

The existential crises of the artist and “all this crap”

Conversation between Guillermo Ros and Julia Castelló

The entrance to this exhibition is the entrance to the imaginary of Guillermo Ros, his way of seeing and understanding the art world, his peculiar analysis of the context in which he lives (survives) and works. The gallery presents an obligatory itinerary: the viewer has to start the visit on the ground floor and climb the stairs to continue on the upper floor. Rather like a videogame, we encounter two frozen scenes on two levels, two distinct ambiances in which the struggle is carried on.

Gallery 6 at the IVAM is without doubt an architecturally complex space, with low ceilings and various columns and permanent elements. However, Guillermo Ros has come precisely to fight against the elements. The first frozen scene presented in *An Exercise in Violence* is a forest of columns that transforms the ground floor into a hypostyle hall, a battlefield that Ros engages on the basis of *Berserk*, the legendary manga by Kentaro Miura, which is a habitual reference in his pieces. The original columns of the room blend in with those produced by Ros, which are distinguished only by what appear to be rodent bites. Incrusted in the columns are fragments of Buixarró stone, sometimes polished and sometimes natural, standing out amidst the whiteness of the room. This is one of the types of stone found in the Llotja de la Seda, the old Silk Exchange of Valencia, an emblematic building and symbol of the Valencian Golden Age. Guarding it are numerous gargoyles and sculptures or reliefs symbolising lust, carnal sin and perversity, macabre scenes that refer to the infernal regions and the lowest human instincts. We are transported to these figures, on this occasion in the form of rodents, by the postures assumed by Ros's sculptures on the upper floor. They are rats ready to raze the museum, feeding off it and gnawing at it with their Damascus steel teeth. Part of their bodies seems to be turning into that limestone we found in the hypostyle hall. Surrounded by remains of columns and stone, the rats are the protagonists of a scene of ruin and defeat. Here and there, in the midst of the debacle, there appear incrustations of those pieces of Damascus steel, surprisingly delicate and finely worked, in which the viewer recognises the teeth of the rodents.

An Exercise in Violence is a dialogue – or a struggle, to be more precise – with the architecture of a museum. It responds to an exercise of analogies, imaginaries, violence and more violence, that build up to culminate an epic product. Through a conversation with Guillermo Ros, we shall try to find the keys for passing through the screen of this twin-levelled scene and discovering what is hidden by each of the elements that make it up, which always refer to the process of artistic creation.

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Julia Castelló: In this project, you speak of the violence generated by any process of artistic creation, a cultural violence that legitimises, justifies and fosters the idea of self-exploitation as a personal necessity of the artist, who generally lives in precarious circumstances. You describe the artist as a being subject to violence who absorbs work and forgets his own mental and physical condition.

Guillermo Ros: In *An Exercise in Violence*, I speak of the act of producing, of creating, of the violence inherent to the process of creation. My working process has changed since I performed this exercise of sincerity, of reflection on what happens when I'm creating a piece. I remember

that when at first I wanted to deal with this type of thing, which I then considered a more internal affair, I always materialised these themes as a 'trollish' metaphor, as a hidden meme or something encrypted. The finished piece ended up being more amenable. Not placing those themes in the centre seems to make the work more serious, more intellectual, because it comes from an investigation and ends up materialising in a more amenable way. There's some truth in that, and it's very interesting to work in that way, but I decided that what motivates me to work and what gives sense to the things I do would go in the centre. In the end I think I've reached a balance between the two.

JC: So it's a question of manifesting what goes on during the artistic process, though from a very personal point of view. In this project, you approach it from a purely physical aspect, like the contact with the material alone in the studio, but also with a contextual focus: how you relate to the environment where you work, the people of the art world, living with an entire context...

GR: Exactly. In reflecting on these aspects, stories or tales appear that can be brought to the centre of an exhibition. I prefer not to look for something I can talk about, but to encounter these questions that are occurring around me during production or creation. They're questions that you encounter because you spend hours working and wondering why you need to work so many hours... Then you come across all these key aspects. I think being aware, knowing what you're doing and where you are, is very positive, and is part of that exercise in sincerity we were talking about. It's the formula I have for finding a sense in things. I'm incapable of tackling themes that I'm not touching: when I speak of what happens around me, of the context and what I do in that context, what I produce and how I situate it in a scenario... the concept emerges on its own. I've spent years, for example, wondering why I work in stone. Until I found out why. I need to live with the material and grow tired, feel used. This leads once more to violence, starting from an act as prehistoric as working stone. And working stone, coincidentally or otherwise, leads to the history of stone: a specific quarry that's currently maintained, a stone of a very carnal appearance. At some point, a hole was formed in the mountain to make the quarry, undoubtedly an act of great violence, and now it has to be camouflaged and repopulated so that the wound will be less visible.

