



## Art in liquid borderlands

Rogelio López Cuenca talks with Lynda Avendaño, Ignacio Estella and Eva Fernández del Campo

The career of Rogelio López Cuenca (Nerja, 1959) has been peppered with incessant linguistic and semantic investigation since his start in the Agustín Parejo School, a group that emerged around the University of Málaga in the late 1970s, when politicised practices were beginning to fade and give way to a ludic, carefree postmodernism. In the late 1980s, López Cuenca participated in many of the artistic events that pointed to a new terrain in art, one that was committed to the present and to investigation: *Antes y después del desencanto* (1989), *El sueño imperativo* (1991) and the monographic *Word\$ Word\$ Word\$* (1994) are unmissable exhibitions for anyone interested in the history of contemporary Spanish art.

However, if his career tends to be associated with this investigation into language, travel and voyages, the themes at the heart of this monographic edition of *Anales de Historia del Arte*, they have also held pride of place in his oeuvre, even from his early days. Yet his approach to this theme has never been the least bit apologetic and is instead more charged with an important critical reflection which enabled him to sketch new margins and positions from which to address it. The voyages that López Cuenca examines do not ignore migration and its terrible effects on the migrant's body; they address the colonial and imperial past which are still pending issues in Spain; they confront the domination of tourism and its centrality as an economic engine before COVID revealed its fragility; they examine exile and the flight from the eminent threat of war. This critical perspective from which he tackles voyages is perhaps the best tool for thinking about this topic, especially at a time when it is limited by both the global pandemic and evidence of the impasse which the return to normality will entail, as it will require the destruction of the environment as the inevitable prerequisite.

We spoke with López Cuenca about the implications of travel in his work, about its political dimension, about the purpose of museums today, especially in a city like Málaga, which is packed with them, about colonialism, about the role of tourism in both its “beach fun” and cultural varieties; and we even discussed the role of our own discipline, art history, in creating myths whose unpredictable effects can actually change cities and neighbourhoods, which end up being turned into vacuous cultural showcases.

**EFC**– We are living in a world enmeshed in an incessant migratory flow despite constant attempts to build barriers to prevent it. Do you think that art today is necessarily crossbred?

I wouldn't go so far as “necessarily”. There is still a steady resistance from the hegemonic Art History (which is the kind fed to the media, and what ultimately pre-

vails in the social imaginary), with its pantheon of heroes and feats, which is heavily ethnocentric and racist. As Iván de la Nuez has noted,<sup>1</sup> the *Other* can be allowed to contribute a touch of exotic colour, of *flavour*, but *knowledge*, the power to inscribe these differences in the dominant story, is still the purview of the North and the West.

On the other hand, if we adhere to a broader interpretation of terms of migration and crossbreeding and view them as mixing, as contamination, clearly no cultural expression is either produced or lives outside the sway of these phenomena.

**EFC**— You just opened the exhibition *Orientalisms* at Valencia’s IVAM, which you curated along with Sergio Rubira, an exhibition which contains a series of works which show the stereotypes on which we have built our Western gaze since the 19th century. This is an issue which has concerned you for some time, right?

Yes, I began the project *El paraíso es de los extraños* in the 1990s (it is still a work in progress today), which I have been updating ever since then and creating in different formats, from publications to exhibitions, as well as courses and workshops, or presenting it at conferences and specialised seminars, in a field in which usually not enough attention is paid to the importance of images in building our commonplaces and clichés with regard to the Arab and Islamic world.

But my interest in the topic obviously does not date from then. In Spain, the reactionary obsession with denying or misrepresenting the history of Al-Andalus is legendary, and yet this obstinacy coexists alongside a highly affected, theatrical idealisation, an Orientalism as fanciful as it is pernicious. *The Moorish* is an essential ingredient in the “dough” of our collective identity—even more so in Andalusia—which is expressed in infinite gradations and weavings of phobias and phobias. This phantasm only dissipates if you draw closer to its complexity through reading and study. In my case, I must have learned about Edward Said through Juan Goytisolo, as he had not been translated here until the 1990s.

**EFC**— I don’t know if you think that Orientalism’s idealisation of others may be somewhat lyrical, that the Orient has somehow served as a catalyst of the Western fantasy and that even though this has been used to control and dominate it, as Edward Said said, it has also been used to build a fundamental imaginary for fantasy and for Western art. I think there is no doubt that our art and our world owe an unpaid debt to the East.

