

Memory, Sight, Expectation G rard Wajcman

What's happened here?

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It's not often this question occurs to someone going into a museum. Usually you're wondering what's going to happen. You enter an art space ready for an encounter, with no fixed expectations. The event is still to come, even in the case of the art of the past; because in a museum there is no event other than the works and the encounter with them. The works are full of promise and museums are basically a kind of love nest, specifically intended for encounters in which the promises of art can be fulfilled. This is why museums tend to be forgettable, being entirely devoted to the discreetly zealous service of the works: the White Cube Service of today's hotel-museums.

And so, entering a normal museum in which everything seems normal, we don't often find ourselves wondering what might have happened. Signs of outright devastation or manifest violence – massive damage or destruction, wreckage or rubble suggesting an accident or a terrorist attack – would spark your attention at once. But in their absence it's rare to come upon a functioning museum with its works apparently intact and have your eye caught by some elusive detail – tiny maybe, but odd enough to be noticeable – that generates a vague uneasiness and has you looking round and wondering, just what's happened here? As if, for some reason it would be hard to pin down, something called for a shift of attention from the work as such towards what might have happened to the work. Or rather, as if the works on display bore with them, within them, the trace of some invisible event – mysterious and incomprehensible, in the near or distant past – of which they have been the victims or the witnesses. As if the works of art were, silently, what's left.

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Why are these bookshelves empty?

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[Malgastar / 19 large pots of white paint / first examination] To come in the door of a museum and see twenty large, open buckets of white industrial paint on the floor is somewhat perplexing. First misgiving. As if the museum was still being got ready and we'd arrived too early for the Ignasi Aball  exhibition: this is a modern museum, they must be adding the final touches to the white cube. Or else the exhibition is over and they've already repainted the walls for the next one.

Whatever the case, the visitor has the feeling there's been a hitch, a mistake: if he's not early, maybe the museum, the artist, the curator or the technical crew are running late. A few pots of paint left on the floor and seen from a distance are enough to generate uncertainty and misgiving, opening up a sort of time warp between too soon and too late. This work – because it is a work, and seemingly a very simple one, called Malgastar – possesses the strange power to suspend the present, the present of the work that is the time of viewing it, and thus to suspend the work itself. And in doing so, it puts the viewer in the position of seeing something other than a work, of seeing what he's not supposed to see: a time preceding the work, the preparations for a work or an exhibition, the behind-the-scenes business of art and museums. A vertiginous temporal upsetting, in which the work of art becomes a machine for looking at the past. You could call this a "witches' brew", thinking back to the opening scene of Macbeth where, as if the curtain has risen too early, the audience surprises the three witches in "a desert place", making their deadly predictions: we should not have been there, should not have seen what happens before the actual story begins. A stolen vision in which we intrude

on a secret not meant for us – an art secret. A magic moment.

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The works of Ignasi Aballí are written into time. The works of Ignasi Aballí write time. The works of Ignasi Aballí disturb time. Maps of the past, they rise out of kinds of time warps: between before and after, yesterday and today, between what's seen and what happens, between now, before and after. Or rather, offering themselves in the moment of seeing that is our present, it is they themselves that open up the time warps. In all their seeming immobility, the works of Ignasi Aballí are works in motion. For as Aristotle says in *Physics*, Book VIII, "Time is the number of motion" in terms of "before" and "after".

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[the missing pot hypothesis] The arrangement of the pots of paint in three straight lines – two lines of ten and one of only nine – raises the suspicion of an empty place, of a pot that is missing or has maybe disappeared. Has it been used then thrown out? Has it been stolen? For the moments there are no grounds for any specific hypothesis. But something has happened.

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[Malgastar / 10 small pots of white paint in a vitrine / first examination] There's real sorcery, a real witches' brew in the work of Ignasi Aballí: with simple pots of white paint he can cast the viewer into a time preceding the exhibition. However the visitor immediately notices something else, next to the big buckets of paint. Other pots, but smaller and under glass in a vitrine, like genuine works of art. Abruptly we're back in the present. With the vitrine, that classical exhibition device, everything indicates that we're looking at a work, or several works – precious objects, at least. Yet uncertainty moves in again. Second misgiving. This work, also titled *Malgastar*, is made up of little pots of white paint, artist's paint: of the raw material of art, of what's needed to make a work – of painting. The work must thus be intended as a work within a work – of painting – the way Vermeer, Courbet and Picasso used to be able to paint themselves painting, palette in hand, in their studios. But here there's a time/art split. A work of art shows what's needed to make a work of art, except that in contrast with the Vermeer, Courbet or Picasso examples, strictly speaking there's no work, no painting in sight: all you can see, a little further away, are a vague, pale sort of rubbed-out square on the wall, a canvas covered with dust, a square of weirdly painted glass (a mirror?) and kinds of windows painted with transparent varnish. [Pintures transparents (Transparent paintings)]. The work – of painting – isn't there, or is no longer there, or is not yet there. The painting is there potentially, still shut away in the pots like the genie of Aladdin's lamp (even if "shut away" puts it badly, the pots being open).

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And then the matter can be looked at in another light. In the vitrine these painter's materials are displayed at the same time as they are set at a distance, shown as testimony pulled out of the past or sent back into the past. There's a split in time, because at the very moment when, inside the vitrine, we discover a work in the visual present, the work is projected into the past. The thickness of the glass suffices on its own to generate distance in time. The vitrine changes the very nature of the object: under glass these are no longer pots of paint, they are documentary material, processed by the museum and put on show; and we look at them, in spite of their modernity – this is acrylic paint – with the feeling of contemplating ancient, almost exotic historical remains (Roland Barthes said that the only exotic thing we have left is history). Rediscovered pots of acrylic paint: a dig in a painter's studio; an archaeology of the art of the 20th century.

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A detail already noted backs up the hypothesis that we're looking at shards of the past: the paint is completely dried out. Dead paint in the pots. A new mark left by time. And new witchcraft, because the vitrine effect is enough to turn a museum of contemporary art into an archaeological – or ethnographic – museum. A museum of contemporary art becomes a museum of the tangible history of painting, or a museum of potential painting.

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After all, strictly speaking this set of pots is a work of painting. But how do you categorise such a work of painting? As a still life: Still Life of Painting? As a naturalist work: The Nature of Dead Paint? Or as a Rembrandt-style history painting showing the body of painting being dissected: Dr Aballi's Pictorial Anatomy Lesson?

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Pots of paint enshrined under glass: might these be true relics of the art of the 20th century – or relics of the true art?

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Might we be faced here with a meditation on the death of an art form? A fact worth recalling is that since the beginning of time, no art form that has ever been born has ever died.

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There's another, intriguing detail: a detail within the detail that doesn't fit exactly with the archaeological hypothesis, or that complicates it singularly. The pots are open and the paint is dry inside, but all the pots are full. They've never been used. This calls for additional examination, for a closer look.

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[Malgastar / second examination] A fresh hypothesis arises. If the pots have been opened and the paint has never been used, this means they can't be considered simply as remains, as bits of leftover paint. Paint's destiny is to dry, but on canvases, after use. This paint has never been used to paint anything at all and has dried right there in the pots. Malgastar in Spanish means "to waste". Every picture leaves behind its pile of corpses, of pots and tubes of paint. Our discovery of full pots fits with the observed absence of any picture. Nothing has been painted. These pots full of dried white no longer contain any potential painting: no work has ever emerged and none ever will emerge from this crusted paint, whose potential will never be realised. These pots of paint are the useless remains of an aborted art. They have produced nothing and will produce nothing. Except themselves.

