

## Pilar Parcerisas Substance and Potency in Contemporary Man

The return to the sacred from the fragility of human existence is one of the great challenges of contemporary art. A greater challenge still, however, is to attempt to re-establish a relationship of coherence between the experience of time as a continuum between past and future, in direct reconciliation with the ecstasy of the present, and its single, untransferable "instant", and to do so from the tradition of Western religious mysticism.

Many artists have sought in the East, in Taoism and in Zen philosophy, the absolute and transcendental that the spirit represents, like the perfect moment that James Lee Byars pursued. While for Yves Klein blue pigment meant the spirit, and monochrome recognition of the mystical power of colour, we find the extension of this philosophy to the chromaticism of some contemporary artists, for example, in the activation of the physical and spiritual forces that Wolfgang Laib transmits in his application of dry pollen or the dry pigment used in popular Hindu rituals to cover, like spices, the sculptures of Anish Kapoor.

Before the arrival of these artists, however, the influence of Eastern mysticism had been felt in the most revolutionary twentieth-century art: abstraction, in the writing of Kline and Tobey, in Ad Reinhardt's monochrome spaces, or in Rothko's metaphysics. Other artists, such as Joseph Beuys and Antoni Tàpies, have reached a synthesis between East and West from a more material, philosophical viewpoint.

The avant-garde has never been at odds with religion itself, but rather with its forms of representation, the lapsed iconography of the sacred, especially in the Catholic faith. This meant that throughout the twentieth century the avant-garde sought refuge in primitivism as a path leading to the origins, to the pure, primordial state of man's spirit, which religion could no longer provide. Whether from the religious side, from ritual, either Hebrew or Christian, or from primitivism, avant-garde art has invariably paid attention to the sacred: Rouault, Ensor, Chagall, Klee, Picabia, Picasso and a host of others.

Those contemporary artists who were summoned by the sacred, religious aspects of art did not propose a mere iconographical or formal renovation of Western art; rather, they went to the essence, the symbol. One of the most recurrent themes in contemporary art is the crucifixion, because it is the one most linked to human existence, to sacrifice, to death as an event, to drama, to the baroque emblem, to mystical pedagogy and to the strands of philosophical and religious renovation that helped man to emerge from the medieval night to assume responsibility for human life and existence, demanding from himself transformation through action. Figures like Ignatius Loyola or St John of the Cross were essential to the establishment of the bases of a new mysticism at their respective historical moments.

Many contemporary artists have felt attracted towards this mystery of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and have expressed this attraction through their crucifixions: Francis Bacon, Antoni Tàpies, Darío Villalba, Arnulf Rainer, Hermann Mitsch, Manolo Millares, Antonio Saura, Eduardo Chillida, and undoubtedly, Joseph Beuys, for whom the figure of Christ is essentially "a human power, a divine power working in the world through ourselves, a spiritual substance",<sup>1</sup> a fact he materialises through the mystery of Golgotha, seen as the union between Christ's blood and the earth, a mystery through which man acquires the ability to carry Christ's impulse with him and expand it.

Fernando Prats (Santiago de Chile, 1967), a Chilean artist now living in Barcelona, fits exactly into the framework of the Western baroque tradition and seeks the spirit from the ritual of the Catholic religion and its Hebrew substratum, taking as his twofold departure point the mysticism of St John of the Cross and two of his fundamental texts: the poem *Noche Oscura* (Dark Night) and the commentary *Subida al Monte Carmelo* (Ascent to Mount Carmel). The other major point of reference in his work is Joseph Beuys, as an artist who works matter as substance and the figure of Christ as man's participation in the cosmos.

While St John of the Cross transpires in the work of Prats as the means to achieve the void, nothingness, nakedness of the spirit or the active night of spiritual purging, to empty the soul and remain in obscurity – "God is 'hidden' and only in the void, nakedness and solitude lies mysticism",<sup>2</sup> Joseph Beuys is a reference of materiality: "The substance of Christ is realised in matter and work".<sup>3</sup>

Fernando Prats achieves these two objectives through transformation of matter. On the one hand, the alchemy of the smoked, a process of stripping, preparation and access to the poem of emptiness and of the existential night; and on the other, the *soplo*, the puff of air accompanied by heat he blows into the sacred bread, spiritual food, symbol of the Eucharist and the mystery of the Trinity, transforming it into the *almohadilla* or mystical pillow that accompanies, now as its own idiom, his latest installations.