JC: Violence and the exploitation of the artist were already present in other works of yours, like *Burn Out* (2016) and the exhibition *Troquei Whey Por Um Gol Quadrado* (2019). They were also very evident in *Però no tinc temps per aquesta merda ara mateix, com si m'importessin els concursos de pixades entre monstres* (2020), a show with Paco Chanivet whose title was a meme in itself.

GR: It could all be said to have started with *Burn Out*, also in stone, with pieces simulating the bodywork of a car that has burst apart in a crash. I was still speaking with a certain degree of subtlety about the self-exploited artist and the immediate context, a concept that was starting to emerge. Those pieces were the precursors for the arrival of *Troquei Whey*, where the whole conceptual structure was established. That project was a watershed. It was the first time I had presented a series of works in the form of a scenario, and it was what really opened the way for the production I've done for the IVAM.

Focusing on violence means giving it a critical (and very self-critical) perspective. It's centring it on a form of work that I think many of us share, including those in a similar situation in non-artistic fields. It's positive to be aware that these things happen, even if we're addicts. That's why I talk of exercise and reflection. By trying to find a sense for the artistic process, I reached the conclusion that it's all a matter of time, and time is a very valuable thing. Time of your life

invested in something you know will not bring in any profits, but will wear you down physically and mentally, and at most will be a line on a CV. That's if you look at it as an "investment of time". And seen in that way, it's extremely violent. Nevertheless, I try to make that time useful for providing me with nutrition and satisfaction, and not to become obsessed with the exhaustion and insecurity. We have to be aware that we are indeed lucky to be doing what we like doing, but we have to watch out, because then these existential crises come along with all this crap. It's also necessary to reflect on the conditions we need and see that the time invested not only fills you in this abstract and personal way, but brings you health at every level. Producing is quite an erosive and wearisome exercise, in spite of the ecstasy you feel when you create, produce and finally have the opportunity to show the work.

As regards time, when I'm producing or reflecting on what art is, I also think of the time invested by the viewer. It's true that art is a tool for expression or criticism, but I'd like the viewer's time to be useful, I'd like them not to be left indifferent, to feel they're being called to (as happens to me when I produce, creating a narrative or establishing connections). Sometimes I think that the most valuable thing is ensuring the viewer's time is well invested, because the rest of the benefits won't be for me. And I'm not talking just about money – that too – but above all about mental stability.

JC: And when you arrive at that mental stability...

GR: You never arrive!

JC: But when you arrive at that mental stability – and perhaps money, and a certain social status – isn't that the moment when the creator becomes an "artist"? I know you have your reservations about that word...

GR: You might say that. Particularly, I feel uncomfortable with the connotations that accompany the concept of the artist. I prefer the word "sculptor", or even "creator of contents", as some streamers say. I find it a definition with much more sense from the point of view of the time invested, and also for the possible viewer. These days, I think everyone can interpret the word "artist" in a different way. In my personal experience, the term has often degenerated into a sort of disguise. It's a disguise that means entering a violent, hostile terrain where the goal is none other than to rise to power in order to abuse it, to drown in one's own ego and to produce things in whose contemplation the viewer will invest time – a banal one, in my view. All this, evidently, is from a very subjective point of view, but yes, I do think the artist ends up becoming a character that loses the most sincere and meaningful part of itself in a process as abstract as producing artworks.

I always perform the exercise of imagining myself on a desert island and coming across someone exactly the same as myself, with the same experiences as me. I imagine myself having to explain to him what I do and why, and at that moment I think I will be at peace with myself if I do something I really believe in. And for that to be so, I need to talk about what I touch, my context. I can't start to look for flourishes and citations that justify a theme for which I've had to push the machine to its limits...

JC: Seen in that way, are the rats of *An Exercise in Violence* artists or creators?

GR: They're both, and other things the viewer might interpret. The exhibition includes precisely the word "exercise" as a reference to all the layers of reading that emerge from this scenography. In my head, the rats sometimes take on the role of parasite and sometimes that

of self-exploited agent, insecure and undisguised. I understand and respect both, but I criticise the exploitative carrion-feeding position, and that of the disguise. My position will always be to talk personally and honestly of the context I'm in and the material I live with. But I understand there has to be a bit of everything, and that's how the rats in the exhibition are: they can represent the artist / institution / artistic agent, with a role absolutely separate from mine, or myself, the insecure creator who sickens from self-exploitation.

