

Inside the Volcano

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It is believed that peace and absolute silence prevail close to the eye of a hurricane. Experts also say that when one climbs down the inside of a volcano and reaches its core, one finds perfect calm, even if the volcano might be active. Whenever I read or hear these statements I inevitably think of the heart of an artist. We all know that in true artists, the heart is not lodged in the chest, but divided, as if it had shattered into a thousand pieces, and spread all over the body. The core is divided in two. Inside the volcano with which an artist replaces the heart there is an incessant movement, a maddening noise, which is why the heart is elsewhere. This is why two places make up a single centre for the creation and, in general, also for the life of an artist.

Juan Hidalgo's two centres are the mind and sex. Mentally and physically. This is not a pun: all of his work is based on intelligence, on the subtle understanding acquired through measured and sustained observation, and on desire. The desire for others, which inevitably passes through the love one feels for oneself. Juan Hidalgo loves himself: this is evident in works in which the science of life occupies forms, colonises colour, and in which Hidalgo's perennial I comes and goes, arrives, looks around and sometimes stays. The brush of a glance is the quintessence of intelligence and, equally, the brush of a hand, of a sigh, is the central drive of desire. Mind and sex, the hand and the eye, the body and, naturally, the flesh, the skin, the final understanding of the sum total of all these fragments. Perhaps it is in this final understanding in which resides the sensation of calmness, of lightness, the smile that accompanies the work of Juan Hidalgo.

All of Juan Hidalgo's work, all of his life and artistic trajectory has been revisited time after time over the last decades. His name has become familiar, almost famous, in the spheres of contemporary art and his presence valued, as if he were a symbol of quality in the contemporary scene. He has received awards, exhibited his work, even staged several actions to which some of us amateurs have attended... but essentially Juan Hidalgo has always been the perfect stranger among us. A stranger about whom we know certain things, of whom we have seen several things, but of whom we could not say much. Inscrutable behind a smile, we all know of the distance he puts between himself and people, and between himself and many other things. We have all met Hidalgo as an adult, when he had already built his own personal world, after Zaj –another famous stranger. A first-class conceptual artist, like the rest of his Zaj colleagues, he appears before my generation like a person resurrected from a remote world. His friends, his experience, and above all his outward calm indistinctly denote an attitude different from the one we are accustomed to. And all of this is unmistakably reflected in his oeuvre, the voice of a quiet man, the gesture and true presence of an artist.

In a way, this exhibition has been conceived as a very personal journey across some of his central series and as a collection of scattered objects and ideas which, gathered here, acquire greater meaning. Hidalgo's oeuvre is inevitably dispersed, since it has been produced over a long period of time and has used different languages, although the themes he approaches are always similar and could basically be said to be centred on "me and my appreciation of the world outside me but adjacent to me." The conspicuous me and my circumstances, but with a very different treatment of the "me" and that which comprises it, and of how circumstances can seem anecdotic when they are really crucial, differences which, all in all, make it possible for the work of Hidalgo to build a personal universe that is symptomatic of a man who is very special but who has connections –links, we would say today– with us and our own world, with our own peculiar sensitivity.

It has often been said, in lectures and texts on Hidalgo, that his oeuvre is absolutely contemporary. It could not be any other way since Juan Hidalgo is not only alive, but lives all aspects of life that justify it being called by that name. Fortunate in love and health, his dedication to life and work (surely in that order) has built up the kind of urban legend that Hidalgo represents every time he shows up, less and less, in Madrid. The modernity or contemporaneity of his work is based to a large extent on the freedom to present and handle a subject. Any patently banal thing is chosen by Hidalgo, and it is precisely owing to that patent banality why it is chosen. Although perhaps, as Hidalgo himself has sometimes pointed out, we are the ones that are chosen by things and not the other way around. In any case, the point is that countless objects and persons have chosen Juan Hidalgo to turn him into their author as works of art, and now all those things, objects, photographs, words, attitudes, have come together to make up an exhibition.

There are three central series in this selection, as well as a whole set of objects, collages, graphic works and atmospheres that accompany the central nucleus formed by the three series. "Testimonies", "Erotica" and "One more" intermingle while cutting across an obviously autobiographical narration that speaks to us not only of what Hidalgo sees, but also of what he holds dear. Subjects such as identity, self recognition, the similarities and differences with which our lives and our distinguishing features mark us as if mapped on our skin. From the decade of the sixties to the 21st century, a complete personal and indubitably un-transferable history.

In "Testimonies" Hidalgo offers us fragments, mere hints of personal accounts that are absolutely impossible to understand for the spectator. Bright cracks that afford us a glimpse of events, small tales, potentially important memories, all in all fragments of life lived by Hidalgo. There is no shortage of self portraits, as in his whole oeuvre, something that is frequent, almost customary, in the work of conceptual artists or artists trained within the framework of conceptual art. Everything is narrated through the first person, through the artist, who narrates from within his self, from within his body. The autobiographical aspects are invariably

present, even if in this case the contents of the narration are apparently superficial passages, like souvenirs from travels, or events, or stories left behind. People and characters. Testimonies of something that happened, photographs, objects that remind us that something happened, and with this small gesture alone the mechanism of memory is turned on. The spectator can only imagine, build up a story that might be different or similar to what really happened... or maybe create a story for which these works are the beginning, the point of departure, the excuse that sets in motion our imagination; this is how he manages to make the work a product of the person who sees it, of a receptor who imbues with meaning that which could have been a mere joke.

