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Lluís Hortalà: A Literal Trompe-l'oeil

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Guillotine is an unusual exhibition that seeks to deceive the eye: all the wood artifacts displayed in the installation are engaged in a lavish play on appearances.

Lluís Hortalà (Olot, 1959) attended the renowned Van der Kelen Logelain school in 2014 and 2015 to study the decorative painting techniques that Alfred Van der Kelen established in the late nineteenth century. That is where he learned to imitate the texture of marble, which he now applies masterfully to a set of falsely protruding objects. His goal is to catch the viewer's gaze and immerse it in a network of tensions and contortions that prompt a certain archeology of the scopic regime based on the actual physical effect on the eye. The trompe-l'oeil allows Hortalà to turn the reflection on art and visuality back to a bodily experience through a series of objects which succeed in fooling the eye time and time again –even when the viewer consciously believes to have discovered the *trick*.

Jean Baudrillard referred to the trompe-l'oeil as *a fake of a fake*, "a simulacrum that is fully aware of play and artifice" (1): the trompe-l'oeil catches the eye, interferes with its capacity to compose a place, and dismantles the preeminent position usually held by the gaze. Faced with a trompe-l'oeil, the gaze can no longer impose a vanishing point with which to prevail upon the space, instead being captured to become the vanishing point for the gaze returned by the objects themselves. This is no longer the Cartesian eye, which, spreading its gaze upon the world, thinks and, *ergo,* exists; (2) the subject-facing-the-trompe-l'oeil is actually in the opposite position. The eye is, above all, *viewed* by the object the viewer presumed to view. Therefore, the world of the trompe-l'oeil is a world of pure visuality in which there is nothing to be seen: the viewer's eye discovers that it is entirely dominated by the gaze of another.

Accordingly, any trace of idealism or of humanistic exaltation evaporates in this exhibition. As Jacques Lacan notes, the trompe-l'oeil does not vie with the world of appearances, but rather with the world of ideas, the *Platonic* world, in which, since ancient times, it has been assumed that every appearance masks an intentionality that transcends the object. (3) However, that does not apply to the trompe-l'oeil, an even more intense reaffirmation of the material agency of the world, yet without its being *hyper reality* either, but rather, as Hortalà observes, the trompe-l'oeil "is not more real than the real; *it is the real."* (4) The trompe-l'oeil provides us with the expression of the visual deception of visuality in all its literality.

The Museum as a Guillotine

In the late eighteenth century, the notion of art underwent a decisive change. E. H. Gombrich refers to it when he describes the transition that occurred at the time from the notion of *art that must be noble* to the idea that appeared thereafter, of *art that must be sincere*. (5) The trompe-l'oeil technique allows Hortalà to intervene violently in this seminal moment in art, in the history of art, and in the scopic regime of modernity.

The transition from an old noble art to a new sincere art came about with the Enlightenment and Romanticism, although consolidating the change required a technology that was highly innovative at the time: the museum. In fact, the Louvre was the first device to allow art to exist beyond any other consideration and thus establish its own law, its *autonomy,* based on which it could develop as if it were a product of nature and in all its authenticity. (6)

Hortalà reveals the aseptic "white cube" of the Centre d'Art Tecla Sala as heir to this fiction from the very start of the exhibition, when he covers the first wall with a 1:1 scale reproduction of the baseboard from the Museo del Prado. Thus the museum appears established as such: above the prominent baseboard hangs a circular, voluminous piece –*Robespierre* (2017-18)–, alongside what appears to be its preliminary sketch, deceptively framed, and with a painted wall behind it that recreates the color used in the Museo del Prado in 1899 in an attempt to enhance the work of Diego Velázquez commemorating the third anniversary of his birth. Hortalà eloquently names the baseboard *Guillotine (El Prado)* (2019), with a nod to Tony Bennet's suggestion of a correlation between the implementation of the guillotine and the invention of the museum during the same historical period, in his essay *The Birth of the Museum* (1995).

