

The deep sense of disillusionment<sup>1</sup> that has taken root in contemporary art cannot transport our imagination to a total drought or towards that proliferation of “nothings”, like true aestheticised gumdrops. Žižek has shown that amongst the antagonisms that characterise our age, pride of place may perhaps be given to the antagonism between abstraction, which is an increasingly determining factor in our lives, and the flood of pseudo-concrete images we perceive. If we can understand abstraction as the progressive self-discovery of the material foundations of art, in a process of unique depictorialisation<sup>2</sup>, we should also be able to understand that within this process lies the hard core of modern art. There is undoubtedly a considerable fracture between epic modernism (exemplified in the case of painting by American abstract art) and nihilistic existential gestualism (in which category certain moments of European informalism may be placed) and the new forms of abstraction arising after conceptual dematerialisation, the phenomenological givenness of the minimal, and, of course, the crisis of the Great Histories occurring in the heart of our postmodern condition. Instead of giving ourselves over to a kind of pathetic repetition of commonplaces such as those referring to “art is dead” or the “disappearance of painting”, we should rise to the challenges of technical deployment insofar as they signify a crisis in meaning.<sup>3</sup>

We need new theoretical tools, and above all, a non-restrictive or brighter-than-dull mental disposition to understand that our pluralist age does allow for the generation of new artworks of such an extreme intensity that they demand a highly proactive perusal. Doubtlessly, Jorge Arxé has been able to answer the challenges of this time of crisis with a huge amount of creative vitality, conscious of the fact that cybernetic tools are not, in themselves, the “be-all and end-all”, but rather the channel through which he is able to express his emotions. In a recent article on Jorge Arxé this writer pointed out that his works in the last few years have become a unique variation on his former sculptural proposals in which one could appreciate a close scrutiny both of concrete art and of minimalist rhetoric.

It is not a question, after all, of a brusque break from his expositions in the three-dimensional field, or an oversight for that matter, but rather a bid for a whole new field of investigation. We should remember that this artist already developed work processes in video some years ago,<sup>4</sup> and that he does not recur to digital images just for “fashion’s” sake, but as the result of his own personal poetic evolution.

Indeed, Arxé has shown that if his sculptures lean towards poetic lyricism, in his digital works he seeks “a more organic visual impact, closer to movement itself”. Both in his sculptures and in his impressive synthetic images, Arxé maintains his concern for balance and proportion. His shapes and intense colours establish rhythms and create melodies that allow for a reappraisal of the theme of the Deleuzian fold – those divergent series that always plot out pathways with multiple forks: a world that captures rather than encloses.

The musical model is the one that best enables us to comprehend the rise of harmony in the Baroque and the dissipation of tonality in the Neo-Baroque: “from harmonic closure to an opening onto polytonality”.<sup>5</sup> This polyphony of polyphonies inherent to the Baroque reasoning, transhistoric as it is, does not lead us towards illusion, nor encourage us to abandon it, but rather inspires a tendency to do something with illusion, imbuing it with a spiritual presence that once again gives all its pieces or fragments a kind of collective unity. Each monad, by expressing the entire world in itself, includes it in the shape of an infinite array of diminutive perceptions or responses to stimuli, with the presence of the world ultimately being the result of a search for a

subject, or better yet, a yearning for a subject. And, in truth, there is something tense yet pleasurable in Jorge Arxé's new images, in that play of constructions and deconstructions, in that enigmatic materiality, so planar but at the same time capable of transporting us towards the seduction of the volumetric. In an etymological play on the surname of this honest creator, we might say that Jorge Arxé looks to the enigmatic beginning of all art, as the Greek ἀρχή means precisely that: "beginning".

We might say that creations so obviously "hyper-technological" such as those he is currently developing serve as a kind of "archaeology" of his peculiar obsessions. The origin of the work of art, as Heidegger declared, separates us from the useful, from the actual tools, obliging us to perceive from a more objective standpoint.

It is in the gaps of this world (the readily available in a structure calculation) and this Earth (the inexhaustible storehouse of sensation) where artwork appears or is revealed, or better yet, in that domain of friction where the truth of the artistic experience is ultimately placed in a work of art. Arxé generates the radical novum of the aesthetic by means of cybernetics – which is his way of limiting the aspirations of metaphysics.

