

Controlled cities

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Abstract

This text aims to analyze the relation between the organization and the structuring of city spaces by architecture and urban planning, and the homogenization of bodies and social exclusion existing in cities. A situation that acquires special traits thanks to the spread of a cyber technology that deeply modifies the most common spatio-temporal relations. Against this background, it is highly significant to find the creation of dissident geographies by some artists and architects who propose more plural and ambiguous spaces.

Keywords: architecture, body, sexuality, control, discipline, cyber technology, dissident geographies, Francesc Ruiz.

“Cities and sexualities both shape and are shaped by the dynamics of human social life. They reflect the ways in which social life is organised, the ways in which it is represented, perceived and understood, and the ways in which various groups cope with and react to these conditions.” (Lawrence Knopp, 1995: 149).

Urban space planning (often presented, in the interest of power, as a merely technical design) can be considered one of the technologies of domination that must constantly endeavour to solve very different problems. Among these are the issues related to aspects of inclusion or exclusion, of visibility and concealment, of control or subjugation, with which citizens have to cope. It should not be forgotten that the various forms of human activity impose meanings and transform a ‘mental’ space into a specific architectural landscape charged with political meaning. As the American architect Joel Sanders (1996) points out, in order for this to happen, the primacy of men in the access to the domain of vision is crucial, since hegemonic masculinity constitutes a cultural privilege that ensures the continuity of masculine control over the spatial distribution of the gaze and the architectural construction of masculinity. For this reason, through the masculine (hegemonic) gaze, urban planning (one of the most effective instruments of oppression) endeavours to consolidate its linguistic orders and be the bearer of meaning. In other words, this design constitutes the mode, the way and the manner in which things are looked at when building the city.

For centuries, the gaze at the service of patriarchy has been dominating the social order, projecting the culturally established roles and displaying only one way of relating, moving and organizing ourselves in space. One only way with which we had to identify and according to which we had to perform the normative inscription of our body in the social environment – or else undergo its marginalization, given that each society is defined not only by what it includes and supports, but also by what it excludes and ignores. Thus, in this context, the ‘deviant’ bodies or the ‘wrong’ attitudes have great difficulties to find models or objects for identification in this spatial and cultural identity process, since there is usually no place for them. The *pensée unique* opposes any inkling of heterogeneity and imposes the hallmarks of masculinity as the standard and the rationale for any attitude and occupation of the town. As Diane Agrest (1996: 49-68) argues, masculine anthropomorphism sustains the Western architectural system since Vitruvius, who established a constructive symbolic order where the bodies of the woman and the minorities were absent, repressed or forgotten.

In spite of this, in recent years things are changing. What remained concealed is revealed, or seems at least susceptible to discussion. New spatial concepts are emerging, appropriating the classical orders and subverting them in new and liberating designs that stress the expression and the seduction of bodies, of all kinds of bodies. In the endeavour to modify the configurations of spatial borders, it is crucial to disrupt the masculine gaze because in this way it becomes possible to destabilize the binary contradictions on which narrative codes and conventional theories of space rely; at the same time, the way opens to the creation of new ways of looking, much richer and more diverse.

The new ways of looking often challenge the establishment and are therefore taken as dangerous for the established order. This has turned the urban space into something that looks more and more like an immense place where every critical presence is taken as a threat that must be controlled and surveyed. The nightmares of the surveillance society, outlined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in the shape of the Panopticon, have exceeded all expectations in the domain of confinement spaces, to include any urban space (real or virtual) where the body is registered, controlled and domesticated. At present, the body – all the bodies, any body – has been reduced to a code, encrypted by a huge and complex GPS that tracks, flags and persecutes any movement – however small – that takes place within the city. It is the introduction of clean and rational forms of social control that get subtly embedded into our attitudes and personal habits. Permanent visibility becomes a trap where the crowd – disjointed and undifferentiated – is replaced by a series of discrete individuals – recognizable and tagged. This constitutes a subtle and deliberate technology of subjugation, with methods that conform and permeate, without interruption, the totality of the social urban structure.