The guillotine was the instrument that provided *equal death for all,* regardless of social rank or class. It introduced a clean, democratic cut that would put an end to the spectacular staging of torment during the Ancien Régime. And, although over time it became an icon of the French Revolution, the innovation provided by the guillotine was the possibility of concealing punishment and death from the public eye and ceasing to present executions as a form of social entertainment.

The use of the guillotine spread quickly across early nineteenth-century Europe. However, as Bennet observed, it did not travel these paths alone, but rather alongside the opening of royal and church-owned collections, as well as the institutionalization of the first public museums, which also began to proliferate in the main cities on the continent. Therefore, while the guillotine had rendered the former terror-based forms of government obsolete, the museum had the mission of replacing them according to new social contracts: by admiring art, the people would recognize themselves as part of a universal brotherhood while also empathizing with the State as the sponsor of the museum and of cultural policy. To keep society under control, the State would no longer have to exert coercion or symbolic violence; it would only have to intervene in a matter as subtle as shaping the population's taste. (7)

The fireplace diptych, the main character in the exhibition, provides an account –in three different times– of how the transition from a noble art to a sincere art required the intervention of both the museum and the guillotine. In its first appearance, *Il y a bien du monde aujourd'hui à Versailles* (2016), the artist places the two fireplace mantels across from each other in a confrontation that personifies the vanity of Marie Antoinette and Madame du Barry: on one side of the room stands the Madame du Barry mantel, in an insulting Bourbon style –voluptuous, almost pornographic, Rococo in all its splendor. The piece replicates the original fireplace from the Salon des Jeux in the palace of Versailles, where this plebeian who had risen broodingly to the status of a countess would sit –whenever she was not in the royal bedroom, where she satisfied the perversions of Louis XV, the lustful king who was enslaved and, ultimately, entirely subjugated to her will.

Right across from it stands the fireplace mantel of Marie Antoinette, the *Austrian she-wolf, the Rococo queen,* also known as *Madame Déficit* for her squandering of the public coffers during her rule. This mantel comes from the Cabinet du Billard, which the queen commissioned for her quarters and where she showed a degree of refinement that anticipated the spirit of Neoclassicism. While, on the one hand, this style followed the revolutionary flame of the Third Estate, on the other hand, the courtesans of Versailles embraced it as the new trend that was all the rage.

With *Il y a bien du monde aujourd'hui à Versailles*, Hortalà alludes to the palatial dispute that arose between Marie Antoinette and Madame du Barry in the early 1770s, revealing the *de jure* power of the then princess and the *de facto* power of Louis XV's mistress. This tragicomedy, a Versailles catfight with broad repercussions for European geopolitics, ended in victory for Madame du Barry, which led Hortalà to make her mantel ostensibly larger than that of the humiliated Marie Antoinette.

Continuing along the exhibition itinerary, the rivalry between the fireplaces is triangulated by the second appearance of a museum baseboard: it is the climax in the narrative, in this case the original baseboard from Room 700 in the Louvre –*Guillotine (Louvre)* (2017-19)– placed in an elevated position, crossing one of the rooms from end to end. Here, the baseboard does not even function as the representation of a baseboard, but rather as a thin horizon line: the Louvre, the museum that opened up a new world, the first museum in the modern sense of the term. (8)

Likewise, Madame du Barry's mantel also ceases to be a mere representation of a mantel: it rises and splits in two to escort both flanks of this baseboard-guillotine, which it considers its destiny. It appears to pay tribute to it, although in fact it *vanishes.* The two pieces of furniture converge, through a sophisticated foreshortening, towards the split that will change their status irreversibly: polished weapons to replace everyday courtly squabbles, the princely arsenal had to be strained and twisted into a paroxysm in order to cross the threshold and enter the museum of the Revolution. The trompe-l'oeil placed in perspective probably reveals the extraordinary feat that pieces of decorative art had to perform in order to shed all traces of heteronomy and attend only to their own aesthetic exaltation. The revolutionaries interpreted it as a purge, although by now purification appears as yet another layer of makeup. In the light of the trompe-l'oeil, the action of the Louvre can only extend Baudrillard's account, appearing as *a fake of a fake of a fake.* (9)