To a large extent, what this creator teaches us is that the essence of technique has a poetic nature, which is tantamount to saying that wherever the fold is (the devastation of the world produced by our Faustic will) we can also find, as Holderlin reminded us, that which saves us. In some annotations to his recent works, Jorge Arxé points out that his pieces form structures that symbolically refer to the ocean, to the aquatic: "the idea is to suggest a colourist transparency that allows us to see the bottom of, to call it by some kind of name, the lake."<sup>6</sup> Identity is reflected and at the same time dissolved in the heart of the water. It is a question of abandoning the idea of water as something associated with mere fate, such as an unconsummated dream, by placing it in an essential life experience, a random game of ripples that "unceasingly transform the substance of being."<sup>7</sup> Water in the sense that Heraclitus must have meant when he said that we could never bathe twice in the same river – subjectivity fused into the element that passes before us, leaving behind it only mud. Immersion in these waters signifies a return to the pre-formal, in its double sense of death and dissolution, but also of rebirth and circulation anew, as immersion multiplies life's potential.

Birth is normally expressed in dreams, as we have been told by Freud, through the intervention of water. This medium usually alludes to the transitory, but also to the finite: water is transparent depth, something that communicates the surface with the abyss, which is why we can say this substance intertwines the images.

Using his artificial visions, Arxé leads us from "water-rings" to immersion per se, to the human presence with a yearning for bathing. Jorge Arxé's works are a sort of allegory of nature, insofar as nature is the uncontrollable.<sup>8</sup> He himself points out that his recent works look back to "the destructuralisation of nature by mankind, suggesting that we are faced with a depth of field that is inapprehensible and as extensive as the widest possible meaning of this term."<sup>9</sup> Those strange "surfaces" of his appear to clamour for, yet simultaneously forbid, the act of touching; with their sensual undulations and playful geometry they make us think of man's capacity to destroy as well as to imagine the world, generating "a tempest in the seam opened in our subject".

Jorge Arxé's thinking outside the boundaries, stripped of all anecdotes and literalisms, does contain the vibrations of the void: "I can now state it: the starting point of an

artist,” writes Peter Handke, “is the deep feeling one has, often times, of an enormous vacuum in nature, a void that he, perhaps, using this emptiness as an impulse, will fill with works, but then, again and again (meaning that he is indeed an artist!), will relegate back to the void, renewed again, to a huge void, a void that gives pleasure: like a void in full boiling-point”. In the works of Jorge Arxé there is a kind of sublimeness – a characteristic of postmodern art according to Lyotard – in which shapelessness and that defect of reality contemplated by Nihilism both seem to intervene.<sup>10</sup>

In the sensation of the sublime there are various faculties of knowledge, each opposing the other, dragging us along to a limit (the fight between imagination and reason, but also between understanding and sensation).<sup>11</sup> The sublime – that sense of terror that enables reason to postulate in order to avoid the shipwreck of conceptualisation – is finality with no end, the threshold of the nameless, but it is also the intensification of subjectivity dwelling on the contemplation of the non-finite. Indeed, in Arxé’s works there is no shipwreck of the imaginary; quite the contrary, one can hear the powerful heartbeat of hope, appealing to the pulsating energies of beauty, and obliging us to look at the world in a different manner. In a brief poetical passage, dedicated to the forms of artistic diction, Aristotle defined this enigma much like this: the form of the enigma therefore involves connecting impossible terms through the use of existing things. Metaphors abound in the enigmatic, but there is also a certain density of combinations and connections that are impossible, a mixture of literal and figurative meanings.<sup>12</sup> The pathos of the hidden is connected to the surrealist conception of the imaginary as a plane (dissection table) where all that which is radically heterogeneous can be found. The artificial and an evocation of the natural are fused into one in the enigmatic works of Jorge Arxé, which offer a playground for desires which is simultaneously close to us yet distant.

