

Bartomeu Marí
Portrait of the Real through Absence

Since the late-1980s, the work of Ignasi Aballí has developed around two apparently contradictory or at least very different lines of practice. The first of these is the exploration he began at the beginning of his artistic career into minimal activity, miniscule gesture and the most imperceptible modification, a concern that reveals an anti-formalism he shares with other members of his generation. The term “generation” is used here to express the idea of a “community”, perhaps artificial, of Southern European artists, spectators in the battles between formalism (gestural, material) and conceptualism. The second line Aballí has followed is a cultivation of fiction as material and as a means of locating his work. In this, he has much in common with those who, in the late-1980s, helped to place film and video at the centre of the art scene. From painting to the object, from the object to its representation, from ready made to photography and from photography to fiction. These are very much two-way journeys undertaken to explore both the roots of understanding, which grow beneath perception, and the nature of artistic practice towards the end of a century surrounded by controversies about the death of art, the disappearance of criteria for beauty and stylistic revivals and references. Aballí eschews the comfort of style to take on the painstaking and laborious role of the scientist who must invent the very object of his science.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the art scene sublimated the domain of painting, converted into an excess of images, trends and stylistic groupings, as the predominant technique. While art continued to be rooted in the post-expressionist and abstract practices that have existed for so long in Spain, German and American painters had helped to turn art into a geographical area, one with evident physical qualities. This turned it into a problem of matter and form. Through inertia, matter and form became complementary: it appeared that one particular form corresponded to each different material. And later, with all other paths exhausted, came the explorations of limits, as if this were a country or a geographical landmark. Over the closing decade of the last century, a period marked by the explosion and fragmentation of art, the picture and its component parts became a practical battlefield. Material and form gave way to discourse and narrative. Contemplation was displaced by comprehension. Content took the place of formal combination, and the unspeakable – as it referred to the abstract – became pronunciation and reading. The language of the cinema, in particular in video format, restored the presence of photographic realism and the moving image.

Either emptiness or fiction. Either nothingness or the invention of a reality that could be described but not physically pinpointed. Either the mute, imperceptible action of the passing of time which, more than eroding, builds, more than extracting, contributes something, or the arrangement of a narrative architecture to turn it into something that explains, into an organiser of metaphors in which the literary and the cinematic are mixed. There are no actors in Aballí’s fiction, or at least we see none on the stage; there are, however, situations, situations drawn from the spirit of the patient writer.

In the late-1980s, object, word and image found themselves on centre stage, at the heart of the problem, the focus of attention and discourse in a way they had never been before. Invention – which dominated the photomontages and collages of the early part of the last century – was replaced by an excess of media: television, press... the burgeoning electronic media. The age of excess had specific correlations in an artistic creation that was becoming more and more the victim of parasitic advertising languages that scattered its aesthetic components all around. Aballí’s work from this time also

drinks of the excess of images and discourses of the moment, seeming to seek a counterpoint, the negative of this quantitative increase, to find intensity of content. Aballí takes as his own the modernist maxim of “doing more with less”. Against the shock or surprise of vision, the artist proposes the continuing perception that should be prolonged in memory. Against speed, he invites us to slow, thoughtful reading.

Object, word and image seem to articulate Ignasi Aballí’s entire artistic production, simultaneously and without hierarchies amongst them. But they are not interchangeable: one is not the equivalent of the other, neither are the relations between them relations of correspondence, but of co-existence, symbiosis.

We can look at Aballí’s work in relation to two traditions that became grafted one onto the other (or one into the other) over the course of the last two decades of the last century: whilst in his early work Aballí employed the practice of the pictoric system, he soon began to move more towards acts and conditions of production that distanced him from the typical problems and configurations of those times, from investigations into the limits, the frontiers of representation. Intrigued and fascinated by the contradictions inherent in what can be represented, Aballí began to cultivate the oppositions between reality and fiction, or hyperreality and materiality. Though apparently neutral, Aballí’s works are in fact infused with sharp, uncomfortable and sometimes bitterly critical content about the world around us. On the one hand, we find works in which the artist disappears as a subject and allows the accumulation of dust or the sun’s corrosive action on the materials to form them. On the other, we are confronted by an artist who meticulously collects, inventories and arranges information from the newspapers, gathers images reproduced to infinity or pays homage to the anonymity of others, turning them into the creators of illegible images. Also illegible are, in *Rètol* [Billboard] (2005), the key words the artist presents, in such a way that they repeat the loss of meaning caused by repetitions within art’s subdialects. Taking as his starting-point the anodyne nature of the colours in universal catalogues, the artist produces *Carta de colors* (ideologies) (2005), in which he enumerates the ideological or political connotations that these colours have acquired through convention. Acquired connotations, subjective yet accepted over time, seem to “decorate” and domesticate thought. They can also spark off associations of highly unexpected meanings.