With *Ambulatory*, Fernando Prats invites us to make an inner journey, a spiritual journey, a physical and mental displacement. He accompanies us as we wander through the symbol of the sacred form in different contexts and situations, on an itinerary of meditation through the passion, death and resurrection of Christ as a language of crisis and catharsis in which man may recognise and identify himself in his own substance, a reflection also on the void and the beyond, in an exceptional setting, Vic Cathedral, infusing new life into spaces of worship, or parallels to worship, de-consecrating the museum and returning art to a place more appropriate to its origins and tradition.

In this wandering, man the observer appears as a passer-by, an idea we already find in the *Subida al Monte Carmelo* by St John of the Cross: "the mystical union of the soul with God is 'total and permanent according to the substance of the soul and its powers regarding the dark habit of union, for as regards the act... there cannot be permanent union in the powers of this life, but merely passing union.' Furthermore, the union is merely through 'participating transformation'".<sup>4</sup>

However, this is not the first time that Fernando Prats wanders through this dark night, which he relates with the creative act. Despite his youth, he has reached a state of maturity after a long artistic career. The insertion of his action into the mystical-religious way comes from far back and is linked to the artist's own life. His forced emigration from a poor country such as Chile, afflicted with hunger and sorrow, generated in the artist his first crisis: his uprooting and entry into a blank page in his life, his first void, his first dark night, of nakedness, asceticism and re-encounter with another tradition, history and culture. Undoubtedly, to begin again from nothing constitutes a catharsis, rebirth in another place in which the common links to his past maintained a universal religious bond.

Fernando Prats's new journey was that of another geography, Barcelona, but it was also of the option for art: "The objective of the journey I decided to make was not painting itself; rather it was to verify whether painting contained sufficiently solid arguments to allow me to leave behind everything that is not self-representation and achieve an understanding of the behaviour patterns of the plastic arts associated with themes that concern me: the sacred, its representation, ritual and its binding actions, the symbolic, Chistological dimension, Christian and orthodox religions".<sup>5</sup>

Fernando Prats's artistic option was already born very closely linked to religious architecture (in this sense we recall his 1994 project – which unfortunately was never executed – of mobile altars conceived for the church of Santa Maria del Mar, or the installation *Cripta*, developed for Espai 13 of the Joan Miró Foundation and subsequently exhibited at the Royal Monastery of Poblet). Another theme linked to both architecture and mystical light is that of the stained-glass window, which Fernando Prats sketches in *Vidriera* (1995), a drawing in soot. Once again he quotes St John of the Cross when he compares "the mystical soul with a stained-glass window, Which the divine light of God eternally (...) inhabits".<sup>6</sup>

In his first environmental works, a recurrent theme appears, the *medulla*, a soft, internal, intimate substance of the nervous system which is set against the bark, the trunk (the *leño*), and belonging to the most highly prized reliquaries of saints. It already appears in his intervention in the staircase and façade of the Church of Sant Martí, in Girona (1995) and in *Cripta*, in the piece made from bone marrow and rubber that refers to a passage from Genesis: "Here I have surely seen the back of he who sees me" (Genesis, 16,13).

Indeed, his departure point is the figure of Christ and the mystery of Golgotha, the transmutation or transubstantiation that is produced in this sacrifice for which the blood of Christ is shed and spreads through all the veins of the earth. In the first place, then, the *crucifixion*, either of man or woman, under the image of the *Mujer crucificada* (Crucified Woman, 1990) who appears in some drawings. And from here new interpretations will derive new interpretations of the cross, of the wooden trunk (the *leño* and the *madero* of the Spanish Baroque) in a mosaic of smoked paper, the descents (*caídas*), the *Pietàs* and the altarpieces with host wafers, such as *Anástasis* (1997). In the second place, the altar as a ritual sacrificial table, the centre of the installation that with the title of this altarpiece he exhibited at the Church of Nuestra Señora de la Divina Providencia in Santiago de Chile in 1997, the protagonist of which was the altar for elevation, made from an accumulation of cut-out hosts that together configured

a volume in the form of a cross. And continuing with the physical church space and its furniture, the grille, the confession, forgiveness, and it was thus that he wrote on the large grille of the confessional in this Chilean church: "God's love forgives everything", an invitation to transfer the word through the grille to forgiveness and catharsis.

He came increasingly closer to ritual elements, and from furniture he proceeded to clothing, to the Casulla (Chasuble, 1997) – a kind of chasuble-cross transfixed vertically by the medulla and horizontally by adhesive tape on which a passage from St John of the Cross's *Subida al Monte Carmelo* is written –; and from clothing to the ornament, to the symbol of the Eucharist: the host, Christ's body, symbol of totality in alchemical philosophy that coincides with the number 4 as the natural division of the circle and with the central Christian symbol that represents a quadruplicate, an oblong cross in 3 + 1 proportions.

