

From an everyday pop intimacy.

The Recreational Games of Victor Arrizabalaga

Fernando Golvano

Objects and contents become indifferent. The only question is whether they are "indifferent". How can something indifferent be interesting? When the object loses its value as an object, the "way" it is presented retains some value. "Style" becomes value. It is in the "style" that the transferral takes place.

Jean-François Lyotard, *Zona*

Art can be a means of negotiating other arrangements of reality, other expansions of the imaginary, other appropriations of art memory, other games that reveal diverse desires and motivations, and it can do so from a critical, ironic or playful distance. Victor Arrizabalaga has chosen to approach his art like a recreational game which addresses that area of the real/imaginary from a game-wish and from that oblique detour represented by any ironic approach. His work, with a pictorial and sculptural diction which appears to celebrate drawing and formal simplicity, reiterates recurrent motifs from art history—in his series of women (*majas*, *graces*, *nymphs*...), his still lifes, and his recreations of the objects and artefacts that furnish our everyday life. In these cases, as if they were being turned into subverted furniture, the designs of his sculptures seem to mark a playful and welcoming surprise in the interiors (or on occasions in the urban space). Amidst the things, his paintings or his sculptures would appear to call for that delectable dimension of art to be seen in what Mario Perniola calls "the *sex appeal* of the inorganic"¹.

We know that within the modern programme, novelty is in constant search of other inventions and recreations; that each artist modulates a singular attention to the world, to the things and desires of different

¹ Perniola highlights the effects of contemporary installations that take the visitor in, creating a welcoming, pleasant space. This effect is apparently achieved by objects whose presence arouses a similar "sex appeal". Cf. Mario Perinola, *Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (*El sex appeal de lo inorgánico*, Trama, Madrid, 1998).

types and that original invention is a myth on the horizon of another myth, the progress of art. In dialogue with that environment, Victor Arrizabalaga's position is freed from miscellaneous significance and metaphysics to recreate, with a new expressive syntax, works that are evocative of pop art. And they do so in an outstanding way, through the weave of plain-coloured lines, the use of black lines to delimit the figures and shapes. Also, through a certain game-like appropriation of the object landscape that surrounds us, his work often reinforces echoes and references to leading figures of American pop: Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann. Arrizabalaga himself says that what interests him most about Lichtenstein are certain formal elements, while it is the singular iconography of Wesselmann that he finds appealing. Pop spread into the art world an unprecedented power for the images of the everyday, sparking a reformulation of realism with appropriationist openings and work such as this forms part of that poetic transfiguration of the banal.

What is Victor Arrizabalaga's position in the movement of the new in art? He knows that there is no creation *ex nihilo*; that there is a reserve of innovation and recreation available to anyone who wishes to use and update them. From that premise, therefore, he has developed a slight pop innovation, which seductively penetrates our eye. Thus the feminine imaginary (graces, Aphrodites, nymphs, naked maidens), he has taken from a long pictorial tradition, here becomes a series of light and flirtatious sculptures. It is scarcely important that some - such as the large format piece, *Sirena de pelo ondulado [curly-haired mermaid]* (2002) - are made of steel: the empty spaces and gaps that model the figure remove weight and gravity from it, to achieve an effect of strange lightness. This leap in scale, which can be seen in pieces such as *Iron Maiden* (2001), *Doña Clota* (2003) and *Lolita* (2004), are not intended to modulate a monumental stress; nonetheless, they remain free of monumental historicistic values, pointing instead to a space of ironic and game-like complicity. Unlike the small pieces, however, here this is achieved by reducing the colour and increasing the constructive complexity of the pieces.

Arrizabalaga's artistic career began in the early 1980s, set against the failure of Oteiza's attempt to create the Basque School groups in the mid-1960s, and the legacy that other younger artists sought to promote in the 1970s. In the early 1980s, a new generation of Basque artists (Txomin Badiola, Angel Bados, Juan Luis Moraza, Pello Irazu. and others) with links to the art school of the University of the Basque Country, proposed a change in conceptual direction which would enable them, through a dialogue with the new artistic developments taking place on the international scene (minimal and conceptual art in particular), to radically disassociate themselves from the inheritance of the Basque School groups. It was a long way from the diverse postulates of the sculptors from the former avant-garde, known as Gaur—albeit they still felt contemporary. These included Oteiza's search for the active disoccupation of the space, related to work by Russian constructivists and abstract and esoteric notions from Mondrian and Kandinsky, which was to conclude in an experimental and metaphysical project whose synthesis integrated art, spirituality and religion. Also in this group was Chillida's poetry of the limit and gravitation of matter which related two forms of understanding: the poetic-artistic and the philosophical; And the romantic legacy of Mendiburu, whose sculpture was oriented towards an informalist abstraction, paying close attention to the expressive matter and the sculpted gesture, and explored a popular symbolic universe which fraternised with nature and the underlying. The emerging sculptors of the 1980s displayed only a faint reflection of that magnificent triad of Basque sculptors. Instead they chose other aesthetic postulates, progressively adapting their sculpture towards morphologies of assembly and installation. This creative topology, with its blurred limits, defines the contemporary scene of what we still call Basque sculpture.

Initially, in the 1980s, Victor Arrizabalaga worked primarily in painting but his interest in sculpture gradually came to the fore. However, this interest seems to have arisen as an objectual expansion of the painting: initially it hardly extended beyond two dimensions. It is in his paintings that we see the first glimpses of those aesthetic postulates we now recognise from his sculptures. For the last few years, though, his work

has used a more fully sculptural logic, demanding a richer and more complex perception from various perspectives. The game, too, has been extended for our eyes. The iron plate is assembled or dislocated to form those colliding gamelike pieces, some full of “critical aerobotic irony” (to quote Javier Urquijo). And his pieces have also gained a new autonomy by being stripped of base or pedestal, by transmuting the incorporeal such as flame or smoke into solid form, and the accidental into substantial, through the free play of the imagination. Perhaps it is for this reason that it is his still lifes—converted into contemporary icons—that best reveal his recreating game of pop reminiscence. He has traced a path that stands outside both major avant-garde references and that contemporary generation, more concerned with conceptual and minimalist trends. Nonetheless, some of his sculptures—including *Dolmen*. and others from 2004, might have some game-like relation with the poetry of Oteiza's disoccupation of the cube, recreated here with a neoplasticist determination. In this constructivist game he appeals to the memory of the deconstructed forms and the primary colours (red, blue, yellow, white) arranged on square or rectangular surfaces, but he does so without the theosophical devotion of Mondrian or Theo Van Doesburg.