Nietzsche said we always want to live through the experience of a work of art, and therefore we arrange our lives so that this desire can be fed by practically anything! Quite an idea. Hypnotic shapes, arising from a “cerebral” and electronic space, impose a kind of melody. María Zambrano has affirmed that the human soul has lost its music: “music, or in other words, the recording in the soul of the immutable impracticality of origin”. No doubt, the works of Jorge Arxé, whom this writer has already qualified as dealing with the archaeology of origin,<sup>13</sup> can be understood as a variation in the shapes in which both music and the (spatial) impression of the void intervene. From the Pythagorean standpoint, in the early beginnings of philosophical speculation, there arises a passion for proportion and harmony – a tradition that is based on the idea of rhythm.<sup>14</sup> And, strangely enough, this rhythmic modulation takes shape, in some of Arxé’s works, as geometric reticulation. The reticulum, an emblem and myth of modernity, is less rigid than it seems. It also has something of the ethereal, an unexplainable levity. In this scenario, subject to the dominion of line and angle, there appears a certain “allegory of the oversight” that Duchamp called the *infra-mince* (geometry without thickness) or perhaps the sudden transition from the familiar to the inhospitable. Space expands in all directions in reticulation, with the actual artwork being a fragment of it snipped out of a larger canvas; and this transgression takes us “beyond the picture frame”, with a dematerialisation of the surface from the pictorial, while the material is dispersed “in a blink or a tacit movement”.<sup>15</sup>

The grid, with its absence of hierarchy and centrepieces, emphasises its anti-referential nature, making it obviously hostile towards the narrative. “This structure, impermeable to both time and the accidental, does not permit the projection of language into the

domain of the visual: the result is silence".<sup>16</sup> The reticulum is, despite its lack of recognition as such, a representation of the pictorial surface, in which, to a certain extent, a velatura is created, thereby securing its repetitiveness. Following the fiction of the original status of the pictorial surface, in a time which is intrinsically a time of defining new purposes, Arxé converts his "immensely technified structures", in vibrant chromatics, into an appeal for a return to that musical origin of which we have lost all memory. Our representing ceaselessly seeks a "reason", our images have almost always been mere promises of something else: a jump into the void, into a place with no floor. Heidegger proposed a change in tonality with his principle of ground/reason based on a single question, referring to how "God plays and a world comes into being": "Does the nature of the play let itself be suitably determined in terms of being qua ground/reason, or must we think being and ground/reason, being qua abyss in terms of the nature of play and indeed of the play which engages us mortals who are who we are only insofar as we live in proximity of death? The play, in essence, pertains to ground/reason."<sup>17</sup> When Arxé explains his latest works he comments on the necessary presence of humans "in festive form, like an avalanche of bathers bent on cooling off on any old summer afternoon".

In contrast, his wise allusion to the oceanic feeling (a crucial Freudian term) reveals a deep-set cultural discomfort, a bitter impression that art has seemingly forgotten its material power and unbridled energy. What we want from art is a germinating capacity, an aquatic activation in our lives, instead of forcing us into a crueller dimension like that of a mass-organised "Ludovico treatment".<sup>18</sup> Arxé seeks a fertile territory, in which world and Earth can achieve a reencounter, by means of a digital production. There can be no doubt that this creator, from his first sculptures to his most recent computer-generated images, shows a singular exactitude in his approach, meaning not that he pursues silent perfectionism, but rather harmony in appearance without renouncing background noise.<sup>19</sup> For Italo Calvino, exactitude meant, above all, three things: A well-defined and calculated design of each piece, the evocation of clear-cut, incisive and memorable images, and the most precise language possible used as the lexicon, as this shapes the expression of all the nuances of thought and imagination. We may think that exactitude, albeit paradoxically, is related to indetermination, but of course with the conviction, the mystic certainty, that "the good God is in the details." To understand exactitude may compulsorily involve speaking of the infinite and the cosmos, to the extent of indulging in a totally Flaubertian delirium. Calvino claims that exactitude is a play of order and disorder, a crystallisation that may be determined by what Piaget called "order in noise": "the universe disintegrates into a cloud of heat, it falls inevitably into a vortex of entropy, but within this irreversible process there may be areas of order, portions of the existent that tend toward form, privileged points in which we seem to perceive a plan, a persepective".<sup>20</sup> To a large extent, exactitude, as in Arxé's works, places depth right on the surface; it makes structure visible, transforming the skin of the work into a mirror that looks in onto itself. The digital forms of Jorge Arxé make something that is, in every sense, virtual to suddenly "materialise". The bright red colour swatches superimpose themselves to compose strange columns reminiscent of the Borrominian Baroque. There is something definitely "driving" about these; perhaps even allegorical of the strength of pulsating blood, in the forms fixed over a completely white background.