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The fact that the pots are open and the paint has dried before being placed on a canvas leads us to conclude that these are no longer anonymous pots – mere "pots of paint" – and that this is not "painting" shown as documentation, as a fragment of history. There's someone behind all this: these pots are the sign that someone has been here, opened the pots and let them dry. They are not evidence of some art of the past, for they themselves have a past, a history: they have belonged to an artist, they are the pots of paint of a painter, but of a painter who has not painted. Which means that "painter" is maybe not the right term here: as a painter the person concerned has, in the final analysis, done nothing except buy some pots of paint at an artists' suppliers, and opened them. And that's all. So we shall say that someone – let's call him "an artist" – has bought them, and opened them, and for some unknown reason let them dry. But why? If there is no painting, there has been no painter. We can fairly surmise that the pots of

paint on show belonged to the artist Ignasi Aballí, who does not practise painting.

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The open pots of paint are the sign that someone has been here. They're like a signature, a bit like the one van Eyck added to the Arnofini Portrait, just under the mirror showing his reflection: *Johannes de eyck fuit hic*, he wrote, preferring *fuit hic* ("was here") to the traditional *fecit* ("made this"). But he did make the picture, which is there before our eyes, together with the painter-witness in the magic mirror in the background. In *Malgastar*, nothing has been made: the open pots are the witnesses of a pictorial non-act. Full of unproductive matter that has given rise to nothing, they are a signature without a work, a signature that says, "*Ignasi Aballí fuit hic* (was here), and *Ignasi Aballí non fecit* (did not make this).

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Suddenly the work changes its meaning, and even its nature, because we are no longer in the domain of the idea, of critical – and perhaps fractionally melancholic – thinking about Painting. This is no longer a meditation on an art form: we are confronted with a Mallarmean work revealing, in a museum, the time preceding the museum, the time of the studio we are not supposed to see; spotlighting, in a public place, objects taken from the private, solitary place – closed, dark, mysterious, almost mythical – that is the artist's studio. But even more so, what is being shown to us is not just objects taken from inside an artist's studio: this is painting abandoned, fucked over, trashed. Painting without a picture. Pots of sterile matter and wasted time. Pure outlay.

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What's happened here?

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Why have these pots been opened and not used? In fact, what from afar, at first glance, looked like a conceptual work on "Painting", is turning out little by little to be an autobiographical work on the private life of an artist, putting on show his secret thoughts, his desires, his queryings, his driftings and maybe his sufferings. These open pots of paint could be the remains of and witnesses to a time of self-questioning and doubt. An abandoning? A failure? The fissuring of the dried paint in the pots is like the irregular movement of thought, a drawing of the mental landscape inside an artist's head. Ignasi Aballí has opened these pots and left them there, unused. A waste. Maybe he was waiting for inspiration, maybe he forgot them and moved on to something else, maybe he went off travelling? And maybe during that time he dreamed of becoming a painter? He did not become one. With their lost paint these pots are witnesses to lost time; but this lost time is also a time of art. An artist has bought pots of paint, taken them up to his studio, opened them and forgotten them. Maybe during this time – days, months, years? – he stayed there in his studio in a state of bafflement, watching the paint dry in the pots. Maybe his only activity as an artist, during that time, in his artist's studio, was watching the artist's paint dry in the pots? It should be mentioned here that also found in Ignasi Aballí's studio was a bare canvas covered with dust; to go by the thickness of the layer of dust, it must have been there, without the artist touching it, for months, years [*Pols (Deu anys d'estudi)*, 1995-2005 (*Dust (Ten years in the studio)*)]. A waste. But what was wasted, and who did the wasting? Wasted paint? Time wasted not painting? Maybe this work is the work of time lost, of the time of not making the work. A kind of madness (Michel Foucault defined madness as the absence of any work). But the artist's lost time is maybe also the regained time of art. Between the time spent by the artist in his studio while the paint dried in its pots, and this time when he displays

the pots as a work in a museum, there is the pure shift from time lost to time regained: that time during which, like Proust writing the long novel of his own “wasted” time, the artist makes a work of his lost time.

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This work is the opposite of Courbet painting himself painting in *The Artist's Studio*, of Vermeer showing himself from behind in his *Allegory of Painting*, of Rembrandt's self-portraits or of Velazquez in *Las Meniñas*, where they show themselves brush in hand: *Malgastar*, a work of painting, can be seen as the painting of the absence of the painter, of the time during which Ignasi Aballí was not painting. A self-portrait without portrait, *Malgastar* could be called *Portrait of the Artist as a non-Painter*.

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Open, unused pots of paint: maybe these are first and foremost testimony to a desire for painting. Pure desire for painting.

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On Ignasi Aballí's empty bookshelves there was doubtless the complete version of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the book by Panofsky in which the author talks about van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, a volume on Vermeer and a catalogue of the 1960s work of Bruce Naumann, which boiled down to walking up and down in his studio wondering what he should do as an artist.

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But why are these bookshelves empty?

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[Correcció, 2001] Self-portrait without image. It's logical that a work hung on the wall further away should attract our attention. A totally white square. A masked mirror, in fact. Strangely covered with a coat of opaque matter, as if painted (except that this white doesn't look like painting), the mirror is betrayed only by its edge, by its rim. In other words no one can see himself in this mirror; it reflects nothing. We could say that having been made a support it entirely loses its character as a mirror. But is it the support that counts here, or the painting? The two together, surely. Mirror without image. And as it is painted, it is also a picture without image. Would Arthur Danto, author of *La transfiguration du banal*, speak here of “vacuity of mimesis” or “mimesis of vacuity”?

But why paint on a mirror, or paint a mirror? Blind mirror and picture without image: can't you paint yourself on it all the same? Since Alberti and his treatise *Della pittura* of 1435, the mirror has had a core role in art history, to the point of being considered the very wellspring of painting. Drawing on a totally new foundation myth, Alberti makes Narcissus the “inventor of painting”: to paint, he says, is to kiss (*abbracciare*) the mirror of the spring's surface; this fundamentally loving gesture possesses an inherent, irreducibly “narcissistic” character that makes painting always, more or less, painting of the self. A similar principle is to be found in a saying attributed to Brunelleschi and fashionable in Quattrocento Florence: *Ogni dipintore dipinge se* (“Every painter paints himself”). In Alberti's terms then, once the mirror is covered, made opaque, Narcissus falls into the water and the wellspring of painting dries up.

There was a period when Arnulf Rainer erased his own portraits. Ignasi Aballí erases our reflection, the image to come; he erases all reflections, all images, including his own. The question won't go away: blind mirror and picture without image: can't you paint yourself on it all the same?

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Behind *Malgastar*, the signature-work of the painter who has not made a picture – a work in some respects the reverse of van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* and its skilful play with the background mirror, in which the painter’s reflection is perceptible – it was logical that Ignasi Aballí should hang a blind mirror, in which the painter is not reflected.

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Even so, to paint a mirror white, to draw the curtain on one’s image, is still to paint oneself: could there exist a truer portrait of the artist as non-painter than this? The second portrait of its kind. Narcissus is dispatched into deepest darkness and Alice prevented from going through the looking-glass. Wonderland is closed. This is an art without illusion, an art that abruptly brings us back to this side of the world.

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[Correcció, 2001 / second examination] On closer inspection the white matter used to cover the mirror turns out not to be paint at all, but Tipp-Ex, the famous German office product for masking and correcting typing mistakes. Thus the name Tipp-Ex – from *Tippfehler* (“typing mistake”) often shortened in German to *Tippo*, and *ex-*, the privative Latin and Greek prefix – holds out the promise of the elimination of the “tippo”. So once again the issue is pots of white, but here they’re missing – obviously, because this time the white has been used, has been spread over the one-square-metre surface of the mirror. How many bottles of Tipp-Ex must it have taken to cover an area like this?