It may also be an example of a triadic mandala, according to C. G. Jung's interpretation of it, for in the Christian world also the Trinity conserves the 3 + 1 proportion. For this author, the four parts together form a symbol of totality, that is, the *Selbst* (Soul) in its empirical manifestation: "As God, Jung writes, Christ is the unity of the Trinity, and as the historical son of god and anthropos he is the exemplum and model of the individual inner man and, at the same time, point, goal and totality of empirical man".<sup>7</sup>

This interpretative meaning we also find in the action *Manresa* (1966) by Joseph Beuys, an essential point of reference in the work of Fernando Prats. F. Mennekes recalls Joseph Beuys's view of holy bread: "this is only bread in its outward appearance, for in reality it is Christ, in other words, the transubstantiation of matter". And he adds, "Here the material acts between two levels linked by a story. It is bread as the metaphor by antonomasia of all human food and, at the same time, the essence of all the stories about Christ and all his words".<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the themes, the materials used are also treated as substance, and they begin to exercise a specific weight in the artist's language. They are materials he appropriates from Christian ritual, ranging from the oil and balsam the bishop uses in consecration to the host waver and soot (that which is closest to incense), which in his hands become genuine plastic materials he has managed to endow with life. Ephemeral materials that form part of the metaphysical spirituality they want to transmit, materials that want to be substances of a visible reality that embody the manifestation of the spiritual.

Soot as a loss and as sacrificial purification in Hebrew ritual. Prats is not the first artist to use soot in painting; Informalists before him such as Tàpies have done so, and Yves Klein's *fumés* and Sigmar Polke's smoke on glass are also linked with this modern tradition. However, in the case of Fernando Prats soot, subsequently fixed by immersion in water (the baptismal ritual), is not a stylistic resource with which to mask or paint a surface but a ritual plastic medium that introduces us into emptiness, into the disappearance of the body, into the traces of the soul.

Fernando Prats has invented an even more personal language, which he first presented at the Galeria Joan Prats-Artgràfic, Barcelona, in 1999 in his assemblage *Lugar de reposo* (Place of Repose). This consists of the *almohadilla*, a kind of air bag made from three slices of unleavened bread with the relief image of the sacred form repeated four times, from the atelier of the nuns of the Divina Providència, in the Barcelona district of Lesseps, which, through humidity, air and heat, he injected with a breath of life, a puff of air which he blew into these air pillows, which suddenly became inflated with life and spirit.

The artist himself explains his discovery thus: "I used three alchemical elements, water, air and heat, and unleavened bread, which I left to soak in water for a few seconds; the outlines tended to disappear. Since the bread was so thin, I had to add a few slices more in order to strengthen and unify the body. Then, with my hands I began to join together, several times to invisibly sewing the finger, heat, and the flesh. The aim of the process was to sew together the edges of each host. Thus, with the ends joined together, a chamber was formed in which the air was stored, a 'puff' (*soplo*). The piece took the form of a small pillow (*almohadilla*). It was astonishing. I had discovered something new: pieces of body began to join together and they became transformed into a new substance in the form of small pillows filled with air, possibly with 'spirit'. It was very difficult for me to concentrate on the detail of a single pillow, for the entire piece revealed the outrage of its own process".<sup>9</sup>

Apart from these two experiments with soot and bread, Fernando Prats uses oil, balsam, chrism, wax, rubber, blood, and medicines, materials that help him evoke the altar sacrifice, death and resurrection, the rituals of some sacraments, blessings and consecrations, actions such as anointing and sealing. He also uses smoke and the host as visible symbols that form part of altar rituals. For the artist, they are “tokens of emblematic forms of materiality presented as ‘compositions of place’, the product of an imaginary construction”.<sup>10</sup>

Fernando Prats’s artistic career has been marked by a process above all of stripping, of gradual dematerialisation, characteristic of a more procedural and conceptual than representational language. His Christs have progressively become divested of all matter, until they become pure essence: graphite or soot on film, the gradual death of matter that re-emerges in another perceptible dimension: substance. He has progressively rejected his first, still baroque, dramatic figurations to surrender to the symbol, to the “nothingness” of soot or to unleavened bread as the body, to emptiness and fullness respectively, the synthesis between painting and sculpture, a symbol that allows him to relate metaphysics and substance, above all from the platform of the social plastic arts (or social sculpture) advocated by Joseph Beuys, from which each person may be an artist if he/she uses creativity as their capital. To share in Christ’s body, to be a participating passer-by as proposed by the mysticism of St John of the Cross is also what one perceives in Fernando Prats’s art, an invitation to share a human and divine experience, a desperate search for the human soul, for the Selbst, beyond life and death.

