctive and experiential. *Okay, okay ... But then what does she do, exactly?* She makes mostly sculptures, things blatantly contaminated by popular culture, from

comics to fantastic cinema, from gore to kitsch, through a kind of veiled psychedelic approach, resorting to slang, soft obscenity and vernacular and urban language. I didn't want to interrupt my oral portrayal of Liz's work without noticing that everything I had just said was balanced out not only by a particular attention to the more obscure side of children's imagination, by slapstick humor and general irony, but also by a set of subtle responses to contemporary moralism and the coolest, most laid back attitude so as to give everything I had previously said a far less serious tone.

I was thinking it was something more of an abstract approach... No, quite the opposite. Many of Liz's works are strikingly figurative and explicit. For example, one of her best-known sculptures is a brushed aluminum unicorn pony whose tail liquefies at the hands of a skeleton wearing a top hat. Another one is a bronze super-penis that ejaculates a fishing net where all sorts of debris have been stuck – debris that could either have been brought to shore by the sea, or been left by someone in a dark corner of some western metropolis. As Natxo was beginning to raise a question about the relation of all this to ZDB, someone in the office noticed that, whatever the relationship, having Liz do an exhibition at zdb would have, at least, the virtue of mitigating the current *natxismo* – an right-on neologism that signals Natxo's by-now-famous *lack of connection* with the work of women artists: a phenomenon that has granted him all sorts of provocations and minor revenges by different people and instances, the most efficient of which has been Destiny itself, who decided to bless him with three daughters... For my part, I hastened to take weight off from this question. I actually never believed that Liz wanted her work to be defended strictly in these terms. Although the female universe plays a decisive role in the construction of her work, it does not appear as a means to an end, especially if that end shall lie outside the intersubjective exchange that is the matter of all artistic experience. Her militancy is of a different order. And if, in fact, one can see her marionettes – as Louisa Elderton recently did in Frieze magazine – as a commentary on the progressive reduction of the role of women in society to a mere prop; if it is possible to face the artist's engagement with techniques associated with *female crafts* as an appeal to a sort of celebration of this tradition in the artistic context; if a super-penis can be understood as an allusion to the still dominant phallocentrism in current western societies, it is also possible that all this is much less calculated and much more the result of genuine and direct emanations of a universe that simply doesn't ask permission neither to cross the border to the side of eccentricity, to the side of delirium, to the realm of the abject and provocation, nor to exercise the right to practice each and every one of these, freely, at the heart of the Messeplatzs of this life.

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