A book by Juan Vernet is entitled *Lo que Europa debe al Islam de España* (What Europe Owes to the Islam of Spain).<sup>2</sup> But we are so comfortably ensconced in our ignorance that it’s not easy to break it down. In this regard, as you rightly suggest, the most common Moorophilia is often two-way, in that idealisation is the perfect excuse for maintaining relations of domination which are in no way questioned by this fascination; instead, this concealment actually contributes to reinforcing it. The same mechanism can be seen in the subalternisation of other groups, such as the Roma community: the glorification of the most easily exploitable aspects of their cultural products, or of certain individuals, whose art is admired and praised, does

<sup>1</sup> De la Nuez, I. (2018). *Teoría de la retaguardia*. Consonni: Bilbao.

<sup>2</sup> Vernet, J. (2001). *Lo que Europa debe al Islam de España*. Acantilado: Barcelona.

not mitigate the degree of exclusion suffered by the group as a whole. And let's look at the most glaring example: the patriarchal system's systematic and rhetorical praise of certain virtues or attitudes in women (from beauty to mothers' self-abnegation and sacrifice) to offset their marginalisation and silencing as historical and political subjects.

**EFC**– The exhibition also shows the works of some contemporary artists who try to debunk the clichés.

Yes, most of them are artists working today whose works are situated in a complex field where theoretical discourses such as cultural studies and the decolonial turn thread in and out with phenomena such as the global circuit of contemporary art biennials and the powerful new centrality of the Gulf Emirates in this scene. The works of these artists contain all these elements and factors, sometimes in an explicitly conflictive way, while they seem to be accepted in others, with a variety of biases, to be sure, which can range from the ironic or the clever activation of paradox to the bald-face exploitation of that “exotic flavour” rule which we just discussed.

**EFC**– Sometimes I think that some of these artists from the Arab world, especially those who have become the most famous in Europe, somehow repeat old clichés to once again show us the same stereotypes, albeit from a different perspective: the harm, the veil... terrorism. Do you think that there may be some kind of neo-exoticism in these artists' acceptance in the West today?

Absolutely. The exotic gaze of Western superiority doesn't just dissolve overnight. The only thing that could disturb the order upholding this hackneyed seductive art is that these aesthetic objects seek to be revealed as subjects that “talk”, that make explicit the fact that those images were actually not about the *Other* but about ourselves. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that the works of these artists must be subordinated to certain languages, cultural frameworks, protocols and standards in order to be “legible”. It isn't easy, but this tension is also liable to generate extraordinary results at times. I'm thinking—not to leave off the references to Arab culture—about a classic in self-reflective hybridisation and crossbreeding as a way to venture the possibility of “another alterity”, pardon the redundancy: the work of the Moroccan author Abdelkebir Khatibi.

**EFC**– The image of colourful exoticism of painters like Matisse clashes sharply with the terrible reality of xenophobia and the way migrants from the Maghreb are treated today. What can art do about this?

The same thing that clashes (or should clash) in the other subalternised and silenced groups we have already mentioned: the glorification of everything *Roma* (or certain aspects of this culture) with the effective exclusion of “real” *Roma*, or that same mechanism applied to women.

The celebration of that idealised alterity, of that abstraction (which doesn't exist outside fantasy) serves as an excuse justifying the disdain of the specific, flesh-and-bone *Other*; this is what enables the work done by women to be derided (or not considered work, that is, not worthy of payment), or the practically slave-like exploitation of African day labourers, or the mere existence of immigrant internment

centres, which would be an unacceptable scandal were it not for those mechanisms which permanently dehumanise the *Other*, in which idealisation is the loop that neatly seals it off.

To your question: today art may seem virtually useless in the face of the omnipresent machinery of the media and its full-time production of meaning, but this does not make it a sterile space. The same holds true with academia: we have to accept the limits of our sphere of action, as well as its possibilities. If Matisse (and his countless imitators) are effective in creating these stereotypes, art can also operate in the opposite direction, to tear them down. We have to be aware that we are working with another timeframe. If we work more in this direction, ideas are produced from critical artistic practice, and from the university, which are capable of spreading to become a crucial part of social debates. Concepts that become prominent in processes of major transformation at any given time initially come from minority spheres.

