

Affected knowledge

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Immersed as we are in the core of the debate on what defines scholar research in art, it stills feels difficult to come across positions which, besides dealing with the virtues and weaknesses of academia, would address the issue from the parataxis [1] between text and image. Despite the natural confrontation of opinions, there seems to exist a suspicious and overwhelming consensus when it comes to defend one's objective strengths before the other's subjective features. This rhetoric of the dignified value of the text, as opposed to the joviality of the image, is surprising in the sense that the dislocation between text and image -or at least the revision of what we mean every time we refer to each of them- has been long established in the eye of the storm of contemporary aesthetics' discourse. It seems as if the number of statutory crises produced and announced by visual studies, Rancière's [2] 'phrase-image', or even the image's digital offing, were just separate entelequies which do not alter the university procedures for validating and managing knowledge. It seems as if scholarly texts still remained as the sincere, honourable, and sacred safeguards of knowledge, staying outside the deep epistemological discussions the crisis of the visual has brought along with. However, this is a circular process, and it would not make any sense to rethink the status of the contemporary images status without pondering new textualities that would alter and refresh the established ways of producing meaning. In other words, while the aesthetics of transversality of the digital age is common currency in the corpus of the theory we produce, it is seldom actualized inside the academic institutions that traffic with it, as if they had lost their ability to both affect and be affected by their own discourse.

José Díaz Cuyás (2010, p. 13) mentions, in his article for the INTER/ MULTI/ CROSS/ TRANS seminar, held in the Montehermoso centre, that "the role of the contemporary artist gets each time closer to that of the epistemological tourist", and I cannot but agree. Nonetheless, I still doubt whether it has not been through the same strategy that the art historian has always approached art and, ultimately, if it is not this very "danger" of "mistaking" what comes from travelling side by side with a kind of authenticity derived from the very touristic device" –artistic in this case–, the same kind of danger the historian has always faced when deciding which among the features of knowledge must transcend humanities or the human sciences. I wonder if we are calling a 'danger' the by far demonstrated art historian's inclination towards art and artists; to that curiosity that has allowed him to think over images and turn them into a historical knowledge by collecting art works, souvenirs, or epistemai. Even recognizing that this touristic quality is not actually "a disadvantaged or negative position" per se, it cannot be questioned that addressing the artist as an epistemological tourist is a way of undermining the inclusion of his knowledge into academical scholarship –which legitimately looks down on it from a set of criteria forged after its very own image. It is precisely due to that irresolvable confrontation that originates in a mistaken vindication of the work of art as thesis, that I would rather reconsider the term amateur as he who is able to affect, so as to get closer to the position of the art researcher, instead of referring to the bare artist –who doubtless benefits from being a tourist. I agree with Cuyás' analysis, with regards to the influence of suspicious economical and ideological

interests, when it comes to inserting art into the new research drive of R+D+I, but my interest in proposing this role is no other than to sketch what the artist as researcher can critically contribute with to the university faculty. Affect emerges in this scenario as the subject's potential tool to recode the academic context to which he aspires and not just as the diverted threat of the artist's shallowness in opposition to the rigour of scientific texts. The affective audacity with which an amateur approaches knowledge lights the quarrel between the lover's desire and the loved's authority, thus forcing the response of the latter to decide the way in which he wishes to be affected. It would be about claiming the initiate's role, of him who acknowledges himself as vulnerable to the wise man's scrutiny, but also of him who grows larger before the failures of the master, while revealing to both parts that scholarly rigour is not detached from its very performativity and illusion of authority. The appearance of knowledge -of acknowledging when he in fact loves- allows him to run all the risks and trigger all the threats a profession requires, its purpose not just being its renovation, but also its reaffirmation in its own assumptions and traditions. This performative attitude of the lover as knower, far from being deceiving or detrimental for the production of knowledge, if appropriately aimed is the seed of the knowledge to come. It is not about giving the graduate student *carte blanche*, nor about mistaking the artist with the researcher, nor forcing the inclusion of artworks into academic research. It is about restaging within amateurship the obvious role played by desire in the transmission of knowledge; about translating and making sensible to the humanities community the evident critical nature of this affective naivety -which is depicted as risky by the unavoidable chimera of master rigour.