But the real question lies elsewhere: are we really aware of what have to be called the philosophical implications of Tipp-Ex? We’re looking at a product whose underlying concept is difficult in that it is basically dual and contradictory. On the one hand the product enables concealment and on the other it is intended to make visible: for by allowing us to cover a mistake it makes it possible for us to write over the top. Hiding what was originally written on the support – the paper – it in turn becomes a support on which a new mark is going to be inscribed. In this way Tipp-Ex fulfils the same function as a screen or veil, masking the visible while putting itself on show, offering itself anew as a surface. Thus Tipp-Ex conveys the idea that every disappearance is indissolubly linked to an appearance: discussed below, the video *Proximamente* seems to propose precisely this idea for our understanding. Tipp-Ex, however, reveals a potential greater than that of the screen or the veil. Since it does not settle merely for presenting a contradictory state of being, for allying two opposed and irreconcilable actions – concealing and showing – it introduces a quasi-divine power to whiten: the power, in short, to restore or initiate a virginity. In terms of its concept Tipp-Ex is not only a means of correcting, of making good a mistake; it is a means of erasing it, purely and simply, as if it had never happened. The ultimate retouching. In its commonest use as a remedy for mistakes Tipp-Ex can quite justifiably be considered as attaining to an unmatched theological power: that of wiping out sin, up to and including original sin.

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Going against the grain of the usual function of art, here we have a work that does not so much add to as subtract from the visible by withdrawing all image from it: in this case from the mirror. To his own cost Freud had borrowed Leonardo’s distinction between painting and sculpture: that one works *per via di porre*, by adding, and the other *per via di levare*, by taking away. Here, by painting the mirror, by adding a kind of paint, Ignasi Aballí initially and paradoxically takes away. He corrects. *Correcció*, the name of the work, could be seen as suggesting punishment, asceticism, penitence, a determination to obscure and even humiliate the work by making it disappear. This is not the case, however. Far from setting out to administer a correction to badly behaved

mirrors, Correcció presupposes the act of correcting – in the sense of repairing – a defect. In optics we speak of the correction of lenses, of correcting vision to improve and sharpen it. What is involved here is covering a mirror so as to make people see better. To direct their gaze elsewhere. Towards this side of the world.

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Brecht once issued an edict in the manner of the laws engraved on Moses' Tables: "Thou shalt not replace the world with an image of the world." A law of art that states that images must not mask the world, but make it visible. Ignasi Aballí obeys this Brechtian commandment.

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Is there anything surprising about linking the apparently opposed acts of veiling and seeing? Not only has art long made play with the powers of the hidden, it has gone further and unveiled the truth of the veil. In this respect art is philosophy. Since antiquity and Pliny's famous duel between the painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios, the dialectic of veiling and seeing has been perfectly understood – and in a most exact and deep sense: the veil thrown over the visible excites the urge to see, to see what lies beyond and behind the veil. The veil as a summons to seeing. This could lead to an art of the eye that goes beyond the image. Veiling a mirror would be the equivalent of triggering the urge to see. A fertile paradox: here subtracting image means adding to seeing.

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Obviously there remains a question: what lies beyond? We know the reply of Parrhasios, triumphing over his rival Zeuxis when the latter asks him to draw back the veil and show his painting: beneath the veil there is nothing, because the veil is what Parrhasios has painted. With trompe-l'oeil he has fooled Zeuxis. Ignasi Aballí's reply is an extension of this work of artistic truth-telling: beneath the veil is the reflection, our own image or, rather, the absence of our own image – for beneath the screen the mirror remains empty. The concealed image could provide the truth of our image, i.e. its illusoriness or its vanity. At the same time the work is not there to administer a lesson in humility – neo-Platonic or Christian – concerning the illusoriness or vanity of mirrors, of images, of our image, and thus punish Narcissus. Once again this is not at all the case. This mirror coated with a white surface reveals the truth, but the truth of the work: that behind every work there is the viewer. Duchamp used to say that it is the viewer who makes the picture. This work by Ignasi Aballí demonstrates what Duchamp was saying.

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A strange question to ask oneself, all the same: what might lie behind a work? Firstly because here the work offers a white surface, a plane, and at bottom the work is nothing other than this white surface. Do we imagine the sheer quantity of work it must have taken to paint an area of one square metre with the tiny brush set in the stopper of a pot of Tipp-Ex? But there's a crucial nuance here, which is that by using Tipp-Ex instead of paint, Aballí did not exactly paint a white area of one square metre: he effaced one square metre. In other words he subtracted something, thereby forcing the assumption that there was something beneath the plastic coating; that there was, beneath the virgin surface and prior to the virgin surface, already something. As a rule, when we find ourselves looking at a picture, we wonder what has been painted on it. So here, faced with what presents as an empty picture, we're ready to move on; but out of curiosity, maybe, or in the interests of a clear conscience, we read the plaque – "Correcció, Tipp-Ex on mirror" – and suddenly we have to stop: there's something underneath. The covering-up demands to be looked into: in painting over the mirror with Tipp-Ex, Ignasi

Aballí has revealed the underside of the painting. And he has done more: he has created a past for this painting, created what lay beneath it – a history or even a prehistory of the white surface that is generally supposed to be the base of a picture. In doing so he compels the supposition that there was and is something under the empty, virgin surface. He focuses our attention not on what is to come – what is going to be painted on this surface – but on the time preceding it, on what is behind it and what predated it, i.e. on what is there before the least little thing is painted. The work demonstrates visibly that, to use Hubert Damisch's expression, there is depth to the picture-plane and something beneath the visible. There is something behind the elementary form of the visible that is a blank, empty, virgin surface. But what is shown by Ignasi Aballí's painted mirror – which appears to show nothing at all – is that what lies beneath it is not exactly nothing: it is us, looking at ourselves. In the mirror, virtually, is the viewer, the virtual image of the viewer: in other words, what lies beneath is the person standing in front of the picture. Seemingly a work of pure surface, *Correcció* turns out to be a complex interlocking of planitude and depth, of above and below; with the ultimate revelation being that the true underside of the work, that which lies behind it, is the viewer. The white surface of *Correcció* confronts us with our own gaze: a blank mirror shows what we can never see in a mirror.

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What's happened here? Once again, is there not, yet again – beneath this sophisticated image and vision apparatus, beyond the complex, rigorous mechanism of this work – the trace of an event? Why has this mirror been hidden? Faced with this veiled object we might feel a sense of bereavement. We know that in certain burial practices, notably among Jews, it is customary to cover the mirrors in the house of the deceased. Here something has been lost. Our image.

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[*Gran Error*, 1998-2005] The difficulty of describing this work: white square on black square, white square on black background, black square set on white background and covered with white, erased black square under white square, or black square laid under white square? It is neither a minor nor a pointless detail to stress just how Ignasi Aballí's works, for all their apparent simplicity, regularly seem to pose major difficulties in terms of actual description. It is not just that they always stand revealed as more complex than a passing glance might lead us to believe; rather it is as if, each time, a gap, a fracture, begins to take shape between what we see and what we can say we see. This happens so frequently that Aballí's work can be suspected of situating itself in the breach between what is seen and what is said. Certain pieces do this quite explicitly. Far from seeking to close or cover this gap, the work of the artist may consist of ceaselessly pinpointing it, of creatively drawing on the faultline between what is shown and what can be said about it. It is doubtless also this factor that makes it so difficult to speak of his oeuvre as a whole, to transcend the material singularity of the individual works. Even if it is clear that his oeuvre is informed by a rigorous logic in which each work has its place, the artist demands that, in the interest of following his ideas through, we look at the works one by one, in their absolute singularity, as if each were a monad containing the totality of his thinking. Likewise each work demands, for its full implications to be grasped, that we accord the closest attention to its specific mechanism, its tiniest detail. Here it's not God who is in the detail, as Aby Warburg's dictum put it, but all of art and all the depth of a thinking embodied in each work and in their smallest material detail.