The figures and objects he creates affirm the very pictorial and sculptural literality; however, beyond the complicit delectation they evoke, they might be said to become indifferent—in the sense given to the word by Lyotard in the quote heading this text. He thus forms part of a contemporary version of a mannerist environment, in which “style” becomes value, as a recognisable constructive cipher. Additionally, in his paintings as in his sculptures, the colours are seen to be pure in a cohabitation which excludes mixture while at the same time updating a neoplasticist resonance. In several pieces, as critic Javier Urquijo has observed, there is also a nostalgic reminder of the glamour of modern times²; nonetheless, Arrizabalaga seems to temper it with an ironic appropriation from a neo-pop visual language. He might be said to be emphasising an artistic delectation (through a chromatic celebration based on plain colours, and also with the formal sets of those domestic objects), as opposed to a conceptual mediation.

² Javier Urquijo, «Glamour y neo-pop», in *El Mundo*, 16-IV-2003, p. 57.

Perhaps this pop-like mannerist yearning—through which the desire for style is emphasised without losing the objectual power—is in counterpoint to the immaterial and conceptual trends which challenged the recent history of sculpture. If this field has seen a semantic displacement from the concept of "sculpture", as Rosalind Krauss said in her famous 1978 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field"³, it has done so by paying attention to two features: the blurring of the logic of the monument through its delocalisation, and the production of the monument as functionally de-located and self-referential. Thus, as Krauss puts it, "Through its fetishization of the base, the sculpture reaches downward to absorb the pedestal into itself and away from actual place; and through the representation of its own materials or the process of its construction, the sculpture depicts its own autonomy"⁴. And in that development, the expanded field is generated, creating problems for the set of oppositions—whose four poles of demarcation are: landscape and not-landscape, architecture and not-architecture—between which the category of *sculpture* is suspended. Other new categories are incorporated: *marked sites*, *site-construction*, and *axiomatic structures*⁵. These transformations affect the very notion of traditional sculpture and its loss of commemorative and monumental value, encouraging a formal and thematic renovation. As Javier Maderuelo has said, "building is going to be the new task of sculpture. The action of constructing is going to develop in turn new sculptural procedures, such as reinforcing, assembling, manufacturing or building"⁶. For his part, Cereceda, in *Hacia un nuevo clasicismo* (1999), adds that there are two inescapable issues that return time and time again: the first is its relationship with spatiality and the second is that of the "self-annihilation of traditional sculpture" (why inverted commas?)⁷. Spatiality goes back to the way space and time interact, which classical and Baroque precepts sought to modulate through timeless and immutable values—leading to an anodine and monumental reiteration—and to the expressive containment of modern sculpture. But, with the development of contemporary sculpture towards a new expressionist emphasis or towards a disparity of minimalist and conceptualist enunciations, that process of self-annihilation of modern canons will accelerate. In both

³ Rosalind E. Krauss (1996). *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (La originalidad de la Vanguardia y otros mitos modernos)*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, pp. 288-304.

⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, op. cit., p. 293.

⁵ Rosalind E. Krauss, op. cit., p. 297.

the Spanish and the international context, therefore, we can see an extension of the conventional boundaries of what has come to be called sculpture without any one tradition being in a position to claim to be hegemonic. It is a question, then, of accepting that the field of the sculptural is tensed by its irreducible plurality and by its permissive paradoxes, in a confrontation between the conventional and the transgressive. At the present time, that field is once again being enlarged with proposals that involve hybrids between sculpture and architecture in a kind of object-setting, and this in turn redefines the space and the place in a specific and heterogeneous context, metamorphic and plural. Faced with this expanded context of the sculptural, Victor Arrizabalaga's objects display a loss of conceptual gravity, stating themselves to be unnecessary and indifferent from that hegemonic approach at the scene of the sculpture's displacement to its limits. But they become interesting in that other way which recreates and extends the area and the law of the imaginary. They appeal to the free game of the imagination and the sensitivity for a fraternal reception with the everyday and its surprises. Novelty may be light or profound, permanent or obsolete, but the substantial lives in its capacity to capture our attention and prolong the desire for invention through the dialectic of difference and repetition. All this is enunciated with a certain satirical determination in Arrizabalaga's pieces. A game of dislocations between shapes and things, is recreated for an alienated dialogue. The visible opens to other possibilities from a neo-objectual sensitivity which incorporates a memory of the pictorial. Unusual artefacts, fleeing graces, furniture as visual metaphors: perhaps they are other ways of fictionalising life, and of decorating—with no metaphysical adherence but with pop beauty—the domestic spaces of our experience. Perhaps they play at other configurations of the imaginary/real. And they add that neopop glamour without nostalgia. The expressive economy of his piece *Smoking I wait... [Fumando espero...]* (2002) precisely enunciates that ironic attempt. Analogously, there is the way he alludes to the well-known coffee machine *Moka Express*, designed by Alfonso Bialetti in 1930, which has become one of the icons of modern design culture.

The artist knows that the dynamics of repetition and difference inform

⁶ Javier Maderuelo "El fructífero camino" in *La deshumanización del arte*, Universidad de Salamanca, 1996, p.120.

