

## In Flight Toward A Brave New World

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The work of an artist is much more than the images that he or she creates, and very often entails a reflection on the ideas in circulation that construct the reality of living from day to day. Engaging critically with a given work in its entirety also involves speaking of what there is behind it, of what sustains it as framework and context, and of the things it suggests from what it leaves unsaid.

José Luis Santalla belongs to a generation that, having started out in the eighties, has used photography as a versatile, ductile tool, in an imaginative exploration of its narrative possibilities.

In his work the series have succeeded one another as a search for ever more radical possibilities. We might think here of those projects in which photography comes close to drawing or to watercolour in landscapes of an oneiric nature (*Manipulaciones* [Manipulations], 1986) or in which duplication, through the introduction of the idea of the mirror, generates possible spaces for the imagination (*Dípticos* [Diptychs], 1990).

At the same time many of his images have tended to construct allegories in which the objects adopt a different meaning and a different use, in a clear purification of narrative lines that derive from a certain surrealist vision and that might be defined as visual photo-poems. This is a perspective of actuation that has attained the status of a style, especially in the work of Chema Madoz.

Having said that, the work of José Luis Santalla has been more inclined to fashion a discourse of stylistic fragmentation that would afford it a narrative versatility from which to address specific themes, tensions and contradictions. The oscillation between the inert and the animate tends to endow the objects with a life of their own, as it also does with the fragments and even the landscapes: this can be regarded as a form of symbolic or allegorical statement that in the most recent series becomes a form of reflection on the world and reality.

It is precisely with Santalla's latest series, *Un mundo feliz* [A Brave New World] and *Fugas* [Flights], that his work has acquired a greater density, bound up with a meditation on the values and the models at work in contemporary society.

The process in both these series premises as its bases the fiction of animating simulacra of values and models of conduct, in the first, and the voiding of the mundane fragments of daily life of human presence, in the second, as a means of formulating a story that is articulated sequentially, as in an episodic novel. Presence and absence become the nuclear axes of a visual statement that lays itself open to multiple interpretations.

In order to understand this development in Santalla's work it is necessary to clarify the evolution of the value system and the construction of the new models of the body, which serves in the last analysis to contextualize the preoccupations of several generations of artists who, in a subtle but remarkably incisive way, have critically confronted the fracturing of values in present-day society.

During much of the 20th century the values—that is to say, the guiding ideas and symbols of society and culture—had a primarily written expression: they were manifested in ideas and, in their more elaborated form, in ideological discourses, developing a voluminous corpus in which

literature reordered and codified the most essential elements. The values reflected a code situated somewhere between individual ethics and a diffuse idea of the common good, over which there hung the weight of the purity of the utopian as their projection into the future, as an ideal framework for overcoming the problems of the present and as a bastion of resistance to the perversions and temptations —authoritarian or totalitarian— of established power. The canon was thus conceived of as residing in the hands of the writers, as an advance guard of resistance and a moral reserve. The text prevailed over the image because discourses were still based on ideas and on the rigour of humanist thought, with its foregrounding of solidarity, justice, equality and progress. The system of values is constructed as a form of resistance on the part of humanist culture and confronts a dichotomy between the pragmatic values of *raison d'état* (economic logic and the survival of a productive apparatus linked to the maintenance of social structures with very clearly defined typologies, from work to the family, the nation or the community) and the supreme values of a humanity struggling towards a better future that will eradicate inequalities and ensure dignity, attempting to establish, beyond synthesis, a balance within a certain harmony.

This is a literary and philosophical utopia embodied by figures as disparate, but at the same time as manifestly coincident, as Hannah Arendt, Elías Canetti, Thomas Mann, Ernst Bloch, Jean-Paul Sartre, Walter Benjamin, Primo Levi, Paul Celan and many others, all tending to define and redefine the human condition.

The devastating destructive impact of World War II, with its sequels in the infinite horrors of the Nazis extermination camps and the Soviet gulags, marked the values of the 20th century as a challenge and determined a reconstruction of humanism from a redefinition of utopia. However, as a response to the perverse ideological utopias of the century, from the late 1940s on the post-war era saw the emergence, first in the United States and subsequently in the rest of the capitalist world, of what has only recently come to be defined as a technological utopia, consisting of a materialistic and consumerist vision of reality and its values. It is precisely with the organization and expansion of material consumption as a solution to political and social problems that the system of values began to configure an increasingly pregnant and defined body of images, in which the typologies are incarnated in vital postures and appearances rather than in ethical principles or attitudes.

