

Sublime Readymades

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When I received a letter suggesting that I write a catalogue essay contextualizing Perejaume's work "by talking about the present artistic situation within a global perspective," I felt a bit perplexed at first. How could I presume access to a global perspective in which to contextualize an individual body of work? And moreover, how could a single, mortal being, whose conceptual horizons are necessarily quite limited, possibly be seen as the representative of such a global gaze? Only later, after I had given Perejaume's work fuller consideration, did it become clear to me that the request was actually on target, since the question of a global perspective —its horizons of possibility, its constitution—lies at the very center of Perejaume's work. For a long time now we have been hearing about the Death of the Author. But it is more and more the case that what is missing from contemporary art is actually the viewer. And so artists are increasingly beginning to envision and invent their own kind of viewers, ideal viewers to whom they would eagerly present their work, and with whom a real viewer might identify. According to Perejaume's designs, the figure of such a global spectator is perhaps one of the most sublime —and therefore also one of the most ironic.

1. The globalized gaze

Today it seems that those involved in the market, politics, and especially in art derive particular pleasure from discussing the process of globalization. That one make one's work accessible to a global gaze is expected of every single active member of the art world, be he an artist, curator, or critic. Two things are assumed: that every individual work has to be judged in the global context, and that this judgment has decisive significance in terms of the Author's future destiny. As a result, each art world member's heart fills with hope as well as anxiety. In order to anticipate the global judgment of his own work —and perhaps even to correct it—each individual tries to gain a global perspective as quickly as possible. But that clearly does not work, nor could it ever, since no one can actually imagine who, after all, could represent an ostensibly global perspective, not to mention the criteria by which this viewer would pass judgment. We know we are observed, but we do not know by whom. We feel ourselves seized by the gaze of the Other, but this Other remains invisible, absent. Even if the Other is taken to be the international art institutions, these institutions still elude conceptualization and description. The global art world remains a vague, albeit plausible, concept, which lacks any immediate evidence. Multiple aspirations, suspicions and anxieties are bound up in this concept; they manifest themselves in the many conspiracy theories which spawn and proliferate in the art milieu.

Perhaps the main reason why an artist would pin his hopes to one of the art institutions active at the global level is that affiliation with such an organization can serve as a kind of escape hatch from the tastes and sensibilities which predominate in his local circles. Thanks to advances in communication, an artist need no longer trouble himself with changing the cultural orientation of neighbors who might not appreciate his work; instead he can pointcast like-minded individuals from far and wide, and thereby obviate the kind of urgent emigration which artists like Picasso, Kandinsky, and Buñuel could not avoid. Incidentally, this explains the sense of depoliticization in contemporary art, which many perceive. Earlier, the artist who found little favor within his home community had no choice but to project his hopes on the future: he would try to change the thinking of those around him and, in so doing, conjure forth a new viewer, a new man of tomorrow, bringing to life a whole new society, and, when necessary, entering into the forceful currents created by political movements who were striving to effect social transformation.

In the contemporary moment, however, these avant-garde, utopian impulses have exhausted themselves; alliances are no longer sought in the future, but rather beyond the geographic limits of the political and cultural spheres into which one was born. The utopian imagination has changed direction; now it projects itself into space instead of time. In place of the temporal utopia imagined by the Modernists, there has emerged a new spatial utopia: the Global. Today we look to the processes of globalization for redemption, investing in them the kind of aspirations which were once pinned onto the future. Following this point, it would seem that the anxieties about the depoliticization of art have no grounding; instead of an avant-garde politics of the future, today the artist engages with the politics of globalization. Indeed, finding renown outside of one's locale can actually add leverage to an artist's influence at home and even work transformative effects on local institutions. Aware of such potentials, the global artist or intellectual can devise strategies to influence the situation back at home.

But where there is utopian hope, there lurks also the fear that this hope will not be fulfilled, that utopia will devolve into dystopia, that the foreign, globalized perspective might augur condemnation instead of redemption. After all, future expectation is fueled much less by utopian hope than it is by dread of an imminent apocalypse. Moreover, the global spectator's gaze must not necessarily be a benevolent one: it could very likely pass a negative judgment over an artist's or intellectual's work, and then, following this verdict, sentence it to historical oblivion. Contemporary mass culture preys on just such insecurities with films like *Independence Day* or *Mars Attacks*, in which aliens, posing as global spectators from outer space, find little fascination with all things human. The most desirable global gaze which one could imagine would not only have to telescope out to encompass the entire universe, it would also have to be compassionately humane yet secular. One would hope for an affable and enlightened space tourist as the possessor of this gaze, a being who would look down upon us and affirm our world.