JC: Then they're enemies and co-battlers at the same time.

GR: Of course, and this is where the notion of self-criticism comes into it again, because the rats acquire a testimonial role in the exhibition. The story of this show begins, ends and begins again. It's a loop, in the sense that they manage to get into the museum and feed off this museum, but this very act eventually blinds them. They need this food, but they can't help succumbing to the parasitism of the museum or, to put it another way, to violence. Seeing rats in the museum is also seeing this gallery as a hostile territory that resists the exhibition. I've studied all the previous exhibitions, and it's a very difficult space. The gallery has a lot of handicaps, not only because of its architecture but also because it can't support too much weight. I wanted to take the quarry to the museum because I see it as such, as a quarry to be exploited. Those spaces have tons of weight, and in *An Exercise in Violence*, I've brought those tons to the architecture, to the pillars. I've created a scenario where the pillars pretend to be full of stone. It was the way to resolve my personal objective. On the other hand, I haven't touched the room or the original pillars. I haven't tried to camouflage the architecture or the lighting: the idea was to work with the original gallery and allow it to be seen as it really is, its violence.

In fact, some rats eating the museum are a critical reading of the institution, of the institutional architecture. Once more, it is an act of violence, a reflection and a self-criticism, because besides the rat that gets into the institution and eats it, there's also the rat that exploits itself, which is probably the most personal part of the show.

JC: The rats suppurate stone. They go blind, with their eyes turned to marble like other parts of their body. And their teeth are made of Damascus steel. They're the same materials as we find in the pillars.

GR: Exactly. The pillars and the rats are made of exactly the same materials, although formalised in different ways. Both have cut and modelled polystyrene cores, cement with resin and mineral silicates, stone and Damascus steel. All these elements have their logic and their own narrative: the rats feed off the pillars, the architecture of the institution, and to be able to gnaw their way to the core of this meat, the stone, they need a tool, in the same way as diamond tools are used in a quarry to be able to exploit the stone. This tool is steel. In the end, the use of steel becomes a kind of tribute to tools. In a way, the Damascus steel is a metaphor for weaponry, for it should not be forgotten that it has always been used precisely to forge weapons. The rats themselves end up suppurating this material they feed off, which is the stone. They are blinded by this material. It is the materials themselves that speak to us of the exercise of violence, and the conclusion of this scenario is that it is impossible to stop: it's an endless loop.

JC: Let's talk about this confrontation with the exhibition gallery. You pose it as a struggle, but at the same time it's a great opportunity, getting into the museum...

GR: Of course, but you mustn't let yourself panic. These challenges are dangerously stressful, they're an activator of alarms and violence. You think of the whole art system, you're aware it's a museum, you know which museum it is, that it has to be done well... and you're dooming

yourself. That's why I try to speak of the act of exhibiting as a violent act where the creator is liable to snap... We're very fragile!

JC: Let's talk about epic and lore. You take this concept from the videogame, where it means the background to a story or a character, and you transfer it to the artistic sphere. You speak of the lore of the characters in the exhibition, of the architecture, and of your own, but what I see is a perfect blend of referents.

GR: That's a way to define it. I was talking before about finding a concept, looking for the whys. As I said, one example is stone. This material leads us to a history that forms part of the lore of the exhibition, but in turn it has its own history, which you find by working the material: suddenly you meet someone in that quarry, and that gets added to this lore. It's a matter of looking further and so finding the concepts.

I approach the exhibition as a battle that has to be won. Violent scenes, battlefields, motivational music to carry on the fight... I think all this has a lot to do with epic, precisely because of this extreme insecurity, because of those opportunities – battles – which you're under an obligation not to lose.

JC: Does epic consist of winning over violence?

GR: No. Violence can't be beaten, it's a parasite. It can be beaten with psychological help, and perhaps in the long term... But no, epic means surviving. And this gets violent again, because the objective is to stay alive. Not even just to stay well. Epic means moving on and on and not allowing yourself to be defeated. Or ending up badly but then getting up again. Or being tired but carrying on, saying: come on, one more effort...

JC: Come on, thirty-six columns...