⁷ Miguel Cereceda (1999) *Hacia un nuevo clasicismo. Veinte años de escultura española*, Generalitat Valenciana, Valencia, p. 9.

art and life, that contemporary art has cancelled out any master narrative, any regulatory value and any generic distinction (as Danto has shown in his analysis⁸). Hence one of its possibilities is that creative exercise which makes of lightness, or citation and appropriation, a fertile strategy of plastic construction. Ultimately, it is another opening for the unceasing recreational game.

⁸ See Arthur C. Danto (1999) *After the End of Art; Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Spanish translation: *Después del fin del arte*) Paidós, Barcelona. Danto defines contemporaneity as the moment of maximum aesthetic pluralism: "If everything is possible, nothing has a historic mandate: to put it simply, one thing is as good as the next. And in my view that is the objective condition of post-historic art". Contemporary art blurs the borders with history and the master narrative, and for this analyst presents other defining features: the collage of heteroclit resources, and the loss of essence based on the beauty.

ANIMATION

(Synonym of activity, excitement, movement, and –by extension– spectacle, the principal features of contemporary art. All else is tedium).

For a number of years now, Victor Arrizabalaga's forms have been breaking loose from the flat surface. Now, definitively removed from it, they animate, activate and excite him, they move with joy. It is like a celebration of colour and form, an abundance of memories and inspirations...

Relieved of their residual pictorial tensions, the forms –as he said– have become more flexible, actively invading real space. In most cases, I would say they have invaded it with a critical *aerobic* irony. As a testimony of its time, there is an element of that exercise that –according to the experts in collective health– keeps body and mind in shape. But let's get to the point.

Just as Lichtenstein virtually simulated an invasion of the third dimension from a two-dimensional plane, Victor Arrizabalaga does just the opposite, transmitting and reducing perception of the three-dimensional object to two dimensions. This involves violating the natural law of observation – an effect which is also to be seen in nature itself, in the form of a casual encounter, though here it is the result of reflection. And so, this sculpture is nourished by painting and pretends to return to it, ratifying the idea that art is just fiction.

Arrizabalaga begins with the plane –iron plate of ever-greater depth and volume– impelling the sculptoric language on, without abandoning it. His first steps outside the picture sought flat scenic animation. When he had passed that stage, he explored a way out through evolution and found it in movement. But movement is not possible on a flat surface. And so he had no choice but to change the scenic space, resorting finally to three dimensions.

When Arrizabalaga was preoccupied with the message – object representation, naturalism – he didn't stop with volume. Now, though it is no longer his concern, he still holds onto it jealously. Its testimonial presence evolves,

however. Onto that same value, he now superimposes rhythm, gesture, fold and crease, allowing the piece to take advantage of this new discourse.

Now it produces shadows on itself, which is the only way one can describe sculpture. And so it has gained something it did not possess before: emptiness and its opposite, fullness. In this play of negative/positive, he also uses the cut, allowing him to generate action in real space.

But there is another unusual detail which particularly seduces me. While the former posture or order of the painted lines disintegrates, pluralising the option of combinations, the synthesis of shapes expands in space, generating architecture. He seeks new possibilities, using a bather's leg, for example, to insinuate an arch which might well be a bridge or a gate leading somewhere, or creating a human figurehead for a ship.

Arrizabalaga's personal obsessions denote restlessness. He has moved on from those first decorative mini-pieces to other intermediary ones, like projects for a macro-idea which will finally come, to meet the natural or urban (but always public, open) world; despite its dimensions, in its conception this is monumental sculpture.

Now, always clinging to reality, Arrizabalaga begins a new journey through memory; an inspired adventure – animated, active, excited, in motion... In other words, the spectacle of art.

Javier Urquijo

VICTOR ARRIZABALAGA
THE DRIVE OF THE VITAL

*They came together in the centre,
Here there is work, there calm*
D. A Freher

Examining Victor Arrizabalaga's work is a suggestive optical exercise which proves intense from the very first— however cursory—experience.

It is as if in his creative categoricalness, the artist has inundated absolutely everything in his desire to be all-encompassing. We can also see in his approach a gaze touched with *transversality*, whose apparently worldly teleology overtly invites us to pursue perhaps the most common of human aspirations: he unreservedly infuses us with his desire to lead us through art to that moment of happiness, that pleasant instant, which his multicoloured work undoubtedly affords us.

And so we discover that the artist's *uninhibited* and openly neo-pop approach is a door left deliberately ajar so that we can pass naturally through the artist's reserve. Once we have entered, we meet that which is closest to us— even the most trivial, that which by definition is always dispossessed almost through elimination of its unexplored potentialities—to generate in us a certain pleasurable and *multi-referenced* delight. Despite this paradox—not without a certain fluency, it must be said— Arrizabalaga's work unexpectedly strikes up an unconditional dialogue with the automatically predisposed complicity of the spectator.

The artist transmits a strong sensation of having everything all laid out, always ready to resolve the questions that the conclusion of his visual invitation might arouse.

We cannot but be struck by the fact that in his pictorial work, for example, there is an almost excessive obsession to provide the work with a framing, leading the artist on occasions to literally frame the frame itself, or to re-

border the frame in a dithyrambic game of juxtapositions and superimpositions in which he seems to move with ease, free from inhibitions.

Critics have often commented on the clear parallels between Arrizabalaga's art and Roy Lichtenstein's masterly works. While this is certainly true, this shared universe, riddled with references to the comic, sometimes appears to sit too tightly on the Durango artist.

To some extent Arrizabalaga takes his inspiration from mass culture, not just with a view to questioning the decadence of consumer society, as Lichtenstein famously did, but also more humbly to recognise the importance of the range of colours as a contemporary rallying call for stimulating our unlimited source of aesthetic sensations.

Nonetheless, Arrizabalaga's closest creative proximity is to Tom Wesselmann and his impulsive images. Like Arrizabalaga, Wesselmann's art is enticing in its freshness and visual economy, and earned him the acclaim of critics who had initially been reluctant to lend him their support. Arrizabalaga and the Cincinnati artist converge fortuitously in the network of pop imagery and its aesthetic *a priori*.