The shift from literature to the image as a reflection of the system of values emerged with particular force in the response that Pop art, with its recovery of the commercial object and the advertising image, made to the existential tensions of Abstract Expressionism. At the same time, the 1960s was also a period of documental exploration of photography, coinciding with the massive diffusion of television as a powerful medium of mass communication, effectively bearing witness to what Guy Debord had defined as the 'society of the spectacle'. There was, then, in parallel with a general extension of material well-being on the back of full employment, a democratization of access to consumer goods and domestic appliances, private vehicles and leisure, that from the 1980s to the present consecrated the market-led technological utopia as the undisputed basis of a set of individualistic values.

The change is decisive: humanism seems to have dissolved, like an anachronistic residue of the past, to make way for the consumerist hedonism of appearances; work is no longer an

individual effort that seeks to consolidate the common good but a means of obtaining, quickly and with the minimum effort, a material success that is immediately translated into the ostentatious display of the trappings and insignia of appearance.

It is no accident that during the 1980s and 90s so many artists should have turned to portraits of the great thinkers and philosophers (Leonel Moura or Ellsworth Kelly) and writers of the 20th century (Ana Teresa Ortega) as a symbolic representation of a scale of humanist values in the process of disappearing. In contrast to the operation of commercial trivialization mounted by Warhol, with its tendency to equate a Campbell's soup can and the face of Mao (as an emblem of denial of the capitalist system and of consumption itself), symbolically converting them into consumer objects, the recovery of the humanist system of values in the form of portraits of literary culture, while clearly evidencing a certain nostalgic tone, institutes a critical reflection on the change of models.

Values seem to be incarnated in material appearances.

On the one hand the body and the face, disseminated by an effective media machine driven by the fashion and cosmetics industry, the star system in film and music and by the marketing of elite professional sport. Television acts within this mechanism as a resonating chamber in which only what appears on the screen has any validity, and what is shown on the world's television channels is an identical tangible and carnal image of the values of the appearance of the body as the supreme spectacle of personal success. Advertising has echoed these mechanisms, and endorses exclusively bodies 'inscribed in fashion', in the same way that the film and entertainment industries recycle their models from the plastic surgery business: the more artificial the body and the face, the more beautiful they are and the more fully they incarnate the ideal value. Plastic surgery smoothes over defects and individual features to absorb them into the canon of eternal youth, while a pseudo sport enshrined in the fitness centre and the body-building gym constructs the muscles: we are witnesses to the triumph of the artificial body, which has precious little to do with a healthy life heals and exercise or nature.

At the same time the new values are also embodied in the materiality of *mises-en-scène* as artificial as these bodies and faces: this is the culmination of the triumph of consumption of appearance, endowing them with economic and social status. The power of money is the basis of this peculiar incarnation of ideals in the material. Consumption is the supreme activity of the individual subject, who has shifted (descended) in the modern democracies from the civic estate of the citizen (where the common good is situated above the individual, but there is no common good if the individual is not taken into account: this delicate balance is regulated by freedom and by an ethics grounded in solidarity) to the purely economic estate of the individual as consumer (grounded in competitiveness as the ethically regulatory element marking the bounds of solidarity).

Values, then, have ceased to be transmitted through the literary in order to be expressed in images. In this sense, the symbolic levels of our societies have adopted a state that is at times literal, as we see in the dynamics of the TV spectacle and in the success of the reality show formula.

The slipping of values and models toward appearance and image configures the radicalism of the perspective of the desire, a desire that is not only that of possessing but of seeming, in order to be identified as one of the ideal models. The simulacrum, the *mise-en-scène* and the

set have come to be the ideal landscape inhabited by the models. The typology of the film or television sound stage determines the decor of our homes, while the dummies in the windows of fashion shops adopt the poses and the glamour of life as seen on celluloid, the prototypes of what we want to be. These dummies enact the gestures of the pop videos shown in the discos or adopted by top models in adverts and on the catwalk, constantly reminding us of the standard formulas of seduction, material success and ostentation: formulas that, repeated over and over again in the fictions of the TV serials, all of us imitate as the most pragmatic indicator that we are living happily in the technological utopia of appearances and leisure.

A significant factor here is the way that photography, in particular, has since the nineties developed a vision of the models, adopting a mimetic or literal position in relation to the images of the new values. It might perhaps be thought that this perspective is the result of a critical documentary necessity, but this is not exactly the case, since the stylization, and in some cases a certain humour, indicate that an identification is being established. Instead, what we see here is condescension and hypnotized complacency, frequently revealing a flat vision of the world, or at least decorative purposes that facilitate a better digestion of and adaptation to the models.

These are the strategic devices that have adopted youth as a closed way of living within the broad spectrum of consumption that extends from fashion to dance music, the rave and cosmetics, leisure as a form of forgetting and of thinking of nothing other than desires. The body is often mythicized as identity, albeit cunningly masked in the assertion of gender, and the images are so close to the formulas of advertising that they are immediately cannibalized by the mechanisms of appropriation in the service of consumption.