GR: Thirty-six columns... and more than two hundred sculptural elements! All this forms part of epic: there's the competitiveness – and I'd talk again of the system, which corrupts everything – and the battlefield, the levels to be got through... I have many personal references going back to childhood that I've been able to infuse in the creative process. One of the referents that have greatly marked me, and which I regard as the greatest exponent of creative genius, is Kentaro Miura. I often work directly on the stories and philosophy of *Berserk*. This manga is the highest reference of the violent, of the struggle for life and of a very pessimistic focus, where the sole objective is to keep going one way or the other. In fact, one automatic reference that surged up as soon as they told me which gallery I was going to exhibit in was precisely a scene from this manga. The first thing I thought was how to make sure the gallery didn't beat me, and the direct reference occurred to me of *Berserk*, when the protagonist is summoned to a hypostyle hall where he can't use his sword properly because of the columns. It's a scene where very specific things happen in a very specific place, and where the protagonist can be identified with workers who have to struggle on day by day. This is the lore, and what I understand as the conceptual structure: finding these things, identifying them and putting them together.

JC: I insist on the referents because in speaking of violence, you could have used only *Berserk*, which is a constant in your work, as a referent. But here you take this manga with the hypostyle hall, the stone (the quarry) and the gargoyles (and so the Llotja de la Seda in Valencia), the rats (with their own imaginary as rodents, rather than as creators or artists), videogames with their scenes or levels... You mix it all up to create your own scene, your own imaginary.

GR: Yes, it's a staged narrative, or if you like, a frozen scene. That's why I talk about lore. It's a question of confronting a level as in a videogame. The gallery has two levels, and one of them is found by climbing the stairs. These are references of videogame structures or epic scenes.

It's for this reason that I take the concept of lore from videogames and apply it to art. It's the way to explain an accumulation of references and contexts that go into the same installation. The lore is a universe, a background. On many occasions, this background gives you the keys to what there is around you, and what you can talk about afterwards. Something can be found with which viewers can also identify when they see it. The lore goes further than background and contexts: it mixes it all together. It's making a compressed file of a hard disk to talk about inherent violence.

JC: A very personal hard disk, yours alone...

GR: Evidently. Everyone has their hard disk and it's always different, with its whys.

JC: We're looking at an exhibition with infinite readings, and one very complicated to explain in this respect, with so many things that represent you... In any case, it must be said that it took you just a week to conceptualise it. In other words, within this magma, it seems you're clear about the nexuses and the scenario...

GR: You force your head to go at three thousand per hour. You're conscious of the project you propose yourself, of the days it's going to take, and of the fact it's going to overcome you, but you propose it to yourself anyway. The project means starting as soon as possible and not stopping until the day before the opening. And here there's another object of reflection: not knowing how to stop and looking for a sense in something that in a certain way satisfies you, but on the other hand brings you no profit at all.

JC: It's an unconscious awareness...

GR: Yes. It's an extremely strong awareness, because you're conscious of the need to create and do this kind of project to feel fulfilled, but at the same time there's a tremendous lack of awareness, because you don't know that you're going to have a very, very hard time...

JC: That need to create can be linked to your relationship with stone. It's not common to find artists so committed to the material they use. How did you start to work with this material?

GR: I've been working with stone since 2010. Something indescribable attracted me about this material, perhaps because it allowed me to ask myself questions, tire myself out, work with my hands. Really, I found the why only a short time ago. It's a material that requires patience and a lot of time until it allows you to find certain things. Stone asks you to live with it, something as simple and complex as that. The working time it needs is the one that has repercussions in time: calluses on your hands, injuries. But it also allows you to know the material and enjoy it more intensely. You learn at which moment of the day the stone shines most and you take advantage of that to polish it, you see how the muscles seize up when you spend time handling heavy tools... It may be that this vision is a little romantic, but I also think you have to be careful not to become addicted to the pleasure we feel when working the material, because it involves physical wear and tear (and mental too, when the objectives are linked to your CV).

JC: In your case, then, working in stone is your way of finding an answer to the question about sense.

GC: Well, it's easy not to find the sense when there's no financial stability, which often also brings emotional stability. But I'll answer your question by going back to the previous one: the first exhibition featuring this material was *Cossos* (2014). The idea was the glorification of the material from its natural forms. Stone can be worked in a thousand ways, but I can only understand it by giving it sense on the basis of its qualities, not for purposes that are alien to it. One of the stones I used for that show is now the protagonist at the IVAM, where in a way I also speak once more of the glorification of the material. After so long, seeing these connections allows me precisely to find a sense in my work.

JC: During the conversation, you've talked about the "concept" and the "conceptual". In your work, you do a lot of memes of the conceptual – in your collaborations with Alberto Feijóo, for instance, and specifically with the project *Unchained* (2018) – while on the other hand you grant a lot of importance to the artisanal part of your creative process: spending hours with the material, hours working and living with it, while it's your own self that's manipulating the piece. However, your work emerges as tremendously conceptual. Would you say your pieces are conceptual in spite of yourself?