Separately—but keeping on the path of the artist's perfectionism—we find throughout Arrizabalaga's career a concern with the delimitation of the line, which he orders by compartmentalising the different creative borders.

In his canvases, for example, he establishes the hierarchical importance of each character or image. Naturally, Arrizabalaga puts into practice this concern with *spatiality* to resituate in the picture the right shapes for each occasion with no hint of asperity. The artist places considerable importance on the initial stage of all his work. One of the strongest features of this concern is his academic mastery of drawing, which forms the germ from which all his visual work springs.

The result is that throughout his career, regardless of the format used (including sculpture), we can see a formal care to consecrate drawing as the most basic and necessary of all techniques an artist should master in order

to resolve each work fluently and easily. And each work must first be thought out and then meticulously re-thought out in all its tiniest details.

Another striking feature is the tribute Arrizabalaga pays to certain leading artists, despite the fact that in order for an artist to be appreciated, he sometimes needs a *revision* or even a holistic view of his entire career. One might say that there is always more to this artist than there appears. As we have already noted, in even a cursory examination we can find constant references to Matisse in Arrizabalaga's work. This can be seen in some of his coloured drawings of human figures, which have an abrupt tendency to break with the constrictions imposed by the two-dimensional field. We can also find certain parallels between some of his highly unconventional human stylisations and the most characteristic of Brancusi's work. Of course, the artist's closest affinity is with Andy Warhol and all the post-Duchamp iconography of beat collaterality which peppers his work.

SCULPTURE

It is perhaps in his sculpture that the artist's configurations most emphatically explore all the creative flow already hinted at in his pictorial work.

Using a sheet of iron of the right thickness as a mouldable material, Arrizabalaga confirms his—sometimes colossal—effort in his mastery of steel, forging in his structures a balance between the severity of the material and the malleability of the finish, with its fragile, delicate appearance.

The first thing one is struck by in his sculptural compendium is the almost exacerbated commitment to colour—that colour which accompanies the kaleidoscopic formula life itself is made of. It covers the basics of the chromatic scale, in a striving for purity which always seems to inform Arrizabalaga's work. It is in this phase that the artist feels most at ease, having definitively broken free of the confines of the canvas, and now resolutely penetrating the three-dimensional world. Indeed, many of his pieces in other formats had long clamoured to be placed in this plane of unequivocal haptic desires.

Once relocated—with no chance of returning inside the *volumenic* sphere—

the work, through deception and wily insinuation, reaches one of the artist's key moments and stands before us, calling on us to heed it.

Throughout his sculptural technique, we can see a concern which is neither discreet nor by any means gratuitous with the positioning of his work in space. Despite the carefree nature of his subject matter, Arrizabalaga is not afraid to show a certain interrogative concern which is almost by definition determined by the suspension which always accompanies his sculptures.

One of the notable features of this suspension is the complex *mise-en-scene* which accompanies his human figures (or perhaps we should say humanising figures) who—as in the case of some of his nymphs and graces—“innocently” display their female attributes. We can even deduce their absolute ease and lack of inhibition in the successive poses with which they delight us; joyful, fun and always light-hearted, as if they were in search of some sort of *golden age*, pursuing a naturalness yet to be rediscovered.

What I would most like to stress about Arrizabalaga's subject matter, however, is the pertinacious fetishist fixation which leads him to turn enormously varied objects into icons which, rather than accompanying his field of expression, referentialise, by means of what we might call “totemic” images, elements that possess an incontrovertibly identifying content.

For example, the presence of stiletto-heeled shoes in some sculptures pushes the balance even further towards the joyful and festive side. This is continued in a series of sculptures which captivate us with their chromatically refinement. In his attempt to seduce us we find no double games, simply an encouragement to rethink our relation with the everyday. To achieve this, Arrizabalaga dresses his creations in colour, a colour which announces a perpetual festival which the spectator instantly feels part of, from the very first sight of the work.

All of the sculptures making up the artist's magic three-dimensional imaginarium also display a very peculiar interest or curiosity, a singularity which leads him to spread the tentacles of his attention in inventions we might term “foreign objects”. One of these artefacts, the one represented in *Soliloquy*, consists of an ingenious ticking clock locked in a cage—undoubtedly a *sculpturised*

metaphor on the impossibility of trapping time, that time which goes beyond the mere clockwork mechanism which only tells us of its cold and inexorable internal passing.

In another of his three-dimensional architectures, he plays dexterously with a set of Russian dolls, showing the surprise element to be an inherent and necessary part of artistic creation. Surprise is a factor we must not dispense with, if we are not to run the risk of stagnating in a comfortable but absurd monotony.

Continuing with the same theme, in Arrizabalaga's sculptural work we can find other items of interest, cleverly personalised by the artist's bright gaze. A cheerful coffee-maker, for example, seems uninhibited, in *Moka Express*. And the list also includes another set of environments ranging from simple books to an umbrella, left open as if wishing to protect us against some uncertain element.

Through his art he converts all these items into gadgets which have to be moulded, so that ultimately they become consecrated objects, within a plastic *metadiscourse*, conferring on them what we might call a charter of artistic nature.

It is as if the artist sought, with that creative chutzpah that has accompanied all his three-dimensional career, to give these items—despite their figurative everyday irrelevance—a chance to become works of art, entitled to be viewed by a spectator who will inevitably recognise them immediately.

LARGE-FORMAT SCULPTURES

Victor Arrizabalaga has also created large sculptures, and though the number is small, they have recently taken on a particular significance.

Nearly ten of them are privately owned, and mostly stand in open air settings in private gardens.

There are some differences between these large three-dimensional works

and Arrizabalaga's smaller pieces; perhaps the most striking is that they are either unpainted or painted in a single colour.

I would like to take a closer look at four of the most emblematic works in this category: *Lolita*, *Sirena de pelo ondulado* [*Wavy-Haired Mermaid*], *Doña Clota*, and the very rotund *Iron Maiden*.