At the same time, however, another photography has emerged, one situated in a perspective that regards the simulacra of the models as symbols of the void and as a breaking down of identity. These simulacra are the typological representations of the models, oscillating in the tension of identity as a canonical alter ego: the dummies.

Since the early nineties Valentín Vallhonrat has approached the simulacra of the representation of the world that are promoted at various levels as paradigm models, static and inactive, of an ideal vision of the reality. It is not so much a case of a model of reality as of how reality ought to be. In his series *Cristal Oscuro* [Dark Glass] he engages with models from different historical periods, from baroque sculptures to stuffed monkeys or modern dummies. We find ourselves addressing an archive of representations that ask to be seen as living and strive to constitute themselves as even more real than the real thing. In other subsequent series he has dealt with spaces dedicated to love and desire, hotel rooms rented by the hour, waxwork models of Hollywood stars or miniature monuments of the pseudo-cultural theme parks of mass tourism. Hiroshi Sugimoto has also pursued a course that coincides in certain themes, addressing the perfect image of nature in the dioramas of natural history museums or the historical typologies that figure in waxworks museums, coming close to a cinematographic vision of the scenic reconstruction of the film set.

To approach the simulacrum is to establish a fiction and above all to configure a reality based on the confusion of identity and desire. It is precisely in this context, in some sense resistant, that we should situate José Luis Santalla's series *Un mundo feliz* [A Brave New World].

In this cycle, initiated in 1999, Santalla takes as his starting point the famous novel by Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, first published in 1932, which at that dark moment in European

history set forth a tragic consciousness of the end of the utopias, and portrayed an equally dark vision of a rampant technological utopia.

Huxley's novel was to some extent premonitory with regard to the effects of the technological progress on people's lives. The dominant mood is one of fear of totalitarianism, of control and submission, amid the regimentation of private life, cloning, test-tube babies, a form of *à la carte* television, the tranquillizing the social drug soma, and a social structure stratified in specialized castes, governed by a strict division of labour. Everything in *Brave New World* points to an artificial happiness that operates as a social illusion in which all tension has finally disappeared—and with it, of course, every political form of the *res publica*, too. Huxley's novel can be seen as pointing down a road of distrust of the future, with its perception of technological progress as a threat for the thought and to humanist culture. Just a few years later, in 1949, George Orwell published *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which he saw the future is under the totalitarianism of control, and in 1953 Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* portrayed a future without books: reflections on the death of culture and its humanist values in the form of science-fiction.

José Luis Santalla offers us a contemporary re-reading of *Brave New World*, with his own very personal narrative take on the values, centring on the models held up to us by fashion dummies and situating us on the line of demarcation between the living and the simulacrum. The dummies, as simulacra of an ideal model of physical beauty and perfection, seem to come to life as if they were new men and new women ready to invade and occupy the world with a new style of life that has more to do with the appearances and glamour than with the problems of daily life. The ordinary, imperfect man and woman, with their everyday problems and preoccupations, have become an anachronistic, troublesome species, and like a species in danger of extinction, they have a chance of being saved if they can gradually come to resemble the models, analysing and imitating glamorous poses, clothes and gestures, adapting their behaviour to the universal formulas of collective leisure.

The pictures were taken in shops and shop windows, in the manner of portraits, bringing out the most suggestive sides and the expressions that were most in tune with the poses cultivated by the advertising industry. Each image was then treated digitally, being broken down into pixels that were subsequently enlarged until the features became blurred and out of focus, in order to establish a strange crossover between truth and fiction, between life and the simulacrum.

The various portraits make up an archive of models that embody the supreme values of the ever-more-perfect body and champion a world subject to the dictates of appearances. Although they are dummies, they could equally be people of flesh and blood, in that make-up, fashion and plastic surgery are now capable of turning us all into models: the technological utopia has found a juicy application in the construction of the body and the perfect appearance. The design of the models is not simply a process of imitation, it is also a system of conversion: the model is not only ideal; it is possible for us to incarnate ourselves in it and assume it as a permanent appearance.

This oscillation between the animate and the inanimate, and the possibility of establishing on this basis a story of fiction and analysis (which is also poetic), has in some sense been a constant in the work of José Luis Santalla. This emerges very clearly in the compositions constructed with plants and branches in the illusion of mirror doubling, which as if they were portraits are given the names of people, in the manner of allegories. But for a fuller

understanding of this slippage between the simulacrum and the real, it is especially useful to connect *A Brave New World* with *Flights*.