It is no accident that Perejaume's writings and works harken back to Romanticism with such frequency, for this cultural moment marked the advent of the global spectator who was secular, benevolent, and capable of viewing all the cultures of the world with the same intense enthusiasm and compassion, a representative, in fact, of Hegel's Absolute Spirit, who could reconcile human perspectives with those of the global and sacred. The significance of this reconciliation is accurately registered in a passage from *The Aesthetics of Ugliness* by Karl Rosenkranz, a student of Hegel's: "If we took our planet as an example, in order to be considered a beautiful celestial body, she would have to be shaped like a perfect sphere. But she is not. She is flattened at the poles and swollen at the equator, furthermore her surface is marred by the greatest dissymetries of elevation. A profile view of the earth's crust shows us, when viewed stereometrically, the oddest confusion of heights and depths in its intractable contours. Similarly, we could never say of the moon's surface that its disorderly proportions of elevation were beautiful, etc." ¹ When Rosenkranz published these remarks, humankind was hardly capable of exploring outer space. Nevertheless Hegel's student characterizes the global viewer as a kind of sci-fi extraterrestrial who jets into our atmosphere on his flying saucer and judges the aesthetic merits of our solar system. Rosenkranz implies that, since this creature from outer space shares the same Classicist tastes of the author, he must therefore come to the same conclusion in his examination: planet Earth and its surroundings do not look good. The alterations necessitated by an attempt to correct the Earth's unseemly proportions, however, would prove unpleasant for Earthlings. It could be argued, then, that Rosenkranz anchors his arguments squarely within the aesthetic principles of ugliness in order to placate any potential global spectator who might make his presence known to us in the future. Without intending to, the Hegelian judge of global aesthetics reveals again and again his comic side. Soon after his appearance, this figure would be mercilessly satirized by Kierkegaard. Yet the contemporary international art system—with its implicit (and at times explicit) claims towards a global aesthetic—continues to feed off of the Hegelian promise of reconciliation between the global and the local. So criticizing, satirizing, or negating these aesthetic claims actually seems less interesting than investigating the technological means with which such claims are formulated and asserted. It is precisely this type of investigation which Perejaume undertakes in his artwork.

2. Pessebrism: Globalization through minimization

If Rosenkranz speaks about the shape of the Earth in this way, it is because, for him, the Earth resembles the big blue marble depicted in astronomy books; indeed he seems to base his reflections on the gaze (that is, the actively globalizing gaze as well as the one which has been passively globalized) on this type of illustration. Rather than inquire into the institutional, political, or economic conditions of globalization (a move which others have already made), Perejaume investigates the

precisely these formal and technical conditions of the global gaze. Perejaume calls this technique "pesebrism", deriving it from the Catalan "pesebre", the genre of miniature sculptural representations of Bible stories (such as nativity scenes), in which scenes from distant times and places can be viewed in miniature scale. Fittingly, Perejaume mentions Noah's ark as a primary example of pesebrism: here the global can be viewed only once it has gone through a process of diminution and domestication. For Perejaume, the universal and global spectator, as described by Romantic philosophy, always depends upon techniques of miniaturization —such as those engaged by painting as well as the Internet—which disseminate "pesebristic" images of the world to him. The illusion of a universal or global gaze, the notion of enlarging perspectives, and the broadening of knowledge, among other phenomena are the effects of these reductionist techniques. Pesebrism functions for Perejaume as the other, opaque, unreflected side of globalization, since we only gain purchase on a global overview by mechanically reducing the world. In order to understand the nature of the global gaze, then, we must first grasp the mechanisms of pesebrism, that is, the minimization which specularizes the world. In his work Perejaume does just that, with no small degree of irony: he not only tests the techniques used to reduce and render the world into an aesthetic object, but he also suggests how problematic the constitution of a global gaze actually is, given that it defines itself according to those same operations of minimization.

