

Suffering bodies. Emilio García Wehbi and Philoctetes: Lemnos in Buenos Aires.

Abandoned body, hurting body wrapped up in anonymity and silenced by indifference. The indigent body occupies the city, becomes invisible and soaks up in silence an inaudible life. A body is man's matter, is the presence and the wrapper that defines and presents a human being. How does one coexist with the pain of its forgotten presence? How does one come to the point of denying it? In which way can one deny it? For Emilio García Wehbi, in our cities "two kinds of people exist: the passers-by, and those who really inhabit it". In the conceptual grounds of his project *Philoctetes: Lemnos en Buenos Aires*, the artist claims that his goal is to interrogate in aesthetical terms the link between these two kinds of people; he relates it to a "suspicious normality"

On grounds of these perceptions, on Friday 15th November 2002, between 7am and 3pm, the *Philoctetes Project* took place in the city of Buenos Aires. Newspapers and Television Networks covered the event and, in a dose that mixed indignation and informative coldness, the visible face of the project was exposed: 23 hyper-realistic puppets were located in different spots of the city and the reactions of the citizens along that space of time.

Nevertheless, the project and its achievement reach a higher dimension that includes the workshop held the previous days, the experience itself and the subsequent debates. In this way the narrow frame of the single day of the intervention was overcome, setting up an artistic act that lets in an interrogation on art, society and politics. This article does not aim to bring a finished image of the experience, it solely aspires to point some matters that will lead to an approximation to *Philoctetes Project* as an act of thinking that also makes possible to give a glance on society.

In *Philoctetes*..., besides the artist and his group of collaborators, 60 people of different ages and professions were involved. Among others, actors, photographers, set designers, musicians, visual artists, dancers, psychologists, sociologists, design students, teachers, art students, singers, dramatists and film makers. This means, a wide professional spectrum, that with no major information about their role in the experience, approached the project touched by a call that made them think about the social reality of their country and about their own bonds with the city. In a certain sense, the massive response to the call of the project brings a first testimony about some social and cultural needs.

From the conceptual grounds of the project, the artist himself proposes the signs for a first tackle of the experience. In a fictitious dialog, García Wehbi, suggests moving back 40 years, to take impulse and to jump the post-modern wall, in order to intervene in the present. In short, to re-establish the links with the forms of artistic expression that during the 60's – 70's were strongly connected with the social and political processes of their time. These are the years of the *conceptual art* boom, that is, of an art that's intention is to strengthen the reflection and critical thinking, sometimes even giving little importance to the quality or the material result of a finished artistic object. It is in that same period that *actions*, *happenings* and *performances* become particularly relevant: the artistic action moves further away from the traditional work of art, becomes an ephemeral act in which the object vanishes and once the action is carried out, it leaves photographic or film register as the only traces of its existence. In that process, the artist modifies his traditional place and becomes closer to a kind of expressive center of energy from which he involves an audience that participates more actively.

Repeatedly it has been pointed out the great influence that the avant-garde theatre has exerted towards the *action* as an art form. It is important to remember that García Wehbi has developed a remarkable theatrical labor and it is possible to think that the *action*, as an expressive form, comes very natural to him. Then, the artist conducts his research through an emphasized social commitment. "We are proposed to accept our own defeat (...) to get fascinated with our own dribble's bubbles (...) to ignore reflection (...) to ignore reality (...) We are demanded to be furious watchmen of the winners". And then he approximates the place an artist should hold today "questioning reality (...) bringing down the walls of our theatres, opening the windows of our art galleries. Reality is outside". At the late 60's Pablo Suarez (1) expressed himself almost in the same terms to explain his withdrawal of the Instituto Di Tella (2) to develop an art more committed to life. Since today, as before, reality is so conflicted, social tension is so strong, the artistic work of García Wehbi proposes to go through the walls that holds it within, in order to face a wider audience, the audience you find beyond institutions. It is so, that for *Philoctetes*, the entire city was the eventual frame and every passer-by a member of the audience and an actor all at once. It does not mean a warned audience that looks for the artwork any more; here the art takes the audience by assault. In fact, when the effect of the bodies lying in the streets provoked and caused commotion among the spectators, many of them questioned the artistic aspect of the intervention and eventually demanded that if it was art why not show it in Recoleta (3). Someone could have objected: "I've done everything I could not to watch, who has the right, in the name of what art am I forced to watch". The angry reactions or doubts towards the intervention are comprehensible and even anecdotic. The fact is that the irruption of the puppet awkward the privacy of the passers-by, shakes their perception and invades them. From there comes its inquisitive and repulsive power. But also its healing power.