In contemporary art terms Aballí's work calls for the kind of venture undertaken on behalf of the Renaissance by Daniel Arasse and the "close-up history" of art he set out

to construct in his book *Le Détail*. Aballí's use of singularity runs directly counter to the too-widespread taste for overviews and syntheses, fights against the taste for totalisation and generalisation. This one-by-one rationale doubtless explains, at least in part, why the Aballí exhibition is scattered through the museum: in preference to a single, homogenous, continuous space, the artist has opted for a discontinuous presentation that takes the visitor through every part of the museum as he or she follows the path leading from one work to the next. The unity of the exhibition is thus created by the visitor's itinerary; and the unity of Aballí's work is achieved via the visitor's gaze and its temporality. So now the question regarding Gran error can be put again: white square on black square, white square on black background, black square set on white background and covered with white, erased black square under white square, or black square laid under white square?

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Like it or not, whether we try to describe this work or simply look at what is painted on the wall, there can be no escaping the reference to Malevich's *Black Square on a White Field*. We know that the latter, starting with its title, raised a problem of description. Moreover *Black Square on a White Field* was not the title chosen by Malevich, who had originally named it *Quadrangle*; it was the picture's description – an approximate one, even if coming from the artist himself – that quickly took over as its historical title. A dual problem opens up here, firstly in relation to the disparity between the word "square", with its purely geometrical referent, and the black shape as painted on the canvas. From a distance this shape seems to meet the stated geometrical requirement; but a closer look reveals that it is not square at all and that its edges, far from being ruled up, were created freehand, like any purely painterly creation. Secondly, the notion of the "field" on which the so-called square is supposed to be set is deeply problematic: once again, a closer look makes it clear that the surrounding white area was, at least in part, painted after the square.

So: what is a background that comes back into the foreground, and sometimes encroaches on the central form? Gran error provides the answer. But whatever the case, when we look at Malevich's pioneering work today, almost a hundred years later (it dates from 1915), it seems to contain in its dark window a part of the art of our time; just as a pot of paint contains, potentially, all the painting in the world. To a greater or lesser extent the works of art of an entire century seem to have emerged from this one, thus realising the potential of a simple black square painted on a white field. There is a kind of paradox here, however, for this fulfilment of its creator's ambition to "liberate art from the ballast of the world of objects", this masterpiece of "mimesis of emptiness" intended to represent the absence of the object, went on to generate an incalculable number of art objects. It was thus the prototype of a fertile kind of painting – at the other extreme from open pots full of paint.

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And so a century later we have an artist setting out to Tipp-Ex-out the black square. Gran error. But what strikes us straight off – it's even a little funny – is the blatant failure of the venture. Under the Tipp-Ex and far from being obliterated, the black square is as clear as the nose on your face. A little like those cases of hasty retouching in painting – you see it most often in frescoes, which call for fast work and leave little margin for error – where the underlying image shows through. A pretty unusual situation in a museum, this: an artist deliberately putting a mistake on show. A black square on a wall: like a stain on the white of the museum cube, a stain someone has tried to cover over by repainting with white, the colour of the wall. If we forget about the Tipp-Ex for a moment, what's involved is covering a shape painted on a surface, a

backdrop, by trying to cover it with the backdrop: it boils down, then, to the decision to repaint a white wall on which a black stain had appeared. But here's the stain rising out of the depths and showing through the coat of white supposed to mask it. An indelible stain, like a lapse, a crime whose trace can't be wiped out. What's beneath – the stain, the error – makes its return into the world of the visible. Little by little the idea takes shape that there's a black square oozing through the museum walls, and that there's no getting rid of it, as if it's there to haunt art and the visible forever. But where is the error, the big error? Where is the lapse, the crime? In the fact of the square staining the wall, or in the determination to get rid of the stain? If we called in Dr Freud he would be pretty much justified in seeing this work by Ignasi Aballí as an exact image of repression – which is to say, of the failure of repression. There's no getting round the fact that repression always fails, more or less: that what it's all about. We'd like to be able to efface everything, slap on the Tipp-Ex of oblivion and consign this or that problem to the dark night of the past or the trashcan of history; but just when you think you've got rid of the problem, back it comes – usually hitting you full in the face. We tend to forget that what is forgotten necessarily makes a comeback, and in a bent, deformed and often disagreeable way: this is, precisely, what's called the symptom. Like a black square gradually resurfacing on a wall, our forgettings infiltrate our memory, our thinking and sometimes our bodies; like a black square veiled with white, the ghost of the past comes to haunt a present afflicted with reminiscences; like a badly concealed black square, the hidden always finds its way back into the light. The black square might be the unconscious of contemporary art, and there's no forgetting that. Gran error lays bare the unconscious of art, the work of repression: which is the same as saying it lays bare the failure of repression. Black square on white field, the symptom of the century. Gran error, the exact portrait of the symptom of the century.

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The Tipp-Ex bottle with its little brush is like a tiny pot of paint. Maybe painting is now a means of obliteration, and the act of painting one of elimination. Where Thomas de Quincey wrote *Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts*, Aballí seems to have tried to write a book entirely with Tipp-Ex: *The Fine Arts Considered as Murder*.

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What's happened here? — Looks like a crime, an image murder. But botched.

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Gran error recounts the ineluctable return of painting. Indestructible painting. Not only is painting not dead, you can't kill it. So what Aballí suggests is turning a foul-up, an error into the stuff of art.

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[Finestra, 1997 / first examination] Window open onto. Painting considered as an open window: this was the invention, the fundamental upheaval in the history of art and the eye brought by the Renaissance and the coming of the picture – a modern form of painting, as opposed to the medieval polyptych. This invention had an inventor, this upheaval a theoretician: Leon Battista Alberti. In the treatise *Della Pittura*, in which he elevates Narcissus to the rank of inventor of painting, he is also the first to declare that painting a picture is opening a window to look outside. The birth of illusionist painting. Ignasi Aballí paints windows. The window: a recurring theme in painting. Here they are reduced to individual panes, painted directly onto the wall with a transparent acrylic gel a bit like the varnish used to protect paintings. In other words, here we have a painting without paint, reduced to its varnish, its transparent surface. So you see the wall quite clearly. You can't get windows more open than these. Strictly Alberti windows. If the picture is an open window, to paint an open window is literally to paint a picture. You

could say that here Aballí is doing literal painting. You could also say that he is a literal artist. Which has to be understood two ways. Firstly, he's a totally literate artist, one who deals with letters and the written in forms including lettering [Rètol], the book [Biblioteca], literature [Sinopsis and Desapariciones] and lists [Llistats and Inventari]. He's also an artist who takes things to the letter, which forces us to look at his works the same way, i.e. to decipher them. From some points of view they seem mysterious and indecipherable, but the problem vanishes the moment you realise all you have to do is read them to the letter, just as you have to respect the importance of the details. This art of taking things literally produces the kind of poetic truth also to be found in the work of Jean-Luc Godard. Just taking things literally. This simplicity sometimes turns out to be strangely complicated for us, for a time at least, because we are usually driven by the deep-seated – and perhaps deeply religious – belief that things always mean something other than what they say. And yet a window painted with transparent paint on a wall shows clearly that (1) a painting is an open window to be looked through, and (2) that this window of painting opens onto a blank wall. In other words, Aballí's windows, with the economy of means that never ceases to strike us in his work, sum up the truth of the window of the picture, the truth of the illusion of illusionist painting. The truth of the illusionist picture is that it opens onto nothing: nothing other than a dense screen. In this way Aballí shows what Cézanne achieved for modern painting: that the picture is not a window, but a surface that lets you see, a surface something is painted on. Aballí's windows demonstrate the truth of the illusion. In this respect they are works of philosophy, for there is no greater truth of the illusion than the one that says, this is an illusion. In short, his windows lift painting's illusionist veil and lay bare its material truth: that behind the paint there is only a wall, and behind the wall a succession of other walls. Aballí's windows open onto the truth in painting: that there's nothing to see – except illusion.

