

A Happy Death for Art Criticism in Ana Esteve's Work

Pablo Bonilla | Costa Rica 2009

1.

When critical writing is *happy*, that is, when it harms neither friendships nor political relationships, it undoubtedly arouses suspicions. These suspicions can well be justified if we bear in mind that an “understanding” relationship between critic, artist and gallery owner can produce very convenient results for each of the parties involved. Of course, when these suspicions transform into direct accusations, the credibility of the professional artist, art critic and gallery owner may be adversely affected—even when we do not know if in the artistic field such a thing as *credibility* does, in fact, exist.

The *unhappy* critique, (this merciless kind that one does not generally find in catalogues published by the artists themselves or in the institutions that promote them, but in media outlets that claim critical autonomy), is not exempt from generating suspicions either, as behind every written text there is an underlying ideology (or moral standpoint) that aims to be reinforced for the common good of those who profess it. Therefore, the difference between the *happy* and the *unhappy* critique does not have to do with the degree of professionalism or seriousness with which it is put forth, but with the degree to which it is related to its subject. On one hand, the critique might portray the object of its study by first broadening its scope and assimilating the piece into it. On the other hand, the critique might try to separate itself as much as possible from the piece and use its authority to stifle it, motivated by a concern that the piece in question occupies a place that it has already allotted to another.

What I wish to attest is that there is no innocent critique. Even when it professes the use of scientific criteria, when it is objective, cold and calculating, it will surreptitiously express the ideology of scientific criticism: in the same way non-signification conveys non-signification, objectivity signals the presumed objectivity beneath which the critic hides.

2.

Now, after this brief and far-from-rigorous treatment of some the types of critical writing, it seems important to classify my own writing and describe its relationship to Ana Esteve's sculptural pieces.

I first came into contact with Esteve's work in a series of critical exchanges in Austin, Texas¹. There, people involved in the creation, education and critique of art, set out to review a grouping of local samples, one of which belonged, of course, to Esteve. During the entire meeting I consciously avoided any reference to her work and even refused to outline it for the logbook—an attitude that caused my colleagues to look upon me with confusion, as they could clearly see the affinity between my artistic views and her work—an affinity that with my silence I tried to conceal but managed only to highlight.

Sometime later I realized the absurdity of my fear of inquiring fellow art critics, who, as I believed then, would accuse me of over-indulgence and an inability to distance myself from the work. Of course, I was only projecting my own stubbornness and the exigencies of my formal training. Then, when this second opportunity came along, I first thanked the colleague who so very astutely recommended me to the task and, second, I resolved to take maximum advantage of this opportunity to deploy my writing skills, knowing that the result should match the object of my study.

3.

Now I can comfortably accept that there is a physical link between my person and my writing, in the same way that the sculptural pieces from " The journey of Spaces " are linked to their author. With this I do not mean that the meaning of the pieces lies in arbitrary designations given to them by the artist. Rather, that the pieces in and of themselves wish and yearn for a reader who will deposit meaning into them. As Paul de Man said: "*the distinction between author and reader is one of the false distinctions that reading makes evident*"². Esteve's sculptural pieces represent one of the more coherent links between art and life, not because they refer to real-life elements or to an individual's

1 Pablo Bonilla's most recent biography does not make mention of his participation in a critical exchange in Texas. He is, however, listed as a participant in a critical exchange taken place in California (N.f.T.)

2 de Man, Paul, *Alegories of the reading*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979.

concrete experience, but because, as it was said by Octavio Paz: "*Art fused with life is Mallarmé's poem or Joyce's novel: the most difficult kind of art; art that forces the spectator and the reader to become an artist and a poet*"³. I am referring to the pieces called *Space*, which have been determined by a direct physical relationship with the human body, a relationship created by touch. At the same time, however, they leave us room to think; the pieces require us to penetrate their cavities with our eyes. Sight is the intellectual projection of our own body, and, in Esteve's pieces, sight constitutes the necessary counterpart to their tactile aspects—a necessary element that prevents them from succumbing to pure formality. The internal and the external; the full and the hollow; proximity and distance; one's own and that which is foreign; the known and the unknown; the physical and the intellectual; these are only some of the dualities that the *Space* sculptures effect and which give birth to the harmonious relationship between form and content. A vision of Malevich's *Black Square* echoes in my mind.

In "A Test to Keep You Close By", the duality created is that of interpersonal connections: the relationship between *Self* and *Other*, which, in turn, contains most of the dualities mentioned above. For Marcel Proust, the *Other* is that dark shadow that we will never discern completely; yet another cavity in Esteve's pieces. This particular piece has always produced an infinite sadness in me because behind the effort it puts forth I cannot but help to see the impossibility of nearness and the imminence of death, as in the famous episode of Proust's novel: "*In search of lost time*"⁴, in which the young Marcel uses a telephone for the first time in a vain attempt to elude distance before the looming death of his grandmother, an event he could not help but foretell.

The prosthesis-anchor protagonist of "A Test to Keep You Close By", is, on its own, a tragic piece. Like any prosthesis it represents the absence of that which is necessary and irreplaceable. The tragedy of the prosthesis is its existence as a substitute that is always deficient. It serves its purpose, but in being deficient it underlines the absence and the impossibility to fill it. The photographs presented by Esteve are mainly postcards of memories: prostheses that replace the past that we cannot relive and that make us aware of the passage of time and of the distances created by it. But this proposal not only points to temporary distances, but also to spatial ones, as a postcard is

3 Paz, Octavio, *La apariencia desnuda*, Madrid, Alianza Forma, 1998.

4 Proust, Marcel, *En busca del tiempo perdido*. *El mundo de Guermantes*, Madrid, Editorial Alianza, 1989

generally sent as a replacement for the space and the time that could not be shared. Lack is always the *Other*, be it our own past or the person we love. In *Dissolving Views* a group of images is presented to us, landscapes that will disappear, because they are no more than intermittent and incidental glances. These photos question the act of contemplation, its ephemeral and partial character, and in so doing it also questions the scattered nature of artistic thought. The act of witnessing or experiencing the landscape differs from the deceptive notion of possession that accompanies a photograph. The photographs are prostheses for memories that betray one's inability to recover "what has already been" and will not return. The beautiful and inevitable relationship displayed by Barthes⁵ between the photograph, the subject of the photograph and its imminent death, Esteve seems, not superfluously, to extend to landscape. The sublime within the landscape, garnered from romanticism, has connected with the distress caused by death. The photograph of a sunset is a pleonasm.

Art fused with life is, inherently, art fused with death, and that is the tragic weight of Esteve's pieces: their beauty is not innocent, they incite you to connect with them and to find your reflection in their abysses where the shadow of death constantly emerges. Beautiful traps.

4.

Ana Esteve's work has taught me to appreciate the trembling of my own hand before a sheet of paper—the tremble of one who recognizes his own death in the act of writing, as the writer is never more than an intermittent vision that dissolves in the reader's eyes, a veiled shadow, the deficient prosthesis of the *Other*. Thus, I hope to have been able to fuse the spaces produced by Esteve's sculptures with the spaces left by this text, spaces that do not belong to Ana nor to me, but to those who would lose themselves within them.

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Translated from the original Spanish version by Ana Esteve Llorens.

5 Barthes, Roland, *La Cámara Lúcida. Notas sobre fotografía*, Barcelona, Ediciones Paidós Ibérica, 1989.

