

MIGUEL PALMA

(STILL)

MODERN

DISCOMFORT

CURATED BY
MIGUEL VON HAFE PÉREZ

(Still) Modern Discomfort

Miguel von Hafe Pérez

I first met Miguel Palma in 1992, when I was helping to put together the exhibition *Images for the 1990s* as Fernando Pernes' curatorial assistant at the Serralves Foundation, in Porto. From the outset, we agreed with Miguel that one of the works to be presented in the exhibition would be *Device* (1993). This object-car-sculpture involved the participation of various agents (an engineer, mechanics, artisans), with a project-based dimension that would characterise much of his subsequent career. The shape of the sculpture is reminiscent of the utopian design of modern cars, halfway between warmongering and aerodynamics. At the time, I was sure that this work synthesised with crystalline assertiveness a paradigm shift in Portuguese sculpture. It achieves a passage from the artist as a builder of forms to the artist as a manipulator of ideas through construction. This, therefore, does not involve a passage from sculpture to its expanded field, or conceptual dematerialisation; instead, it comprises a critical revision of modernity, stripped of the world's transformative urgency. The full scale of this project/event was underlined by the official permission to drive the car-sculpture on the A1 motorway from Lisbon to Porto, escorted by a police car. Video images of this performance recorded by the artist are presented in this exhibition. They reiterate the miraculous, unprecedented nature of the entire situation: a work of art driven by its author at over one hundred kilometres per hour that must have amazed all the other drivers in the area, and astonished everyone who saw it parked at the entrance to Serralves Villa in 1993.

In a context in which the studio work of artists was still primarily linked to a certain transformative manual work, Miguel Palma's artistic strategies began anticipating a disruptive view of the arts system and the idea of the artist, which was still enveloped in an aura of romanticism. In 1989, with the exhibition *Ludo*, held at Galeria Quadrado, Miguel made an ironic comment about sculpture's capacity to achieve a passage of meaning between the concept and the materiality of the works. In this case, he invented a kind of theme park in which heavy structures in concrete and

iron replicated the elements of a game that is impossible to manipulate. The (physical) weight of the works corresponded to a basic anti-playfulness that also referred to the question he has always addressed in his works—i.e. the double face of a modernity that is anchored both as a teleological vision of rampant technological advance while carrying a ballast of devastation and disgrace. The efficiency of a train, car, or aeroplane, the beauty of their shapes, the unusual mobility as the first symptom of an unprecedented civilisational leap are one side of a coin that reveals on its reverse the contorted iron that goes beyond the fragility of our flesh, the roads that tear into landscapes that should be protected, or the pollution that we all trying to hide under our carpets.

Miguel Palma is clearly fascinated with icons of classical modernity. Here, however, these elements are continually subjected to a conceptual migration in which his intervention demands a vital hermeneutic densification. His appropriation of scale models, for example, brings them closer to a second-degree reality—the scale model indicates the existence of another entity at another scale; but the situations in which these scale models appear are situations that suspend reality, as if the excess of reality of these objects was short-circuited by means of a derisory game in which the real becomes vertiginously polysemic and poetic, in a tone of lacerating crudeness. In this respect, he subjects his scale models to accidents and collisions in works such as *Lisboa-Roterdão* (2001) and *Accident Motion Pictures* (2003)—as well as the cruel *Dream House*, from the same year, presented on a drawing board where a miniature *Porsche* that has crashed into a tree interrupts the putative enjoyment associated with the harmonious scale model of a modernist house.

Miguel Palma proposes to us considerations of an absolutely unique existential density in the form of works of art. His curiosity and the way he articulates different horizons of knowledge underline our capacity to reinvent ourselves by concealing the inexorability of the higher law—the victory of time over human finitude. As devices that can foster a critical gaze towards our recent past and our present, Miguel Palma's statements confront us with



30 minutes, 2016. Punch clock, timesheets. Artist's collection.

the tensions experienced in the fragile balance of our existence.