Forever present in this work that is built up from the private, from the most intimate moment of all, the moment of silent observation and commentary from the margins of what has been lived and seen, is a sense of humour. The very choice of things, of the vast amount of objects which Hidalgo uses in his works, from the posture that is midway between cynical and ironic, perhaps innocent, of the artist posing with three types of glasses, with three rings on a single finger, everything that in a similar way can be felt in the slow rhythm prolonged to its extreme in his actions. Maybe it all boils down to that: to a question of time. Maybe it all is, as when we talk of sculpture, a question of time and space.

The second, more recent series, "One more", has been executed over the last years and is a humble and apparently simple enumeration of things that are added to other already existing and known things...it is simply one more. One more hat, one more flower, one more man from mainland Spain, one more woman from the Canary Islands, one more kiss, one more ass, one more size-33 shoetree, one more dog... Life goes on and people and things are added on to an experience and understanding based on touch and sight, to a life which, like all others, unceasingly adds and subtracts. Losses are not entered here, only additions of things and people, smiles that in the long run bear witness to our existence. In "One more" the elements with which the works are built are also tinged with deeply autobiographical aspects: a problem can arise when these works are seen outside the framework of personal parameters of the artist, for even though they incorporate universal elements, they also feature very local, personal elements with which Hidalgo builds up jokes, puns, especially about his insularity and that strange independence that is only attained with time and only when it seems that almost nothing matters, because only the most essential matters.

The series "Erotica" is based on Hidalgo's complete trajectory. Sex, desire, the body in each of his fragments are permanent elements. This series encompasses already classical works such as *Flower and man* and *Flower and woman*, both from 1969, and *Man, woman and hand*, from 1977, three works that practically lay down the bases of Hidalgo's treatment of sex. In the first place, the approach to the body is direct, though on other occasions he uses more symbolic elements such as a flower or a mirror; it is the body, undressed and, what can give rise to an even greater sense of

unease, half dressed, dressed but soon to be undressed, being undressed. The body is fragmented photographically, and the hand guides us on our visual journey across a surface that is at once known and unknown, always the same and always different, that is the body of the other. Not only the body of the loved one or the lover, but simply another body, a naked body that is presented as if it were a half revealed mystery.

Of all the fragments of this body, surface of desire, it is the hand and the sexual organ which have pride of place in many of these works. The hand as "imitation" (imitation of the penis, of course), and as the discoverer of that sexual organ which, like a baroque flower, can be happy or sad. Hidalgo discovers and handles, like few Spanish artists before him, the beauty of the male sexual organ. Of a real, happy or sad sexual organ, an everyday, close and always desirable sexual organ. This is not the place for the sexually phenomenal or gifted, more appropriate for porno magazines or bodybuilder shows. Here the body is a common body, the one we share not only with our eyes, it is even ours as the artist's body, the artist's hand, sometimes is. As I was saying, the hand and the sexual organ are the fragments in which Hidalgo summarises a body, an almost always sexed and inevitably longing body. The hand and the sexual organ, i.e. sex and sex. The hand as an activity of the mind, of desire made movement and action; sex as an idea and as a body: the hand and the penis.

The sexual organ is that of a man. To date, very few times is the man's naked body the one that centres the subject of a work. Naked man, his sexual organ before our eyes, within reach of a hand that approaches it and surrounds it, two real bodies, of desirable and available men who rid themselves of false modesties and prejudices and show themselves, beautiful and desirable, as what they are or, at least, what they can also be: sex and desire. And this is where we find, once again, a sparkle of intelligence and a sense of humour. And, also, the silence that surrounds all this oeuvre, and this is also where we discover that what at first sight seemed ever so simple, simply is not simple in the least.

Simplicity, the open simplicity that is so difficult to attain, is present in most of his objects and atmospheres, as well as in his actions. A measured simplicity, with a musical rhythm in which silences and sounds are equally important, as are movement and stillness, what is said aloud and what is kept quiet. Reality is made up of complementary elements, not only black and white, but also red and green and blue and yellow. But above all it is the presence and the reference of an absence, of what is named but not shown. It is the realm of allusion, a seduction based on deception like all seductions. And when you don't know what to say, simply say Zaj. Just as a whole philosophy of action was summarised in that phrase, the objects and collages of Hidalgo summarise a complete treaty of formal wisdom that is also a course book on vital experience. Perhaps the coexistence of these two drives, the vital and the formal, is not always easily divisible, but it is basically effective. Here, what had already been hinted at in the "Testimonies" series re-emerges: each of these objects, of these atmospheres, speaks to us of past stories, of real moments in the artist's

life, hence its visual strength. They are fragments of experience that are contaminated by the language of art, or perhaps fragments of art fully contaminated by man's vital experience. And they are also so close to the body that inevitably many of them appear as sexual or physical allusions, snippets of ideal or adored bodies, bodies that have been caressed and enjoyed, and again the hand, the hand that acts and caresses, touches and creates and gives meaning to the body and art. An extension of our intelligence, like our gaze, prosthesis of our desires and our imagination, undeniably the most erotic fragment of the body. The hand and the sexual organ, the male sexual organ symbolised yet again in *One of Juan Hidalgo's eggs for Zaj Easter*, or in *Balls* (two lacquered Christmas-tree balls placed under a transparent dome) or *Angel vase* (another imitation of a male sexual organ inside a transparent jar), and the hand in *Ayacata* (two gloves over the back of a chair).

A work entitled *Volcano* –and with this piece I can bring to an end, in an unforeseen turn, this voyage through some of the sensations which the work of Hidalgo can awaken in us– presents a volcano made up of folded chairs. The insignificant to name the grandiose, and an element that flourishes in the latest works of the Canary artist, the power of his land of origin, its insularity, the differentiation of an identity that finds itself, of a unanimous difference. A volcano that is silent, a volcano that is active and working but that can only transmit peace and well-being to those who approach its core, that strange calm which only life, living and understanding, can transmit.