Fortunately, none of these figures exist in their caricaturized and pure form; the lover is a liquid and versatile role that thoroughly announces the budding researcher. In strict formal terms, the amateur is someone who, regardless the degree of his knowledge, does not professionalize it. In other words: avocation does not describe the amount of wisdom, but the sensible quality with which the subject affects it. The amateur is someone who loves, not necessarily someone who ignores [3]; someone whose specificity is rooted in his very potential to affect and be affected. Unfortunately, the necessary discipline demanded by knowledge prevents us in most cases from positively evaluating the sensible disruption an amateur activates as a subject; a disruption that parallels the appropriation of artworks by the historical discourse. The art historian would declare that, in opposition to the artist's epistemological tourism, his relation to artworks and artists has nothing to do with intrusive hobbies, since they are the ones who define the scholarship of images. And he would be right. But I am forced to believe that this productive freedom to create new fields of knowledge by means of alien criteria is still an act of power against the "state of estrangement" (Rolnik, 2011, p. 17), or against the "alterity" of art, which destabilizes, incommodes, and "reclaims a recreation of its shapes and its links' maps, as a condition to reach a new balance" (Rolnik, 2011, p. 18). We are already familiar with the result of this disaffection: the subject's experience, as well as his affective faculty, is kept out of the scholarly production on art, since they have been long regarded as symptoms of partiality and weakness and are thus disguised as the "sad classifications created by art history to interpret the art proposals at stake" (Rolnik, 2011, p.18). The idealization of artistic practices as autonomous, or under labels such as conceptual or ideological, works in the opposite direction to Rolnik's 'ethics of desire' -or the amateur's love- whose role in Latin American art movements of the 60's and 70's is that of linking, not breaking, on a par with other areas of knowledge to forge together the upcoming definitions. Instead of incorporating the bodily vibration of art and perusing the ways to adequate it to the parameters of knowledge production -assuming it is not yet installed in it- we chose to validate affection through the intellectualized experience of ghostly characters; we legitimize life with ideological examples of what a the body was back then, unaware of how alive, or dead, are we performing our own written text.

Acknowledging that as lovers we also build learning, and that we fearlessly traverse the foreign with the aim of defining our very own -that we learn from what we secretly love- keeps us from burying own our time and desire, and saves

our hopes that distance will dignify us so that someone will conjure our forthcoming sensory life, once it is already sterilized. To assume this affective role is not enough to maintain scholarly rigour when it comes to recovering forgotten narratives; it nonetheless matches it to re-incarnate its very own germ and furnish them with contemporaneity; it states us as living beings. P. Feyerabend (2003, pp. 181-182) writes, in the epilogue of his *Philosophical Provocations*, that “the best content, the most liberating message, turns into its opposite when it is spread by people with ‘the truth’ or ‘conscience’ within their souls and a mean look in their faces”. Barthes (1968) adds that “within the probable, the opposite is never possible, since the notation here lies on an opinion which is majoritarian, but not absolute” [4]. Avoiding such abrupt positions, what they do in fact air is not the theoretical instability of an aesthetical and affective research, but the consensus that such a lack of stability exists in effect as a danger exclusive to images or to artists’ research in art, instead of existing as inherent to the truth illusion of learning. To research with others’ images should be helpful to perceive in them the mirror of our inner subjectivity, and to recognize those other textualities, instead of transplanting corpses who bare the load of such a strict solemnity that, not even in their own putrefaction, can grow anything other than this useful illusion of stability. The poetic dimension of the text lets us project the subject who is lost among objects and returns them to life; we re-instill energy into them so they can fiction again and reinstate them in their appearance, in their living image. That which is alive is also that which fictions; however, it is also the subject of dissent and who threatens, disputing the consensuated rigour of reality and fertilizing the ground for future fictions. In this state of things, the sensible improvisation of the one who loves would transcend display as a common place –long ago not even common to all art practices– and would affect the very transmission of knowledge.

“To improvise is, in the first place, the first exercise of our intelligence; it is the poetic virtue, the impossibility of saying the truth, which, despite feeling it, makes us speak as poets, makes us narrate our soul’s adventures and corroborate they are understood by other adventurers; they make us tell our knowledge and see how it is shared by other feeling beings” (Rancière, 2003, p. 87).