The alienation of a programme for sustainable ecological living in late-capitalist societies is a central theme in Palma's creative concerns. Works such as *Ecosystem* (1995–1996), *Ambi-air* (1996), *Alfacis Popularis* (1999), as well as those shown in this exhibition—*Carbano 14* (1999), *Seedbed Project* (2006), *Catalytic Paintings* (2007), and *Air Print* (2012)—claim a vital space for questioning our relationship with the environment. They achieve so through visually powerful exercises in which, in parallel, one wonders what it means to create a sculpture or a painting today.

Carbano 14 is a terrifying machine open to critical speculation: the stratified city is presented as a geological cross-cut, in the archaeology of a becoming nurtured at the surface by the possibility of cultivating who knows what: a vision of a utopia that has been lost in the compression of survival. In *Seedbed Project*, such survival involves brazen warmongering, somewhere between threat and liberation. The natural (seeds) and the artificial (cannon) create, once again, a sense of future

urgency. The artist proposes imaginary solutions that may slide into complete ineffectiveness—this is his absolute right. What he does not dispense with, however, is the right to contagious indignation. Have the seeds that Miguel once fired from this device into a wasteland in the municipality of Vila Franca de Xira ever sprouted? This question is as futile as asking how many times Richard Long had to travel down *A Line Made by Walking* in 1967, as well as trying to figure out why this work has become iconic of a special relationship between art and nature and of the very concept of sculpture.

Catalytic Paintings and *Air Print*, in turn, suggest the same ecological interpretation, but now divert our attention to the tradition of painting. In a kind of reversed, perverse Impressionism, *Catalytic Paintings* is the result of the action of carbon monoxide on a landscape in which trees mask an increasingly black surface, as a car spews out pollution onto the trailer, the latter especially conceived by the artist to carry the paintings. It is no longer the case of capturing the essence of light reflected in nature, bodies and objects—that was the main concern of the pioneers of landscape painting in the nineteenth century; instead, it is the gradual darkening of the possibility of glimpsing anything other than the black cloud in the background, caused by a simple utility vehicle. The trees become spectral, apocalyptic monuments of landscapes stripped of any beings or meaning.

Air Print's monumental canvases conceal a harmless play with avant-garde abstraction. They are, however, another powerful affirmation of a processual record in which time witnesses the invisible effect of air pollution. Seemingly first transformed into rigorous formalistic exercises, the canvases expose the amount of pollution filtered inside the container on whose sides they were hung. A Malevichian white, protected at its centre by a square stencil during the exhibition period at the 2012 Liverpool Biennale, shows the original state of the canvas-filter, while the grey colour is nothing more than pollution quantified through the matter that has clung onto the surface of these “paintings.” It comprises time and devastation in an incisive commentary on the aporias of a utopian modernity in which colour (or non-colour) can conjure up metaphysical ideas that transcend disciplines.

The question of time in his oeuvre is also inscribed within the core of overriding concerns that he has focused upon. Firstly, at the start of the exhibition, we see the work *30 minutes* (1999), which I had the pleasure to present for the first time in the group exhibition *Noise*, at the former Galeria Cesar, in Lisbon, in 1999. A punch clock whose timesheets had been altered suggested that the spectator should stay in the exhibition space for about thirty minutes. These are times that go against the eating-and-drinking ritual that defines most of the time spent by people attending contemporary art exhibition openings. The neo-Marxist equation of working time—the obsolete apparatus of the clock and the timesheet—with the pseudo-obligation of a visitor to spend a certain amount of time within an exhibition short-circuits the very ideas of work and leisure. Each spectator's individual conscience is thus immediately conditioned by guilt if they cut short the visit.

