Ana Barriga. Without Cruelty, there is no Festivity

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One evening, I took Beauty in my arms
—and I thought her bitter

Arthur Rimbaud
A Season in Hell

I would like to begin with a reflection on that bittersweet sensation so aptly described by Rimbaud. It is a feeling that can be extrapolated to the world of painting, whether viewed from the perspective of a more acidic contemporaneity or from that of an almost always darker past. I believe Ana Barriga can be seen in this light, especially as her work combines irreverent, intelligent humour with a pictorial art in sync with (but also detached from) Bad Painting, sharing the spirit of artists like Chantal Joffe and indebted to the attitudes of chronologically distant masters such as Goya and Caravaggio.

Ana Barriga is interested in dialogues between figures. It is almost always an apprehensive, tense, open relationship. As in the baroque, everything is taken to an extreme. In her polyphony, objects resemble each other in disjointedness, rather like Severo Sarduy's concept of *retombée*, when something distant, something that interferes, can become analogous and even function as a double. Ana Barriga's painting inhabits the ineffability typical of poetry, the enigma of her objects, the fleeting interstices of her figures.

First of all, I would say that Barriga's painting is in line with Artaud's claim that the truth of life lies in the impulsiveness of matter. Artaud even defined himself as a primitive made unhappy by the inexpiable horror of things. No one can deny that cruelty is one of the oldest foundations of culture. In Ana Barriga's work it is a kind of wild fiesta—as the title of one of her early paintings explains—where a dancer and a pepper can coexist, to give just one example of that ironic theatre. In antiquity, cruelty was one of the greatest festive delights. We find it in Nietzsche and Bataille, but also in the still lifes of Sánchez Cotán and Zurbarán.

In fact, Bataille said that if we do not seek elation or rapture, it is because we cling to what is safe and comfortable. This contemporary condition is also found in painting and in art. The exalted and the sacred have always been close to fright, transgression and profanation. Ana Barriga embraces those premises by assaulting her own paintings, physically with spray paint and conceptually with her choice and distortion of motifs. Her oeuvre denotes a passionate determination to plumb the inscrutable depths of the object. She begins by scouring flea markets for objects in which, though they have nothing in common but their characteristic ugliness, she sees something new and unexpected. She then mutilates

them, sifting through their innards and forcing them to coexist in a peaceful yet distinctly uncomfortable contradiction. This gives her a still life, which she photographs and subsequently paints with oils and enamel, spray paints and felt-tip pens. Ana Barriga sacrifices her own painting, which explains why it always seems to be in transit: the object sublimates, surpasses itself. In *Adán y Eva* [Adam and Eve] (2019), *De animales a dioses* [From Animals to Gods] (2018-19) and many of the artist's other works, it seems to be some sort of ecstatic delusion not far removed from the tradition of Spanish realism represented by Sánchez Cotán or Antonio de Pereda, who sought the dispossessed and disembodied. Life embroiled in a kind of duel.

At the CAAC, Ana Barriga's painting cunningly adapts and blends into rooms with their own distinctive personality, although the camouflage is achieved by contradiction. We might describe these paintings as a kind of anti-memory, where impulse, knowledge, investigation, respect, irreverence and many other attitudes coexist and shatter in the paint. It is painting in decline. An interior theatre. A tortured, torturing painting, impenetrable in its rhythm, in its deconstructive condition. But Ana Barriga's painting is not dark like the works of Spanish realism; in fact, it is dominated by radiance, colour and light. Rather than lurking in the shadows, eroticism hides in the foreground of the desecrated. The artist always ends up exalting her objects, just as a religious man always ends up embracing his own skull.

The works in the exhibition were devised especially for this occasion as site-specific pieces, adapted to both the dimensions and theme of the spaces that hold them. Thus, the Refectory and the Magdalena Chapel in the former Carthusian monastery are doubly present in their religious nature—a faith the artist professes in the act of creating—and their connection to pottery, which accompanies Barriga's work as the main raw material of her models. Even so, Ana Barriga's pictorial art is a kind of serendipitous confession based on the process of painting. There is always a crack just large enough to let through a chance discovery, a randomness capable of deviating to complete a painting. As María Zambrano might say, confession is the language of one who has not eliminated his/her nature as a subject. It is not the feelings, longings or hopes of the subject, but an act of self-revelation performed to avoid the horror of a confused half-existence.

This inclination towards richness rather than clarity of meaning is illustrated in some of the artist's elective affinities, such as Francisco de Goya or, more contemporaneously, John Baldessari. Curiously, Baldessari loves Goya's black paintings and spent many long hours in the Prado galleries where they hang. Baldessari takes the unstable equilibrium of certain Goya paintings into the realm of Pop art, appropriating images to dislocate them and search for multiple interpretations. The same thing occurs in Ana Barriga's work which, like Baldessari's, adds an inner vision to the superficial reading. The obvious is shown, but in folded form. It is a surrealist vision like the one Baldessari borrowed from Buñuel, rendering space violent and allowing the detail to create ambiguity. As in Ana Barriga's painting, the obliteration of context renders meaning elastic and elliptical, no matter how much her titles direct our gaze towards one of the multiple faces.

