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**Benet Rossell, *artor*
Or How and Why We Met in Paris
Nearly Thirty Years Ago**

a minimum of artistic expression, by indirect criticism, by constant doubt, and by humour and irony, to mention but a few examples. Referring to the prehistoric inhabitants of the caves at Lascaux and El Cogul, the artist reminds us that 'painting was for them, and I too am one of them, a tool for thinking that allowed them to see themselves as they were; as beings perfectly integrated into a mysterious and inexplicable natural world.'¹⁸

1 Chief among his micro-languages are micro-opera, micro-performance and micro-theatre. On 1 August 1996, with the ritual incineration of his sculpture *L'ametlla com balla*, he founded *cendrisme*, the latest *-ism* in contemporary art, which he defines as, 'Hey! Come on! Cast the ashes to the wind and watch!' as part of the 'creative process of art and the incessant transformation of forms and ashes'. (In a special issue of the magazine *Cave Canis*, Barcelona, February 1997, 600 copies). He also invented *theatrot*; unrepresentable fragments, dialogues and monologues: *POTATO*; a literary genre that 'has practically no content but a lot of plot, that is to say, starch. Anyone can understand it if they have learnt the barest abstract parameters.' (Benet Rossell, *Road Poetry*, Lleida, Pagès Editors, 2001, p. 61).

2 Centre Vieille Charité, Marseille, 1993. Exhibition curated by Bernard Blistène. A reference to the wordplay that Marcel Broodthaers used on a political map of the world. He transformed the title by crossing out two letters of the word 'political' (li) and inserting a single 'e', so as to transform it into a 'poetical' map of the world.

3 Benet Rossell, 'Paris signo a signo' (2001). Presentation for a symposium on Jacques Lacan, organised by the Escuela Lacaniana de Psicoanálisis del Campo Freudiano en España, in collaboration with the Institut Francès de Barcelona, and published in *Coloquio Jacques Lacan 2001*. Buenos Aires, Barcelona, México, Ediciones Paidós, 2002, pp. 122–23.

4 Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI. *Los cuatro conceptos fundamentales del psicoanálisis*, Chapter 6: 'La esquizia del ojo y la mirada', Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Mexico, Ediciones Paidós, 1987, p. 109.

5 Joan Brossa, *L'Espirall*, Barcelona, Galeria G, 1976.

6 *Benet Rossell: An American Exhibition*, Anthology Film Archives, New York, May 1990. Interview with Benet Rossell by Annemieke Van de Pas, Barcelona, April 1990.

7 '...un glaçat glaçó / que té el rostre ràpid / a l'aigua es fon / al si del Sena.' Benet Rossell, 'Resina de glaçó', *Road Poetry*, p. 38.

8 '...Poesia i plastomàquia a l'escena / au vinga va / que les tertúlies en veu alta / provenen d'un no sé on poètic / i la plastomàquia l'he inventada jo / mentre la campana es desfà / a toc de cendra / i oblits esmicolats / d'antuvi / per posar esment gràfic / de color, gest i garranyics / a les ànsies dels ressons.' Rossell, 'Un bri de plastomàquia', *Road Poetry*, p. 45.

9 Benet Rossell, *I Think with the Tip of the Brush*, unpublished text of October 2009, of which revised version has been published on page 221 of this volume.

10 Alexandre Cirici, 'Metallenguatges de Santos, Portabella, Beni', *Serra d'Or*, no. 134, November 1970, p. 62.

11 *Idees i actituds. Entorn de l'art conceptual a Catalunya, 1964–1980...*, Barcelona, Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, 1992, p. 208, interview by Albert Macià.

12 Esther Ferrer, 'Los signos gráficos de Benet Rossell', *El País*, 19 February 1980.

13 Exhibition *I'm*, Galeria Palma Dotze, Vilafranca del Penedès, September–October 2009.

14 From a short story by Antonio Molina Flores read in Barcelona on 28 April 2009 to mark the presentation of the book *Archivo F.X.*

15 *La ciudad vacía. Política*, a project by the artist Pedro G. Romero, was organised by the Antoni Tàpies Foundation at the Teatre Tantarantana.

16 Coments by the artists in an article by Teresa Sesé, 'La desaparició del ramblaire', *La Vanguardia*, 29 September 2009.