**IE**– Your work is closely tied to the touristification, particularly of the city where you live, Málaga, a city which has made culture, especially art, a prime tourist and economic attraction. What are your strategies to avoid ending up absorbed by that hurricane? What spaces of resistance can be found in Málaga that refashion this dynamic?

It isn't easy to survive if you pit yourself against the media ramrod of this apparatus, although it's not easy if you don't, either, since this purported "city of museums" is nothing more than a slogan and an image meant for the tourist industry, to attract masses of tourist, as well as the investments in infrastructures that these masses require, from hotels and restaurants to transports. What is strikingly clear is that neither art nor artists are very important in all this, nor are the other workers who barely ekes out a living in the culture field, who watch as the public resources that should be earmarked to this sector systematically end up benefitting tourism and brick-and-mortar construction.

Likewise, the experiences of cultural self-management which have emerged around the periphery of this monster are quite precarious and often reflect the vain hope of scavenging a few of the crumbs that might just fall from the huge feast, trusting the neoliberal promise that the market will sooner or later bring justice. Since 2007, La Casa Invisible has been the most noteworthy critical and alternative experience, both culturally and socially, despite the institutional harassment to which it is subjected; it is besieged in an almost mediaeval fashion, is under the constant threat of eviction, has to restrict its public activities, has its water supply cut off...

**IE**– Another important aspect of your work has focused on the social dimension of essential figures in art history, Picasso in particular. In what sense do you think that art history has helped create this symbolic overinflation of Picasso?

Picasso is a very special case. Let's think, for example, of the difficulties entailed in exploiting another figure who seems somewhat similar at first glance, such as Federico García Lorca in Granada. Their instrumentalisation always leaves uncomfortable loose ends. Valeriano López has done an extremely powerful study of the phenomenon: the eerie funeral wreath with the legend "Your murderers won't forget you". Picasso is a different animal. Regarding the circumstances that converge to make the existence of such a multifaceted and versatile "product" possible (the person,

the persona, the artist, the oeuvre, the Picasso sign, the Picasso brand), I believe that the book by John Berger (*Success and Failure of Picasso*) is one of the most comprehensive and accurate examinations of the complexity of the case, because Berger does not conceal his sympathy and even his affection for the human being and his identification with certain elements, yet this does not make his criticism any less forceful. There is one very important fact which reveals the degree to which Picasso has been sacralised: the book, which was published in Spanish in 1973 with the name *Ascensión y caída de Picasso*<sup>3</sup> (Rise and Fall of Picasso), was reissued in 2013 but this time the title was translated as *Fama y soledad de Picasso*<sup>4</sup> (Fame and Solitude of Picasso). No matter how much they rhyme in Spain, the association of the terms “Picasso” and “fracaso” (failure) seem inadmissible.

**IE**– All gentrification processes have specific, contextual particularities, distinctive notes which make them differ from other cities. In Málaga, at least from the outside, you get the sense that there is an appropriation of “hot” concepts and practices such as the relational and urban culture like street art. In your opinion, what are the essential features of the gentrification process in Málaga, especially in how contemporary art is being handled?

The municipal authorities, in this case, go after anything that can garner them headlines, photos or seconds of video in the media. They don’t care if it’s Picasso or Tita Thyssen or Banderas, street art or Easter Week. Their investment in “culture” is an investment in publicity. Of course, it is a disproportionate investment when the goal is to appear in the catalogue of tourist cruise ships and possible city break destinations. To attract clients to hotels and restaurants, Málaga is lacking anything similar to icons the stature of the Mosque of Córdoba, the Giralda or the Alhambra, just to cite a few nearby cities. Nor has it landed anything like the Guggenheim Bilbao. The goal is to try—paying whatever price it has to—to associate the name of the city with any media event, to be proclaimed a European capital or city of something, be it sports or children, or to host the Goya awards ceremony or the Max Awards—underscoring its “cultural” nature, no matter how much of a stretch it may be at times. For example, in 2018 it negotiated with Unipublic, a company that manages sports-publicity events, for one of the legs of the Vuelta a España bicycle race to be held in the province, specifically the opening leg—which was renamed the “museum leg”—in a route designed to showcase the spaces where the city has concentrated its tourist sites, stressing that the starting point would be the door of the Pompidou and that for the occasion the yellow jersey would be re-fashioned with horizontal blue stripes as a “tribute to Picasso”.