The exhibition *From Animals to Gods* invites us to hear the echoes of the painted themes and objects, but also of their architecture. The point, as in Beckett's plays, is to show, not tell. It resembles the baroque world defined by Deleuze: an art not of structures but of textures, a proliferation of folds and fractals, a world of captures rather than closures. Reception is never final. Reality is sequenced and painting constructs its own spatiality, which is closely related to Jacques Derrida's idea of grafting: "A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game." In Derrida's view, laws and rules do not hide behind the inaccessibility of a secret; they simply refuse to reveal themselves. Derrida speaks of a cloth that envelops the cloth, of the impossibility of undoing it. Adding is merely

providing something more to read. He also speaks of timing and spacing. What Ana Barriga proposes is inside and outside the picture; it is an unfolding of times in keeping with a pictorial tradition where context has become content. We see this in the work *From Animals to Gods*, from which the show takes its title. In one sense, this piece can be understood as an exercise in spatial and temporal ellipsis. And, as with all forms of interference or dispersal, the ellipsis stems from the fragment. It is therefore an interruption of reality itself, of its time and space. But the disruption is not necessarily a break in continuity. It's something closer to the contemporary need to orchestrate an accident, to turn something into a fragment and turn that fragment into a baroque, majestic architectural landscape. Adorno put it well in his *Aesthetic Theory*: "Art that makes the highest claim compels itself beyond form as totality and into the fragmentary," as if the event could only come to pass by accident.

From Animals to Gods is a seven-headed group portrait. While Ana Barriga's painting is a representation of a series of representations, this picture is an enigmatic set of Matryoshka dolls. As each head is opened, it reveals different forces until we come to the skull at its end, death. Figures inside figures. Folding personalities. Still lifes arranged to seem even more intriguing. As time passes, the other time, that of representation, becomes elastic. This is precisely the point: to tauten, refine and temper a series of everyday and historical redundancies. Behind all this we sense a personal space that coexists with the act of painting, but we cannot make out that secret niche, even though her painting puts it before our very eyes, for there is nothing more blinding than a close-up, and nothing crueller than the will of a God.

From Animals to Gods is actually ten separate pieces assembled like a reredos. Upon observing the work, we see the density of its discourse and the weighty seriousness of its pictorial expression, which the artist describes with fine-tuned precision: "Technically, it consists of ten pieces, all designed to form a kind of reredos or altarpiece; this, together with the use of symmetry, a symbol of divinity, underscores its religious nature. The media used are oil, enamel, spray paint and felt-tip pen. The oil paint is almost meaty, an opaque, unpleasant substance, without glazes, that renders each brushstroke emphatic and decisive. Mixing it with the more industrial, artificial enamel paint brings me closer to equilibrium and reflects what we are, body and soul, the tangible and the spiritual. The felt-tip pen lets me draw in a way that conveys volume, and I use the spray paint to vandalise my own painting and the image itself, adding different layers of meaning to the image."

If we consider the formal resolution of Ana Barriga's paintings, we can see there is something destructive about them, a chaos that reminds me of Caravaggio, who was undoubtedly the first to grasp the rawest side of reality, eschewing the nobility of themes as well as form. His realism was excess, no doubt mirroring his own short and stormy life, which is why artists like Poussin claimed that he was capable of destroying painting. This statement was based on the way he broke down their classical principles, turning artistic language into discourse. In Caravaggio's work we see painting as an idea, a questioning of the medium itself, for Caravaggio emphasised and glorified gestures, dramatised lighting, humanised settings and, in short, stripped away the decorum to which classical academic tradition aspired. Ana Barriga's painting is much brighter and more colourful, but there, where everything accumulates, the truth is that, though nothing strikes us as particularly bizarre, the meaning is always encrypted. The titles offer some clues, but they never lead to an exegesis of what the works are telling us, no doubt because incongruence and discord have also been summoned to this pictorial feast. Remember, order is internal, and Ana Barriga paints sensations, heterotopia, splitting. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, "Painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility."