Lolita is a well-chosen title for this gorgeous adolescent, so reminiscent of Nabokov's deliciously shameless young heroine. In this sculptural version, she is represented through an intense exercise which struggles to escape from the plane, with a highly convincing finish. In effect, the delicately shaped and polished sheet gives the piece a life of its own, making its potential to strike up a dialogue with the spectator seem unlimited, largely because of the clever finish which makes it almost instantly identifiable.

Naturally, this optical synthesis is greatly added to by the stylised skeleton-like stamp projected by the figure of this particular *Lolita*. By "skeleton" we refer to the work of cleansing, detachment and *unveiling* which the artist's hand has sought to activate in order to transcend mere human nakedness. Thus, what we have traditionally called the *skeleton* represents a sort of *soul* which impregnates this complex sculpture with aura.

The primary purpose of this imposing sculpture would seem to be to unashamedly exalt the self-confidence of female puberty, that period of transition when the girl is not yet a woman and yet, paradoxically, she most closely matches the prototype of the female body as an *object of desire*, as illustrated in Nabokov's celebrated novel.

Meanwhile the curves, the concavities, the convexities, the presentation of the female attributes and the congenial game recreated using the arrangement of the girl's legs immediately turns this piece into a delight for the senses of anyone who views it.

The points of support or hinges on which the entire volume is supported also mark a daring creative move which perfectly finishes off the piece; they provide the necessary balance and give the impression of requiring extraordinary

precision. Precisely for that reason they were absolutely essential in order to finish off this careful creation with substance.

Sirena de pelo ondulado [Wavy-Haired Mermaid] is a steel sculpture, 2.51 metres high, 1.10 metres deep, 1.30 metres wide and weighing no less than 668 kilos! Despite its immense weight, the spectator's first impression is that this is a delicate (though not necessarily fragile) piece. One can easily discern the spatial concern behind the work, which must have caused Victor Arrizabalaga a headache or two. Ultimately, however, the task has been successfully completed.

In pieces such as this, the preliminary design is just as important as the work in the workshop or forge. It is this task—often undervalued—which Arrizabalaga says requires most dedication, since it is in this phase of what we might call creative development that the greatest complexity occurs and also where the artist suffers most with his creature.

In this sculpture the artist's signs of identity remain essentially the same as in his previous work, where he turned shaped steel into something which — despite its initial resistance—surprises us with its extraordinary malleability.

One of the most striking features of this piece is the intense work invested in the mermaid's "wavy hair", which seems to dance joyfully in the wind. The whole sculpture is created with the mannerism which characterises all of Arrizabalaga's incursions into the solid world of steel, which only serves to emphasise its solidity when it comes to identifying with the steel plate converted into the *seed* which gives the life to all his sculptures.

The third piece, *Iron Maiden* is reminiscent of works by Pablo Gargallo, largely because of that tireless search for the *humanising* curvature of the material we see in Gargallo and which is also visible in *Lolita*. It is also worth reiterating the hints of Matisse to be found in all Arrizabalaga's work; in this case it is manifested in the treatment of the legs in a sculpture which lies provocatively in an undisguised hint of mischievous complicity and which should be interpreted as a sincere tribute by the artist to one of his many *masters*.

Like the three others mentioned here, this piece is of a considerable size and is therefore a candidate for forming part of our urban landscape; all it needs is for someone to decide to invest such pieces with the promising title of *public art*—meaning simply “art which is of interest to the public”, and we certainly can testify that Victor Arrizabalaga's large-format pieces are high in public interest.

Finally, *Doña Clota*: a great show of superimposed planes in a space that never appears to have been distant from, let alone hostile to, the volumetric development of this sculpture.

In addition, the contrast of the steel with nature lends the work an excellence which is substantially marked by the feeling of *bonhomie* it exudes. Another important feature is that *Doña Clota* is shown resting (mainly on the sheet representing her buttocks); she perfectly symbolises that state of calmness we all aspire to.

The piece contains the identifying features of all of Arrizabalaga's sculpture, both in terms of the ever-present *twisting* of the material and the treatment of the female figure. This style helps particularise the artist's contact with the three-dimensional element: in his large-format works he strives to find a flourish which is proportional to his sentimental fondness for steel, which he has become the eternal companion of his adventures and journeys.

We can only celebrate the fact that the artist has explored with such notable results the *Gigantist* universe of large-format sculpture.

Victor Arrizabalaga's attitude to life is that of someone who recognises himself as a man of his time, committed to that which is closest to hand—or more accurately that which is most familiar—in order thus to humanise the *objectual* universe that surrounds us and which we immediately recognise when we scrutinise our environs and so reconcile ourselves with all the spaces of “forgotten” everydayness.

We could define this work as an open proposal which nonetheless requires us, with its colourful drive, to stand on the game-like plane offered to us by

this most friendly and polyhedral of artists.

With this complex mix of ingredients, his creations inspire a feeling which comes close to that wellbeing of seeing things well done, amplified by the confidence a spectator feels before something that feels familiar.

Regardless of the literary format with which we have clad the comfortable work of this prolific artist, the autonomy he enjoys in his untiring work means that without the need for any theoretical dressing, we can simply enjoy his work. We should thank Arrizabalaga for the opportunity to simply enjoy the oft-abused sensation of the real. In order to properly appreciate Victor Arrizabalaga's work, we should also remember that he is alone on the Basque art scene in his tenacious loyalty to the pop approach.

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EL ABECEDARIO ARRIZABALAGA

Texto de Juan Carlos Mestre para la exposición "SEX O NO SEX"

A pesar del hierro las chispas extravagantes se obstinan en brillar. En la ferretería del paraíso hay medio par de zapatos con alas y una jaula de besos. Son las piernas del sombrero caminando por el horizonte hasta el anochecer de los antifaces. Es la viruta del silencio asomándose a la ventana de cada corazón transparente. Un agua sin peso cae desde la noria de los párpados y todo el acero inolvidable de los sueños parece oxidarse colgado del perchero del gran olvido. Flotan en el viento los intervalos del peligro y las manos de los argonautas se aferran al rojo vivo de las cataratas atónitas. Será la química de la fascinación quien se ocupe del resto.