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Ignasi Aballí is someone who shows. The art of Ignasi Aballí is an art of showing. Generally speaking, it can be said that artists offer something to look at. Ignasi Aballí offers nothing to look at – or what he offers to look at is nothing. In this respect he shows; and in this respect showing and offering something to look at, far from being synonyms, can be opposites. When Leonardo da Vinci's St John points towards the sky, he is showing not only something we don't see – the sky beyond the picture – but something truly invisible and not even yet in the sky: the coming of the Messiah. St John is showing the Image to come (as St Paul calls Christ). His gesture is one of announcement, expectation and hope. Aballí shows not only that there is nothing to see, but also that there is nothing to expect. Whence his windows, which open not in a wall but onto the thickness of a wall. A far remove from the vaguely mystical windows of Edward Hopper, in which women seem to be endlessly questioning an empty, mute sky: Aballí shows blind windows that show that beyond there is nothing to see, nothing to expect. Aballí shows the silence of the heavens. He shows as an atheist. He shows the truth: that the sky is a painting and that behind it there is nothing to see, for as far as the eye can see. Rothko began laying bare this truth in 1945 with a curtain falling over the painting; Aballí shows it in his play on transparency. Window open onto the truth of a wall – that's reality: you run smack into it.

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In the silence of painting – *muta poesis*, silent poetry, as it was called during the Renaissance – Ignasi Aballí shows the silence.

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Showing is a complex act, and difficult to define. It belongs to the field of the visible, it

calls pretty much for silence – a pointing – yet it is also in some way a language act. After all, pointing is the gesture performed by every word. Invisibly, a word makes something visible. In naming a thing, the word is a way of pointing at that thing. And conversely, showing something is the same as naming it, designating it. The pointing finger and the word have in common the power of demonstration. But there is a strangeness about this operation: for if the word shows the thing, it shows less the thing than the absence of the thing. To use a word is to call up the absence of thing it names. The word is the ghost of the thing. In short the word in itself takes the place of the absent thing. It empties it out, it creates a void. In this sense to name something is to keep it at bay, empty it out, almost make it disappear. The word-thing relationship is not exactly as in Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, in which the name of the chair coexists with the actual chair (and the image of the chair), because the truth of the matter is that the name of the thing as it were murders the thing. The name "absents" the thing. In saying the thing, each word is, rather, saying its absence.

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The conceiving of the word as a monstration and the monstration as a saying – of a proximity between the act of showing and the act of language – can be seen, or heard, in the Spanish word *Revelaciones* used by Aballí as a title of a work. Derived from classical Latin, it means both "show" and "demonstrate". What we see in *Revelaciones* are photographs of people in the act of showing. Photographs apparently taken from newspapers which show the act of showing. Like the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Santiago brandishing photographs of their missing sons, daughters and husbands, like the walls of New York covered with photos of the missing the day after 9/11, these images display faces of people who are absent, and perhaps dead. The silent gesture of showing the image of a face: there is nothing to be said. Presence of absence. To show is to demonstrate.

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Showing is an act, presupposing a subject – someone who shows – and someone to whom the subject shows. The act of showing is a silent recounting between subjects. These photographs with their images of ghosts are ghostly images themselves. Focused on the gesture of showing, they are themselves reduced to this gesture. Of the people showing photographed faces we see not the faces, but only their hands holding up the images. The shown faces hide the faces of those showing them. Those who are showing are made invisible by those they show. They are no more than their gesture: as if these photographs of the vanished made them vanish, as if they themselves were nothing without these faces, without this father, child or wife they show as vanished. Those who show them are almost not there anymore. There are times when there is nothing left to do or say except show. Facing the world, holding up the image of the missing. Hands that show; a mute cry.

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[Finestra, 1997-2005 / second examination] Here again the philosophical depth of Ignasi Aballí's art conceals the artist's presence in his oeuvre, behind his oeuvre. Even in these quasi-abstract windows painted with transparent gel he shows himself, secretively. There is a kind of modesty about him that once again means looking carefully at the works if we are to discover the artist's discreet but indispensable involvement. And if we look closely at the painted windows, noting their distinctive shape and their size, layout and number – eight – it becomes clear that under the generic title *Finestres* Aballí has not simply painted windows: he has provided an exact representation of the eight windows of his studio. These are not just windows: they are his windows. The ones through which the light comes to him each day, through which he looks out or gazes

vacantly. Thus the work is also something of a basic, radical gesture, that of taking the artist's private space into the public space of the museum. Maybe Aballí conceived his window project in the light coming through the windows of his studio. In short, he is reproducing on the museum wall the windows that enabled him to imagine an exhibit that would be the representation of windows. True, you can say of any artist that in exhibiting he brings a part of his space into the museum, even if only in the form of the works conceived and created in his studio. But this work involves no transporting: it consists solely of creating, in the space of the museum, and as a painting, that vital part of the studio constituted by the windows. Like Matisse showing his window at Collioure. This painting does not set out to deceive. As has already been said, when shown as illusions these paintings speak the truth. They are illusions that speak the truth. If you want to, you can always transport real windows to the museum; but you could never transport the light of those windows. This is why windows can only be represented in absentia. And represented windows are only illusions of windows – their image. Light will always be lacking, for no image produces light. Light is present here only as reflection on the transparent gel used to depict the windows; it's like a memory of light. False paint windows opening onto the museum walls: blind windows, opening only onto themselves and the absence of light.

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[Rètol, 2005] Here Ignasi Aballí, signwriter, shows himself a literal artist. Made of letters, this paradigmatic work is at once literal and illegible. At least at first glance. Visibly and illegibly written on the museum's glass wall, it gives you the impression of being there not for you, but for someone else – someone doubtless on the other side of the glass. To take an example from a painter already mentioned, this reversal is somewhat reminiscent of the Annunciation in van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece, in which the scroll bearing the angel's salute to the Virgin is written backwards. Thus the message is legible not for the worshipper but for someone behind the painting: the mystic lamb, the Christ, the living god painted on the other side. Here at the museum, the passers-by outside are the living gods. To put it simply, seen from inside the museum, the line of writing, which looks like the kind of information commonly found at the entrance to public places, seems to be written backwards: as if to be read from outside, doubtless to induce passers-by to come in or to inform the visitor of what he's going to see inside. This could, of course, have the effect of pushing a person already inside to go outside and read what he is going to see inside. This little game could last quite some time, but in fact these considerations regarding inside and outside are pointless: a closer look reveals that Aballí's "informative" scroll is not a back/front reversal. In search of an explanation of why it can't be read normally, we find ourselves thinking of Leonardo da Vinci: Aballí's been indulging in mirror-writing. Not so. The text is not a mirror-image, and anyway it's clear that the letters – each one of them – is written normally. Each letter is legible; but the words are not. Finally we understand that the order of the letters has been reversed. The lateralisation of the writing has been reversed, as if our alphabet now had to be read from right to left. The result is that reading becomes deciphering and we find ourselves children again, stumblingly putting together each word letter by letter as we learn the rudiments of reading. Using a simple coding process to restore obscurity to language, Aballí slows down reading and meaning. In a way he makes us "illiterate" in our own language, as if our own tongue is becoming foreign to us; and we're forced to decipher like so many Champollions looking at the Rosetta Stone. And as we lose the overall vision of these works whose form we don't recognise, we have to wait until we get to the last letter of the word to know what it is. SARBALAP. SDROW. Once you've got the hang of it, the writing

becomes decipherable, but slowly. We come to a museum to see; and here, from the moment we enter and by the simplest of means, an artist forces us to read, and with maximum attention.