I'm reminded of a small drawing that Roy Lichtenstein made the year he died, titled *Study*

for the Chapel of the Eucharist (1997). It would be interesting to see Leonardo da Vinci's reaction to a drawing like this. With the minimalist simplicity of a few pencil strokes, it presents a perspective view of the same space featured in Leonardo da Vinci's Renaissance work, yet there are no figures, no hint of Jesus or his apostles. The solemnity of that classical scene has been reduced to a comic-strip frame where the mystery of the blood and wine, bread and flesh, is represented by an onomatopoeic explosion of light. Leonardo would undoubtedly be surprised at the transformation of his work and wonder about the artistic concepts that, several centuries later, led his *Mona Lisa* to grow a moustache. But this kind of desecration is only possible in a reproduction. To avoid any similar attempts on the original, the work was placed inside a sealed enclosure some years ago in the Louvre's Salle des Etats. Closeted like a relic, hordes of tourists flock to see it, jostling for a chance to grab a piece of the treasure, even if it's only a photograph attesting to the fact that they were there, before the "genuine" painting. But in the 1990s, when digital cameras and, of course, our smartphones were not yet the norm, *La Gioconda* was subjected to a constant barrage of bright lights that bounced off its protective glass. Camera flashes popped, and upon revealing their film visitors inevitably found that the *Mona Lisa* had disappeared behind the reflective glare of bullet-proof glass.

This imaginary light burst serves to introduce what I believe was one of the greatest "explosions" in the history of contemporary painting, Roy Lichtenstein's dramatic appearance on the scene, now key to understanding works like those of Ana Barriga. At the time, the authority of the abstract painting of Pollock and Rothko weighed too heavily on new generations of painters, who either resigned themselves to play a secondary role by pursuing similar options, went back to reviving scraps of reality *à la* De Kooning, or emphatically rejected the situation altogether. Before Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns paved the way with his flags and targets, once again bringing the familiar, the object, into the pictorial frame.

As a good Pop artist, Lichtenstein thought about art and the artist's position and attitude. While he did deliberately engage in art for art's sake, he re-connected it with reality, experimenting and testing the extent to which art was still able to relate to and talk about anything, even the one subject it had avoided up to that point: commercialism. This is probably why Rosenblum, as early as 1963, compared Lichtenstein's position with that of Courbet. Both managed to incorporate vulgar, commonplace content that defied the gravity and severity of the art of their time. Many years have passed, but Ana Barriga's idea of using ordinary objects—toys, pottery and other vulgar ornaments with a short lifespan—and projecting them in a kind of painting capable of embracing playfulness, irony and even sarcasm, is not far from the excessive ugliness of which Courbet and Lichtenstein were accused when they chose to procure their own content and develop a popular style that flew in the face of the mannerisms of the then-dominant abstract painting.

In the 1950s, almost anything could be hung on a wall, and then Lichtenstein appeared with his paintings of Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse, revelling in the vulgarity of the vulgar, the realism of mainstream culture—the same thing Koons later sought in the postmodern era. Lichtenstein enlarged and monumentalised the smallest cartoons and comic strips, making art from something never intended as such, and for this reason he never rejected the "Pop" label as many of his colleagues did. By freezing a "brushstroke", the gestural act of painting, he made a breakthrough of great importance for the future of art, as his creations are pure images, representations of themselves. In his creative process, he began by creating small-scale compositions which he then photographed, enlarged, drew and painted. The spontaneity of creation was subverted in a cold, calculated, indirect process not unlike that of Ana Barriga, although at times her pretty, roguish attitude—as Patricia Bueno described the artist's work some years ago—might make us believe the opposite, because there is always an element of chance, serendipity.

Lichtenstein painted ice-cream sodas, hot dogs, sponges, tyres, flowers, balls of yarn... dehumanised objects, mechanised in the manner of a Léger painting, as if the patina of advertising had flattened all the chromatic vigour and texture typical of expressionism. In Lichtenstein's work, the objects never interact with the backgrounds; they simply float in space, avoiding any hint of narrative intent. As Rosenblum noted, out of all the many possibilities offered by commercial illustration, he chose the mechanisms that reduced painterly relief to a bare minimum. Ana Barriga's work differs on this point, as she is interested in the weight and materiality of objects. For this reason, in addition to using photography, harnessing the never-innocent transposition of the image into painting, the artist keeps the object close, living side-by-side with its anomalies, its true proportions, its entity. This is how the latent power of that object is projected, along with the idea of painting as a delayed medium of expression used to such great effect by artists like Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans. The slowness of the process and the different ways of seeing those objects makes it possible to emphasise the effects and sophisticate the framing. It is there where reasons seem to elude spectators, who find themselves disorientated, opening up to imagination and the abyss of a colourful specular deconstruction that is always vague and distorted.

In this sense, Ana Barriga's painting is realist—the reality of reproduction itself. It doesn't matter if her version of an object is a more or less realistic rendering of the original, because that mimetic reality has already been neutralised during the reproduction process that will later inspire her. As Luis Gordillo said of Barriga, her works are "clearly paintings, very painted paintings, but the painted figures or objects display that objectual ambition, that desire to be more than flat objects, to be bulky volumes in space, to make the transition from two to three dimensions." And this from an artist who, more stubbornly than most, has pursued the image without worrying about whether others thought he was modern. I think he has that in common with Ana Barriga, who also tries to assault, surpass and overwhelm the image, who insists on squeezing out all its possibilities, even though she does not tread the highly unstable ground of abstraction.