Brotan olas calientes y el mar se quita las medias de espuma. Es la hora izquierda de los agonizantes relojes de bolsillo. La hora y cuarto del triángulo, cuando se entrelazan los amores y suena el acordeón en la cantina de los corazones solitarios. Los ojos de Rita Hayworth ruedan como dos sombreros perseguidos por el ruido a porcelana de una broca de ébano. En este instante, en algún dormitorio de las minas alborotadas por el piolet, la eternidad del deseo se hará irresistible. Hay adolescentes evadidos de su rostro como ardillas grises en los bosques de hierro, hay dilataciones de átomos y filos sin uso. Hay una escombrera de compases y cartabones bajo la claraboya de lo que ya ha sido cerrado herméticamente.

Cuando la materia se cansa de esperar toma un ómnibus en dirección a las herrerías del pensamiento. Llega de madrugada al desorden siderúrgico donde aguardan las apariciones, las formas anónimas de los fractales, los vigilantes del crepúsculo que dibujan el contorno del día siguiente. Entre los restos adormecidos de los hierros viejos abre su boutique de sueños la lechuza. Se escuchan pasos de actrices fecundadas por el polen de los cinematógrafos, se oyen bocas dispuestas a discutir con la herrumbre. El augur se coloca su mandil de herrero y cada fuelle se dispone a soplar sus rosas.

De pronto, el fuego. Despiertan los dormidos y los inventados por la electricidad. Tan sólo los peones de maquinarias imaginarias permanecen junto a la hoguera de los grandes hechizos donde arden los espantasoldados de plomo y los pensamientos fáciles. La fiebre es el ornamento de las llamas y las fugaces se estrellan contra la telaraña de la medianoche como si fuesen bombillas con pulmones de cera. La única violencia es el relámpago y los matemáticos complacen la tristeza de los amantes abrazados por el patrón del rectángulo. La vida es eso, una curiosidad incurable, la presencia irreconocible de lo que nunca salta a la vista.

El rostro de las esculturas se maquilla sin causa alguna con el pensamiento del arco iris. Los espejos rotos rivalizan en mostrar la hermosura de quienes han alcanzado la perfección: los sobrevivientes íntimos, los bichos metálicos, las líneas rectas estranguladas por el horizonte y las tuberías llenas de amor. Cansada del temperamento popular, la pasión, sentada en un taburete con colores de helado, espera al cazatalentos de las pensativas que purifican los tímpanos con su mirada de pólvora. Las manecillas del anunciador han llegado a su horario inocente, y todo lo que sucede tras las bambalinas del tiempo se torna gradualmente amarillo.

Fueron en otro tiempo el rompecabezas de los pájaros enamorados, la cucharilla de los hospicios enfriando la sonrisa de la sopa de letras. Fueron hierros niños jugando con el espíritu de los peces muertos bajo los viejos puentes de madera, la chatarra dura del mundo lamida por los arroyos blancos que brotan del ghetto de la luna. Los hierros dulces que se derriten como caramelos falsos bajo la boina de los locos. Hierros fundidos con la simple mirada de una abeja ante el carrito del heladero. El Escultor abre la jaula donde la oreja de humo oye a los profetas, y el puzzle de los acantilados recompone el camino por donde regresarán los dulces prófugos del verano, los comunes recogepeletas del infinito y las chicas salvajes que bailan con los furtivos.

Gallo y gato se disputan la colilla de los cometas del amanecer. Tendida de una pinza sobre un bosque de pinos la Vía Láctea se parece a la nuca sembrada de flautas de una mujer esquimal con palpitaciones de gacela. Como un armario lleno de calcetines, como una cabaña repleta de corbatas y labios de buzo. Son las burbujas del oxígeno saliendo por la cerradura del otoño, las palmeras bailando claqué a la puerta de las tintorerías chinas. Los que se alimentan con problemas sueñan con elefantes abollados, al principio los oyen debajo de la cama, como una escolanía de anclas; luego se acostumbran, como la herrumbre en el camarote de los barcos hundidos. Son los sueños del hierro. Son los óxidos del corazón pintados por las aves marinas que aún no han abandonado sus nidos.

Hierro vestido de coral y colores sentimentales, hierros del martes en el éxtasis de la promesa, víspera del nervioso miércoles de ceniza. Hay palabras que se dan empujones en la fila del diccionario, láminas atraídas por un imán hasta el sexo de las tenazas. En el carrusel del afilador de unicornios giran las sombras que aún no tienen persona, y la tarde se tiñe con el vino azul de los vocingleros, vendedores de ramilletes de cormoranes y reyes de la baraja. Las novias se citan con los ciervos en los caminos

perdidos, mientras los alquimistas, los carpinteros de orquídeas, los sensitivos del jengibre, espolvorean nitrato de plata sobre la pesadilla rubia del oro. Mañana la voz de los herreros construirá el miércoles, pero hasta que sea sábado pasarán cien días, el tiempo que tarda un paraguas antes de volver a ser abierto.

Incluso los pianos tienen cabellos de acero bajo la tecla que trasmite el telegrama de las notas mudas. Nadie oye dos veces el mismo martillo que va escogiendo la forma de las visiones. Solo se escucha el suspiro del hierro, su solitaria soprano recostada en el yunque con tacones de vidrio y un cigarrillo en la boca. La soldadura del rayo cose el botón de las estrellas marinas en el hall de la playa. Las bellas mortales tocan la puerta con sus siete dedos de alcohol, y el vacío desaparece de forma vertiginosa. En torno a la bigornia, pila bautismal del mentalista de los metales, se reúnen los ornitólogos que dan nombre a las aves: calamita, oligisto, siderita, almagral...