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Rètol sets up a visible/legible dichotomy. This written line leads us to postulate a kind of law long known to graphic artists: less legible means more visible. The less writing can be read, the more it tends to become drawing or painting. Art against meaning.

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One of the results – and doubtless one of the artist’s goals – is extremely funny: this written line which, from a distance, looks like a perfectly ordinary bit of information on the glass, runs totally counter to communication. It’s incommunicable writing. Illegible at first glance, this skilled piece of signwriting must be a nightmare for the museum’s communication department: the work of an idiot, a madman or a dangerous saboteur. As wrong as you can get. Nobody would be ready to pay for this kind of communication.

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To sum up, if we take it to the letter, the work at the entrance to the exhibition issues a dual warning to visitors: ¡NÓICNETA! ¡ATENCIÓN! NOITUAC ! CAUTION ! Art and Communication are not going in the same direction – and everything you are going to see in this museum must be taken to the letter. Ignasi Aballí: literal artist.

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[Inventari (Llengües A-Z)] An encyclopaedic list of languages, from “A to Z”. Complete, but demanding to be taken to the letter. When you’re looking at this enormous list of 6703 languages spoken in the world today [according to Barbara F. Grimes, Editor, Ethnologue, 13th edition], of course you can read them – the ones listed – one after another. Maybe wondering where Telegu is used, or Marathi, and which is the world’s most spoken language (Mandarin Chinese – the most spoken, but not the most universal); being surprised to learn that there are 650 languages in Indonesia alone; trying to find out how to say “Do you have the time?” in Kinyarwanda, Sesotho, Bichlamar, Tetum, Kemak, Galoli or Damar; speculating as to the existence of the verb “to be” in Warnang, Heiban, Laro, Logol, Otoro, Shwai, Moro, Tegali or Tinga, or the exact number of Khoisan languages. As you contemplate the supposedly complete list of languages spoken in the world, you can also be tempted to look for the missing ones, ones Aballí might have forgotten. Is Tongan there, and Nynorsk? Indeed they are. Well, for the moment: for like all lists of names, this long list of languages has something deathly about it, like an immense war memorial. And the feeling of mourning is far from absurd, because part of the urge to draw up a complete list of the world’s currently spoken languages is the anguish of seeing some of them die every day: UNESCO has declared 50% of all existing languages “endangered”. The desire here is to preserve, in its immense diversity, what is known as humanity’s intangible heritage.

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Looked at in another light, the long list of languages Aballí has inscribed in black on the wall could also be an image of the Tower of Babel. Babel 2005, if you like. With its tall columns, this table of names is basically the written equivalent of Breughel’s painting modelled on the ziggurat of Babylon. Genesis 11 tells us,

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, “Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar. And they said, “Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.”

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said "Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city." Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

To write down the inventory of the Earth's 6703 spoken languages is to trace the image of humanity's confusion and scattering. But above the great tumult of languages rises the voice of Mallarmé: "Languages are imperfect in that although there are many, the supreme one is lacking." If men now speak different languages, it's certain that one is missing – the "supreme" one, the unique language which in itself would be the truth. *Inventari (Llengües A-Z)* has its roots in Babel and Mallarmé. This picture of confusion and scattering, this monument to global cacophony, this inventory of all the languages that exist is first and foremost the inventory of the language that does not exist, of the language that is lacking. A monument to language in the plural, it is also a monument to the Unique Language, the absent, lost language. A language without a name, it is *The One That Is Lacking*. Of course this lost language, the language of Paradise spoken by Adam and Eve, does not appear in the encyclopaedic list of all languages. But is the missing language, lacking among all the others, really absent from this work by Ignasi Aballí? If we look carefully, really hard, it's there: this language that preceded all languages, this missing language that generated the host of other languages, is the white field of the wall on which the artist has inscribed the names of all the languages. Black letters on white field: he has painted the clamour of the world on the field of silence of *The One That Is Lacking*. The white vibration of the field of this enormous page is like the imperceptible trace, the fossil echo of the Big Bang of the language universe.

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For Mallarmé, the missing language made poetry an obligation. Poetry would "remunerate the defect of tongues", aiming at the unique language that would in itself be the truth. God being dead, the artist alone is capable of "remunerating the defect of tongues".

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[Pols, 1995] A mark has been discovered on the white wall of the long second-floor gallery, opposite the glass wall looking out over the city. Neither painting, nor writing, this long, dirty grey trace runs the entire length of the lower part of the wall. You're surprised the cleaning staff hasn't got rid of it. As you get closer, the long, nebulous trace turns out to be made of an enormous number of smaller ones: another work calling for a double – distant/close-up – point of view. Close examination of the more or less clearly defined marks making up the long grey cloud reveals that each is the imprint of the sole of a shoe; and that the trace situated some 50 centimetres from the floor and running for several metres parallel to the floor is made up of a host of different imprints. Which means that nowhere do we see those paired traces left by a walker. And anyway, how – unless they were acrobats or Fred Astaire, capable of dancing on the ceiling – would people have been able to walk on a wall? Each imprint here is unique. If we exclude the notion of deliberate vandalism, the only likely-seeming explanation for this trace running along the lower part of the wall is that one after another, a considerable number of weary, uncaring visitors had stood with their backs to the wall, facing the other, glass wall, with one knee bent and one foot raised behind them. Resting a little. Literature fits with immobility and the prone position: the comfort of a bench or the

pleasures of the bed; the theatre and the cinema call for the sitting position; but art is looked at standing upright, and requires walking from one point to another. Art for the art lover is a sport that involves a lot of walking, and visiting a museum can be an Olympic event. Jean-Luc Godard once filmed a tour of the Louvre on roller skates. Whatever the case, it's a well-known fact that painting is hard on the legs, and this could explain the long grey cloud on the white wall. Pausing opposite the museum's big glass wall, one foot pressed back behind them, the visitors may have been taking in the landscape, the view of the city. These imprints are the sign of vanished presences: the sign that someone, some people, have been here. The long trace of sole marks on the white wall proves that they came to the museum to see the Ignasi Aballí exhibition, and that after visiting the first rooms and discovering these strange works – an obliterated painting on a wall, an illegible text, pots of dried paint – they took a break on the second floor and spent a moment looking at the spectacle of the city, outside the museum. Maybe asking themselves, during those few minutes, what might have happened. And then they left.

People. Traces of feet on the wall. It makes you think of Warhol's Dance Diagrams, pictures of schematically reproduced dance steps placed on the floor to indicate the placing and movement of the feet. This substantial work brings painting down from the wall to the floor, from the vertical to the horizontal, from the high to the low, from the dignified to the pathetic, from art to entertainment, from the pure to the soiled, from sublimity to dust. Except, obviously, that with Ignasi Aballí the floor you walk on rises towards the white wall you look at, the filthy foot towards the art, the low towards the high, the horizontal towards the vertical, the soiled towards the pure, the concrete towards the picture rail, the dust towards the sublime (Aballí often works with dust). But all the same, it makes you think of Warhol's Dance Diagrams.