**IE**– Living and working as an artist in a city full of museums, I wonder what purpose you think museums should serve today.

Well, first a few clarifications. The first one is that the sheer number of museums that local politicians boast about in tourism fairs (around forty!) is actually an inflated fig-

<sup>3</sup> Berger, J. (1973). *Ascensión y caída de Picasso*. (Manuel de la Escalera, translator) Madrid: Akal (original published in 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Berger, J. (1973). *Fama y soledad de Picasso*. (Manuel de la Escalera and Pilar Vázquez, translators) Alfabura: Barcelona (original published in 1965).

ure because of how gleefully they name everything a “museum”, not only the Pompidou franchises or the collection from the Russian State Museum from Saint Petersburg but also such curious collections as the Automobile and Fashion Museum [sic], or because the administration has encouraged the Easter Week brotherhoods to unilaterally proclaim themselves museums and exhibit their “treasures” under this name.

And another note: I left the city more than a decade ago, since I used to live in the centre, in the zone that began to be presented as the “Picasso Area” after the Picasso Museum opened in 2003. It soon became uninhabitable: a Picasso Disneyworld devoted to this tourism monocro. On the other hand, I’ve already mentioned that the supposed centrality given to art and culture is limited to a showcase policy geared at conquering newspaper headlines and advertising spaces. I don’t think I’m exaggerating if I say that nothing has been done to encourage the activity or reinforce the artistic or local cultural community. Nor, among these supposed 40 museums, is there any critical thinking about who we are, why we are where we are, where we come from, etc., which in theory should be the prime objective of any public museum.

**IE**— Another essential aspect of your work has concentrated on the history or memory of places, of cities. In what way can art help recover the memory of places? What has your experience been in this regard, such as in projects like *Birramblabookburning* and *Málaga 1937*?

While acknowledging the weakness and marginal nature of our position compared to the powerful machinery of the media, I feel that at the same time this offers actually interesting possibilities to question the dominant discourse. The hegemonic framework through which history is usually interpreted constantly moves in the direction of producing consensus around the political proposals—and economic and cultural ones—of the elites for both the present and future.

The greatest weakness of the written discourses lies in their marginality, in their being restricted to a specific territory, with a tendency to being limited to a closed circuit. The clichés with which the majority are warned against “intellectual speculation” or the cliché of “artists’ concerns”—an expression that is encouraged to be accepted with condescension while warning that, at the moment of truth, these concerns are not worth consideration—are the biggest drags, the limits whose overflows we have to focus on. Of course, in the best-case scenario, everything is designed so we can work with a bit of peace and quiet or safety in our little pen. Historically, the groups in power have rewarded—or at least loosened their control and the threat of punishment over—those who knew how to appreciate these spaces of privilege, either real or fictitious, in exchange for their “neutrality”.

**LA**— You often operate by dismantling the imperial symbols, as can be seen in projects like “Los Bárbaros” and “Mapa México”. Does this dismantling allow subaltern visual spaces to be identified within the hegemonic visualities or not? If so, in what aspects of your work can this be seen?

It is truly scandalous that the dehumanisation entailed in imperialism and colonialism is not perceived in the brutality that they mean; that their naturalisation as a backdrop of institutionalised racism has managed to permeate the ambient sensibility until becoming “common sense”. Any effort made against this monstrosity is paltry. Yet sometimes, what this “dismantling” can do, if it is done clumsily, if it is



not done with enough sophistication, is lead to defensive attitudes or even reinforce reactionary positions. I think that in our field of work the goal should be bringing complexity to the hegemonic story, pointing to its weaknesses, its gaps, so that those fascists who don't even know that they are fascists can find arguments to question what they think is the proper view of the world. Precisely because they are so crass, these simplified identity mythologies are hard to disentangle.

**LA-** To what extent do you think that the appropriationist gesture that is so common in your works enables them to engage in dialogue with the micropolitics of local memories and question the aftereffects of hegemonic policies from other eras, as in the “Mapa México” project?