We are speaking of a power which strength lies not in external repression but in something more incorporeal and yet more effective: self-coercion, self-submission. The power is diffused into the social body and acts directly on the individual, endeavouring to turn every person into his/her own guard. The strength of this form of power resides in that it is exercised spontaneously and

without fuss, replacing external violence and coercion with internal discipline. In this way, what we could call a global ‘panopticism’ tries to achieve a society completely permeated by disciplinary mechanisms (such as hierarchic surveillance, continuous recording, perpetual judgement and classification) and dominated by power effects that are extended by citizens themselves. In short, we are speaking of constant disciplinary methods and examination procedures that succeed in turning individuals into docile beings, serving the established interests. In this society of discipline and control – brought up by Michel Foucault and later by Gilles Deleuze – power is not so much exerted through the repression of desire as through the classification, tabulation and organization of this desire.

In a similar way, the roles of architecture as an organic structure for city planning and the wielding of power have also undergone change. The wall that clearly separated inner and outer space has kept on deteriorating and big holes have opened that allow for the witnessing of events that take place in the private sphere, while also conditioning the permanent dramatization of contemporary life.

Under the influence of the media and surveillance cameras, we can see the spatial consistency of the interior dissolving and its inhabitants becoming characters acting in real time. We witness the creation of a new coding of public exhibitionism and voyeurism, as well as an internalization of the disciplinary imperatives – from the popularization of transparent structures in modern buildings to the inclusion of sophisticated technologies of control in contemporary spaces. Likewise, with this spatial transformation, the way the population relates with technologies is changing ostensibly. Currently, surveillance and permanent control have gained a positive acceptance and regard by society and they have lost a great deal of their most negative traits. They are now viewed not so much as an imposition of a vigilant State, but rather as the product of an observing mediatized society. In this line, the community’s growing demand for security and protection lends legitimacy to any intrusion in the private sphere for the sake of the so-called common good.



Fig. 1- THE YAOIS 721-756 (PIERNAS CÓMIC)
2011 IMPRESIÓN DIGITAL | 200 x 140 cm.

Nowadays it seems that authority is only tolerable if it possesses the ability to hide its own mechanisms and endeavours to disguise as general desire what is actually only the legitimization of its specific power. As I said, it is no longer a power relation based on the evident dominance of one person over the other, but rather a concept of power that is scattered and diffused throughout the social tissue and that uses the subject's own capacities for its own repression. A power able to construct docile subjects and operate by means of social and spatial practices that spread to all the corners of life experience; a bio-power that controls the subject at deep biological levels, disciplines his/her bodily gestures, organizes his/her habits and surveys his/her desires. A power that is exercised through the regulation of life experiences by means of files, analysis, statistics, censuses, studies, databases... that process all types of information and collects all types of aspects (births, migrations, fertility, ageing, social and sexual practices, access to culture...). At present, in the consumer societies in which we live, it becomes less necessary to control the bodies by means of punishment – exerted on people's bodies or lives – and more effective to wield power over life, to control populations and their desires. New technologies reinforce this type of society and give it an ever greater meaning. Arguing in the name of security and prevention, society purports to guarantee the same life that it controls.

In this process, current society decrees the crisis of previous institutions and functions as an outdoor control, replacing the old disciplines that operated in the demarcation of a closed system. After World War II, the logic that governed disciplinary institutions spilled out to the whole social field, dispensing with confinement and taking on more fluid, flexible or tentacular forms. Before, society was trimmed and structured by institutions, configuring a striate space; now we navigate an open space, unbounded by institutionally drawn limits – a smooth space. Where disciplinary society built up fixed models and rigid circuits, the current control society functions with adjustable nets. The logic that was formerly restricted to the prison now encompasses the whole social field, as if society had become a permanent surveillance zone. It is what Gilles Deleuze (1999: 277-281) calls a ‘continuous modulation of control’: if disciplinary societies strove to mould the bodies to certain models and truths, in control societies moulds and models never come to a definite, fixed shape.