GR: Not in spite of myself. In the same way, neither is the word "artist". It's conceptual, but always on the basis of the material. The art system frequently belittles the artisan, but I share a lot of things with the work and vocation of the craftsman, and I even find a lot of things in crafts that surpass the projects of some artists, beginning with myself. Making more than two hundred sculptural elements is in part a recognition of manual labour, which is often treated as unimportant within the current art system, or is simply taken for granted.

But yes, my production is conceptual. I make a meme with this term because I convert it into a tool for attacking the type of artist we were talking about before. But of course it's conceptual: my work speaks from a socio-political and critical perspective.

Natalya Serkova

On the project 'An exercise in violence' by Guillermo Ros

As the theme of his project, an artist Guillermo Ros chooses violence—the broadest, almost transhistorical theme for art. In doing so, the artist puts himself in a thematic frame—the project is entitled *An exercise in violence*—an unequivocal indication that the author himself is an active participant in the process of production of violence. In the accompanying text to the project, we find arguments that violence is not only produced in all stages of the artist's work, but that it is, in principle, woven into the very fabric of our existence. In this sense, participation in the process of violence turns into accepting oneself as a full part of the process, a unit of the overall flow. There seems to be nothing that defines our connection to the world and to each other as fully as violence, understood not in private but in an ontological way. In all processes, in all actions, in all movements of the world we can discern an underlying, ancient, impersonal violence, a force directed in equal measure toward processes of destruction, reassembly, and new birth. Such violence transcends time, it is not interested in contexts, individuals or particularities, however it manifests itself in things of all scales, from the global to the most insignificant.

It seems to be the relationship of scales that Guillermo Ros is trying to capture in his work. There are many actors in his project: rats, columns, marble, damascus steel, museum halls, museum workers, food, garbage, iron, revolution, artists, their spectators, their labor, other people's labor, rat labor... This list could go on and on, and do you know why? Certainly because violence, this global transhistorical force, binds all the actors in this chain together with one strong glue. The scale changes with dizzying force: the world revolution is chewed up by rats, and the marble piles are wiped to the ground and turned into garbage behind the nearest McDonald's. What is it? An attraction? An adventure? An exercise? Whatever it is, I suddenly want to be a part of it, too. In a strict sense, each one of us is already part of it—but not everyone understands this and not everyone admits to it. I want to acknowledge my participation with this text—how?—by committing an act of violence over it, of course. An act that will first break this text to pieces, leaving it in disarray, and then reassemble it, clearly demonstrating, it seems, the main thesis

of Guillermo Ros's project: violence illuminates connections between phenomena and a capacity to reassemble things.

The Rat King

No one knows the exact reason why rats entangle their tails and paws, thereby making a semblance of a living nest. According to one theory, this happens at an early age, when the rats, while playing, become entangled with each other. According to another version, adults do this deliberately in order to keep their cubs warm in a nest during the cold season. In any case, when entangled, rats can no longer move and eat independently; they are brought food by their congeners, on which thus depends whether the rat nest survives. In those rat nests that people have found so far, all the rats were already dead (not counting the nests with live rats, which apparently were encountered by medieval people, if we believe the engravings). No one knows exactly how long rats, entwined with each other and immobilized, can live. The number of rats in the rat nests found so far, ranges from five to fifty individuals.

Characteristically, such a compound of rats was named the rat king. The historical figure of the king is a very ambiguous symbolic object. On the one hand, it is a person, clothed with unlimited power, blessed by God, acting on his behalf, an untouchable subject. On the other hand, it is always a lonely figure, a hostage of intrigue, forced to make decisions of inhuman scale and risking to be killed during every minute of his or her life. It is no coincidence that in Baroque cultural tradition the monarch is simultaneously the happiest and the most unfortunate, the greatest and the most miserable, the wisest and the know-nothing—in short, the one who combines all possible opposites and is somewhere beyond the human existence we might understand. In this sense, the rat king is the same strange, ridiculous and at the same time creepy creature, mystically predicting misfortune and elementally unable to survive without the help of his relatives.

Should we wish for such a rat king? Pet each of the intertwined rats on their little heads? Turn away in disgust? Be frightened? Or maybe, make an attempt to unhook their tails?