Well, the very term “appropriationism” should be questioned, since it implies the existence of another artistic practice which would be, say, “original”, which is a very widespread convention and conviction. I believe that making documents and monuments talk about what they are shrouding, what they are silencing, what their mere presence is concealing, is an exercise quite far from the usual elitism and posture of the dominant model of the “creator”. The “interpreting” act, the critical reading can be perceived as an example of a doable, feasible action, of practical mutiny against the automatism with which past and present myths are established and spread.

**LA-** How do you think the collective effort in many of your works affects the process by which your creations are received?

It affects the multiplicity of perspectives and the polyphony which we always aspire to in these projects. But in any case, I think that we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that art and culture are phenomena by collective effort, the outcome of dialogue and discussion with both contemporary and previous discourses; that what we think, say or propose obviously does not come from the cosmic void, nor does it gain meaning and become legible without a given context. The more we bear in mind this collective, social, shared aspect of artistic activity and culture in its broader sense, the less in the clouds we'll be, the more we'll have our feet on the earth, the closer we'll be to achieving some kind of efficacy in controlling what we have in our hands.

**LA-** Bearing in mind the limits of art with regard to reality, to what extent do you think that the visual contamination of the hegemonic and subaltern discourses that you describe and propose in projects like “Valparaíso White Noise” becomes a factual determining factor that is difficult for common citizens to obliterate, despite the critical discourses of art and intellectuals?

I think we talked about that before. It's tough. The social majority is excluded by selling them an elitist idea of art and culture, a segment of the market and consumption associated with entertainment and luxury. At academic conferences, for example, the policy authorities only appear in the opening or closing sessions, if they even show u Just for the photo o And the same goes for art. Or even worse: at that same conference, the opening of an exhibition or a performance is always done after the session and lectures, in the free time when the drinks are already flowing. But despite this, I would like to stress that things could be even worse: there's plenty to defend

and conquer in these spheres. The important thing is not only being aware but having the will to weave ourselves in with other critical social and political experiences which are happening at the same time as our work.

**LA**– Do you consider your projects “Los Bárbaros” and “LIMA I[NN]MEMORI-AM” political art? If so, what makes them political?

Like we just discussed about the idea of “appropriationism”, the “political art” brand viewed as a speciality entails the assumption that “non-political” art is somehow possible. We have already mentioned that as a linguistic phenomenon, art is a social and necessarily collective phenomenon. So, there is no art that isn’t political, art detached from the polis. However, there are “idiotic” artists who like to imagine themselves above all this; they don’t even speak or write in the language of the hoi polloi. In this sense, we should point out the political dimension of seemingly more superficial expressions of culture–fashion, “entertainment” films, “decoration”, etc.– which is where the principles and arguments of the dominant ideology are the most readily expounded and spread in a society at any given time.

**EFC**– What role do humour and irony play in your work?

We should go back to what we spoke about regarding appropriationism. Humour is a traditional device among the underground and the more of less camouflaged responses of subalternised, silenced groups forced to use a language imposed top-down as a means of expression, an oppression which is contested by parody and irony, when there is no other possibility than feigning submission. This subversive reinterpretation of language, of the norms and forms of power, is an explicit expression of contempt, of rebellion. And let’s not forget Benjamin’s reflection on the “convulsion of the diaphragm” and his defence of laughter as “the best starting point for thought”.

**EFC**– Can art transform the world?

It more commonly contributes to the opposite, to helping maintaining the prevailing order by masking its contradictions. But yes, it can change the world, and in fact it does, although not if we understand this sentence in a maximalist or magical way, as an automatic cause-effect mechanism. It obviously doesn’t work like that. And thinking about it, having at some point believed only prompts frustration in many, and often-times, after this let-down, a complacent cynicism from which there is no going back.

So it’s better to work on the shortcomings and limitations of our field—and its extraordinary possibilities as well—and the fact that in this sphere, time is different, less immediate, more scattered and discontinuous. A self-aware and critical artistic practice does not make propaganda, nor can it aspire to a prime place that doesn’t fit it. Our job does not gain its full meaning unless it is incorporated, woven into and even dissolved within broader, more sweeping social processes. If the hallmark of the neoliberal system is the total mobilisation of life, the resistance, the fight, also has to be planned from this multiplicity of spheres in the extension of the extractive logic of capital to all spheres of existence. And one of the most valuable terrains in this battle is the liquid borderlands where the reality and images vying to become its “true” representation veer away and converge.