Mimesis is the classical technique of reduction; when an artist paints a landscape he necessarily reduces it, rendering it fully accessible to the viewer. The labor involved in these procedures of reducing and trivializing is most evident in the instance of the mountain landscape, a genre which the Romantics considered especially magnificent and sublime. That mountainscapes are also one of the favorite subjects of Catalan pesebre artists has not escaped Perejaume's attention —but he himself seems transfixed by the manner in which the sublime in such a geological formation resists both reduction and mimetic translation. Problems of mimesis do not seem to be of great concern in contemporary art; Modernists already did that job earlier in the century, relentlessly interrogating and subverting mimetic operations, and ultimately negating them. Still, Perejaume's reflections on the pesebre prompt him to link the Modernist problematic of mimesis to the investigations of the readymade which are so prevalent today. The sort of readymades ubiquitous in contemporary museums can be easily interpreted as mimetic representations of things found outside the museum environment; but since the standard technique for producing readymades does not demand that the artist reduce the size of the object, the readymades cited in or imported into the gallery from "the real world" usually maintain their original dimensions.

Perejaume focuses his artistic strategies on this point. The sheer size of a given object determines whether it can function as a readymade in the museum space. What happens with the objects which

are too large to fit through the museum's portals? What of the objects which obsessed the Romantics—not only mountains, seas, and forests, but also the very Earth and moon? They only fit into the museum in their diminutive versions. Perejaume selects the same objects which inspired the Romantics, and attempts to bring them into the exhibition space under the strict condition of reduction. His work *Cim de Catiu d'Or* (Catiu d' Or Peak, 1988; p. 104) is a case in point. It consists of a distorted golden picture frame, which reveals the damage which would be inflicted were such a frame to be multiply enlarged, then forced to fit around a real mountain, and then finally reduced to original size to fit into the gallery. This is *pessebrism* at its most paradigmatic: a structure resembling a conventional ready-made reduces and depicts the outlines of a mountain which would be impossible to frame. Perejaume works within the systems of equivalence and proportion inherent to classical mimesis, foregoing the perhaps more convenient option of playing against them, which has become so popular of late. But for Perejaume these equivalences are impossible, and thus sublime; that is why he is drawn to them. Perejaume's works are sublime readymades in the Kantian sense: they propel the imagination in the direction of the mathematically infinite. Following the footsteps of Romantic philosophers from Kant to Nietzsche, Perejaume wanders along his mountain passes in search of the mathematical sublime, in search of something which cannot be inserted as a readymade into the space of the contemporary art system. In his work he appears to satirize the kind of globetrotting art spectator who would expect an artist to reduce the world to the point that it could be captured in a single glance. That which exceeds measurement in the mountain remains hidden from the spectator precisely because he is looking for such a measurement. Perejaume's type of irony is highly ambivalent, however; Kant himself noted that even a mountain range is too small to represent either the infinite or the unmeasurable. Whatever sense of the sublime we can experience testifies to an idea of the infinite which can only exist in our imagination. The role of phenomenal reality in all this is only one of stimulation. The sense of the sublime which flashes up within us is not an effect of nature—in order to recognize it we would require the kind of cultural formation which would enable us to wrest our gaze away from the sight of the tremendous, but finite creation of nature and direct it towards the idea of the Infinite. A peasant who lives in the mountains, Kant holds, cannot recognize the sublime amongst their peaks. To this extent Perejaume assumes the stance of a Romantic spectator. Instead of presenting his own work to the global viewer, Perejaume redirects the viewer's attention towards the beauty of nature. The game which Perejaume plays with the spectator's gaze, like that played by many of his contemporaries, is, thus, a rather manipulative one. Instead of offering his own work up for the viewer to assess, he deflects his audience's gaze onto the fields, onto the mountains, onto the sea. And who, after all, is so insensitive and unsentimental that he could refuse to admire fields, mountains, and the sea? Any possibility of negative critique is therefore excluded in advance.

3. Manipulating the viewer's gaze

Perhaps Perejaume plays with the gaze of the global spectator for no other reason than that it appears so easy to manipulate. Indeed the readymade technique suits itself well for the kind of ironic charge that he wants to create. Any need for an unmediated, physical elaboration of the image is thoroughly eliminated by this technique; instead it is replaced by a series of conscious decisions which are both strategic and verifiable. By exposing his process of selection, Perejaume not only formalizes and strategically deploys his production techniques, he also enables their future repetition, a gesture which dispenses with any claims that the work could stand as an unmediated, unreflected manifestation of the artist's inner nature. This is not the work of Romantic genius in the traditional sense. Since the viewer's gaze is directed toward external nature, the artist's body no longer stands in the way of any repetition of his authorial gaze. The artist's perspective is "disembodied": it becomes a pure gaze, one which does not actively work per se, but rather merely passes evaluation, selects, and combines. This gaze can also be "embodied" once again, in the event that anyone felt moved to either think through the process which the artist has laid bare, or to retrace his series of specular choices. Such a strategy suits the change in the function of the museum. No longer the place where history is displayed in all its uniterable singularity, the museum now runs like an archive in which different ways of seeing are collected and catalogued for retrieval and future use.