Column to be demolished

On May 18, 1871, the Paris Commune teared down the Vendôme Column. Its demolition was one of the Commune's administrative successes—the demolition was preceded by numerous discussions, decrees and questions of an applied nature, such as how it would be most convenient and cheapest to demolish it. The attack on the Vendôme Column was quite logical—erected to commemorate the victories of Napoleon's army, it was surmounted by a statue of Napoleon I dressed as a Roman patrician with a laurel wreath on his head. The column, this confidently directed upward French phallus, was once intended to be a symbol of the militaristic power of the Empire, for which it was thrown to the ground in May 1871.

On Google you can easily find photographs of communards gathered around the fallen column and the defeated statue of Napoleon, as well as the pictures of the square itself, filled with rubble, next to which stands an empty pedestal. This pedestal resembles a stiff, sagging belly, gravitationally pulled downward toward the shattered bones of its gigantic body lying on the ground. Characteristically, before the demolition, the column was thought to have been cast entirely from the iron of cannons recaptured from the enemy by Napoleon's Grand Army. Only when the column was demolished did it appear that it was in fact made of stone encrusted with bronze bas-reliefs. Thus the Commune, having destroyed a symbol of the greatness of the Empire, also, quite by accident, destroyed the myth that for 64 years accompanied this imposing symbol.

What could be worse than the destruction of an old myth? The column was rebuilt shortly after the fall of the Commune (which, as we know, lasted only 72 days), but was the myth of its iron integrity restored along with it? Would the communards have been able to destroy it just as quickly and easily if it had been iron rather than stone after all? Maybe when the Commune was piecing together debit and credit in 1971 and contemplating whether it could afford demolition, a porous brittle stone somewhere peeked out from under the bronze shellac covering, and one of the communards, seeing it, shouted: “Brothers and Sisters, I know how to get rid of it!”

The artist rat-catcher

For art history there is a scandal of its own in the demolition of the Vendôme Column. The artist Gustave Courbet took part in the decision to demolish it, though he denied any involvement later, after the fall of the Commune. Courbet nevertheless repeatedly advocated removing the column from the Square. During the Commune he was elected to its Committee and also served as president of the Arts Commission, a position in which he was responsible for essentially administrative matters of cultural heritage preservation. Regardless of what role Courbet actually played in the issue of the column's demolition, it is the mythologized story of the artist's direct involvement in the cause of the revolution that is important. There seems to be no second such example in the art history when an artist who became widely known in artistic circles, reincarnated as an administrative employee of a revolutionary committee. It is believed that it was at this point that Courbet the artist ended and Courbet the politician began—because it seems impossible to combine these two roles simultaneously. And even though Courbet was quite successful in making revolutions in the field of art, still—as they say and as history has shown so far—true revolutions are made by other people.

Courbet became widely known for his bold solutions to internal pictorial questions. Can an artist today break away from solving the autonomous problems of art and break into the political struggle? Such a question would prove obsolete if we were to argue: a) that the autonomous problems of art are less and less of an issue for artists today, b) that what we call the political today is the gesture with which we brush our teeth in the morning, c) and that therefore there is nothing truly autonomous left in this world anymore, including art.

When the artist chews the rat's tail in the hope of finding the truth of art inside, fused with the truth of life, but finds only the gristle, does this mean that the revolution is over?

Revolution Non-Stop

Once, at the very end of the 20th century, the German theorist Peter Bürger said that the avant-garde did not die because it remained eternally alive in the works of subsequent authors. An ambiguous life, some would even say it is life after death. Although, on the other hand, this is what all artists dream about: life after death. Does this mean that artists themselves would want the avant-garde to die?..

Today it is already difficult to answer the question of who exactly wanted it dead. It seems that everything came out by itself—it died because it had to happen. Revolutions fail because this is apparently meant to happen. After the fall of the Commune Courbet was first sent to prison, where he wasn't allowed to paint (what an irony—because for history he had already stopped being an artist and was only a revolutionary), and then he was sentenced to pay an absolutely gigantic sum of money designed to cover the restoration of the Vendôme Column. Soon afterwards he died. His death allowed him to become an artist again—and this time for good. Thus Courbet the artist outlived Courbet the revolutionary because the former remained in the eternity of art, while the latter died because of his health compromised in prison. The avant-garde lost, the revolution fell, but Courbet seems to have won. Or wait...?

History also knows revolutionaries whose memory will live on forever. Lenin, Napoleon, Emperor Constantine, John Lennon (with some ambiguity for this one)—only the revolutions made by the last two seem to have not yet been defeated. We are still Christians (at least so they say) and we love to consume under the slogans of universal liberation and social responsibility. But what about Lenin and Napoleon—have their revolutions been lost? Bürger would certainly argue with that.

