

# LA OCAÑA

## **The future artist: queer, performance, undercommons.**

Ocaña didn't like to be called gay; he always preferred *proof*, *faggot* or *pansy*, depending on the occasion. And he didn't call his acts or performances *happenings*. Close to the anarchists as he was, he did not accept to be called anything else than "libertarian", a word that he coined in his own jargon.

José Pérez Ocaña arrived in Barcelona from his native Cantillana in the 1970s. He soon moved to Plaza Real and used to stroll down the Ramblas dressed in an unusual manner, blurring male and female attributes, at times as a transvestite, and others dressed as a Chaplinesque figure, both an outsider and tender. These were the years of the Barcelona counterculture and Ocaña became its main exponent. As Alberto Cardín said, he was an artist from the Ramblas, not from Barcelona. Ocaña did not like to visit the Eixample district or anything that made him kneel and climb stairs. He became such a popular character that even today this fame still overshadows his work as an artist, that original practice which announced, 30 years in advance, an exemplary model of creating art for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

That is still the problem. Between 2010 and 2011, in La Virreina in Barcelona and in the Centro Cultural Montehermoso in Vitoria-Gasteiz, I presented the exhibition "Ocaña 1973-1983, Actions, Acts, Activism", which highlighted the performative practices of the artist from Cantillana. It was worth it, even if just for the allegation "The Ocaña We Deserve", dedicated to him by Paul B. Preciado. Since then, his work has been present in numerous exhibitions, in the Bienal de São Paulo, for example, or in the International Mario Montez

that was organized in Berlin and in which all the queer artists wanted to lynch their patron saint, Andy Warhol, a lower-class version of what happened to Truman Capote with his swans from New York high society. There have also been many international historical shows on *performance* which show the originality of his work, and how it always escaped from the attempts at institutionalization that reached him from the world of art. Almost all this, however, occurred outside, literally on the outside. For example, in Barcelona, his emblematic power only serves to overshadow the model of lumpen-proletariat artist that Ocaña embodied and the exemplary case of lumpen-productivism represented by the commune in which his way of life developed: with Nazario, Camilo, Alejandro and so many others. When, in Seville, the progressive left recovered Ocaña as an emblem, it again concealed his artistic practice in pursuit of a misunderstood populism. His paintings and handicrafts are presented under a sort of inclusive paternalism which resorts to demands of number, gender and difference as a way of feeding his stereotype. He is given a symbolic representation that curbs, *de facto*, all his power of political representation.

But La Ocaña was more "bad" than all this. Let's look at what this "bad" means. There is a basic separation of work from art which divides them, according to Jean Paulhan, between "terror" and "rhetoric". As regards "terror", we should understand that the artist does things, almost without language, directly, with a sort of natural, pristine, original and primitive way of doing, as a geranium grows in its pot. With "rhetoric", however, the artist is aware of his language and of how this separates him from the world and that he has to use this language to link his artistic production and, precisely, the world in which he acts. For Paulhan, Rimbaud is the "terror" and Mallarmé, the "rhetoric". Then, there are artists in which this occurs in an indistinguishable, unclear, illegitimate, not a good way. The "bad" Ocaña is the one that appears to be simple, straightforward and popular when, in actual fact, he is planning ways and modes of doing which accumulate knowledge, dissident practices and wide-

ranging survivals. Nazario defined it very well with that song by María Isabel: *I'd rather be dead than plain.*