Encore un moment, Monsieur le bourreau, encore un moment (2017) provides the last scene in the exhibition: here Marie Antoinette and Madame du Barry are personified at the same scale, equalized in front of a guillotine which, in fact, was the last blow the two women received shortly after the Louvre opened its doors. The title is a quote of Madame du Barry's last words, her futile attempt to extend her lifetime when she was already on the gallows. Her request has also been interpreted as the desire for the social theatre of the Ancient Régime to live on in time and not succumb to the purge that the Reign of Terror imposed upon all its actors. Be it Louis XV's *style rocaille* or the *style à la grecque* of Louis XVI, all the ravings of the last decades of the French aristocracy were levelled off according to the same criteria.

In this last scene, however, all the elements seem to have been disassembled. Even the third baseboard in the series –*Guillotine (National Gallery)* (2017)– is only partially installed at the back of the room. (10) The entire epic of the transition from the Ancien Régime to the French Revolution appears here as reduced to the effect of a stage set –as if the narrative had ended up being subjected to a theatrical event, as if what had been perpetuated was neither art nor the political ideals of the Enlightenment, but little more than the artifice sustaining them throughout the entire performance.

Towards a *Cold Rococo* (Anachronism and Institutional Materiality)

Hortalà chooses a place in the past –Versailles– and pursues a material strategy –the trompe-l'oeil. The result is a powerful anachronism that enables him to intervene in the present moment and, especially, in the discursive regime with which art unfolds today.

Versailles becomes omnipresent. And, just as Madame du Barry implored at the end of her life, that "Versailles, that marble fortress with one hundred windows, with its curtseys and intrigues and its buttoned-down parties," that "eternal minuet, with its endless repetition of the same figures," where "each and every movement is controlled," and where people live "for appearances only" (11) did not die entirely under the guillotine's blade: Hortalà's hypothesis is that its world was transferred to the museum and that, even under the guise of presumably democratic sincerity, it has imbued the entire art system and lived on until today. (12)

The long-standing technique of the trompe-l'oeil allows Hortalà to cross over to both sides of the mirror and keep the world of *sincere art* in tension with its underlying layer of nobility. The contradiction lies in the fact that, although "these pieces are about falsehood, at the same time, they continue to be authentic" –as Javier Peñafiel pointed out to Hortalà in a conversation between the two artists. (13) Indeed, Hortalà's trompe-l'oeils veer away from their noble predecessors insofar as they do not conceal poor materials nor a society in crisis under their surface, instead containing nothing but a long apprenticeship, painstakingly executed craftsmanship, and, at the same time, an in-depth reflection on visuality and art itself. Therefore, the pieces resulting from this process render Peñafiel's claim reversible and subject to being interpreted in the opposite sense: *these pieces are about sincerity, and, at the same time, they continue to be the artifice that art has always been.*

Hortalà's particular brand of institutional critique stands out for having anachronism as its basis: his work consists of an attack on art and the museum coming from *behind.* Therefore, art and the museum are set against the epistemology that came right before their emergence as such.

Correspondently, an aspect of the Rococo world that imbues Hortalà's entire critique is that art's capacity for intervention is not limited to the realm of discourse. (14) The material agency of the artefact is one of Hortalà's learnings from that sumptuary period. Therefore, regardless of the meaning that each viewer may attribute to the pieces gathered here, there is no doubt that in each one of them, the trompe-l'oeil will end up checkmating the viewer's eyes. Following the logic of Rococo procedure, affectation and sensuality always prevail over interpretation and discourse.