Revolution, any Marxist will tell you, is a complex dialectical process which can last even at a moment when everything that can be done seems to have come full circle and returned to its previous course (besides, in the form of a farce, a wiser Marxist will tell you). Bürger seems to have been a Marxist. It is ironic that Courbet couldn't be one.

Realism of a Child

Courbet called himself a realist. And that's pretty ironic, too. He seems to have been the first person in the history of art to declare himself a realist. He was sure that his painting practice was closer to the harsh reality he saw around him than what his colleagues were painting. In a way, perhaps it was. After all, he was the first to paint peasants, workers, beggars, and drunken priests at other people's funerals. And yes, we shouldn't forget *The Origin of the World*, which seemed a far more realistic way to depict what art had been pondering with such awe

throughout its history and had never dared to depict. All because it was far from realism. The genuine realism of the true artist.

Does an artist remain a realist when he believes in the victory of the revolution? Or we could ask in a different way: is an artist still a realist when he or she sincerely believes in the good? In universal justice? In the belief that art is really capable of changing the world? Okay, let's not forget the context: a realist from the mid-19th century (not only before Marx, but also before Freud, for a moment) is not the same thing as a 21st century realist or a Bertolucci's dreamer (the one from the 20th century). Still, it was a little easier for a person 150 years ago to deal with abstract concepts than for our typical contemporary, who is used to more modest targets for liking.

Some people like to say that the main realists in the world (not in the sense of artistic style, of course) are children. Although it is not quite clear why exactly them and until what period of their maturity—because children very quickly learn to lie and manipulate, understanding how adults are arranged. And often children manipulate adults with such sophistication that many adults would never dream of. It is often said that artists, too, are children who grew up physically but are still children. Does this mean that artists are the best manipulators in the world? Given that art since Courbet is a process in which some people successfully deceive others, perhaps the thesis of artists being children is not so far from the truth.

Teeth of Love

A rat is running across the square. It is difficult for a man to understand where and why it is running, it is difficult to understand the instinct that drives it at this second. The man notices the rat, but he is not frightened, because he has already met many rats in his life—both humans and animals, and humans who seemed to him worse than animals. He knew about the latter firsthand; he stood in this square on this day precisely because he sincerely wanted to cleanse earth, the whole world, the entire globe of them. Freedom, equality, and fraternity are important components in the life of a good human being, a good, upright society, he thought before he saw the rat, and the moment he saw it, he suddenly remembered the only woman he ever loved. She had slightly long front teeth, and he liked that; he called

her “Ma petite ratte,” and she got jokingly angry and bit his neck with those slightly long teeth. Once, while playing, she bit him too hard, so he was left with a bruise of a purple-reddish hue on his neck, and he was very proud of it—a mark of his adult life with a real woman in it.

Next, to thicken the effect, I could have written that this guy (obviously a young boy, as this short passage implies) was killed three days (or maybe three hours?) after the events described. He was killed, and the rat who ran across the square, who probably saw him as well as he saw it, survived and lived quite a while by rat standards. But I'm not going to overdramatize. Maybe I just want everyone to stay alive, or maybe that's just not the point at all. Maybe it's about those slightly too long, rat-like teeth that bite but instead of tearing apart give someone pleasure. Isn't this where we find one of the most sophisticated dialectics of pain? And isn't this the kind of pain an artist experiences every time they takes up their precarious, thankless labor, once again biting into marble, silicone, or whatever else they has stashed away in his studio for which they hasn't been able to pay the rent for three months? How long would a rat's teeth have to be to leave a bruise on an artist's neck to make them forget their debt?

We seem to have reached the end, and there is only one thing left: to do what I promised at the beginning, which is to put all these disassembled, scattered, disconnected pieces together into something as slender and shiny as a marble column. There seemed to be too many questioning sentences in this text, and it also seems that I was writing about the artist Courbet all the way instead of writing about the artist Guillermo Ros. But I should probably admit that I didn't do it by accident—although it wasn't a deliberate decision, either. It just seemed to me that, bound, like a rat king, by the same problems, tasks, ideas and ecstatic dreams, we all at different times become Guillermo Ros, Courbet, or a rat crossing the Vendôme Square, and the difference between us can be as difficult to find as subjecting a block of marble to our efforts. Guillermo Ros seems to have succeeded in subjugating it by making it into a column and then destroying it. Can this act of violence point to the true structure of our relationship (with each other, with ourselves, with the museum where we go or where we make an exhibition)? Perhaps yes, perhaps not, or perhaps the artist did not intend for this to happen

(remember?—artists are like children). We can grit our teeth and accept the fact that the artist has once again deceived us by throwing us a rat instead of a marble statue, and we will probably get even more disturbed if we spot a barely noticeable bruise of a purple-reddish hue on the neck of the contented artist.