In a recent interview, when asked about her work, the artist replied, "I collect society's best cast-offs, I give them group therapy, I re-educate them, clean them up, send them to private schools, and when I think they're ready to return to real life, I paint them, and then someone with a can of spray paint comes along and vandalises them with graffiti—that's just the way things are." Beyond the humorous undercurrent of these thoughts, I find the idea of cleaning up what others have cast off, of retouching what will later be subverted or assaulted once again, quite significant. The way that exercise of painting manages to reveal the mysterious aspect of objects is particularly appealing. Their apparent lack of substance is precisely what allows Barriga to hear the innate contemporaneity beating within them. Seeing the object through contemporary eyes leads her to grasp a past that reveals itself in an unprecedented form, with its own reflections, weight, invisibilities and textures.

I think Ana Barriga's paintings have something else in common with artists like Gordillo, in that they function rather like puzzles. The image will always be the image and the fold of its vision, its double. This is especially true of *From Animals to Gods*, where we find a series of over-the-top games and iconoclastic actions. The work, measuring 12.35 by 3.8 metres, is doubled and dislocated by humour, like an oversized scream. The image unfolds into a map of multiple faces like a dense accordion, riddled with traps and *trompes l'oeil*.

In Ana Barriga's painting, as in Luis Gordillo's, sensation becomes the servant of vibration. Colours collide and relationships embrace contradiction. And so our spectators' gaze must get to work; we must take place in the accident, because the motif overflows as the surface grows denser. Luis Gordillo described this density of Ana Barriga's painting as

erotic and edible, and he detected an animal, carnivorous quality in the impulse of her roses, like the sacrificial violence of the masters of Spanish realism mentioned at the beginning of this text, but also in the Baconian sense so aptly described by Deleuze, where the task of painting is defined as an attempt to render invisible forces visible. For Deleuze, Bacon's painting constitutes a "zone of indiscernibility" between man and animal, and "in this becoming, the entire body tends to escape from itself and the figure tends to return to the material structure".

This manner of calling upon the extreme, the double or the fissure leads us to the baroque. The images in Ana Barriga's works become an almost savage battlefield, fraught with overlaps and distorted perspectives, changes of scale, tensions, ruptures... It almost seems as if she were trying to turn things upside-down, making everything operate in a transitional state. Ana Barriga's imagery is not defined by straight lines, and in the case of works like those now being presented at the CAAC, the impression of combat and expansion of a painting capable of wreaking havoc on the meaning of things is even greater.

We see it in *Adán y Eva* [Adam and Eve], two faceless figures we can only distinguish by following the clues the artist provides as to their sex. Ana Barriga has commented that her unreality is halfway between the body of a dog and that of a pig, but this work speaks of the human condition. Symbolism emerges in the form of the noble dog, capable of taming man, and the negative connotations of the pig, according to scripture. This work is dominated by the totemic, archaic divinity, the sacred. Meanwhile, hints of the pre-Columbian or ancient Egyptian world float up from the yellow mural background. Ana Barriga's work faithfully honours her early commitment to the sensation of three-dimensionality. That curious carpentry varnishes the entire range of trivial objects piled up in her studio, waiting to join the pictorial fray.

I am reminded of David Salle's work a few decades ago, and how he appropriated images culled from such diverse sources as pornography, the world of interior decor, advertising or art history to create an assemblage of motley cultural references, often superimposing images that ultimate deconstructed the painting. Salle devised a universe where the original contexts of images and styles faded like distant memories, thereby neutralising and subverting narrative conventions. As spectators confronted with Ana Barriga's work, on this occasion we do not seem to be facing a real scene, as is her custom. Here, everything is a lie. This is emphasised by her choice of medium, an enamel paint that reeks of artificiality. The presentation of the scene is also dramatised with exaggerated close-ups of the objects, whose enlargement gives their respective settings much greater depth. The same device has been used by some of the best graphic designers in history, following the precedent established by Aleksander Rodchenko with his collages and the later work of Herbert Matter. Changes of scale have always served to reveal traps and draw attention to something—in this case, a purported equality that is ultimately blurred by the eye-catching landscape.

In Ana Barriga's painting, space is invaded or desecrated and objects glide towards the world outside the frame. That is why her paintings almost always disorientate us: Ana Barriga revels in the pleasure of distortion and perversion, and to cap it all off, she vandalises scenes with mischievous graffiti as a constant reminder that without cruelty, there is no festivity.