Time. Time that is neither past nor future: a present in a permanent state of amazement and indecipherability. *Value* (2002), *Heritage* (2002), *1964–2044* (2004), *Bipolar* (2007), *Ocidente* (2009), and *Cinq temps* (2016) are some of the works in this exhibition that reflect deviations, metaphorical compressions, and imagined reverberations of a timeless time—that of the present. In some of these works, time is an invisible actor that leads to inevitable degeneracy—in *Value*, a Chippendale chair is slowly devoured by woodworm; in other works, the artist's acts lead to a disruption that initiates a new time—such as the breaking and subsequent restoration of *Heritage*, a derisory arc of truth and consequence from the perspective of ordinary life and practice. In this case, what is the value of art and the need for ornament in ordinary lives? Do the hundreds of hours of restoration work surpass the material and symbolic value of the work itself? What do we decide to restore today? For whom? These are some of the questions raised by these works, in a process that is so typical of Palma's oeuvre, due to his assertiveness, as urgent, as a general reflection on the structures of preservation of material life, of individual and collective memory.

Cinq temps is a gigantic work now being presented for the first time in Portugal. It was

produced for the MuCEM, in Marseille, and was installed in the chapel of the fort of Saint-Jean. The sculpture has five rotating discs, each of which represents various epochs in the history of the Mediterranean Sea: the Greek civilisation, the Roman one, the Middle Ages, the Modern Era, and the present day, in the final disc. Here, the present is essentially transformed by both the juxtaposed shadows cast by these five discs on the floor and the perpetual motion that they generate. This work was produced prior, but is nonetheless related, to the peak of the Mediterranean refugee crisis. It has a clear political interpretation, exactly to the extent that it names the great European sea as a melting pot where all the major problems of the contemporary era are currently posed in their most acute form.

As I belong to Miguel Palma's generation, I perfectly recall the fascination emanating from books on human anatomy, on different types of engines, the encyclopaedias filled with transparent sheets whereby, layer by layer, we could discover the complexity of the human body, an engine, the geology of the earth.

Miguel Palma's relationship with technology and with the data of nature and both social and political history reflects his compulsive curiosity. He is primarily interested in understanding the regimen of the image in the construction of a wide range of different discourses and in technical explanations. The artist finds inspiration or research material for many of his works in consulting or collecting thousands of magazines, promotional leaflets, posters, calendars, technical books, postcards, advertising materials, and other memorabilia.

As he himself points out, his relationship with technology is structurally transparent in most cases. The deviations are almost immediately noticeable—such as the use of a professional hairdryer motor in *Little Boy* (2007) to simulate an aeroplane's turbine: the hermeneutic deviation of such dysfunctionality is underlined by the visual nonsense of the commercial aeroplane turned into a bomber aircraft. Comfort and effectiveness are transformed into putative threat—once again, the double face of modernity is exposed with singular poignancy.



Device, 1993. Iron chassis, aluminium bodywork, engine. Coleção Fundação de Serralves — Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto. Acquired in 1996.

The unstable monumentality of *Platform* (2008), one of Palma's most iconic creations, is based on a difference in water level in its four supports. With disarming simplicity, the effect, which is almost imperceptible to the naked eye, has great impact when the tower leans to one side. The fact that this effect is produced by means of a water pump is an essential requirement in such a project, subjecting the works to repetitive effects—mechanical loops corresponding to the visual ones used in much of contemporary video art.

This circularity of physical movements also corresponds to a conceptual circularity that refers to the creation of territories of derision and densification of a tense reality. With *Flying Carpet* (2005), Miguel conjures up a certain children's imaginary universe, and then intersects it with the haunting atmosphere of contemporary bellicosity. A commentary devoid of any moral judgment, as in all his works, it yet allows for the grasping of the implausible in order to better critique the real as it moves away from it. Establishing a fissure in the rationalised understanding of certain

historical data (the recent and successive wars in the Middle East), the initial playful appeal fades away as this mechanical loop, used once again, throws the work towards an unbearable situation without any functional meaning.