The sensual play of balance in these structures, similar to that of some sculptures by Tony Cragg, may have something to do with our desire to account for our identity as something fragile and always in need of "the other". There should be no doubt that the subtle yet energetic imaginarium of Jorge Arxé is located at the antipodes of customary

cultural aesthetic-junk recycling. Rather than revelling in the quotidian and the banal, this creator aims to propose something more marvellous, an evocative universe that is neither the “traumatically real” nor a mere acceptance of sham appearances.<sup>21</sup> Post-art is totally banal art: an art that is unmistakably quotidian, neither kitsch nor elevated, but rather an intermediate kind of art that confers glamour to everyday reality while pretending to analyse it”.<sup>22</sup> It tries or pretends to be critical, when it is really just an unmasking strategy that ultimately, or permanently, takes recourse to the spectacular, that is, the realm of entertainment only.

It is obvious that Jorge Arxé does not aim to produce spectacular images; rather the reverse: he invites the spectator to draw nearer to a domain of intimate tensions, a sort of *pas de deux*, if dance terminology can be applied, in which the turns and swirls require agility, strength and above all, trust and confidence. As opposed to artistic approaches that convert irony into an alibi,<sup>23</sup> Jorge Arxé wants to create a work that is “a bridge between the ‘me’ and the ‘other’”, or perhaps we might say he materialises in metal, or within computerised space, those desires that make us lose our footing, sweeping us off towards pure pleasure. The enigmatic beauty shining out of the works of this artist show that his efforts are not, by any means, in vain. His archaeological investigations, using cybernetic technology, bring us up against the primeval: the experience of water and the need to plunge ourselves relentlessly into it. “The appearance of human beings,” writes Jorge Arxé, “calls for its place, stirring up everything as if water could never stop splattering after we had dived in”.<sup>24</sup> - Fernando Castro Flórez

1. “The illusion of desire has been lost in the ambient pornography and contemporary art has lost the desire of illusion.” Jean Baudrillard *El complot del arte*, Ed. Amorrortu, Buenos Aires, 2006, p. 51. (Translation taken from *The Conspiracy of Art*, by Jean Baudrillard / May 20, 1996.)

2. “It sometimes seems to me that the history of modernist painting can be read as the history of traditional painting put into reverse: a regressive, systematic dismantling of that entire system of illusionistic devices built up over the centuries to make convincing pictorial representations of Christianity’s painful triumph and narratives of national glory. Thus, transparent surfaces become clotted with paint, spaces become flattened, perspective arbitrary, drawing unconcerned with correspondence to the real outlines of figures, shading eliminated in favor of areas of saturated hue that disregard the edges of shapes, and shapes themselves unrepresentative of what the eye actually beholds in perceptual reality. The monochrome canvas is the logical terminus of this collective despictorializing procedure until it occurs to someone to attack the canvas itself physically by slashing.” Arthur C. Danto: “Abstracción” in *La Madonna del futuro. Ensayos en un mundo del arte plural*, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 2003, p. 235. (Translation taken from *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralist Art World*. University of California Press, 2000.)

3. “It sometimes seems that the problem faced by painters is in being competent in new technologies, but I increasingly think that what they are really facing is a crisis in meaning.” Barry Schwabsky: “Pintar ahora” en *ExitExpress*, No. 6, Madrid, Octubre del 2004, p. 11. (Translator’s own rendering)

4. “I started out in 1976 at the Barcelona Fine Arts faculty taking the option of space, and then I attended Javier Corberó’s studio. Those were years in which lots of things were going on. Video brought a big change, and I discovered the potential of images in movement, and I mixed all of this up until sculpture brought everything into perspective”. Jorge Arxé, cited in an article by Roger Salas on the artist published in the newspaper *El País*. (Translator’s own rendering)