17 Joaquim Sala-Sanahuja, 'Apuntar', introductory text to the catalogue of the exhibition *I'm*.

18 Manuel Delgado, *La magia. La realidad encantada*, Barcelona, Montesinos, 1992, p. 114.

18 Rossell, *I Think with the Tip of the Brush*.

(But it feels like only *yestertoday* – a manner of speaking that amounts simply to this: that the time of the work, of the artistic act, is a present that is constantly being begun anew; I would venture even to say: a perennial present, for what with the cosmic chaos we are now wading through, if there's one notion that seems hardly relevant, it has to be longevity...)

So, Benet and me. We had hardly spoken since the last century, since the late seventies and early eighties, in Paris, when I invited him to the exhibitions I was organising at the time with Bernard Quentin (a semiotic painter-sculptor-environment-maker): *Art/Script* at Galerie de Seine, and *Les lettres sont des choses* at Espace Alternatif Créatis. They were followed by the inauguration of the Villa Arson in Nice, in April to June of 1984, of the extensive panorama that locates the scriptural sign as a major visual element in the art of the twentieth century: *Écritures dans la peinture*, which was a collective undertaking generated by Michel Butor.

The ensemble that I brought together, in alphabetical order (which, as we know, is an easy way of fudging questions of incompatibility), was made up of twelve artists, representing every generation and aesthetic, but to me all undeniably important: Jochen Gerz, Anton Heyboer, René Magritte, Merkado, Jean Messagier, Henri Michaux, Georges Noël, Claes Oldenburg, Roman Opalka, Bernard Quentin, Benet Rossell and Joe Tilson.

With 'my' twelve artists I was illustrating the particular use of the imaginative faculty that I proposed to call the *scriptural imagination*. This was a reference to genetic psychology, according to which, and following Julián de Ajuriaguerra, 'writing is made up of visible traces of actions that are more or less conscious, more or less individualised, as a function of maturative, organic and functional factors'.

Regarding the micro-chronicles by Benet Rossell, I quoted the Surrealist poet Robert Desnos. In his great oneiric narrative from 1924, *La liberté ou l'amour*, Desnos speaks of the 'magical phenomenon of writing as an organic and optical manifestation of the marvellous' and imagines 'drops of ocular water through which words are passed so that they come back in a visual form to match with a memory'.

Did not these words herald Benet's 'mutant intersigns' – for example, that *O mounted on two legs acting the humanoid* or the *E expelled and becoming a cannibal mouth?*... These were *anthropograms*, as another poet would say – not a Surrealist but a neo-Baroque poet: the Parisian Cuban Severo Sarduy, who saw Benet as 'an unquiet, breathless individual swept up in the ambulatory errantry of an incessant haste'.

It will surprise no one, therefore, that these *anthropograms* eventually crossed paths with that other 'ambulatory' personage, Don Quijote de la Mancha, who is never far from the back of Spanish minds.

And so all this was thirty years ago, in Paris and Nice. And now in this curiously summery autumn of 2009, Benet has driven from Barcelona to the farm in Dracy, Burgundy, where I live (it is also a place of inter-artistic events), and he is here, with Cristina, having brought documents, catalogues, DVDs and videos... And so little less young! And even more multifaceted than I remembered... 'A construction site of a person.' Never repeating himself.

Experimental

Certainly, the artistic activity of the second half of the twentieth century, if we consider it overall, was experimental, mainly experimental. Triumphantly so. It used audacity and tranquillity, negation and provocation. And often, very often, it appeared caught up in the spin of the new and a headlong flight from the old.

But it also had a kind of nostalgia for a distant origin. For getting back to the hidden sources of the *desire* for art... The cave recently discovered at Chauvet in Ardèche is ten thousand years older than Lascaux – 25,000 years old, they tell us.

All things considered, and now that we have the necessary hindsight, is not the experimental in art the equivalent of revolution, that driving myth of the twentieth century?

Change society by changing art. Or even, as Constant imagined in *New Babylon*: change society (or at least the city) by making the resources of art available to all.

For me, Benet, means the city: Paris and the Catalans of Paris... And yet now, here, in the heart of the Puyse region with its farms, châteaux, rivers and forests, he surprises me by saying, 'I am of peasant stock. Art, it's something I plant in the earth. My calligraphic signs are vegetation, they spread like grass or weeds, they germinate...'

Breaking with the age-old traditions that the twentieth century emptied of all vitality, experimentalism (among other things) made possible the emergence of those *art operations* of the kind that Benet Rossell (and others) practised in Paris in the 1970s and beyond. Of the kind that are still commonly practised all around the world.