This difficulty in enunciating the sensible can be found in *A Gallery Portrait*, where Georges Perec tells the story of the aficionado Herman Raffke's collection of paintings. As a collector himself, Perec packs the story with dates, references, anodyne facts, names, and paintings, slowly crushing the reader's narrative expectations with a tedious reasoned catalogation. The story speaks about a painting, made by painter Heinrich Kürz, where Mr. Raffke is portrayed sitting in his study, facing all his acquisitions. Among them is Kürz's painting, in a privileged position, generating a cabinet's *mise en abyme* that modifies with each repetition the scenes represented in each of the paintings in the collection. What moves one to continue this odd and never-ending list of transactions and auctions is the evident suspicion of being in the face of another of Perec's impostures; the conviction, as a reader who holds in his hands a piece of literature, that the writing's documentary and referential delicacy is nothing but a literary sophistry which also belongs to the authority of every text. To discover oneself doubting on Perec text's veracity, just because one knows who he is and from which art he writes, implies that at least an important part of its truth lies in the way it is felt, while representing itself and displaying fictions and linguistic, visual, and sensitive categories with which we culturally consensuate reality. Before anyone proves to us –in the academical sense of the term– their forced nature, our lived experience turns into a sensible evidence that, regardless of the writer's discipline, learning is completed –and validated– also by our own ability to be affected by its staging. If the book had been signed by an unknown author, or if it had been published in an editorial context closer to the genre of the essay, a big portion of its writing would help sustain our doubts on its veracity, not just because this change of its *mise en scène* would magically turn its fictive features into true ones, but because, as Barthes says, "the pure and simple 'representation' of the 'real' [...] comes to light as a resistance to meaning, and confirms the mythical position of the lived (the living), and the intelligible". Thus, the rhetorical demands of the social sciences and literature would always be "armed as a war machine against sense, as if, by the exclusion of rights, what is alive could not signify (be significative)" (Barthes, 1968). Despite the fact that the sign of identity of scholarly texts is to doubt of every assertion and to check the trustworthiness of the sources, don't we doubt or recheck more thoroughly those sources which cross us lively, placing text along with the image we have of it? Isn't in a way, this affective equality the same concerned and imprecise reading which lies at the core of Sokal and Bricmont's complaints in their book *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*? The issue implied in these questions is whether we are developing a rejection similar to the one that the rest of sciences have towards the supposed imposture of humanities, with respect to accessing the affectivity associated to image-based research. Moreover, this would create an epistemological *mise en abyme* where the contents of our paintings, in opposition to Raffke's collection, would not be aesthetically affected by the critical discourse of the image. The abyss between the unspeakable and the invisible carved by the repetitions in Perec's cabinet, still bears a sinister –and random– rebound with which we started a round trip: we would find that, at least in the third edition of Anagrama publishing house (Perec, 2008), Kürz's fictional painting, around which the whole of Raffke's collection is conceived, is photographed in the cover. The inspection of the inside pages tells us that a certain Isabelle Vernay-Lévêque is the owner of the copyright of the image, but it does not clear its authorship [5]. Its very presence, embodied in the cover, starts this return trip to the surface of reality, confronting us with truth, and documentally stabilizing the literary instability that the reader thought under his control. Isabelle Vernay-Lévêque acts as a bridge between the fiction of a painting, which context in every page reminds us of the fact that it is invented, and its photographic evidence, not so much as a painting in effect made by Kürz –although this option is not discarded– but as a canvas that exists, at least virtually, and can be photographed. Two affective dimensions of thinking thus emerge with the photograph and a character that traverses them. In a sense we could be facing a new version of Barthes' "reality

effect”; one of those “insignificant notations”, such as “Flaubert’s barometer” or “Michelet’s door” (Barthes, 1968), whose meaningful denotation would imply the ‘real’ without mentioning it, but that in this case it would be an image –a pictorial text– what would end up signifying by means of jumping from the cover to the reality in which the photographic trick takes place. It could be about an image created *ex profeso* for the cover with no other function than to be a ‘useless detail’, an addition to the production of veracity of the story. Given this, against it would play the necessary editorial connivance of describing it as a photography instead of as a montage or a cover illustration; moreover, when the very prestige of a book comes from its falsability as a bibliographic source. Besides, we could address the never-ending list of notations as that which constitutes the “useless detail” of the book; namely, a book full with insignificances; full just with insignificances, with “narrative luxuries” which only function is “to rise narrative’s information cost” (Barthes, 1968), thus getting closer to veracity by means of this excess, inverting its traditional function and letting the image occupy the place of the text.

