

Snake skin. Flesh (dis)becoming image

Claudio Zulian

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In the theory of the French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the subjective constitution is due to the essential and constant interaction of three fundamental registers: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. In this sort of combinatory topology, the real corresponds to everything that cannot be imagined, symbolized or said. For Lacan, the real shuns any kind of linguistic and conceptual representation and is in a paradoxical state of continuous latency, perpetually mediated by symbolism and imagination or, thinking by images.

In the multidisciplinary practice of Claudio Zulian (Campodarsego, Italy, 1960) -which moves between cinema, video-creation, musical production and writing-, the real emerges in the Lacanian sense as something opaque and hidden: "the mystery of the body that speaks" and "of the unconscious"¹. Likewise, the images that make up the artistic and political dimension of his work do not reveal that mystery, but rather pass through it, traverse it and even want to preserve it.

These are images that insist in a non-literal way on the time they inhabit, as in the case of the images that shape up the exhibition. Far from being reduced to pure entertainment, they give way to audiovisual pieces that delve into duration and, in this way, question the body. Through a language that often resorts to the technique of the sequence shot and the loop, they are continuous images -that linger in mystery- and that seem to ask us to make the effort to 'be'.

The video *La fàbrica* (2019) shows us the interior of the textile factory Cal Pissit, built in 1843, but in disuse for decades. Located in the center of the city of Sabadell, the empty skeleton of the building stands as a ghostly and silent presence. Thus portrayed, the unproductive factory crystallizes the nostalgic memory of a proletariat that no longer exists, having been replaced by new systems of exploitation and precarization of labor derived from financial capitalism.

1 Lacan, Jacques, *Seminario 20: Aun. 1972-1973*. Paidós Argentina, 1998.
Traduction by Diana Rabinovich.

As part of the project *Vallès: fabricar pasados, fabricar futuros* that Zulian presented for the first time in a multichannel installation format at La Virreina Centre de la Imatge (Barcelona, 2019), here the factory embodies the symbolical and political dimension of the past labor culture in the Vallès region. In a space wants resonating with the echoes of metallic machinery, now there is silence. The image, seemingly static, takes on a performative and even theatrical character: that of an unconscious industrial vestige suspended between movements of actions and impending decay.

In stark juxtaposition and dynamic dialogue with the dormant hush of the factory, the contemplative state is either diverted (or intensified?) by a ceaseless, resonant buzzing that permeates the entire space: it comes from **O Abellón** (2022), a video that shows a group of people of different ages posing in front of the camera and producing a constant sound with their mouths, as in a hypnotic litany of bees. The piece is part of *Vidas*, a video installation conceived specifically for the homonymous exhibition at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporáneo (Santiago de Compostela, 2022-2023), where Zulian looks at the city of Compostela through *Vite*, a social housing neighborhood. The action presented in this video refers to an ancient Galician funeral ritual (*a danza do abellón*), reinterpreted here as a collective meditation oscillating between two symbolic dimensions: that of an act of spiritual communion, on one hand, and that of a robust manifestation of neighborhood associationism and advocacy, on the other.

Following a spiral movement, we find **Transiciones** (2023), a newly produced work that, like **Lobo** (2023) and **Guerras que no han tenido lugar** (2023), is premiered in the framework of this exhibition. As its title suggests, the work takes as its starting point the process of transition from female to male gender, simultaneously delving in to broader transitions of both body and spirit. While the nude figure portrayed in the intimacy of her room evokes the earthiness and eroticism of the flesh, the taxidermied turtledove functions as a simulacrum of mystery and a deadly dimension. However, here death is not solely perceived as a life boundary but as a threshold for freedom, expression and possibility. The notion of a state or a space 'in between', as well as the idea of transit and passage is finally evoked by the translucent screen which concurrently hosts the projection while inviting us to peer through it.

The totemic aspect of animals is also evident in **Lobo**. Here, the mammal assumes the function of a psychopomp (from the Greek ψυχοπομπός, which comes from the union of *psyche*, 'soul', and *pompós*, 'the one who guides or leads'), a creature that in various mythologies and religions had the role of leading the souls of the deceased to the afterlife. However, the wolf-guide in this instance appears to serve a distinct purpose: to urge us to adopt a different perspective. Thus, the camera situates the wolf outside the frame, almost mirroring the audience's position. In the same way, the blue-yellow imagery fosters an opportunity for an inter-species viewpoint, aligning the observer with their own innate animal instinct.