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[Desapariciones II, 2005] A succession of film posters, like the old, sometimes rare ones you find in some cinema bookshops. They're stored in one of those wall-mounted racks that lets you look at them one after another as if you were leafing through a gigantic book. Seemingly what all these posters have in common is that in one way or another, they bear the name of Georges Perec, the French writer who died in 1982. What's more, they all bear titles of books by Georges Perec. You may have seen some of these films; there are others that you recall only vaguely and still others not at all. In some cases you didn't even know that there was such a film. You might be surprised that Perec had worked on so many films, but of course you can't know everything. Made as advertising – to draw the public – the posters belong to the cinema and the memory of the cinema. You could write the history of the cinema with them. But a poster also includes something of our own personal history, of the involvement one can have with the cinema and with certain films. A poster has the power to make us remember a film we liked or didn't like. It's what's left of a film: an objective, material trace of its existence – there must be films of which the poster is all that is left – and above and beyond the cinema as such, what remains of a film for oneself, a subjective trace. In both cases, objectively as well as subjectively, the poster belongs to the cinema. There's something about the cinema that makes it an art of memory: we remember films – especially, of course, those we've liked. And remembering films, the pleasure of remembering a film, belongs to the film, in the same way as the silence that follows a work by Mozart still belongs to Mozart. Remembering films is an activity that is part of the cinema: Serge Daney used to say that discussing a film after the screening, while smoking a cigarette in a bar, is a part of the cinema. In this sense that we can describe the cinema as an art of memory. Hardly surprising that the cinema was born in

1895, exactly the same year as psychoanalysis. This art of 24 images per second, based on the psycho-optical faculty called retinal persistence, has itself a very real power of persistence in our memory. This singular feature of the cinema is most remarkable when we think of other art forms – painting and the plastic arts in general – which have the strange property of having no inherent persistence. We don't remember a picture: we remember – and pretty vaguely – its image, we maybe remember a detail, we remember its impact on us when we saw it; but the picture itself, the painting, evaporates and is lost in the memory. The force of a plastic image only finds its culmination materially, not as remembered image: it demands direct visual contact – a physical encounter – with the work. There has to be a struggle. That's why we have to walk. That's why we have to go back time and again to the pictures we love. That's why even the most consummate art historians, with the most infallible memories, like Daniel Arasse – people who own all the art books, all the photos, all the slides – still travel thousands of miles for another look at a painting that really counts for them, and which they know by heart. And that's also why we never stop making fresh finds in the paintings we think we know the best. We only make these discoveries with the work in front of us. Who remembers that the figure in the Mona Lisa is flanked by two columns? Go back to the Louvre and check it out.

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Strangely, some of the Georges Perec film posters call up no memories at all. Easy to say, I remember *Récits d'Ellis Island*, I remember *Retour à la bien-aimée*, I remember *Série noire*, I remember *Les lieux d'une fugue*, I remember *l'Œil de l'autre*, I remember *Un homme qui dort*. But who remembers *Une femme en morceaux* or *L'abominable pardessus*? Then you start to think: if there can be films that have vanished without trace except for the poster – if the poster is what remains, the tangible trace of a film – there could be nothing simpler than to fabricate a film by fabricating a tangible trace, to bring a film into existence by designing a poster. This would be a new way of making movies – and not really expensive, either. And if films can generate dreams, if it's common practice to make movies in our heads, then with nothing more than a title we're capable of dreaming up a film. Mentally we could screen the feature *Une femme en morceaux* (“A Woman in Pieces”) with, as the support, *L'abominable pardessus* (“The Abominable Overcoat”), Perec's adaptation of a novel by James Hadley Chase. Two very good films, even if you can't get everyone to agree on the plots or, for that matter, on what you actually see. But whatever, here we discover the extraordinary fictional power of a simple image and a few words on paper. Ignasi Aballí is clearly a great admirer of Georges Perec; so much so, in fact, that he's ready to bolster the writer's filmography with additional films. All of them, it must be said, excellent.

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An odd title, after all, the one given to this work: *Desapariciones* (“Disappearances”). For when you weigh up the creative potency of these posters, capable as they are of conjuring up films that do not exist, the title could just as easily be “Appearances”. Here Aballí is making use of a dual potency of words, literature and images. If the value of cinema is its capacity to show what is not seen, and if the value of literature is its capacity to make audible what is not said, this work has the power to show with words and make audible with images: simultaneously the words on a poster are capable of making the silent voices of a film audible, while the fixed image is capable of making visible its absent, moving images. The poster represents the combined power of cinema and literature.

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Desapariciones. The title is a direct echo of one of Georges Perec's major novels, *La*

Disparition, published in 1969 and translated into English as *A Void*. But the *Aballí* title effects two grammatical shifts: from singular to plural and from definite to indefinite article. We know that the Georges Perec novel *La Disparition* contains a very real disappearance: for not once in its 300-plus pages do we find the letter *e*, the most frequent letter in French (and in English). This does not mean, however, that Perec simply eliminated *e* from his novel; rather, he succeeded in writing an entire novel in French without recourse to a single word containing the letter in question. While hailing the achievement – it is said that at the time Perec’s publisher read the manuscript through without noticing anything untoward – we might be tempted to see it as a brilliantly pointless literary exercise. Not so. On the contrary, this is a significant and tragic book: it suffices to point out that *e* is the only vowel in Perec’s family name, a Central European Jewish name originally written in Yiddish. (It is also, in passing, the name of a famous Yiddish writer, Isaac Loeb Peretz, who lived in Poland until his death in 1915, and whose grand-nephew Georges Perec was.)

The point is that, written in Yiddish, the name has no vowels – the language being consonantal and written like Hebrew. The crux of the matter is that the true focus of *La disparition* is on the disappearance of the Jews, of a language once spoken by over 10 million people, and of members of Perec’s own family; and that the novel’s subject, beneath its ostensible story, is what filmmaker Claude Lanzmann named the Shoah, the extermination of the Jews of Europe. In his own disappearances, in his posters for unlikely films, we note that *Aballí* does not include *La Disparition* as a film title: in other words his disappearances, in the plural, have made *La Disparition* disappear. We could say that the true subject of *Desapariciones* is disappearance, and that the true focus of these multiple disappearances we leaf through like a gigantic book, is in fact an absent, unnamed book. *Desapariciones* is the disappearance of *La Disparition*.

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A work whose nucleus, whose beating heart, would be something that’s not there. To make absence present, without masking it, without putting anything in its place; to give to what’s not there, to what has disappeared, its place in the visible. Here we’re talking about the fundamental force of Ignasi Aballí’s art, and a vital artistic issue: that the unrepresentable can be part of representation.

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[Llibres, 2000] A work called “Books” – and no matter how hard you look, there’s not a single book. Just a piece of furniture, an empty set of bookshelves. At the same time you can’t say there’s not the slightest trace of books. Not even that: for, slightly sunken in the middle, the wooden shelves have preserved the memory of the weight of the books. There have been books here. There remains only their absence. A memory.

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What’s happened here?

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The books are missing. Nothing is more real than what’s missing. Look at the little kid, ready for bed, who’s lost his security blanket, and listen to him cry: at that moment there’s nothing more important in the whole world than the miserable scrap of fabric he sucks on to go to sleep. Nothing is more real than what’s missing. Look at these empty shelves that seem to sag under the memory of the books that have been there. That’s all you see: the absence of the books. It’s hardly the beauty of the piece of furniture that strikes us. And what’s more it’s a standard model, apparently the set of shelves specially designed to hold a famous encyclopaedia in forty volumes. So here we have shelves rid of the weight of all the world’s knowledge. Cleared down to the last book. “Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book,” wrote Mallarmé in *The*

Book, Spiritual Instrument; here everything ends up in the absence of books.