Conversely, this bi-directional vertigo produced by the group of infinite Oulipian permutations between the author, the story, the painting and the photographer, seems to act exactly the same way as Rancière’s *phrase-image* (2007, p. 46); that can be “expressed in sentences from a novel, but also, in forms of theatrical representation or cinematic montage or the relationship between the said and unsaid in a photograph” in which the sentence is no longer the sayable and the image is no longer just the visible. Let us think of the variable hierarchy that affects the fictional painter, its veridical description, and his painting, which is made sayable in our reality through the figure of an invisible woman called Isabelle. A written text, edited as an image, which poetically subverts its own value and turns thus into an illustration of the painting that an appearing woman presents us as the unspeakability of truth, despite its being felt. A montage made up not just by words and images, but also with the aid of epistemological, performative, and affective relations established between them, which in no way damages academic rigour, but expands it by adding to it the sensible coherence which objectivity is constantly trying to undermine. This woman’s appearance in the welcoming space between fiction and reality -a book cover- turns the cover’s formal insignificance into a visual text that affects us and is affected by us, and that recovers the book as a bodily experience. When Perec in fact recognizes his imposture at the end of the book, he brings back to life that very subject that the certainty of the literary context had been sterilizing, which inhabits in between the fictional painter and the woman who embodies it in our world. But above all, it reminds us of the reader’s abstract body, always inside the play of fake, trapped in the inverted abyss provoked by an abandonment of measure pactated by all the other senses, far away from the describable, enhancing fiction to the plane of reality, and bringing this last one to the scenario of the living.

At the beginning of 2011, by chance a little after I finished reading the novel, I had the chance of visiting Perec’s retrospective at the Seoane Foundation in A Coruña, Spain. The exhibition showed for the first and only time –at least that is what some reviews stated– the painting Isabelle Vernay-Lèvéque had painted in 1981, one year before Perec’s death. By its side one could see a confession –which I later found in the last pages of the Anagrama edition of the book:

“seduced by the witty tricks of the imaginary collection of paintings described in *A Gallery Portrait*, I made this piece as a fictional commission, trying to paint it as faithfully as I could to the book’s description, although failing to avoid in its finish two differences with it: I had to limit the number of successive reductions [...] and I added a mirror in which the painter is reflected. [...] Perec himself confirmed, after seeing the painting, the infinity of symbolic and structural relations I had deduced he presented in the rest of his work. Ever since I have read Georges Perec once and again, but I didn’t see him again.” [6] .



To see the painting *in situ* did not strike me much. Confirmation of its sensory existence did not add anything of importance to the learning that came from its thinking, apart from the confirmation that it existed in a tangible way. It wasn't but a secondary character in the aesthetic experience of my own story with its image. I mentioned before that Isabelle acts as a bridge, but she is also a disruptive force, in the way alchemical elements are, since she disarticulates that which was before linked, not with the purpose of becoming an enemy, but to equal its own potential to build meanings. The body appealed by the amateur's affectivity is tore apart from the rhetoric of the original source as a differentiating experience -although this does not make her incompatible- and builds a subjective 'original' from which to study the image, avoiding epistemological categories, not so much to discredit them, but in order to refresh them. The text, however, that I could have read from the book, as well as the infructuous seek for Vernay-Lévêque's painting, instead of being always mentioned in references or commentaries to Perec's work, leads us to suspect whether she was a true painting amateur that decided to materialize someone else's fiction or if, on the contrary, she is nothing but a posthumous creation of Perec, conceived with the purpose of redeeming his prude ending -its authoritarian deactivation. I can argue today that there is no reason that leads me to think that discovering Isabelle's true nature -her reality towards us- could contribute with something that would not confirm the affect that a critical-paranoic method, conceived after us, could show us by giving us the feel of an amateur before knowing for sure who she is.