We live in the time of the empire of screens and satellite programs, of cyber technology and the Internet, in the ‘optical’ turn of a society increasingly guided by the relentless bombardment of images. It is the confirmation of the omnipresence of the camera’s eye, that permanently surveys us with Orwellian technologies used to observe and control the movement of millions of citizens in the various moments of everyday life: in traffic regulation, department stores, pedestrian areas, airports and passenger stations, in all sorts of bank information, credit card usage and checking, in telephone tapings, emails... We find ourselves inhabiting control societies based on ubiquitous proceedings of electronic tracking and data collection, miniaturized and mobile monitoring processes – that is, under the gaze of an unfolding of systems fundamentally intended to modulate the flux of vital experiences of each and every person.

It becomes clearer day by day how difficult it is to escape the controlling gaze and the surveillance nets that are capable of penetrating the very farthest corners of human experience to satisfy the voyeuristic desires of the policy watchdogs. It is surprising to witness the installment, in ordinary existence, of an ‘ecology of fear’ – as Mike Davis (2002) put it – that justifies the control of any act and/or space, however trivial or small. In this way, any aspect of private life can be brought to the public sphere and any act can be recorded or observed without previous notice and, in particular, the aspects that escape regulatory constraints or trespass the edge of what is allowed. All of this contributes to spread suspicion, favour denunciation, involve neighbours in surveillance tasks, mistrust strangers or stigmatize this or that social group. These attitudes encourage an excessive obsession with security that can come to mean the sacrifice of political or social liberties.

In this process of domination – subtle but global – the complicity of architecture is key (given that the organization of space and time makes the structuring of bodily discipline possible) to elaborate a number of techniques to fix people in specific places and reduce them to a certain number of gestures and habits. Bearing in mind that the body’s practical experience of space is the first relation from which all other environmental concepts are constructed, we can say that our concept of space emerges from action, from a certain possession of the world by our own body.

In this sense, it behoves to stress how the important transformations that contemporary cities are suffering in the last years are not only related to a change in scale or paradigm, but that they also fundamentally imply a significant technological transformation, leading to more fluid architectures that tend to abolish distances and turn the urban space into something undifferentiated, an unallocated space where virtual and multisensory nets prevail.



Fig. 2- THE YAOIS 685-720 (PIERNAS)
2011 IMPRESIÓN DIGITAL | 200 x 140 cm.

At the same time, we can perceive a city most clearly and meaningfully when we focus on the limits designed for the mobility of each social sector, as well as on the feelings of security, insecurity or danger that each social sector experiences in the streets. In the fear of a free (and sexual) use of spaces, morality and the hegemonic order must enclose, mark, pigeonhole, register, control and censor the activities that take place in every space and must oversee 'compliance with the rules of the game', that no-one oversteps the marks or bypasses the rules set by authority. Nowadays you can do almost anything, especially if you have a Visa Gold, as long as you do it in the previously indicated places. The problem does not lie so much in what is done, but in where it is done. Therefore, as long as it remains unknown, unseen, as long as it does not become visible, as long as it doesn't occupy a public space, one can do what one pleases at home or in a closed space (the private world), certainly out of reach of society's eyes. One of the greatest fears of the establishment is chaos, that is, a lack of clear rules, enclosed spaces, marked attitudes, specific genders, defined sexualities...; the questioning of the rules that define and separate what is allowed and what is forbidden. For this reason, it is very interesting to observe the way social power establishes links between sexuality, public space and surveillance, and to understand authority's manifest obsession to suppress the spreading or the viewing of any sexual manifestation – non-majoritarian behaviours especially – within urban settings (such as public toilets in train stations or shopping malls, changing rooms in gyms, parks and gardens and, even, the street). It is the establishment of a gaze that inspects desire, a desire that must not be displayed and, least of all, publicly practised.