Historically, the interest in representations of the world was internally split, since no one could determine if the source of a work's interest was derived from the actual object depicted or if the artist's nature was so extraordinary, that it alone conferred to the image its particular degree of attractiveness. Consequently, ingenious, artistic individuality became a rarity, a collector's item. This development made it impossible to distinguish between the immanent interest in an individual object and in the mode of its representation. Both counted as products of nature. To a great extent, in earlier art collections the lines which would separate artefacts of natural history and examples of industrial design from their depicted representations were only loosely drawn, if at all.

Along with the obsolescence of the notion of genius, today the artist has been transformed from collectible to collector. The artist is no longer equated with the laborer (even a privileged laborer), rather he begins to observe the world through the same lens as an aristocrat with a penchant for collecting. This transformation discloses itself most markedly in the temporal economy of the gaze and the changing status of the artist within it. In the traditional dynamic between art production and consumption, the artist's investment of labor, time, and power was inordinately greater than that of the viewer; after the artist's lengthy and arduous process of making the work, the viewer had only to happen upon it in the gallery in order to effortlessly consume it with a single glance. Hence the assumed superiority of the consumer, the viewer, and the collector over and against the artist as image-supplier,

who produced his works through meticulous, physical labor. The artist would first stand on common ground with the collector when he presented himself as a producer of photographs or readymades, since, as such, he made images with the same quasi-instantaneity with which the viewer consumed them. In taking up the position of a pure spectator or absolute consumer, the artist compensates for one of the most severe traumas of modernity, namely the disappearance of the aristocracy. This is a theme central to Perejaume's *Fragments of Monarchy*. Today one frequents a large exhibition or art installation in the same way that aristocratic palaces were once visited. The viewer is admitted to enter before the art, but he is not its actual consumer. Whereas many once sought to affect aristocratic lifestyles displayed in palatial settings, now the contemporary art viewer tailors his consumption according to the things he sees in the art space. The viewer no longer merely consumes the artist's products—like an artist, he invests his own labor into the process of consuming the world.

Possessed of a sovereign gaze, Perejaume takes on the airs of a *flâneur* who regards the world, finds it lovely, and directs the attention of others to that which he has noticed. He turns the spectator's gaze away from himself and his own work, conducting it onwards, to culture, to the outside world, to nature. In a certain sense the artist wants to surveil unseen, unnoticed; he does not want to stand in the spectator's field of vision, but rather desires to impel the viewer further ahead by making his gaze an offer which it cannot refuse—that of mountains, seas, and nature. As a result, the artwork begins to function as a device for specular manipulation; its potency in relation to the viewer's gaze is maximized the longer it stays in the dark, the further it withdraws into the shadows. But Perejaume's readymades do something else as well: they also leave open the possibility that the spectator might choose to shift his gaze to the actual artwork in order to observe its inner working. His readymades reveal the processes of reduction and depiction, mechanisms which, as Kant maintains, outfit the gaze with a pair of cultural spectacles—the very ones which allow him to apprehend the sublime in nature.

4. The sublime spectator

Even if the international institutions of modern art assume the power to display images of our planet in reduced versions for the visual pleasure of the global spectator, these institutions still remain nothing more than small parts of the same world they want to depict. As long as *pessebrism* is understood to be the one-way depiction of nature in the exhibition space, it would not adequately address questions about the kind of gaze which could view both the world as a whole and all of the art which is produced in it. In order to cover this conceptual ground, Perejaume also practices a kind of inverse *pessebrism*: he brings art into nature, installing it in the wilds, where, we might suppose, no one will see it. This is the case in his *Pessebrisme dels monocroms* (*Pessebrism of the Monochromes* 1993; p.103), where he integrates three colors of Malevich's suprematism—black, and red—into the folk-

loric scenery of Catalonia. Here nature is no longer miniaturized and made viewable for the gallery visitor; instead, the art is removed from view and taken off to the mountains. Similarly, in his *Fragments of Monarchy* Perejaume inverts the pessebre and, as a result, makes plain his admiration for the power and might of King Ludwig II of Bavaria (p. 110-111). The king himself engaged in a proto-ready-made process, imposing palaces on the grand order of Versailles as well as their accompanying manicured landscapes into secluded sites where they would have scant practical function and where only God and the select few could be able to see them. This Perejaume's move could be seen as a kind of castling—the museum and nature trade places; nature becomes an exhibition space set free of the museum's spatial constraints.