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So what is no more than a simple set of bookshelves truly appears here as a high-tech artistic instrument. No longer used as shelving, put on show empty, it fulfils but a single function: it shows. It shows its empty shelves. That's all it's there for: for the eye, and for attracting the eye to its deserted shelves. So it has a function in the field of the visible: to show. This little set of shelves shows all the knowledge in the world: knowledge now travelling out through the world into which the volumes of the encyclopaedia have departed. But then again, there is no proof that these shelves were used only for the volumes of an encyclopaedia; the only thing we can be sure of is that there were books on it. These shelves show a vanished library. Looking at this empty, ugly piece of furniture, you suddenly have the curious feeling that it contains a secret relating to the artist: maybe the secret of his life, something quasi-biographical that yields the meaning of the choice he made one day to be an artist and enter a museum and show pots of paint. Maybe he was the one who emptied the bookshelves, as if, one day, he had to get rid of the books in order to become an artist. Leaving these empty shelves that show that there were once books here. Thus it seems to call an exclusive, fundamental choice into play: the utterable or the visible, literature or art, saying or showing. It's here that we can see Ignasi Aballí as a Wittgensteinian artist. In Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, published in 1921, we find a number of propositions that, taken together, make possible the structuring of what could be called a logic of art, one that could be summed up as follows: there is what can be said and there is what cannot be said; what can be said must be said; what cannot be said must be shown. According to the resultant doctrine, then, the rule of what is shown begins precisely where the rule of what can be said ends. There is something impossible to be said. And we could conclude that this something impossible opens the specific space of art, which would simultaneously have the obligation and the power to make visible what cannot be said. This is what Aballí's bookshelves are voicing, in silence, with their showing of the absence of books. They are voicing the fundamental silence of the artist, that is to say the choice of showing. Showing and not saying. These empty bookshelves are perhaps the artist Aballí's farewell to books. This does not mean, of course, that as a person he has even thought of giving up reading, books, knowledge or literature; that this highly literate, voracious reader might ever have opted for ignorance, philistinism or obscurantism. It simply means that the choice of being an artist implies a fundamentally silent way of working: showing – not saying. Showing books, when the occasion calls for it. But the books he shows are present in his works only in terms of the visible: absent and leaving a yawning void [Llibres, 2002]; or shown in images, in photographs in which they are also inaccessible, having been covered with a sheet of plastic [Biblioteca, 2002]; or in wooden sculptures; or ultimately no more than traces of dust on a wall [Enciclopedia, 1994]. Books are there, but as leftovers, visible and illegible. The books bearing our memory have disappeared.

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We can't read all the books, but as long as they're there, in our libraries and on our bookshelves, memory is in good hands. We can't remember everything, but books do. Someone can always open them. They are the vestiges and the guardians of memory. What happens when the bookshelves are emptied, the remains of the past and the vestiges of memory are swept off them? What remains of memory when all the books have disappeared? Suddenly the emptiness of the shelves becomes the blankness of our own memory. The empty shelves make up the great library of our forgettings. But in the silence of the books we can also hear a call to memory. The vanished books are perhaps

inside us. It is up to us to open them, to remember – or not to forget.

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At the end of the exhibition, punto final, the ultimate encounter with the empty bookshelves. Looking at the boards still bowed by the weight of the books, you have the feeling they've just been cleared, only a few minutes before you came in. There's a mystery, something must have happened. It makes you think of the opening of Stevenson's novel *The Wrecker*, with the handsome schooner *Wandering Minstrel* seemingly adrift and abandoned in San Francisco Bay. Yet there are no lifeboats in sight, no sailors in distress. A boat is lowered, men board the schooner. A strange calm prevails. No sign of damage, no mess, and from the bridge to the hold not a living being in sight. The entire crew has vanished. And yet in the wardroom are bowls of coffee, half-full and still warm. As if, for some unknown reason, the occupants had hastily abandoned ship. The wind of an insoluble mystery blows through this novel that Borges and Henry James ranked among their favourites. What's happened aboard the *Wandering Minstrel*? And what's happened in the great white ship of the museum? Nothing seems out of place, there's no mess anywhere; but why are these bookshelves empty?

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Given the absence of visible damage, of any sign of violence indicative of some deliberate, perhaps criminal, activity, and the impossibility of providing the least explanation for the various mysteries of the works, all the museum spaces were put under video surveillance at night and during closing hours, when there is no one moving through the exhibition [0-24 h, 2005]. The resultant video is a look at the absence of looking. It might provide the answer to a question not asked often enough: what do exhibition works do at night, once they're alone? The question might seem weird, and even crazy, yet Aballí's video forces us to look at a fundamental aspect of looking, one that seems so perfectly natural to us that as a rule we pay it no heed. It seems normal to us today that the works should be shown to us in the light, concealing nothing and without the least evasiveness – like everything in the world, in fact. The subjects-viewers-citizens we are control the way things are looked at. Everything visible – every object, including works of art – must submit to us. Nothing hidden anywhere. We don't like hidden stuff. It bothers us. We want to see everything. We demand to see everything. Nothing must escape our eye. In this light seeing becomes an inalienable right. The idea that sometimes we might not see everything seems a near-intolerable infringement of this basic right. And to exercise our rights we endlessly provide ourselves with ever more sophisticated means of seeing everything. Video surveillance cameras are one of the major features, and not the least disturbing. There are some of us who want to see at all costs, illegally breaching people's privacy if necessary. The newspapers and reality TV show that the problem is not just police power being used against us, or Big Brother watching us: we are ready to violate our own privacy, without being forced and even delighting in doing it. True, all Ignasi Aballí has done is film a museum at night. This raises only the minor question of what happens when no one is there – but also, while we can be sure they want to be looked at throughout the day, of knowing what the works get up to. The existence of the museum, a modern institution, is a major manifestation of the hold of the viewers on the visible. The museum embodies our determination that the works, like everything else, should be subject to our gaze, when and where we wish. It seems natural that things let themselves be looked at, yet everyone knows it wasn't always this way: for instance, painters may have painted works not intended to be seen – by us at least. The museum is the

institutionalisation of the right to look, rising in our cities like a monument to the absolute power of our gaze.

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Once again, in this work by Aballí a time warp opens up. In the present tense of the exhibition and the presentness of the eye, he presents the image of an earlier time, of an exhibition at night without visitors, of works without eyes looking at them. Showing the past, these images could show what may have happened: but they work with suspense too, generating in us, as does any film, the expectation of some coming event. What's going to happen? The art of the time warp is palpable in all the works: an art that is there to make the past present; an art with the power to establish the past – past events – in the present, in the moment of seeing; an art in which the works create an expectation of something to come. Aballí builds a strange Time Theatre, with past and future emerging into the present of the works. In this sense we can speak of him as an “Augustinian” artist, for as St Augustine said, “There are three times: a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future... The present of things past is memory. The present of things present, sight. The present of things future, expectation”[Confessions, XI, 20 (26)].

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Artist of the trace and artist of time, Ignasi Aballí is in some respects an artist of fiction, literature and cinema, making literature without books and cinema without film. With his works he creates images and narratives – but within us. His empty bookshelves demand to be filled with history, the cinema posters make us invent films. The absent books are a call to memory, and posters for Georges Perec films make us say, “I remember”. Aballí is an artist who makes you talk. Generating speech is a fundamental virtue of art – art being essentially silent. Works of art that show in silence have the strange property of causing speech. You could call the works of Ignasi Aballí conversation pieces: they have the power to make us speak. In this respect, Aballí is an artist of the event. His works inspire us to speak the event, but to speak the event is not to say what happened: for in reality, as Jacques Derrida has said, it is the speaking itself that makes the event, that produces event. Causing us to speak, the work of Ignasi Aballí causes the event.

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But what event? That maybe it's now up to us, each of us, to finally answer these questions: What's happened? And what's going to happen? Questions about what's happened. Up to us, and no one else, to reply, to make the event.

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Isn't that what Ignasi Aballí set out to show?