Referring to strategies of the Duchampian readymade universe, although only from a formal perspective, static works such as *Already Made* (2010), *1971–1983 (14 Summers)* (2014), and *Retrofitting* (2014) appropriate found objects that gain a particular density due to their *exhibition value* as opposed to their *use value*. When the artist became aware that the employees in a garage he used to go to accumulated tyre stickers in the form of a ball that grew over time instead of throwing them away, he asked them to give them to him. In a nominalist, transitory impulse between universes (from the material to the symbolic), *Already Made* becomes an assertion that questions both the artist's status and his creative intentionality, while also paying testimony to the perception of the passage

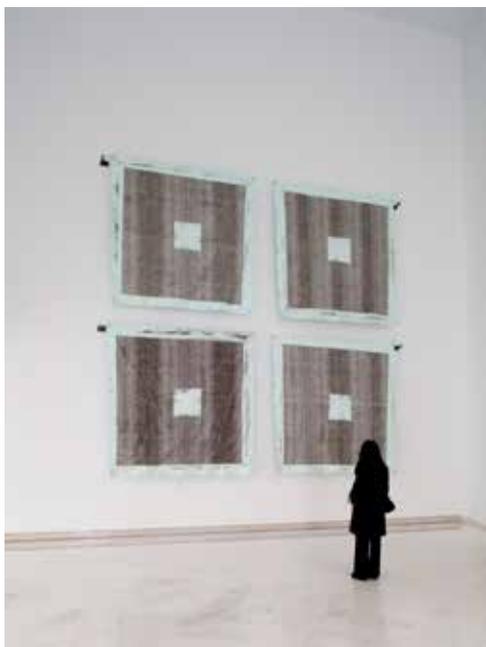
of time in its abstract dimension—given that no one knows or will ever know whether the work, in its current form, took a week or a year to gain its size, which has become crystallised forever. 1971–1983 (*14 Summers*) also refers to a matter associated with the passage of time, addressed as a memory of hierarchisation of the public space, in particular through its temporary rental. In the museum, the work corresponds to a spatiotemporal interval that returns to the public space that which should separate, protect, and mark private identity. In *Retrofitting*, Palma becomes an iconoclast: after dismembering a *Rolls-Royce* car—one of the icons of symbolic and material power—he presents its carpets on the exhibition wall. Small moments of a deceiving abstraction, they are once again signs of a vital detour that turns the most trivial item into a luxury object, in an eventual exercise of process art. The entire process of dismantling the *Rolls-Royce* means a quest for savage irony: unlike the beautifying/stupefying impetus of contemporary tuning, when Miguel Palma stripped a 1972 *Rolls-Royce* Silver Shadow of all its decorative, non-functional elements, he turned it into a standard car—into a blasphemous vertigo.

None of this could happen without the aid of an absolutely fundamental weapon in his entire creative process: humour.

In a work such as *DSEX* (2016), Palma addresses the always inhospitable world of pornography in the manifestations of “high culture,” by creating a miniaturised world of cardboard characters (the first moment of distancing from reality) that interact with each other through the artist’s manual action (the second moment of distancing) in shocking sexual movements around, and within, a miniature *Citroën DS* (the third moment of estrangement from reality). Operating from a strange miniaturisation of the world, Palma contrasts the purity of the lines of this twentieth-century design icon with pornographic fiction, fusing the weight of human flesh into the glow of the car and its seductive upholstery. Design and pornography—so far removed from each other, and yet sharing a common goal: graphic effectiveness.

Are these worlds coming to an end? That does seem to be the case for investment in disruptive design models in the car industry for mass market segments, such as the DS... The situation of pornography is quite different, but let us not go there. The exponential digitisation of this once underground or concealed experience seems to suggest the opposite.

In relation to the digitisation of experience, it is important to consider one of the central issues in Palma’s artistic universe: the concept of obsolescence. Interested in rummaging through the world of forgotten objects and devices, or those that have been relegated to obscure museums of the material history of mankind, he reinterprets the programmed failure of many of these objects as the hidden face of an unbridled, hyper-consumerist society. At the same time, he continues to admire the sometimes awakened intentions of visceral utopianism that, nevertheless, shape the contemporary era. In 2000, Miguel Palma created a device that looks like a clear tribute to the countercultural fears of the matchless beatniks of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957): *Sieve* is a monstrous apparatus ready to swallow



Air Print, 2012. Synthetic felt. Artist's collection. Photograph by Mark Ritchie. Courtesy CGAC, Santiago de Compostela.

any contemporary consumer object. Its size, mode of operation, and purpose make it the ugly duckling of the works presented in museum contexts. Destroying unused objects, objects that so many people would love to own, pulverising them, in an action that cannot be repeated too often in an exhibition due to the noise and trepidation they cause, is an exercise of unbridled authority over the world that we can watch whenever this work is assembled.