Absent and present as subject, in his more recent work Aballí links the abundance of images around us with the scarcity of meanings we can attach to them. The formulation of meanings for images appears to be a protected territory that the artist seeks to make public and available to the perceiver, for whom, in the end, the work is intended. *Revelacions* [Revelations] (2005) is a video recorded in a laboratory devoted to fast photographic development, and where we see the sheets of images emerging from the developing machine. The speed at which the rollers go round call to mind thoughts about industrial production, about the serial nature of objects produced. “Mechanically”, the machine develops images captured “by the hands and eyes” of individuals, who also remain anonymous here. The work does not explore questions of identity: we know nothing about the photographers themselves, nor would this add to our understanding of the piece. The images do, however, make us think about the history of photography, a chemical technique, artisanal in its origins, that has since turned, having become popularised, universal, into a digital process in which there is neither chemistry nor development, neither products, nor workers, nor machines. The development process, its industry, its machines, the time required to produce and process everything, are all disappearing. The actions or consequences sought by the artist are those that leave traces, that is to say, that leave our environment, that have an existence, that we can only recognise in the rest. Similarly, *0-24 h* (2005) gives the machine, in this case a

security camera in a museum, the task of revealing to us actions that take place there whilst the centre is closed. We already have the chance to witness events that occur in the museum whilst it is open to the public, but Aballí closes the circle of perception by producing a 16-hour film that enables us to see the “dark side of the moon” at this museum. This is a definition through enumeration, through inclusion of individuals (in this case units of time) of his universe; in a hyperrealist narrative of inaction, the work condenses the perception of the anonymous onlooker and that of the watchful eye that seeks to ensure that nothing happens.

Newspapers provide ineluctable proof of the fleeting nature of time. To hold a daily newspaper in our hands is to accumulate traces of reality. The present lasts the distance of a glimpse, returning the next day with a new edition. *Calendari* [Calendar] (2005) narrates the elapsing of a whole year through the photographs published every day on the front page of a particular newspaper. Displayed with neither captions nor identification, as if they were the numbers of days on a 12-month calendar, these images provide an X-ray of the whole month, a narrative on the outstanding personalities and events of each day.

Meanwhile, whilst Aballí’s interest in the cinema’s efficacy had already been revealed in such works as *Desaparicions* [Disappearances] (2002), perhaps one of his most lyrical pieces, further confirmation is provided by two recent productions: *Sinopsis* and *Próxima aparició / Próximamente / Coming soon*, both dating to 2005. The cinema’s efficacy lies in its ability to create plausible, unreal but credible, worlds, worlds we can believe in. *Sinopsis* [Synopsis] uses a typical resource of 1970s conceptual art: a combination of images and texts that neither illustrate nor explain each other. This incongruence, however, is false: each panel in the work contains the image of equipment, tools or instruments in the places where they are used when a film is being shot: lighting, sound equipment, ladders, tripods, wiring, false walls... These are the signs that work takes place, that the activity involves many people with different roles, tasks which are complementary and, of necessity, orchestrated, timed. But the (obscene) scenes are empty. It is night, or Sunday, or it the work has been completed and they have all gone, leaving everything lying around on the floor. At the bottom of the panels we can read synopses of films as they appear in the newspapers, in English and in Spanish. Some synopses coincide, but most do not. It could be any film. We know neither the title nor the names of the artists involved. There is no star system, no year, no nationality. The synopses remind us of scenes, characters, relationships or events, but in reality they inform us about the unknown. They try to seduce us into going to see the film in question. Synopses are always written once a film is ready for screening, but Aballí’s work sets them side-by-side with traces of the filming process itself. Before and after are brought together to close a circle that offers us the possibility of gaining access to a new fiction, but one which also includes all those fictions that we will never see, perhaps –returning to *Desaparicions*– those fictions that never actually became reality.

This could form an approximation to the work of Ignasi Aballí, now the subject of a first critical review by these three European institutions, a retrospective only due to material necessity, but which seeks to be interrogative in essence. “Interrogating”, exploring, the work of a young artist also involves two types of exercise: one of analysis and another of invention. Artworks exist, but are also imagined; they are constructed in an indeterminate future. And although many of Aballí’s works are remade each time they are shown, they are remade with their materials, under the conditions of perception and interpretation that are always associated with them. This exhibition is, in a way, an experiment. It is the result of providing a location for a work based to a large extent on

the placelessness of art, and is imbued with the idea that art does not have a natural place, from which it originates and where it finally ends up; rather that the work has to be constructed in its own place, it must find the seat from which it is to be seen. For this reason, at each of the presentations that form part of this project, jointly prepared by MACBA, the Museu de Serralves and the Ikon Gallery, the very arrangement of the exhibition will undergo contortions and different forms of organisation. It is not a question merely of arranging the objects in the exhibition spaces, though: rather it is an inversion in nature –concerning architecture, time and culture – at each venue.