

## Shipwreck With No Spectators

Fernando Castro Flórez.

There are forms of “poetic justice” that take on a sinister dimension (both familiar and rendered desolate due to repression), as if an *ill-fated destiny* were condemning the catastrophe underway to invisibility. The ghost doesn’t *reappear* or disturb the fantasy, and it is not a case of a “patriarchal logos” (à la Shakespeare) that cries out for revenge as a consequence of the betrayal of blood ties; rather, what occurs is a lack of an “event,” an *asymptomatic* standstill, if you will excuse the paradox. In the autumn of 2020, after postponing the exhibition *Hauntopolis* in the Art Center Tomás y Valiente in Fuenlabrada (planned for the previous spring), we decided to exhibit the pieces for one week, in a moment of “apparent” de-escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic. We had selected specific works from Santiago Talavera in which he addresses issues like the ecological crisis, animal welfare, and what could be described as an aesthetic/ethical fight striving for global justice. Drawings, paintings, and an impressive art installation (in which there was a wall *marked* with the phrase “We are only apocalyptic so that we can be mistaken,” from Günther Anders) had been distributed throughout the space in order to provoke collective thinking about the dire situation in which we currently find ourselves. The exhibition was never inaugurated. That is to say, that with the exception of those who set it up, those in charge of the center, the artist, and the curator, no one was able to wander through the space and observe the works of art on display. The “lock-down measures” imposed *zoom logic*, the “vicarious experience” of a *virtual tour* which, at the end of the day, barely generates any critical intensity.

Calamities can magnetically attract other disasters. Shortly after, Talavera’s studio flooded and many of the works from the *cancelled exhibit* suffered damage. The artist himself told me that he considered his “invisible” show a kind of “catastrophic meta-narrative,” and that when he saw that some of his works were literally floating in the water, he sank into a justified dejection. It was as though all his artistic meditation about the end of all ends had materialized in a *subjective demolition*. He had to tap into his last reserves of energy to create “something with that,” conscious of the difficulty or even the impossibility of rhetoricalizing the situation.

Since then, Santiago Talavera seems to have adopted the concept of art as a language of suffering, along with a conviction expressed by Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, which states that the appearance of “reconciled” art must be broken by a heterogenous experience in order to literally “allow debris of experience” to create a different function and aesthetic effect. With admirable courage, this artist rescued and restored his ruined works of art, undertaking work that he associates with Paul Virilio’s concept of “the original accident.” In an intuition I had while simultaneously listening to Talavera while I was reading Athanasius Kircher, I realized that, more than a Noah’s Ark-style flood narrative, what he does is work with a determination that is more *forensic* in nature than archeological. On the fragments of a wall he had to knock down, he creates hypnotic drawings in an attempt to make that which is *catastrophically* connected visible, such as the connection between the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings and a meteorological phenomenon in London.

We stand before a *shipwreck with no spectators*, where we cannot sweetly contemplate, as Lucretius would, how the ignorant suffer in a cruel world. Nor do we feel that our relationship

with Nature can be restored through a *seclusion from the world* to help us reach the golden cross on the mountaintop. Romantic sublimity has been (perversely and joyfully) desecrated by contemporary shapelessness, and the expansion of cynicism affects even nostalgic feelings. Santiago Talavera doesn't undertake the Grand Tour in the manner of Goethe in order to study volcanoes; for him, the eruptions are a sign of the destruction of the world in which we live (or survive); *Neptunism* is of little importance when we are witnessing the disappearance of permafrost. The most worrisome part is that many politicians, as well as many inhabitants of this planet, refuse to change their lifestyles and even deny that we are in a *critical situation*, transformed into subjects that refuse to see, such as those blind, superstitious people against whom Diderot railed.

In this Gabinete de Dibujos exhibit, Santiago Talavera presents his work *Reinventing the Show*, an extraordinary drawing of an empty theater which looks as if a meteorite has hit it, surrounded by various eruptions. Our gaze is "located" on the stage as if we were the actors in this disaster; from this perspective, we can also see a bird attempting to flee. Talavera began thinking about this piece during the months of "successive cancelations" of *Hauntopolis*; he recovered a photograph of a revolving theater from somewhere in his archives and finally managed to give solid form to the *ghost*. What is on display here is not melancholy in the style of baroque theater, nor is it a mere realist conflict (with that bourgeois society that barely perceives the rumor of historical conflict from the comfort of its home), but rather a sort of *theatrical interruption* (in the Brechtian sense) that attempts to leave catharsis behind, using alienation to provoke thought and possibly achieve solidarity.

In a conference he gave in CENDEAC in May 2020 (in the cycle "The End of the World. An Agenda for Another Planet"), Talavera defined his work as "preventative actions." His apocalyptic visions have absolutely no intention of collaborating with the tanato-political discipline, nor do they seek to reincarnate Cassandra's fate. What Talavera does is to subtly *detail* the *catastrophe* (which for Benjamin is embodied in the fact that the worst "continues to occur"), even distributing magnifying glasses around texts and drawings to emphasize the need for us to become more involved spectators. In his paintings, he introduces glitches to lend credence to the productive dimension of error. He likewise undertakes fascinating *détournements* of historical images, as in his piece created from photographs of the Cuban "missile" crisis.

Santiago Talavera's apocalyptic imagery recedes dialectically; for instance, in his work *No More Dystopia* (2020), he attempts to place a limit on wallowing in disaster. The spirit of "fatalism" is subjected to a *mise en abyme*, although it is difficult for him to rid himself of the frustration of having exhibited his work without *anyone seeing any of it*. The anomaly of *Hauntopolis* seems to be in line with the speculation of "a world without us," illustrated, as Talavera pointed out to me, by that scene from Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), in which works of art are in the hands of powerful "bunkerized people," destined not to be looked at. *Capitalist realism* takes on an impressive allegorical reduction in that "state of exception." From the archeology of the flood and by positioning himself in a "forensic" manner, Santiago Talavera has painstakingly drawn *terrible scenes* (such as that fragment of a wall which shows a classic theater in which an empty chair stands out, a chair which will, in the manner of Beckett, grant no one a place to rest), not to sublimate disaster, but to remind us that "there are one hundred seconds left until midnight."