At first it seems that the inversion of the conventional relationship between the museum and nature is possible only from a theological perspective. In order to imagine a global viewer who does not need to reduce the world, we must believe in God. Yet Lacan, in his renowned analysis of the gaze, has already shown that not only God can serve as a vantage point from which the global gaze is lowered; we can also be seen by a sardine tin floating on the sea and reflecting bright spots of sunlight.² We tend to imagine the sources of light which illuminate the world as points from which we could be observed. The visibility of the world as a whole owes itself to this light whose white-hot source ultimately escapes our sight. Because no one can control the light which catches us in its rays, rendering us visible, the artist, too, is nothing more than another detail of the big picture, an image whose magnitude exceeds his powers of surveillance. Even when Perejaume installs an artwork in the most remote spot, it still loses nothing of its exhibited nature; as long as it remains in light, it continues to be beheld.

In this sense Perejaume's gesture of inverting the pessebre is most apt, since it sustains the expectation that there exists a global viewer who would do more than just represent the international art milieu. Such an expectation lends itself to a social psychological interpretation, one which would diagnose it as the effect of the artist's internal division, a split which was cleaved into the artist as a result of his double-identification with Catalan culture and the international art scene. Lacking the ability to recognize and evaluate the codes, references, and problematics discernible by an art world insider, a local viewer cannot properly assess Perejaume's art. The international art *flâneur*, on the other hand, is impervious to the myriad details and associations which refer back to Catalan culture. In a certain sense, every contemporary artist, Perejaume included, inhabits a no man's land between his own culture and the international art scene; many who find themselves in this predicament sorely want for an audience of receptive viewers. So it makes sense that the artist should expectantly await a spectator who is absolute, messianic, if you will—one who can close up the gap between the local and the global with his all-encompassing gaze—even if this spectator is nothing more than a Lacanian sardine tin, whose subjectless light bleeds out all cultural contrasts. Nevertheless

Perejaume no more harbors the illusion that light, including the sun's rays, could function as the ideal global viewer of his art, than he does the illusion that art could function within the wilderness or, further, that there could exist an image of nature so supremely comprehensive as to subordinate all the secondary images which are derived from it.

In his work Perejaume surveys precisely the no man's land between "local nature" and the international art industry, the dark places where contemporary artists lie in wait. As Perejaume writes, "The healing and corrective power of a work of art derives more from the intermediate place that it occupies than from any deliberate intention on its part to fulfill such a role. Capable of opening up gaps and breaches, fundamentally intermediary, art is a lapse, a no-man's land, situated between nature and signature."³ And further, "We are in the dark orchestra pit of pessebrism[,] convinced that there is a geography that exists previous to both nature and signature, with real landscape and painted landscape set up in front of us to give us some sense of equivalence".⁴ It seems that the sites where art is made and consumed form a whole geography which must remain out of sight. Visibility can only be achieved after art has established its systems of equivalences through enlargement and reduction, as well as through various modes of depiction.

But even when, as a result of this, we define the relationship between nature and culture as pessebristic, there remain dark recesses within the intermediate rifts, places which cannot be illuminated. Using the same figure of thought as Kant does in his third Critique, one could say that the sublime viewer, whose omnivoyant judgment we could only fear, is just a byproduct of our reason. The artist works with an ideal viewer in mind, who, in reality is merely a figment of his own imagination. But since the conceptual horizons of any actual spectator are necessarily limited, such a spectator can only partially represent the sublime viewer of infinite capacities whom the artist wistfully envisions. Nevertheless, the more deliberately and intelligibly the artist discloses his technical processes, the better the actual viewer can play his role as a sublime viewer. Indeed identifying with the global spectator which Perejaume conceives holds a certain charm for the normal, mortal viewer. Without contending with the traditions of mimesis, Perejaume manages to expose its internal mechanisms, and, at the same time, offers up to our gaze views of his beautiful country, places where we would gladly let our gaze linger a while.

1 Karl Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Häßlichen*, 1853, p. 15.

2 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire*, book XI. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973, p. 88 ff.

3 Perejaume, "Two geographies" in *El grado de verdad de las representaciones*. Madrid: Galería Soledad Lorenzo, 1991, p. 46.

4 Perejaume, "Nature and signature" in *El grado de verdad de las representaciones*. Madrid: Galería Soledad Lorenzo, 1991, p. 49.