Santalla's most recent series, *Flights*, opens up a number of narrative lines that connect with the oneiric through the oscillation and the tension between absence and presence. The images recreate banal scenes of everyday life, landscapes and interiors from which the bodies have disappeared leaving the traces (animate) of their passing, their presence and their actions: all that is left are the appurtenances of the bodies (clothes, shoes or objects they were using) in the same attitudes or poses as those of the vanished bodies. The bodies have disappeared, as if they had been spirited away by some unknown force, but their clothes and accessories remain and insist on their actions.

'Flight' has probably come to be the most characteristic attitude of both the individual and of society itself in contemporary culture: this is a cathartic flight that resorts to 'escape' as a way of eluding the problems of the day-to-day, fundamentally by means of the leisure that has become the ultimate priority objective of life and work, in a stratagem that effectively makes not only problems and preoccupations but also responsibilities disappear in a constant headlong 'flight'.

This 'flight' takes place not only in the annual holiday leisure periods and end-of-the-week breaks (the weekend is marked off from the working week on the calendar as a free space to be devoted to the compulsive consumption of leisure, and given rise to a whole industry of the weekend, with its special seasons and offers). Very subtly but very effectively, consumption and the contemporary modes of shopping fashion an escape in the passion to possess. At the same time, advertising strategies and popular narratives (mass cinema, both comedy and action; television serials; the star system; showbiz; celebrity gossip, the pop life) configure a reality of small certainties that act as mirages of security in an ideal world in which success, money, love and physical beauty armour us against the avatars of the real world. Escape, as rest, leads to a compulsive flight, in a flight from anything that would disturb the quietude of the 'eternal dream' of a happiness constructed with the hedonistic values of the material.

In the light of this, in *Flights* the traces of the body are always the vestiges that configured its appearances and present themselves not as abandoned residues but as living proofs of the permanence of dream and illusion.

Behind these images of absence there hovers the idea of the invisible body. They inevitably summon up the fantastical world of terror delineated by H. G. Wells in his novel *The Invisible Man*. The story, published in 1897, creates its disturbing, fear-laden atmosphere in the most humdrum details of ordinary small-town life in the south of England, in which Jack Griffin, a brilliant but mad scientist, seeks refuge after testing on himself, and experiencing in his own body, the formula that has made him invisible. This kind of terror might perhaps make us smile nowadays, in the wake of a Surrealism that established a poetics of the ridiculous and, above all, the increasing sophistication of suspense in science-fiction films. However, beyond the scenes in the book (and in the 1933 film) in which clothes left lying on the floor testify to the flight of the invisible man, or in which shirts and objects fly around, indicating his fugitive movements, invisibility—initially imagined as absolute power over others—almost immediately becomes a terrible burden that limits his freedom of action and forces him into a permanent flight toward concealment, finally driving him to murder.

In the novel, Griffin reflects on his state of invisible and comes to a terrible conclusion: invisibility

can be used to escape, to get close to some one without being seen and finally to kill. In effect, then, invisibility establishes a reign of terror. In a letter to his friend Kemp, Griffin boasts: 'This announces the first day of the Terror. Port Burdock is no longer under the Queen, tell your Colonel of Police, and the rest of them; it is under me —the Terror! This is day one of year one of the new epoch, —the Epoch of the Invisible Man. I am Invisible Man the First.'

Invisibility is thus presented as an overwhelmingly disturbing reality, but only when it leaves vestiges or traces of presence. It is interesting to compare, here, James Whale's 1933 film of the novel by Wells and the free interpretation released by Paul Verhoeven in 2000 under the title *Hollow Man*. The first film, Whale's *The Invisible Man*, faithfully follows the plot of the novel and tells a horror story in the style of the Gothic novel with a dash of mystery in the narrative, creating images with a strong visual impact that even at this early date draw on the Surrealistic gaze. Verhoeven's film, meanwhile, from its science-fiction premise, enters fully into the dynamics of the psychological thriller: the scientist, Sebastian Caine, loses his mind and becomes a murderer who exploits his invisibility to indulge in sexual abuse and other crimes, and in the end tries to kill all of his colleagues because they have witnessed his transformation.

In *Flights* José Luis Santalla creates an atmosphere close to mystery, certainly disturbing but never terrifying, within which he develops a vision that is fundamentally poetic, evocative of absence expressed as sudden disappearance or of invisibility as a new form of appearance and life. The narrative element operates as a mechanism for the suspension of reality, with an approach that is very close, in subtle ways, to the strategies of the Surrealists. Indeed, it is precisely this surrealistic factor that defines his disquieting poetics of mystery.

The apparent void is charged with presence, but it is the absent element, the body that has 'flown' (or 'fled') from its circumstances and from itself, that supplies the tension.

In the last analysis, without the image of the body, the world, inhabited only by its vestiges, its garments, its traces and its poses, seems have been robbed of soul, of humanity, even. And here we find ourselves confronting once again the problem of the models and of the empty frame of appearances as a social symbol.