In Vic Cathedral, the artist has traced out a path through different spaces, the main motif of which is Christ’s experience and his impulse through the sacred form, a theme on which the artist has already worked, although here it acquires new meaning, by virtue both of the places the artist uses and of the fact that the Bishopric houses a number of host moulds from the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Fernando Prats’s installation consists of an itinerary divided into different stations. The first stop is the albergueria (Lodging house), a mise-en-scène of the artist’s work process, in which drawing plays a primordial role. Drawing is the embryo of his projects, in which the genesis of the main idea lies. The drawings are almost automatic expression of the mind, although their intention is to influence the intimacy of the organic, the detachment of form, to leave only its spectre. Drawings that recall the flow of the human organism, that seek the void in the form of the body, in which matter (graphite, soot) is a trace, a shadow that confirms what is not there rather than an affirmative stroke.

The second stop is the Cripta, in which the artist has built a circle on the floor consisting of 750 almohadillas or mystical pillows, which together create a monumental sacred form.<sup>11</sup> The artist has breathed life into the bread, breath and respiration in the crypt, a closed tomb that now finds a breath of resurrection in this magnificent circle that transports us to the domains of sculpture in space.

In the Sala Capitular (Chapter house) a cascade of 120,000 forms alludes to the shedding of flesh in the holocaust as a collective sacrifice, and to the mystery of the Trinity that derives from the Holy Ghost, depicted in the painting that presides over the main altar in the Chapel.

The Sala del Tesoro (Treasure chamber) – divided into two parts: that of the crosses and that of the chasubles – has received a different treatment in these two spaces. In the first, four slices of unleavened bread express four moments in the sacrifice of Christ: the wound, the blood, the grille treated with smoke and the puff, four expressions of the matter and colour employed as substance. In the second, a piece of large dimensions, Casulla (1997), made from film and soot, is vertically transfixed by the medulla while on horizontal strips of tape we read a fragment from the Ascent to Mount Carmel by St John of the Cross. The way the chasuble has been treated with smoke, its material density and its compact texture bring the thickness of God to mind to which the saint refers: “We enter further into the thickness, into the deep thickness of God”.

In another display cabinet a box, a kind of reliquary or Fluxus-kit, contains and singularises the essential elements of the exhibition: an almohadilla or mystic pillow; the medulla, present in the form of the vertebra of one of the abbesses of the Convent of St Cecile, Cologne; a piece of gypsum flooring representing the sacred form; and an accumulation of hosts, fragment of a shedding of flesh, like the one we have seen in the Chapter House.

Finally, the space of the Claustre (Cloister) constitutes the last station the flooring with the sacred form invites visitors to walk, tread, jump or leave aside this plaster tile distributed chaotically in the different passages. From one of the tombs hanging on the wall flows a black rubber shroud, while another shroud lies at the foot of another tomb. A third tomb

exhibits the relief of a scene from Golgotha, its lid resting on the floor of one of the cloister wings. Shedding of nothingness, emptiness, negation of light, death and resurrection in the questions the artist asks about the disintegration of the body and reintegration, return and resurrection.

The entire ambulatory that Fernando Prats proposes is a constant interrogation on life and death, the beyond, a life experience that combines metaphysics and substance, and, above all, a reflection on the potential of man and its effects on the social corpus, on the basis of Christ's experience and the symbols used by the Church to denote his presence in this world. The work of Fernando Prats is impulsive and plastic, it is born from the interior to cause transformation and brings the individual and society together. It appeals to the inner gaze, summons each one's dark night and does so with his instruments – the plastic arts – to reach a point of communion between art and religion.

#### NOTES

1. Mennekes, F.: *Beuys zu Christus/Beuys on Christ, conversation between Joseph Beuys and Elisabeth Pfister (German/English)*, Katolisches Bibelwerk Verlag, Stuttgart (Homily to Beuys), p. 136.
2. Aranguren, J. L.: *San Juan de la Cruz*, Ediciones Júcar, Madrid, 1973.
3. Reithman, Maax: *Joseph Beuys: la mort me tient en éveil*, Arpap, Paris, 1994, p. 225.
4. *Op. Cit.*, note 3, p. 34.
5. Prats, F.: *Bitácora de taller*. Unpublished, Barcelona, 1999.
6. *Op. Cit.*, note 3, p. 34.
7. Jung, C. G., *Sobre cosas que se ven en el cielo*, Editorial Sur, Buenos Aires, 1961, p. 168.
8. Mennekes, F.: *Synaisthesis substantiae*, Galeria Joan Prats, Barcelona, 1999.
9. *Op. Cit.*, note 5.
10. *Id.*, note 9.
11. The artist's almohadillas are containers of *soplo* (thin slices of moistened bread blown up with air and closed by means of a circle of heat).