

The eye overwhelmed by immensity and the tongue paralysed... ()*

Faced with an exhibition such as the one currently being presented by Andreas M. Kaufmann in Kraków —a city of the greatest importance, culturally speaking, but essentially in terms of *civilization*, a quality we will return to in due course— the first difficulty that confronts us is the *how* of its visualization, as something intimately bound up with the choice of an appropriate place in which to arrive at a panoramic vision that may not be more spectacular, but is certainly more *profound*. This difficulty would derive not only from the aesthetic-artistic complexity of what is shown, but in the choice that we as spectators make of the *moral* quality that the exhibition itself demands of us, or commits us to, since what it proposes is an initiatory journey that explores the fragile boundary separating civilization and culture from barbarism and destruction. In some sense we can speak of this impressive exhibition conceived and created by Andreas M. Kaufmann as an impossible, nostalgic *Bildungsroman* in which the accidents and adventures are recounted not by some latter-day Wilhelm Meister travelling the roads and inns of Central Europe, but by an artist, also Central European, who is interested in the visual concretion, or in the aesthetic (and always denunciatory) documentation of a particular accident of history, when that accident takes place on passing through the glass frontier that divides culture from horror. Hence what I regard as the great importance of knowing the appropriate place in which to situate ourselves, not so much for the iconic, graphic and representational exuberance that Kaufmann offers us as in the degree of mutual commitment that he demands of us, in so far as passive contemplation of what is shown would, paradoxically, be the most mistaken and conservative response. And I say paradoxically, given that we are dealing here with a manifestation of art that does not call on the spectator to interact physically with the works, but does demand a very deep-rooted, constructive emotional response to what is shown. In other words: we as spectators are asked to be the best possible internauts, appealing in the presence of an emergency to intelligence, to reason, to culture, to compassion, to civilization... But there is, or I believe there is, a practical example that will help us to understand the ultimate, essential purpose of this admirable exhibition.

As all those who have seen it will recall, the film *Hiroshima mon amour* by Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras continually alternates documentary images showing the devastation caused by the dropping of the atomic bomb and the love scenes involving the two central characters, a French actress on a tour of the Far East and a young Japanese architect. The film was made in 1959, the same year that one of the greatest European composers of the 20th century, the Pole Krzysztof Penderecki, was writing one of his most beautiful (and most powerful and terrible) works, *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*. All through the film the lovers' relationship is troubled by the recollection of the tragedy, erecting between them an invisible wall that prevents them from finding total happiness. That wall is constituted by the two phrases they repeatedly address to one another, and to themselves: **'I have seen everything' / 'you have seen nothing'**. Each time these words are spoken there appears on the screen the sadly iconic image of the atomic mushroom cloud.

The huge number of images that make up the present exhibition by Andreas M. Kaufmann engage with this reduction and breakdown of language in its attempt to express the horror, as the devastation overtakes the relational quality of language itself. *Those who have seen cannot speak*: they are dead, or they live on with the loss of the functional and practical resource of language, even of the physical language of love.

Every image or every Form that dreams itself as the ‘inhabited language’ of a cosmological diagram is, in its initial fantasy (even if it is itself a social document), and prior to any other consideration, more an *imprint* than an image as such, something the imagination engraves in the memory, delving down and displacing lived or suffered memories to become a memory of the imagination, faithfully pursuing its own oneiric succession of actions projected with the violent writing of the language of Adam, a language without syntax; and, of course, on the fringes of or above and beyond the concrete physical (historical) materialization of that image, in that as *imago mundi* devoid of foundations and structures (destruction has strange, invisible foundations) it becomes a *cosa mentale* engraved and tattooed into the imagination with the same brutality (a *positive*, constructing brutality) with which we perform those acts that, uniquely, afford us access to the absolute wonder of refuge: the best Form, the best Image. Because —and I really do believe this— underlying this sea of social, historical and affective documents that Andreas has brought together there is always a nostalgic longing for refuge, not as the place where flight ends, but as the territory where culture and civilization are beyond the reach of the senseless violence of the cataclysm.

Indeed it is none other than this idea of refuge that prompted Paul Celan, in that beautiful sad waltz he dedicated to his mother, a prisoner in Auschwitz, entitled ‘Todesfuge’ (Deathfuge), to speak of that ‘**wonderful architecture**’ that only the blue of the sky can attain when, his mother’s body reduced to grey smoke rising from the chimney of the oven, he ‘celebrates’ the most dramatic of defeats, because ‘**we shovel a grave in the air, mother, / where you won’t lie too cramped**’. Celan, then, from the imagination of memory (that cruel nocturne whose strains would only fall silent when he decided to fuse his body with the waters of the Seine), from the terrible *engraved* image, as we said, of his mother crossing the infinite threshold of an infinite house, is finally able, by means of the only material available to him —words— to construct a last refuge for his mother: the poem ‘Todesfuge’.

Every documentary image embodies a will to refuge, and it is especially pertinent to note this in the wake of Walter Benjamin’s famous assertion that every document of culture is always a document of barbarism, an idea that has been given an extraordinary development in our own time, from the perspective of a liberal or *lay* Marxism, by Frederic Jameson. Of course, many of the visual documents rescued by Andreas M. Kaufmann had no need to become barbarous: they were barbarous from the very moment they were made active, black messengers of death. Having said that, the extrapolation carried out by Andreas, like some entomologist of the avatars of modern society, posits the dilemma of a recovery of the absolute of its image to reveal through its mere presence a double act: its explicit denunciation and a total refusal to look at those acts as if they were a print of History. In fact, these images expose us and situate us at the

same crossroads, in the same impossibility of communication, as the protagonists of *Hiroshima mon amour*: we have seen it / we have seen nothing.

It is precisely because we have seen nothing that this exhibition (its *idea*, its *concept*, its ethical ambition, to be quite clear) is so necessary, so aesthetically and morally necessary. All the more so because what Andreas is addressing here is the need to reread history as a document at once social and aesthetic; a position very close to the idea that a philosopher of history as serious and self-assured as Kant formulated of, precisely, the *sublime*. In other words, the feeling that is produced when the imagination fails to present or to ‘make us see’ an object corresponding to the concept we might have of it. To put it yet another way: the ‘sublime’ would be that which ‘does not let itself be seen’; that which ‘cannot be explained or told’. It would, in short, be the aesthetic paradigm of that which is unrepresentable but is continually clamouring ‘to be presented’, ‘to be seen’, ‘to be told’. This is the highest and most noble point in all of Andreas M. Kaufmann’s work, and this exhibition in the very civilized city of Kraków (*so close to Auschwitz, so far from Auschwitz...*) impinges on the moral commitment of the person who is willing to contemplate the cruel images of horror. What cannot be seen deserves to be seen.

Luis Francisco Pérez
Barcelona, the end of Summer

(*) From the novel *The Man without Qualities* by Robert Musil.

(translated by Graham Thomson)

Luis Francisco Pérez (Madrid, 1955) has lived in Barcelona for many years. A critic and theorist of contemporary art, he is a regular contributor to various Spanish and foreign publications, and the author of catalogue texts for a number of artists. On rare occasions he has also curated exhibitions. He is deeply interested in the moral and social function of the aesthetic experience, and is also attracted to other manifestations of contemporary culture, such as contemporary classical music.