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
 Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
 And there I found myself more truly and more strange. (Stevens, 1990, p. 65)

Nevertheless, if we surrender to the pleasures of logic and trust the editor of the book, it seems impossible to think that intellectuals of a size such as Alberto Ruiz de Samaniego -the exhibition's curator- or the Seoane Foundation itself, would risk their institutional prestige by not telling the truth in case they had found clues of a feasible fake. It is true that, had he planned it wittily enough, Perec could have commissioned the painting, leaving after him a role game that would survive every thorough dissection; although this hypothesis does not seem very likely if we pay attention to the way he deactivates himself at the end of the book -trapped in a political and pedagogical correction towards the reader which is almost offensive, all must be said. No; to start a process of documentary demonstration about the event would only result in its sterilization, besides burying once again the affection that rises in every reader who lets himself go by the rigour of imagination. It is the knowledge that emerges from the contingent, from Isabelle's confessed amateurism, what research in art is able to value; regardless of her existence as a person, a fake, or an alter ego. If there is something to learn from this French amateur's apparition is her proficiency to move within the opposition of the feasible and the truthful -amongst definition and poetry- and the affect with which she overcomes the reality complex which seizes Perec in the last page, by refreshing and sensitizing with her painting an artwork which is not hers. Isabelle Vernay-Lévêque is the living proof that knowledge must be created without asking for permission, as well as the evidence that "the relationship with the other, even if asymmetric, open, and without any chance of re appropriation, must draw a move of re-appropriation of one's own image, in order for love to be possible" [7] (Derrida, 1992, p. 212). Ana María Matute proclaimed in her Cervantes award acceptance speech, "if you someday come across my stories or my creatures, do believe them, since I have invented them". From the everyday imposture of claiming to have heard of an author when we do not know him, to the boldness of remarking someone's work when it is only known through the stories of others, everything can produce knowledge. Firstly, because it lets us apprehend ourselves inside the inter-locution as persons -"I am not a what, I am a who" (Feyerabend, 2003, p. 181)- but also because the performative lapse the other can perceive in us, even when we are fully aware of what we are saying, starts an affective cascade of impending incubated events. To research with images would then result in their squeezing in all directions and times -as well as in the times before it is turned into something reasonably intelligible, when we ignore it- would lead us to reconcile our affect with knowledge, risking thus to turn into permanent amateurs of the focus of our inquiries. "Aristophanes, not Socrates; Nestroy, not Kant; Voltaire, not Rousseau; the Marx brothers, not Wittgenstein. These are my heroes. They are not philosophers, and philosophers, although they flirt with them as a pastime, would never accept them in their circle" Feyerabend remarks (1993, p. 16). The threat of relativism threat is dangerous in so far as it endeavours a disaffection towards our experience, promoting a blind faith in the rhetorical superiority of the institution. Precisely because not everything works in every case, we cannot grasp the possibility that the separation between the text and the sensory image would resolve itself solely by rationally contrasted means. As we expressed in the beginning of this article, the amateur would avoid that confrontation castled within the 'everything goes' and the dissected polarity, and would turn to affection as a tool to address the epistemological dilemma that understanding the artist as a scholar implies. Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism, which clearly seems to become more and more evident by thinking with images, appeals to care and feed the dispute between the paratactic equality of knowledge forms and their sensory image, not so much to erase categories, but to open a negotiable path amongst them, so as to be able to think by traversing them. It appeals to an academical rigour that acknowledges the very desire with which it codes, paints, and rewrites the known, affecting the images of the world and inventing stories inside history which do not accept undocumented discourses, but which do let themselves be affected by them in order to remember the rigour brought to us by the sensory body. In order to make knowledge a transmittable discourse. A living discourse.

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Footnotes

[1] Parataxis (from the Greek 'the act of placing something side-by-side with something else') is a literary technique, used in writing and speech, that enhances the construction of short and sentences by means of the coordination of sentences instead of subordination. (Author's translation.) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parataxis> (retrieved 11 July, 2011).

[2] In his book *The Future of the Image*, Rancière discusses the "large parataxis" as that which transcends writing and dearticulates the traditional functions of the text with regard to the image; of the speakable with regards to the visible. Rancière thus enhances the use of parataxis use in its relation between image and text, instead of considering it as an exclusive function of the second.

[3] Amateur, from Latin 'amator', he who loves, bears a resemblance to the Spanish 'amador' or the French 'amant' ('lover').

[4] Online version of the article: <http://es.scribd.com/doc/6603561/Barthes-Roland-El-Efecto-de-Realidad> [retrieved November 7, 2011].

[5] The cover's note reads "photograph □ Isabelle Vernay-Lévêque" (sic.)

[6] (Atributed to Isabelle Vernay-Lévêque) "Georges Perec, A Gallery Portrait", transl. Ian Monk. In *Three by Perec* (Harvill Press, 1996).

[7] Author's transation.