José Luis Brea used the term "neo-Baroque" in the early 1990s in reference to the ability of conceptual and post-minimalist art to shed its *interiority* and its correlation with meaning, thus gaining the ability to glide effortlessly along the layer of discourse, as if it were a graceful, groundless allegory or a permanent *line of flight.* (15) Hortalà also seeks to intervene in the relationship between the signified and the signifier, although in this case the artist chooses to base his exploration on the

space below, on the material support of the signified, the *signifier,* while using the excess of artifice as the strategy for collapsing the signified. One could not even claim that it is *art for art's sake* –a notion that all institutional critiques ended up unmasking as one of the strategies of the discourse– but rather that in Hortalà's case we face an even more defiant world, that of *artifice for the sake of artifice*.

Entering into a dialogue with Brea, I believe we could refer to this excess of artifice as *neo-Rococo*, or a *cold Rococo,* a *silent Rococo.* In fact, applied to Hortalà, the term Rococo does not only have the quality of a historical or stylistic reference; the artist actually builds upon this apex of aristocratic art to develop a full-blown procedural strategy.

Robespierre, the first piece in the exhibition, condenses in its circularity Hortalà's entire approach to art and politics: drawing upon all the eloquence that turned him into a charismatic leader, Maximilien Robespierre persuaded the entire population to identify with his political project. Despite the known fact that this attempt to align the whole population with the single discourse of the Republic in absolute terms only succeeded in unleashing the most violent period of the French Revolution –the Reign of Terror, during which a vast number of people were purged after being declared enemies of the people, and which, in its grand finale, ended up leading the Jacobin leader himself to the guillotine. With his *Robespierre,* Hortalà points out that not only the pristine ideals of the Republic throbbed at the root of the purge: if Robespierre's narrative was effective enough to drive over 17,000 French people to their death, it was also due to his ability to captivate with words.

The circularity of *Robespierre* has more to do with the ubiquity of artifice than with the wheel of time or the notion of an endless return. Robespierre's feet were always firmly grounded on the mosaic with which the architect Bernardino Maccarucci decorated the floors of the Gallerie dell'Academia in Venice the same decade of the revolutionary's birth: a compass rose turned into an ornament, the hypnotic base on which the roadmap unfolds, the scopic drive that is incessantly replicated with the will to power and which reemerges in every instance of domination. (16)

Robespierre is a *vanitas* of the ideals of the Revolution: *artifice you are and to artifice you shall return.* Beneath the dream of transparent politics viewed as the direct will of the people, there will always be an underlying rhetoric, the mediation of artifice and of enchantment, sensuous beauty, and a considerable dose of eroticism, with which, ultimately, the courtesan world of the Ancien Régime was identified, and which we have not succeeded in shedding ever since.

Notes:

1. Baudrillard, J. (2011). *De la seducción*. Madrid: Cátedra, pp. 61-64. (Original French title, *De la séduction;* published in English as *Seduction*).
2. The entire philosophy of Descartes stems from a subject with a gaze who finds the basis for his thought in the construction of mental representations of the world. In this sense, Descartes must not only be considered the founding father of modern philosophy, but also of the modern paradigm of visuality. As Walter Ong noted, all of modern individualism can be explained by the equivalence "The eye = the I". See Crary, J. (2008). *Las técnicas del observador. Visión y modernidad en el siglo xix*. CENDEAC, pp. 47-96 (Original English title, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*); Jay, M. (2007). *Ojos abatidos. La denigración de la visión en el pensamiento francés del siglo xx*. Akal, pp. 25-69 (Original English title, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*).
3. Lacan, J. (2010). *El Seminario. Libro 11. Los cuatro conceptos fundamentales del psicoanálisis [1964]*. Paidós, p. 118-119. (Published in English as *Seminar XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*).
4. Conversation with Lluís Hortalà. Barcelona, 21-06-2018.
5. Gombrich, E. H. *(2013). Lo que nos cuentan las imágenes*. Barcelona: Elba, p. 196. (Originally published in English as *The Story of Art*).
6. "Beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, a work of art was expected to be authentic, and achieving that authenticity was only possible through self-definition: its existence had to depend solely on its own laws, much though they may have seemed annoying, offensive, or even unacceptable to the society of their times." Rofes, O. *Art públic i producció de localitat*. [Doctoral thesis defended in 2015, unpublished].
7. Tony Bennett further elaborated the ideas suggested by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (1975) regarding the introduction of the guillotine during the Reign of Terror and the development of the modern penitentiary system. Bennet himself acknowledges that his work *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics* (1995) analyzes the museum apparatus in strictly Foucauldian terms, given that this philosopher did not actually develop an analysis of museums as part of his archeology of knowledge. An essay that is indebted to these reflections and has also been useful to me for the purposes of this article is Brea, J. L. (2002). «El museo contemporáneo y la esfera pública» (The contemporary museum and the public sphere), in *La era postmedia. Acción comunicativa, prácticas (post)artísticas y dispositivas neomediales*. Centro de Arte de Salamanca, pp. 85-102.
8. Schubert, K. (2000). *The Curator's Egg. The Evolution of the Museum Concept from the French Revolution to the Present Day*. One-Off Press, p.18.
9. The contradiction between the values of the Revolution and those of the art from the royal court were the subject of controversy and frequent debate between the members of the Commission du Muséum des arts and, later on, of the first Conservatory. Casimir Varon described it clearly in his *Rapport du Conservatoire du Muséum national des arts* in May, 1794: "An involuntary sense of regret interferes with the pleasure of spreading before you our riches; art has diverged far from its true path and celestial origins [...] a multitude of dangerous and frivolous experiments, the results of long centuries of slavery and shame, have debased its nature: wherever one turns one sees that its productions bear the marks of superstition, flattery, and debauchery. Such art does not recount to the noble lessons that regenerated people adores: it does nothing for liberty. One would be tempted to destroy all these playthings of folly and vanity if they were not so self-evidently unworthy of emulation. But nevertheless there is some point in trying to veil these vaults, to obliterate these false precepts. This is our task and we shall strive to achieve it. It is through the overall effect of the collection that this can best be done. It is by virtue of an air of grandeur and simplicity that the national gallery will win respect. It is through a rigorous selection that it must command the public's attention." Quoted in McClellan, A. (1999). *Inventing the Louvre. Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. University of California Press, p. 113.
10. The National Gallery, established in 1824, operated under the auspices of the British Museum for a large part of the nineteenth century. The British Museum, founded in 1759, has sometimes been described as the oldest museum in the world, although during its first fifty years it did not act as a museum in the usual sense, instead offering a semi-public collection with limited access, primarily comprising books and manuscripts: "Persons desiring to visit the museum had first to give their credentials at the office and it was then only after a period of about fourteen days that they were likely to receive a ticket of admission," the German historian Wendeborn regretted in 1785. In historiographical terms, there has been debate as to whether the British Museum and the Louvre constituted two different genealogies in the origins of the modern museum or rather that the notion of the museum as we know it today truly stems from the Louvre, with the earlier British Museum being remodeled according to the French museum's principles. When Hortalà takes the baseboard from the National Gallery and introduces it in his *Guillotine* series, he is clearly leaning toward the latter version. See Schubert (2000). *Op. cit.*, pp. 17-28.