The plasticised dust from the residues grinded by *Sieve* is the most obvious token of a contemporary unease. Miguel Palma, however, does not share the pessimism of E. M. Cioran. He prefers the design of unlikely monuments to contemporary unintelligibility. In this sense, he continues a tradition of moments when society was confronted with words, images, and actions, anticipating experiences that could be understood in the light of future interpretation. Without wishing to state here that the artist is “avant-garde,” I can only share the feeling that many of his works have the ability to permeate the future with hints of reification of uncertainties of the present day. In fact, Palma never wanted to think about the avant-garde as the driving force of some positivist project in his career. I am convinced that sometimes he is even amazed at how old his approach is, i.e. how it more or less involuntarily underlines key issues of Western modernity. For a substantial part of his creative drive comes from a shared anxiety: the anxiety derived from the failure of an informed construction of democracy that crumbles because of corporate interests and widespread civic disinterest; the anxiety of a society that cannot cope with its increasing longevity; the anxiety of a society immersed in an unprecedented digitisation of experience and sensitivity. Miguel Palma operates in the interstices of this duality (euphoric optimism and paralysing pessimism): without false moralisms, he conveys this duality through devices that are as effective in their conceptual resourcefulness as disturbing in their constructive complexity. Miguel Palma’s exhibition machine is thus a device that compresses speed and time; disruptive tension between objectives and results, between mismatched realities, between discrepant movements, and between antagonistic scales. It should be stressed, however, that he does not advocate any kind of moralistic

discourse, and much less does he suggest any kind of solution.

His universe feeds on an expectable line of knowledge of art history itself, coupled with the immediate experience in the confrontation with the work, as any interesting artist does. In the work specifically conceived for this exhibition, he proposes an immense iron mountain of a Constructivist bent, clearly dissociated from any Naturalistic impetus. Here, the Naturalistic metaphor proceeds through a mechanism that produces ice that starts melting at the top of the mountain. Water running down a metal surface: the warning could not be fiercer. Unlike Caspar David Friedrich, the sublime here is once again traced through an ancient fear of electric shock, a paradigm of the price to pay for a sense of modern evolution—at least since Benjamin Franklin. Contemplation of this immense volume is thus underpinned by Kant’s idea of the sublime. In fact, here we think of this iron structure not only in relation to its impressive presence, but also and above all in relation to an artificial process of mimicry of nature that represents a deviation that “surpasses every standard of Sense,” as in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790). Ecstasy and anxiety, recognition—as a structure identifiable at other times in the history of art, from Paul Cézanne to Naum Gabo—and distancing, this is a work that best defines what we may expect from contemporary art: an invigorating distrust before a recognisable universe that, nevertheless, produces a series of shock waves towards its complete comprehension.



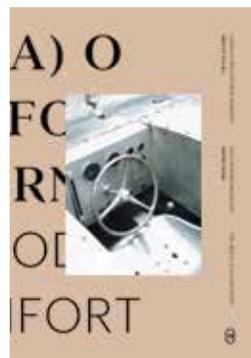
DSex, 2016. Counter, cardboard, paper, wood, base with mechanical and electrical devices, video. Artist's collection.

Education Service

Guided visits and activities
for schools and families
213 612 800
servico.educativo@museuberardo.pt
www.museuberardo.pt/educacao

Exhibition catalogue

Miguel Palma. (Still) Modern Discomfort, with a comprehensive photographic record of the exhibition and literature on the artist. Launched in early October



Share your visit

@museuberardo

#museuberardo

📍 Museu Coleção Berardo

Follow us



/museuberardo



Museu Coleção Berardo
Arte Moderna e Contemporânea



**REPÚBLICA
PORTUGUESA**
CULTURA

Sponsor:



Tintas Robbialac^{SA}

Exhibition support:



BACALHÃO
WINES OF PORTUGAL