A violent parable: the column and the rat; stone and nightmare.

(Or when architecture expels sculpture)

Nuria Enguita

A plinth with two exhaust pipes, and a stone that looks like meat; stone like skin or entrails; and the awe-inspiring figure of Toguro, in the exhibition *Troquei Whey Por Um Gol Quadrado*, 2019. Or the imagery of a bestiary: monstrous dogs, like the artist, like ourselves, in his show *Però no tinc temps per a aquesta merda ara mateix, com si m'importessin els concursos de pixades entre monstres*, 2020. Now – here – rats with Damascus steel teeth and marble excreting from their bodies. A combat against the columns that are the institution. The work of Kentaro Miura in his imaginary, grounded in Berserk, a hypostyle hall and an impossible struggle. The architecture of the museum and the dream of the sculptor.

It was explained by Juan Muñoz in his “Notas afines a tres” (“Notes on Three”), written in 1982 on the occasion of the exhibition *Correspondences 5 Architects 5 Sculptors*: “Gordon Matta-Clark, a former architecture student, conceived sculptural activity as the act of opening a series of circles through floors and walls inside various buildings. This action, which permitted light to pass from one side to the other [...] through ellipses and circles hollowed out of the building, might well have been a sign of alarm for those who postulated a dialogue between practitioners of the two disciplines.” And he refers to a long divergence: Chillida and Beuys against the Guggenheim of Frank Lloyd Wright and the “disdain” it expresses towards the objects that are to inhabit it, or the abstract combat between Richard Serra and Mies van der Rohe, or Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers at the Centre Georges Pompidou. The scale is not the same, but the conflict is: the occupation of space.

Rats that devour pillars and are devoured by the pillars. *An Exercise in Violence*, says Guillermo Ros, and we do not know by whom or on whom it is inflicted. A dispute for space between architecture and sculpture, between institution and life. You climb the stairs in the gallery and a rat, half concealed, peers down at you from above, and you already know you will be a witness rather than a viewer, rather than a member of the public. The scene you are immersed in is one of conflict more than play. An ancient and anthropological fear, a tension that is corporal, and specific current issues: the artist and institutional neglect (and other eternal themes included in that image); nature against civilisation; and the very animality of that civilisation. The distance of the symbolic opens up the sense: from the heaven supported by the Columns of Hercules to the coat-of-arms of Spain, traversing the piece of eight and the dollar, from the Parthenon to the Capitol. “Daughters of numbers”, “handmaidens without knees”, “with a temple over their eyes”, wrote Paul Valéry in his beautiful *Canticle of the Columns*.

Somebody might have seen here both Kentaro Miura and Bosch “the disbeliever, who hides his lack of faith beneath jests,” as Quevedo would say. Or as Guillermo Ros says: the gargoyles, winged dragons and centaurs, monsters and semi-human figures and snails, goats and boars... the bestiary and the scenes sculpted on Valencia’s old silk exchange, the Lonja de la Seda (or de los Mercaderes), or some (more terrible) ruins by Bellotto or Canaletto. But here, in *An Exercise in Violence*, the columns have no capitals or acanthus leaves. There is no ornamentation whatsoever. It is their functionality that is under threat, and the abuse of an instrumental rationality that is being placed in question. There is an intimation of a social and personal collapse as well as an architectural one. Column or tree, “axis mundi” from the base to the

capital, from the root to the top: the union of heaven and earth, gnawed at and interrogated. The rats exude the marble they devour, and this scenario, produced with the enormous physical effort of working in stone, is perhaps proposed as a coprology of art, a radical iconoclasm.

Besides researching and conversing with history and with its collection, and besides pursuing its international vocation, the IVAM has the duty and commitment to be present, and not merely as history: to work alongside active artists and support contemporary production, close in time, context and geographical proximity. Today we are doing so with the production and publication of the catalogue *An Exercise in Violence* by Guillermo Ros. However, this support will continue to develop in various ways, not only in connection with this exhibition but also helping to sustain the creativity of our community in research, production, exhibition, diffusion or debate. The commitment of the institution is not restricted to guaranteeing the access to culture, and in its efforts to mediate and communicate with society, the museum is not only the custodian of a patrimony (which must, of course, be investigated). The IVAM's goal, as in this instance, is to be a driving force in the production of contemporary art and thought.