11. The quotes are from Stefan Zweig's biography of Marie Antoinette, first published in 1932, a source that continues to be thoroughly valid today as a record of the quarrels that occurred in the court of Louis XV and Louis XVI, while also providing a highly complex portrait of Marie Antoinette and a commendably beautiful biographic account: Zweig, S. *María Antonieta*. Acantilado, pp. 48, 79, 80 and 128 (Originally published in German as *Marie Antoinette. Bildnis eines mittleren Charakters*).
12. As Andrew McClellan explains in *Inventing the Louvre* (1994), the revolutionaries celebrated the opening of the Louvre as part of the festivities for the first anniversary of the proclamation of the Republic, on August 10, 1793. The museum was presented as a symbol of popular sovereignty and as a triumph of the revolution over despotism. Henry Grégoire, the priest who became a revolutionary leader, referred to the museum as "the mold of the Republic", while Jean-Louis David welcomed the educational role that the institution would have for the people as well as for the artists who put themselves at the service of the Revolution –"The museum is not supposed to be a vain assemblage of frivolous luxury objects that serve only to satisfy idle curiosity. What it must be is an imposing school." The museum was celebrated as an appropriation of the royal collection, turned into national property. However, the revolutionaries did not only take over material possessions: a part of this story that is often overlooked is that at some point in the 1770s and 1780s, when the popularity of the crown started to be seriously challenged, the Count of Angiviller proposed to Louis XVI that he open the Louvre to the public and make his royal collection available to the public. With this gesture, the director of the King's Buildings (*Bâtiments du roi*) argued that the king's magnificence and kindness would be highlighted –and would achieve this aim in a building that was unique in all of Europe. However, the outbreak of the French Revolution put a stop for the progress of this plan.
13. Conversation with Lluís Hortalà, Barcelona, May 31, 2018. Peñafiel's had visited the artist's studio a few days earlier.
14. If the radical reduction of artistic intervention allowed by ready-mades turned Marcel Duchamp into the father of institutional critique, in Lluís Hortalà's case, given the inordinate amount of work involved in producing each one of his trompe-l'oeils, his production could be considered a *Japanese-style* institutional critique, according to the Spanish urban legend of Japanese strikes that involve working double time to destabilize the economy.
15. «It seems obvious that in all the areas of the arts there is an abundance of productions which, from a formal perspective, are asking to be recognized as neo-Baroque,» noted José Luis Brea in his first essay, *Nuevas estrategias alegóricas* (New allegorical strategies, 1991). In this Spanish critic's opinion, the notion of *neo-Baroque* was a *Duchampian find* that had spread through minimalist and conceptual art. With an eminently textual basis and proceeding from the realm of the discourse, the potential of art to remain in an endless line of flight and in de-identification with any power system was attributed to the allegorical strategy of the Baroque. Several years later, Jesús Carrillo interpreted this penchant for allegory as indicative of the lack of agency of art in the Spanish context: «Allegory, as a strategy stemming from a profound consciousness, was not the kind of procedure that typically emerges in a free culture, but a survival mechanism within a system characterized by the precariousness of agency. That is why I dare to consider the 'parallel actions' led by a large group of 'wise' critics in the first half of the 1990s as symptomatic of a system that could not summon enough strength within itself to intervene effectively in its environment, but solely through its connection with the structures of power.» As far as Hortalà's *neo-Rococo* is concerned, we can safely say that it speculates in the opposite direction from that of a *line of flight*, inquiring into the links that art has had with power and as a power, both historically and in the present. See Brea, J. L. (1991). *Nuevas estrategias alegóricas*, Tecnos; Carrillo, J. (2014). «La institución y la institucionalización de la crítica en España». A: Carrillo, J.; Vindel, J. (ed.). *Desacuerdos 8*. Centro de Arte José Guerrero – Diputación de Granada; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía; Universidad Internacional de Andalucía – UNIA arteypensamiento, p. 252.
16. In a footnote to *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud associated what Jacques Lacan would later refer to as *scopic drive* with the moment when humans stood upright and set out to walk on two feet. Adopting a vertical position could be related to the urge to dominate one's environment, which resulted in the sense of sight replacing the formerly preponderant sense of smell. Sight, *the noblest of senses*, was thus intimately connected thereafter to the human will to power. I owe this reference and the interpretation of the passage to Ruben Verdú. Freud, S. (2001). *El malestar en la cultura y otros ensayos*. Madrid: Alianza, p. 251. (Original German, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, published in English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*).