The transition from *artwork* to *art operation* was one of my obsessive concerns as an art critic, that is to say, as a committed witness, a fellow traveller. To map it and name it, to grasp it in its ungraspable movement. In a special issue of the journal *Opus International*, I suggested the neologism *arteur* (*artor*), a portmanteau word combining *artiste* (artist) and *acteur* (actor).

It is, I think, particularly fitting for Benet.

But rather than transition or passage (a one way journey, as is the case for most *artors*), no doubt we need to speak (as one does with Benet) of *oscillation*. The *operation* in the artistic field does not exclude the *work*. He runs between the two. He has never abjured painting, a fact recalled by the *Agenda* from 1995, which followed up the all-painting exhibition at the Museu Morera, Lleida. Nor does it rule out sculpture, as is attested by the monumental letters of the *Una salut de ferro* (An Iron Greeting), a 'sculptural visual poem' for the garden of the university hospital at Lleida.

It's a way of staying free. And freedom means the knowledge and ability to go back to art's *old ways*, free of false scruples or a bad conscience, if and when one feels an inner necessity to do so. I'm thinking of Joan Brossa, whom I welcomed to Paris for the festival *Le Feu des Mots*. Wasn't there a time when he switched, quite playfully, from the *visual poem* (his *Oda a Joan Miró* [Ode to Joan Miró], as experimental as they come!) to the medieval sestina and Petrarchan sonnet? *Ni cap camí pot ser tancat amb normes*, we read in *Perruques* – a sonnet.

Historically, the experimental in art was initiated and then developed by Dadaism, Futurism (before it degenerated), Surrealism and Duchamp, who, in the sixties – as I can somewhat reluctantly testify – was elevated into a universal totem. The experimental has manifested itself in a thousand different ways, often difficult to detect at the beginning. For example, right after the Second World War, the CoBrA movement trumpeted itself as 'the internationale of experimental artists'. CoBrA works (Constant, Jorn, Appel, Corneille, Pedersen, Alechinsky, Tajiri, Heerup, et cetera), which were nevertheless painting-paintings and sculpture-sculptures, aspired to escape the sphere of art, to get back to a more authentic everydayness. Thus Jorn, CoBrA's theoretician, wanted to 're-establish the kind of relations between art and life that existed for the Italian primitives, and that were severed and destroyed in our modern society, much to the detriment of humanity and culture'.

CoBrA advocated spontaneity and even 'being simplistic'. As experimentalists, they rejected labels used commonly both then and now such as 'expressionism' and 'abstraction'. This was a truly *revolutionary* attitude. And when CoBrA began to wind down (1951), Constant made revolution his priority. He transposed his ideas into an utopian urban concept and into hyper-architecture. The result was *New Babylon*, as seen at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona's (MACBA) *Situationists* exhibition in November 1996. Benet Rossell assures me that he has not forgotten the talk I gave at the time with Constant in attendance. I didn't know it, but this must have been particularly resonant for Benet, as its subject was 'going beyond art', in the spirit of the book I wrote in 1974, *Délivrer l'art de l'artistique*.

One of CoBrA's experiments consisted in reducing the distance between drawing and writing – and I can see this, too, as anticipating Benet's *micro operas*. 'Writing and painting are one and the same thing,' argues Jorn. 'It can be said that there is writing, graphology, in every image, just as an image can be found in all writing.' This spirit gave rise to the *logograms* by Christian Dotremont, who himself suggested that we 'see their exaggeratedly natural, excessively free writing as drawing, non-naturalist drawing, certainly, but at any rate of a material kind, of my cry or my song, or the two together'.

The *logograms* can also be taken as an attempt to revalue the *manuscript*, which in our postmodern times is linked to the *fate of the hand*. It is indeed this formulation, coined by the great pre-historian Leroi-Gourhan, that provided me with the theme for the exhibition, in between *Art/Script* and *Les lettres sont des choses*, that I organised at Galerie Kôryô, Paris, in 1982. This gallery was directed by the wife of the Korean painter and calligrapher Ung No Lee. He had been living in Paris. Korea was under the control of a harsh military dictatorship that had no qualms about flouting international law and kidnapping and forcefully repatriating him. Condemned (to death, I believe), he was saved *in extremis* by the energetic action of the AICA supported by the French government, and was able to return safe and sound to Paris. His calligraphy, his scriptural imagination, had been deemed a criminal activity.