In this new cyber society in which we live, it is nevertheless true that we are beginning to witness a clear erosion of the traditional distinction between what is understood by public and private spaces. The boost of observation technologies is mixing up both spaces and is merging them into a new one that is neither public nor private, but that serves to significantly increase the mechanisms of social control (José Miguel Cortés, 2010). A technology that allows us to see and hear through walls must not only change our ideas about what is considered the private sphere, but also about the very concept of spatial limits. The penetrating influence of a computerized society strongly enhances all that we can observe, what we know and where we can know, ever more quickly. It takes for granted that we can know (in real time) what happens in any corner of the planet, be informed about other people's behaviours or participate in any initiative – however outlandish – launched anywhere in the world. We need not go out on the street; webcams (or Skype) allow us to travel without moving from our screens, to talk and relate to people whose abode we do not even know, to teleport ourselves in all directions, to blur the limits of privacy and to look with no fear of being discovered. These technological instruments are a clear invitation to overexpose ourselves, to be transvestized, multiplied, confused and diluted in the relation and the knowledge of other people. If we so want, we can do all this from home through various screens, because we are creating an immense virtual city where there seem to be no restrictions; the scope for action seems boundless and the feeling of freedom, too.

Certainly, the use of these new technological media (such as speaking with mobile phones or smartphones, surfing the web / chatting on the web, using sms, 'whatsapps' or 'face to face'),

provides us with new sources of information or new forms of knowledge and communication. But it is also true that their use can imply that all our actions are susceptible to be tapped on, that we can be located and identified at any time (through the products that we buy, the texts we read, the websites we visit, the contacts we make...) and can give them the information to build a complete profile of our behaviours, tastes, ideas or beliefs. In sum, the media that open up new perspectives and – until recently – undreamed of experiences, also render us, at the same time, more vulnerable to external surveillance and control. Computers, combined with databases and certain statistical techniques, are contributing to create a new era of massive surveillance that is characterized by transcendence of time, distance or physical barriers, by its near to invisibility and for being more flexible, intensive and extensive than the previously known techniques. Hence, the systems of control and surveillance based on the collection and cross-checking of (more or less fragmented and partial) data, or on the connection of different computerized records of each person, allow to draw conclusions and make judgements that enable to build sophisticated personal profiles as a really sophisticated and effective method of direct control.

The breakthrough advancements in the information and communication technologies offer the possibility to know the life and interests of any citizen, something absolutely unthinkable just a few years ago. In our liquid society, information and communication travel intensively and extensively at an unprecedented speed, and the Internet is a much less secure and much more uncontrollable instrument than we could think. Among other reasons, because the major search engines (such as Google, Yahoo or AOL) store users' data and control their IP addresses, a practice that turns them into spectacular databases (because of their amount of sensitive information about millions of people), appealing for any organization eager to know the habits (of consumption or of communication) of specific social sectors or of certain specific citizens. In this way, with a clear political intention, a number of governments from around the world are forcing (more or less subtly, with the excuse of terrorism and security) all the communication service providers to maintain a permanent interception capability. When we use the Internet we have the feeling of not being anywhere and that all acquires a virtual character, but that is not as true as it seems. At least, today the connections are real, they suffer national borders and endure the restrictions of the various governments (Twitter's recent wish to censor critical opinions in certain countries is one of the latest attempts to control the Web). Despite what we may have thought at a certain point, we are like inmates within a huge, boundless panoptical space; we inhabit a global environment that is highly and carefully surveyed around the clock by ever smaller technological devices – almost invisible, but ever more powerful.

In these circumstances, we must be able to design different representational systems of the urban and social fabric that will widen and exceed the borders that stratify and organize the space and time of life in XXIst century cities. A good example of the desire to recreate geographies different from those we are accustomed to – and that often become invisible for us – are those created by the Spanish artist Francesc Ruiz (1971–), who is interested in elaborating those 'other maps', different from the ordinary, of the towns where he lives or works (Barcelona, London, Madrid, El Cairo...). To this end, he uses comic strips as a means of expression, but he removes them