Junto a la barandilla, adelgazados por el deseo como lápices mordidos por adolescentes, se abrazan a y b; a lleva una blusa a cuadros de seda, b una chaqueta de pantera de Manhattan. Más arriba la gelatina de sus corazones descompensa la balanza de las proporciones áureas de lo que se cree es la vida. Se habitan, mitad halcón, mitad insecto. Es decir, se dan a los gérmenes y las mariposas. El amor es una línea en el espacio y las lágrimas de los abandonados pueden compararse con las bailarinas recién salidas del baño turco de los ojos. Entonces, como en una selva virgen, el peso de las mareas se desvanece y llueve.

Kilómetro arriba, kilómetro abajo, diez sillas esperan veinte piernas. Hace sol sobre los tranvías y también sobre las gaviotas y las chapas de las botellas de soda. Los mecheros de bicarbonato andan asustando al mundo, incendian los vasos de agua, rompen la rueda de los arados para impedir el zigzag de la primavera. Ningún abanico sale solo de casa, ninguna ardilla voladora se lanza en paracaídas sobre los parques infectados de vértices y ángulos casi absolutos. El verano, rodeado de saltamontes y espinas, se lo piensa dos veces. El dogo siderúrgico perseguido por los ruiseñores de pico dálmata no se lo piensa tres veces. El isósceles y el escaleno, metamorfosis de la inmovilidad, se salen por la tangente en dirección al siglo de las divinidades góticas.

La *Verdad*, diario independiente de la mañana, es consciente del estado de gravedad de las nubes. Bajo las sombrillas una reunión de madres irritadas con el oso hormiguero,

siguen el ejemplo de los pastores protestantes. Piensan en las colmenas de fin de año, piensan en los cuervos que carraspean; piensan, en fin, en un diluvio de vinagre. Ajenos a tal conmoción, los albatros que embetunan con sus limosnas el muelle se dirigen fríamente al bulevar de los sabelotodo. Hace falta valor para llevarle la contraria a un cerrajero de trompetistas. *La Verdad*, diario dependiente de la noche, yace desahuciada en el museo de microbios en desuso y rompecabezas estupefactos.

Lama. Vehemente masa gaseosa que en presumida combustión se eleva de los cuerpos que arden. Novia inesperada del soplete y mosquita muerta de los fuegos fatuos.

Más o menos todos los caballos de carrera odian a su jockey. Las fieras abominan de las familias con cacahuets, los velocípedos con carácter de vencejo de los torneos de caracoles, la axila del desierto, etcétera. Pero en cualquier momento, en medio de la multitud, aparece una mujer con el espíritu de la velocidad. Su fuerza giratoria afecta durante un segundo las mareas, la inteligencia de los calamares, la tendencia al orden de los planetas. Debajo del vestido estampado con ocelos late, aún incompleta, la ninfa certera de la tempestad. Es la belleza comestible de las naturalezas vivas, la desintegración de los escolares prodigio diluidos en acuarela.

No se te ocurra caminar descalzo por una avenida incandescente. Lo bello produce imbecilidad, corazones cubiertos de amapolas y tragafuegos carbonizados. No es necesaria la campana, ni la bóveda, ni el invernadero. Cada noche alguien desobedece el tiempo enfermo de la atrocidad, se asoma a la ventana, observa a las gallinas jugar al ping-pong. La juventud de dios retorna al escaparate de su ojo, le canta las cuarenta al afilador de guillotinas, abre cajas de música en los funerales solemnes. El otoño maltratado por el floricultor perezoso reparte pequeños salvavidas y juguetes mecánicos entre los adornistas. Y comienza el verano.

Ñandú con su cabellera negra se sube al tren de los verdugos. En el último vagón extrañas lámparas de gasolina queman su apacible abstracto ante la interrogante mirada de nadie. Nadie es nadie, un francotirador en el aserradero, una botella dentro de otra botella retenida por una tercera botella. Nadie los peldaños al infierno. Nadie el ladrido de nicotina que todos los días rebosa la cabeza de los personajes dormidos. Léase belladona donde pone beleño. Contéplese acero donde brilla lingote. Toda evaporación es una venganza, todo lo sólido un incesante golpe de suerte.

Olvídate de tus orejas nacidas para escuchar la frase de los vientos. Olvídate de tu boca nacida para distinguir el azufre de la sal de los agonizantes, y el hocico de la serpiente del iceberg ante la vacilante aureola. Olvídate de tus brazos que han crecido para sostener las cosas, y el ruido de esas mismas cosas y el ámbar de todas las cosas que guardan un abismo maternal en su centro. Olvídate de tu nariz y tus ojos, juntos desde el principio para distinguir un manojo de hierba de la caperuza de las armaduras, y el lucero del ciego de las estrellas rezagadas. Olvídate de tus dedos que se han puesto de acuerdo para hacer un nudo. Olvídate de tu silencio, pues ha llegado el día de recordar el cumplimiento de lo blanco, nacido para la negritud de los idiomas magnéticos.

Primero ofrecer una partitura cubierta de talco al lápiz de labios. Después una mejilla de cereza púdica a la nodriza domesticada. Al día siguiente abrir el palacio episcopal de Astorga a un séquito indeterminado de boxeadores y deliciosos púgiles. Perseverar en lo milagroso martilleando las almohadas del fin del mundo. Escuchar a los Rolling en lo alto de las chimeneas. Jugar a la lotería etrusca, convencerse de que Marilyn Monroe aún espera ser bautizada bajo el insurrecto sol de la vida. Calcular, por último, los centímetros que le faltan al asombro para precipitarse en las médulas del sueño. Y ahí, torrencial e imprevista, la metafísica de lo desbordante, el collage de los calendarios, la bicicleta del alquimista bajo las obsesivas lluvias.