The contemplation of the role of the gaze and, ultimately, the nature of images, is a theme also echoed in **Guerras que no han tenido lugar**. This video, crafted through the assembly of internet-sourced fragments portraying and ostensible trench warfare, completely conceals the military forces involved, leaving the audience in the dark regarding who is firing or the intended targets. The intermittent rattle of a machine gun and the precise actions of a sniper reloading his weapon provide glimpses into the war scenario. Yet, a deep red rectangle dominates the majority of the frame, creating an almost negative painting effect. The obstruction of the gaze could be interpreted in several ways: it could represent the denial of the spectacularization of horror, or it might evoke the universality of violence. Alternatively, it could symbolize the impossibility of representing any conflict, or even allude to images themselves escaping in the aftermath of a disaster -a perspective in line with what the Lebanese critic and theorist Jalal Toufic expressed in his essay *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (2009). How to explain something more real than reality itself?

Conceived as a whole, this exhibition of recent works brings together key themes in Claudio Zulian's artistic research: the social inquiry in to the metamorphosis of life within urban and peripheral contexts amid a backdrop of capitalist productivism; the development of portraits situated at the intersection of documentary and fiction; the spiritual dimension in dialogue with the bodily experience; the fascination with the real as that thing that continually slips from grasp; and, finally, the value attributed to images.

In this journey where the videos compose a contrapuntal score of rhythms and sounds, but deliberately lacking words and dialogues, the artist seems to extend an invitation to immerse one self to the images and to trust them.

While not immediately apparent, the words of the French historian and essayist Georges Didi-Huberman resonate, "in front of each image, what we should ask ourselves is how (it) looks at us, how (it) thinks and how (it) touches us at the same time"², in a reciprocal interplay of formal, symbolic, and cultural agencies.

And it is here that Zulian pushes us: face to face with the images, "with the relations of time that are never seen in ordinary perception, but are seen in the image, as long as it is creative"³. Until we reach the possibility of questioning and inhabiting the latent mystery, there were, in touching the real, the image begins to burn⁴.

Carolina Ciuti

We appreciate the collaboration of



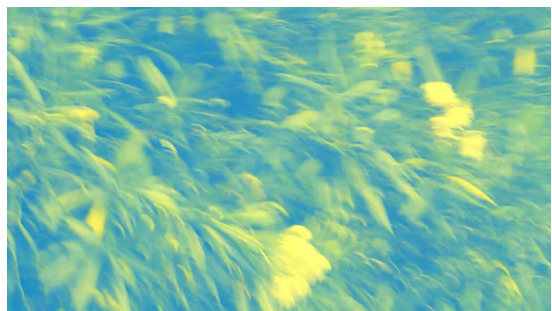
2 Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Harun Farocki. Against What? Against Whom?*. Antje Ehmman y Kodwo Eshun (eds.), Koenig Books, 2010.

3 Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real*. Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, 2018. It is in this essay that Didi-Huberman introduces the idea of the image that burns and catches fire when it brushes against the real, of the image as "a mark, a trace, a visual cup of the time it wanted to touch, but also of other supplementary times".

4 Ibidem.



La fábrica, Claudio Zulian, 2019



Lobo, Claudio Zulian, 2023



Guerras que no han tenido lugar, Claudio Zulian, 2023

CLAUDIO ZULIAN

Artist, film director, musician and writer. He was born in Italy (Camp Sant Martino, Padua) and resides in Barcelona. He developed studies in composition and electronic music with the experimental composer Gabriel Brncic, as well as with the Groupe de Musique Experimentale de Bourges (France). He has a PhD in Aesthetics, Science and Technology of the Arts from the University of Paris-Saint Denis (France). He has taught at several Spanish universities (Universitat de Barcelona, Universitat Pompeu Fabra) and abroad (Eidgen).ssische Technische Hochschule Zürich).

He has exhibited individually in centres and museums such as Centre Galego d'Art Contemporani, Caixafòrum Barcelona, Jeu de Paume (Paris), Centre Andalus d'Art Contemporani, Festival Loop, Maison de Culture de Grenoble, HUB- Museu del Disseny de Barcelona and La Virreina Centri de la Imatge, as well as in collectives at the Fundació Cerezales Antonino i Cinia, Centre Galego d'Art Cont New York, Chicago, Taiwan, Sichuan, Doha, Sydney, Jakarta, London, Leipzig, Sarajevo, Milan and Bologna, being awarded in several of them. He has received the City of Barcelona Award and the National Award of Catalonia for his video installation, film and book *A través del Carmel*. He regularly publishes articles in newspapers and magazines. He has published the book of poetry *A través del Carmel*, Palma: Calitja Edicions, 2010, and short stories *Horas de la ciudad*. Palma. Spain: Calitja Territories, 2002. He has done an intense work as a composer and performer of contemporary music, publishing several albums with his compositions and performances.