from their traditional context, to give it a much wider or expanded vision and format. In short, (thanks to the invaluable help of the Internet and Photoshop), he makes drawings plagued with references and appropriationisms that he later digitalizes to turn them into big photocopies that he glues to the walls, making thus up immense (and cheap) murals of everyday contemporary life. In his works (a product of the influence of situationist theories and underground comic strips of the seventies), many of the common constituent elements of comic strips are absent (the use of cartoons, onomatopoeia, speech bubbles...) and are replaced by unfinished storylines, fragmented situations and non-narrative stories, in a rather surprising montage that beckons the spectator's evocative and interpretive ability to distinguish possible situations, connections or evocations. As the artist himself explains in his statement to the press, "To me, the comic strip is one of the most interesting media there are to discover the city, its inhabitants and the paths they make in it. In the situationist tradition, I am interested in the potential of the comic strip to generate drifts and *détournements*" (Ruiz, 2012).

Following these lines of approach, Francesc Ruiz creates his maps of situations, settings where everything that happens in a certain area are painstakingly recorded in great detail. In stories that seem to bear no apparent connection, the Catalan artist displays selected urban areas to show not only the many possibilities any big city offers, but also to project private dreams or fantasies onto specific places. In this spirit, his drawings constantly revolve around the relation established among sexuality, gender and the dynamics of power. A good example of this are the following works: *Montjuïc* (2003), where he shows the part of the Montjuïc mountain in Barcelona where many gay encounters take place; *S/T [Untitled]* (2008), an ironic drawing where he mocks the participation of celebrities in the Gay Pride Day demonstration in Madrid; or also the installation *Comic Brick* (2008), an over seven metres long montage where he explores the connections between gay comic strips and the construction world, with the whole set of desires and fantasies that are projected on it. Francesc Ruiz resorts to a jumbled aesthetics, yet of clean and simple execution. Above the immediate visual impact, gains significance an elaborate and complex discourse (full of subliminal messages) about the construction of minority cultures and identities in the contemporary city (Francesc Ruiz, 2009).

Nevertheless, his most significant drawings in this sense are possibly the series *The Yaoi* (2011). The term *yaoi* is used in Japan to designate a type of comic strip born in the seventies (a variation of *manga*) of homoerotic content, destined to women and also drawn by women. In this series, Francesc Ruiz recreates a number of situations where images taken from the Internet mix with comic strip characters and other images from real life, to create scenes of homosexual content. It is an analysis of homoerotic iconography that spans from American comic strips of the thirties to the *Tijuana Bibles*, the drawings by the artist Tom of Finland or the covers of the English pop group The Smiths' records. To this he adds references to various contemporary artists such as Julian Opie or Dan Graham, together with the adventures of Tintin's (sexual tourism) journey in Thailand or explicit references to the political situation in Spain. Distorting the origins or the meanings of the images and using the situationist technique of the *détournement*, Ruiz constructs a complex ideological and social lattice of a markedly critical character.