Quiérase o no seguramente la poesía es una forma anticuada de hacer el amor con la literatura de marca. Preferible mil veces el hipo de Noé a los suspiros de la rosaleta cúbica. Y los estuches a los sarcófagos. Nada con el cadalso, nada tampoco con la mandolina y el tirabuzón. Las uñas pintadas rejuvenecen, aumentan el interés por los senos nocturnos y los timbres eléctricos. Ninguna cabeza de mármol se merece un sombrero de hongo, excepto la de inciertos viajeros en el andén con rocío de los equilibristas, excepto el sauce del mediodía desprestigiado por la tirantez de los cables de acero. Todo lo diminuto lleva en su interior la inmensa esperanza de un riesgo.

Ruedan los cuadrados como si fuesen triángulos equiláteros. Otra barbaridad de la geometría. No la única. La preceden los ángulos rectos y las gomas de borrar la

exactitud, las gotas que trazan líneas quebradas al caer sobre los estanques inútiles y los paraderos de golondrinas. Lo sobrenatural de la geometría se prolonga, si observamos de cerca dos rectas, indefinidamente, casi hasta el disgusto, que tampoco ha de ser el último. A menudo la realidad se pone del lado de lo imposible y juntos se convierten en placer, o sea, fragmentos de una respuesta en la oficina de objetos perdidos.

Sobre la hipótesis de que todos los caminos llevan a Roma, tan generalizada como que la nieve es el joyero de un bebé, habría que desencadenar tres réplicas. Una referida al parecido de los gatos con los cantores vagabundos, lo que desmiente la sacralidad de los orfeones vaticanos. Otra, la despreocupación de los creyentes por seguir la ruta de los cohetes celestiales. Tres, el desapego al suplicio. Ardiente trinidad de lo incomprensible, o lo que es lo mismo: la impaciente promesa de Rimbaud, el más apuesto traficante de explosiones y poemas camembert.

Todo lo que no es azar conspira contra la razón. La pipa, obesa cerbatana de humo, pone en jaque la salida de incendios del club de la duración. Los extintores pelirrojos, en tacones de palmo y medio y con guantes de leopardo, sofocan la más fulgurante de las milagrerías: el escapulario de cenizas. Las gafas del existencialismo aumentan al infinito la probabilidad del embudo dialéctico. El sostén de Eva y la manzana de Adán en el tebeo del génesis, reducen a cero la teoría del soplo instantáneo. Y así sucesivamente hasta el parlamento de pestañas de la multitud. Lo peor de una aguja es un violín extraviado.

Una cosa es decirlo y otra muy diferente hacerlo. Que a las ranas también les guste el txakolí da hasta miedo. Miedo espiritual, se sobreentiende. Esa especie de cuchillo invisible que sin ningún pensamiento llevan los cardenales al cabaret dominical. Sólo un cerebro ávido de complicarse el oído con tal silbido podría empararse de eternidad esperando al príncipe Lucky Strike bajo el cobertizo de la fábula. Croa en el hierro el alfabeto de la prehistoria, y del cuerpo metálico del delito se desprenden pequeños terrones de azúcar; a veces amables como un pasamanos, a veces fosforescentes como una fragua de luciérnagas. Toda lencería presupone una ley imprudente, una auténtica trampa para los armiños y las manos heladas.

Vienen a tomar café, pero hacen como si no te vieran. Disfrutan con eso. Gente del espectáculo de la invisibilidad, artistas de renombre desconocido, tímidos odiadores del pánico, mujeres inhallables, ignotas personalidades con una tempestad lírica bajo la frente griega, qué se yo, gente que ha enloquecido comiendo tulipanes como los molinos de viento de Gregory Corso, saltimbanquis, piernas desnudas, elegantes argentinos. Cruzan las calles casi de puntillas, van de dos en dos y medio, entran en las farmacias, vete tú a saber lo que buscan, piden un frasquito con cuentagotas, acaso el de la piedad, acaso el de la virtud y la lástima. Dejan sobre el mostrador media docena de relojes de oro, sucedáneo cursi del hierro. Con naturalidad, como quien habla con una manzana.

Watercloset es una voz inglesa, pero preferible a wagneriano. No hay conciencia sin un pez rojo en la jarra meditativa del gran sobresalto. Los árboles brotan desde algún lejano escritorio, un almacén de raíces, un trirreme enterrado. Y lo hacen sin culpa, como una alegre cosecha de pelusillas de álamo. Esto es aplicable a cuanto ayuda a volar al habitante de lo sombrío hasta más allá de sus límites, y también para cuanto eleva las pompas de jabón hacia la incubadora del fakir de las constelaciones. Cuando el hierro envejece se convierte en aplauso, en tímpano, en herradura gratuita para los caballos sin descanso.

Xilófago. Dícese de los insectos que roen la madera. Preferible el hierro.

Yo diría que contra la muerte lo mejor es un *allegro andante*. Regar con felicidad las semillas extranjeras de lo que aún no se ve, los bellos mundos giratorios que hay en las cuberterías, en los comercios de pararrayos, dentro de las substancias meteóricas, entre los abrazos en huelga como viejas fabricas abandonadas por los obreros, en los antiguos números que antes de la invención del cero servían para contar los pasos que le faltaban a cada mujer, a cada hombre, para llegar al laberinto. Hierro contra la muerte de la imaginación, hierro en las ruinas simultáneas, hierro de los despojos y las sobras completas, hierro en los panes cabalgando hacia pobrísimos pueblos, hierro de las hipótesis en la flecha que señala el lugar hacia donde hay que perderse.

Zapato. Un zapato de hierro con alas. Un zapato con los pies en las nubes. Un zapato de hierro que durará todo el tiempo prohibido después de la vida. Un zapato para los siete dedos que están en la jaula de las plateas como indiscutibles plantas carnívoras. Un zapato de tacón siguiendo el ritmo de las serpientes de cascabel. Un zapato izquierdo, el insomnio; un zapato diestro, el deseo. Se oye decir a las estrellas: Quien en hierro vive, en mágico hierro resucita.

Juan Carlos Mestre