5. Gilles Deleuze: El pliegue. Leibniz y el barroco, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1989, p. 108.
6. Jorge Arxé: A text from June 2007.
7. Gaston Bachelard: El agua y los sueños, Ed. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1978, p. 15.
8. "This naturalness consists of reduction, withering, rusting, losing leaves, fading and corroding; in short: the uncontrollable. The uncontrollable receives the charm of the natural. When nature herself is taken advantage of in all her extension, the inanimate as raw material, the animate as the backdrop for scenarios in films, as a curative climate, a transplant, exhaustively explored in all directions, then marginal phenomena become elemental." Arnold Gehlen: Imágenes de época. Sociología y estética de la pintura moderna, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1994, p. 302. (Translator's own rendering)
9. Jorge Arxé: A text from June 2007.
10. Cf. Jean-Francois Lyotard: Lo sublime y la vanguardia in La postmodernidad (explicada a los niños), Ed. Gedisa, Barcelona, 1987, pp. 20-21.
11. Gilles Deleuze: Sobre cuatro fórmulas poéticas que podrían resumir la filosofía kantiana in Crítica y clínica, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1996, p. 54.
12. "The enigmatic sense is manifested, then, as a meaning which is formally unpronounceable, which brings in its stride two levels of the enigmatic: on the one hand, the co-presence of two alternating and reversible (literal/figurative) comprehension projects that can be applied equally but inversely to the expressions, does not necessarily produce ambiguity or ambivalence in the enunciation, but rather incomprehensibility, the close-down of comprehension in the act of confirming a set of unpronounceable relationships of meaning; and on the other the confirmation that this semantic unpronounceability is limited to the detection of two possibilities of comprehension whose formal coexistence decants towards meaninglessness or contradictory meanings." (José M. Cuesta Abad: Poema y enigma, Ed. Huerga & Fierro, Madrid, 1999, pp. 34-35). Translator's own rendering.
13. Giorgio Agamben: Idea de la prosa, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1989, p. 74.
14. George Steiner: Lenguaje y silencio. Ensayos sobre la literatura, el lenguaje y lo inhumano, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1982, p. 72.
15. Rosalind E. Krauss: Retículas, in La originalidad de la Vanguardia y otros mitos modernos, Ed. Alianza, Madrid, 1996, p. 36. (Translator's own rendering)
16. Rosalind E. Krauss: La originalidad de la vanguardia: una repetición posmoderna in Arte después de la modernidad. Nuevos planteamientos en torno a la representación, Ed. Akal, Madrid, 2001, p. 18. (Translator's own rendering)
17. "Nothing is without reason. Being and reason: the same. Being qua reasoner has no reason whatsoever, it's a play like the bottom-and-abyss of that play of how being and reason happened to us in the play. The question remains: Whether and how we, hearing the movements of this play, play along and accommodate ourselves to the play. And the question still is: How to do this?" Martin Heidegger: La proposición del fundamento, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1991, p. 179. (Translation partially taken from The Principle of Reason, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996. Translation by Reginald Lilly.)
18. I refer to the idea by Anthony Burgess, in The Clockwork Orange, of subjecting a delinquent to an overdose of cruel images so as to "re-educate" him in conductist manner.
19. "But the primeval noise, the last remembrance of the Big Bang, is constituent of space itself: It is not a noise "in" space, but a noise that keeps space open as space. Therefore, if we were to eliminate this noise, we would not obtain the "empty space" that was filled by this noise: space itself, the receptacle of "all the world's creatures", would vanish. This noise is thus, in a certain sense, the very same "sound of silence". Slavoj Zizek: El acoso de las fantasías, Ed. Siglo XXI, México, 1999, p. 205. (Translator's own rendering)

20. Italo Calvino: Seis propuestas para el próximo milenio, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 1989, p. 84. (Translation taken from Six Memos for the Next Millennium, Calvino, Italo. First Vintage International Edition, Sept. 1993, Translated from the Italian by Patrick Creagh.)

21. "In the avant-gardes from the end of the last century, the "return to the real" is a topic that was placed in circulation by the homonymous work of Hal Foster, whereas opposing this, others have been defending, for a decade or so, the agony of the real, phagocyted by integrated showiness à la Guy Debord, which does away with and vestige or trail, until it commits what Baudrillard has defined as the murder of reality, the perfect crime." Simón Marchán Fiz: Entre el retorno de lo real y la inmersión en lo virtual. Consideraciones desde la estética y las prácticas del arte, in Simón Marchán Fiz (ed.): Real/Virtual en la estética y la teoría de las artes, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 2005, p. 33. (Translator's own rendering)

22. Donald Kuspit: El fin del arte, Ed. Paidós, Barcelona, 2006, p. 81.

23. "Irony has also been subsumed. Challenging the world in vaguely ironic way, a little sarcastically, has clearly become a thoughtless cliché. It has metamorphosed from being a method capable of shattering conventional ideas to become just another convention." 24

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