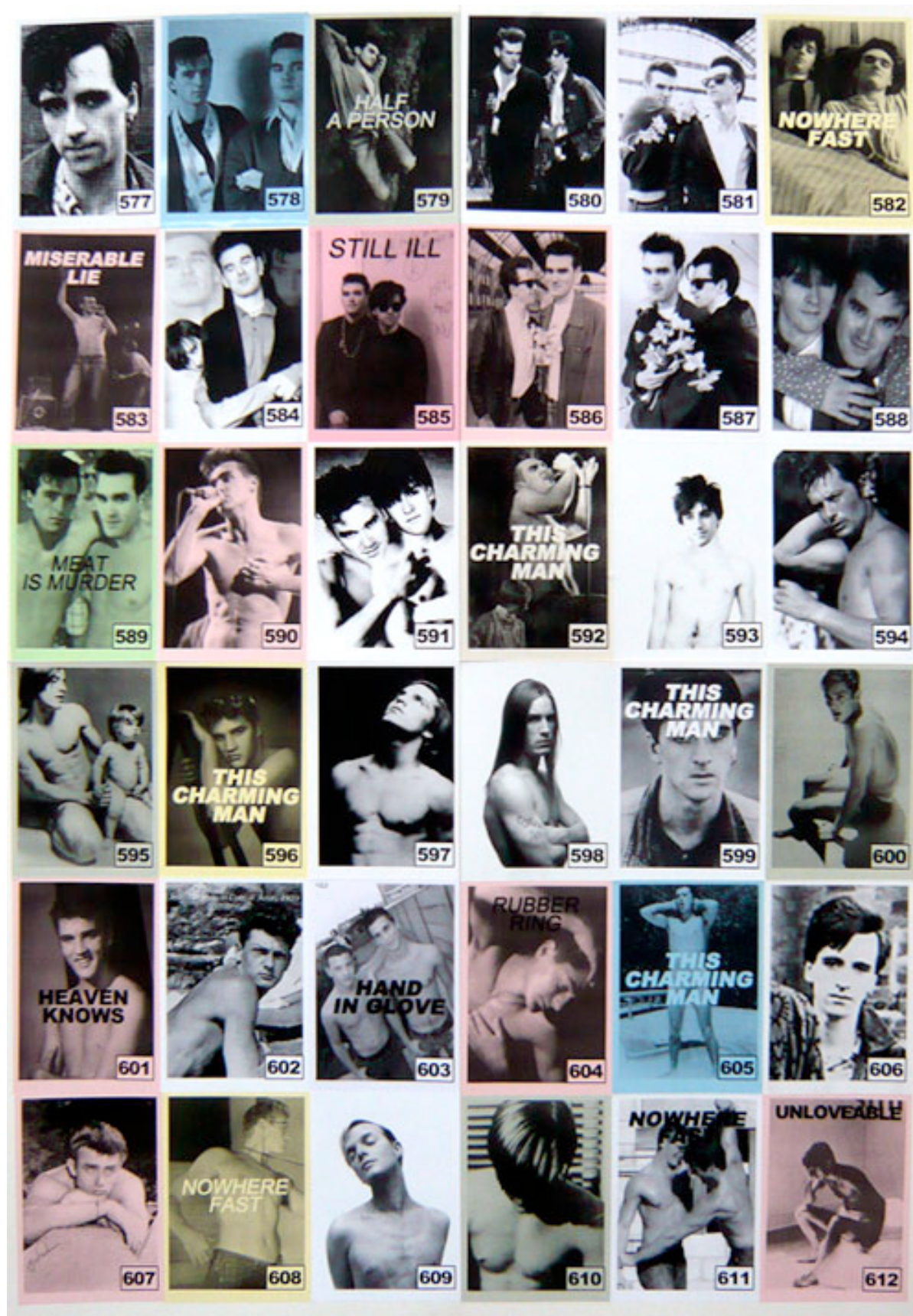


Fig. 3- THE YAOIS 577-612 (THE SMITHS)
2011 IMPRESIÓN DIGITAL | 200 x 140 cm.

Among the Yaoi series, the *Gasworks Yaoi* are especially meaningful. He made them in London, where he devised a sort of newsstand full of comic books of the yaoi genre (actually, there were tenths of different covers for the same comic book), about a story that took place in London's Vauxhall area, known for its gay character. And also the *Yaoi Ayor*, which takes the form of a big mural with the stories of three girls who move to the *gayxample* – the gay district of the Catalan capital – with the aim to perform fieldwork (to gather testimonies and photographs) both on the buildings and premises of the area and on the guys who frequent them, and the relations that take place there. The girls are three voyeurs thrilled by a reality in which they cannot take part. They agree to turn the experiences in this area of Barcelona into a work of fiction, creating a fanzine. This fanzine is entitled *Yaoi Ayor*, the last of which words has a double meaning. On one hand, it is the abbreviation of the English expression 'at your own risk' that gay guidebooks use to mark the urban spaces where anonymous sexual contacts take place. On the other, it refers

to the 'risk' that these girls run by entering an alien milieu. Francesc Ruiz constructs in this way different urban drifts that shape ambiguous maps and evocative geographies that break with the hegemonic and excluding ideas about the contemporary city.

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