'The writing hand, which creates human magic,' I noted at the time, 'can be seen giving ground everywhere... It is no longer a sign of social mobility, nor the best way of storing information, nor even of developing speculative thought. More and more, professional writing makers are making use of machines... My hypothesis is that artists, these super-manual workers, are increasingly guided by an unconscious reflex to save the hand; to save writing, trace and mark.'

On the Parisian scene, trace and mark had become the privileged means of pictorial creation. For common sense (and linguistics), the trace becomes a sign when it is linked to a *meaning*. Usually, before looking for signs, painters began with the *meaning* that happened to be the motif that they were representing: the subject. Here, though, they had taken to proceed the other way round: starting with the trace, the sign, and then finally finding it – or not finding it – a meaning. Sign and trace had become self-sufficient.

This happened partly in following the example (or under the impact, experienced by some as enlightenment, a *satori*) of Far Eastern calligraphy. Artists started looking at it 'from the outside', considering it as a composition made up of free signs, of gestural traces, and in this they were not totally wrong, since in Japan itself a form of 'abstract calligraphy' had begun to develop in the fifties with the *Bokubi* (Men of Ink).

And so it was that Paris (and Europe, not to say the whole world) witnessed a proliferating art of the trace, with countless works being made of forms or formlessnesses that had no stability, programme or references, and wanted none, or maybe even feared them. There was a great reversal in this 'event outside the ordinary, which has something miraculous about it, this passage from the simple trace to the figure', to quote the linguist Robert Laffont who, also an anthropologist, knew that 'the flat surface makes the trace alien to the natural world, for the latter has depth'.

The *motion-full writing* of the great poet Henri Michaux is paradigmatic as regards this new situation of the sign. As a method, Michaux advocates speed, 'the essential phenomenon of our age, but up to now it has not been accepted for what it is... Personally, I make little packets that are representative of the movements of this speed. One should never lose this rapidity.' I imagine that Benet might say something similar, what with all the work he has done with an utterly cinematographic mobility that, of course, came to him from his practice of cinema.

Thinking about it, I am surprised (very belatedly, I grant you) that the need was not felt to designate something called *tracism* – which would have been a valuable semantic tool, since for marks (the *tache*) we already had the word Tachism. 'The word Tachism is no worse than Cubism or Fauvism,' observed the painter Georges Mathieu at the time. 'The adjective "Tachist" does at least have the advantage of indicating direct painting.' And this, according to Mathieu, who remains one of its most brilliant proponents, is characterised by 'the primacy of speed, by the absence of pre-existing forms, the absence of premeditated gesture and a state of ecstasy'.

The critic Charles Estienne, who assumed the role of lyrical propagandist of Tachism, compared it to Surrealism, and

managed to win over André Breton who, in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, designated automatism as one of the basic procedures of Surrealism. Breton spoke of writing poems 'Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern'. Breton soon recognised that automatic writing was merely a 'continuous misfortune'.

The situation was very different in painting, where automatism proved much more productive. Right up to his death in 1966 Charles Estienne made this a personal cause, producing writings to accompany many landmark exhibitions in Paris that, while theoretical, were no less 'passionate', and even 'ruthless'. Few critics have sought to work so closely to artists. In 1953 he invited several painters to spend the summer in Brittany 'in order to experiment with the influence on their work of natural, cosmic elements'. It is understandable that, after his death, artists should have wished to pay homage and show their gratitude. The result was the exhibition *Charles Estienne et l'art à Paris 1945–1966*, put on at the Fondation nationale des arts plastiques in 1984, and which I was asked to curate. The extensive catalogue brought together Estienne's writings, garnered from other catalogues and newspapers. For example, in an issue of *L'Observateur* dated 19 November 1953, he pointed out that 'Automatism is no more laxity (daubers take heed) than it is an applied mechanics (wall-coverers take heed). It is the search for the true psychological and aesthetic structure, which is always there in the depths, and is not interested in ideas or intentions.'

Automatism has generated an impressive number of works of all types. This was conclusively demonstrated by an exhibition that I worked on, *Automatismos paralelos*, held at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria from February to March 1992. Subtitled 'Experimental Movements in Europe', it showed how automatism and experimentalism are linked, and how they opened the path to the transformation of artistic activity, the path taken by Benet Rossell's generation, by the 'Catalans in Paris', by some of the Nouveaux Réalistes: in a word, by 'artors in all countries'!

In an age as uncertain in its principles as ours, a retrospective *exhibition/explosion* of the work of Benet Rossell comes as a reminder that art is born of precariousness.

Freedom.

A choice must be made: rest or be free.