In his theater productions and in his recent *Ensayo sobre la tristeza* (4) García Wehbi uses puppets as intervention objects, as mediators between him and the audience. Facing the question of why not use actors he responds "why would I use an actor if I can have a painless body instead". Therefore, the puppet appears as a pain support, as representation of a suffering body, mirror of sorrow. Some spectators connected it to their personal history: a son harmed in the street and not helped in time, or themselves in a future painful misery.

Mirror then, that gives back the collective and individual grief. Puppet, artist, participants and indigents are independent bodies but in the action process they seem to join indivisibly.

In the shape of a workshop, the artist created a teamwork - observers, photographers, filmmakers - in which each one of the members developed a gesture of solidarity with the proposal. In a certain sense, the person responsible called others, beyond the real necessity of going ahead with the project, in order to help him clarifying his own interrogations: how to resist the pressure of the power, or how to intervene a social and political situation that each day generates more misery and more marginality. As a part of an act of resistance, the artist makes his own protest mechanisms, collective. The participants were involved in a solidarity action. Then, each individual reacted in relation to his own education and also in relation to the modifications that the experience caused. For some the action reasserted their own resistance attitude: "for me the intervention was over the moment *Crónica* (5) showed up", meaning, "I resist myself to be eaten and manipulated by the media". In some cases the puppet was left aside in order to pay attention to the audience passing by, in some others the concern was divided between spectators and puppet. Many established deep dialog with the audience, many argued

about political positions. In some cases the tension was unbearable, up to the point that even the participants questioned the experience themselves.

It is quite evident that at a first level the action was, from the beginning of the workshop, devoted to the participants. Many of them admitted they've discovered new aspects and transformations within themselves and in their social bonds. In this sense many assured to have a more thoughtful look on their social environment in the future. Nonetheless, although the group of participants was able to later discuss about the process and come to some conclusions, still a certain level of this experience and its consequences, remained unmeasurable. In the locations where the puppets were laying, hundreds of people passed by. The actual level of indignation, of instinctive solidarity reaction, of emotion or of true indifference, will remain unknown. Photographs and other documentary material are caught in a zone of suspension. Once the experience was over, only its documents will allow further reflections of what happened that day.

Philoctetes, was an action of political character. Aspired, as we have seen, to intervene reality. In order to reach its spectator, it resorted to provocative extremes; it produced horror, fear or sorrow. In short, to bring down basic emotions in order to put others in a state of alert. The body in the street, the puppet, acted as a disturbing object that left in evidence what goes on in our cities on a daily basis.

When the Viennese Actionists mutilated their own bodies, they were trying, among other things, to show opposition towards the establishment and its manipulation of the body. In Argentina, in all the so-called third world, the human body is worth nothing: it is starving meat, mutilated and lacerated day after day. The puppet is a visible expression of a certain reality.

Philoctetes is an artistic event that faced on this problem and politically intervenes it. The puppet meant an attack to the glance; a disturbance to an order in which the body in the street, the real indigent, has already been incorporated by the silence of denial. A different look makes visible the armies of the unemployed and the hungry that inhabit Buenos Aires City.

María Teresa Constantin - art critic
November 2002.

Notes:

- (1) Pablo Suarez. Visual artist, former member of the Instituto Di Tella.
- (2) Instituto Di Tella. Created in the 60's in Buenos Aires, the Di Tella Institute was a center devoted to the research of new artistic forms.
- (3) Recoleta. Main Exhibition Center devoted to the visual arts in the city of Buenos Aires.
- (4) *Ensayo sobre la tristeza (Essay on sadness)* Photo Installation by Emilio García Wehbi (with texts of *Lenz* by Georg Büchner).
- (5) Crónica. TV News Channel