For example, when we talk about performativity in his work we are not only referring to the fact that he does performances. It is like when Jenaro Talens uses the term theatrical to refer to the work of Federico García Lorca —revered so much by Ocaña— obviously not to refer to the fact that Lorca does theatre, but rather to a plastic, performative condition, of continuous verbal transformation that exists in what he does and that resists, shall we say, ultimately being captured as printed poetry. In Ocaña the performativity is also in drawings, paintings, papier-mâché sculptures, dresses, stitching, cross-dressing, images, and in the types and stereotypes that he gives the photographers of his time. The designation trans, that we can apply to his work, addresses gender politics, but also the capacity for transformation and transformism of a work which is always shown in transit. From popular culture he takes not so much the shapes as the rites; he doesn't want to imitate La Macarena, but rather be carried like her in a procession, like a queen, like a sovereign whore who governs more in Rome than in Jerusalem. He is not interested in the pearly, unctuous, snow-white finish of the extremely beautiful Andalusian virgins, but rather the performances to which these queens give rise. La Asunción and La Pastora —we need an in-depth understanding of this unique dialectic of Marian devotion in Cantillana to understand Ocaña's dialectic— that Ocaña presents are marked, above all, by the signs of transportability, as ancient theology referred to the saints and the angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth.

We are thinking, for example, of those blue, yellow and pink cherubs that Ocaña made out of his own excrement. Ocaña followed a high-fibre diet for weeks and when he defecated it had a pasty texture, in the shape of an ensaimada, with a vegetable consistency which allowed him to cook it as if it were clay. He painted this excrementitious mass, thus giving the angel different colours, and he gave them the status of

*putti*, the small angels that so often held up the celestial cloud on which the Virgin was perched. This relationship of the piece with his own body, as a fragment, part, division, which is shown as a work of art, gives it a votive nature, yes, a little like the relics of the saints or the wax, silver and gold body parts that worshippers take to their miraculous Virgin to thank her for curing their sight, leg or arm. This, then, is the relationship that drawings, paintings and sculptures have with Ocaña: they are always part of a way of doing things that has numerous expressions; they always refer to an action, to a specific event. Think, then, of the sketches that illustrate his arrest as, literally, a cartoon about his own life which is offered to the chapel of art seers, or of the portraits of beggars, as the Murillesque advance of an action in which Ocaña started indiscriminately distributing donations or alms.

It is very interesting to understand this both materialist and theological dimension of Ocaña's actions. The ugly and hunchbacked dwarf that can be found in the historical materialism machine, the theology that Walter Benjamin describes in his famous *Theses on the Concept of History*, is in this case a liturgical puppet, not a dwarf but a boy or girl disguised as a cherub, one of those which accompany La Asunción in Cantillana during the Coronation of the Virgin, a ceremony of popular Catholicism which is the argumentative line of "La primavera" ("The Spring"), Ocaña's great exhibition in the Chapel of the Former Hospital of Barcelona. This theatrical liturgy, theology in action, as it was called by liberation theology, is still alive today. The brotherhood of La Asunción itself incorporated into the ceremony the mechanical apogee of the coronation which was an invention of Ocaña, at the suggestion of a friend who was a stage designer at the Instituto del Teatro in Barcelona, for the staging of "La primavera". In Cantillana, the crown was, however, made of gold, whilst Ocaña made one of Barcelona "gold" out of tobacco paper.

This performative quality, permanently in transit, is one of the virtues of Ocaña's work. When it provocatively refers to the transition —I refer to the Spanish political transition of which Ocaña

was a peer— as a trans transition, he is referring not only to the genealogical line which goes from Pedro Almodóvar to the Javis and which Ocaña announced, but also to a series of political qualities which, for better or worse, whether evoking the flexibility of the body to adopt all possible postures of an orgy or the falsifying superficiality of all make-up, characterized the historical period that we wish to delimit with this name. If Ocaña's "Cristo Marica" ("Queer Christ") [*Queer's Sacred Heart*] was more popular, the Sevillian brotherhoods would not have had any doubts about the virility —man of sorrows— of the resuscitated young man who was the main character of this year's Easter poster in Seville!

Let's look at his performances in the famous International Libertarian Conference of 1977. In the documentaries he is always presented —the original tape lost its soundtrack— as if the progressive music of the time was playing when, it is obvious, from Ocaña's clapping and shrieking, that they are singing flamenco — sevillanas, fandangos, bulerías—. Because it's not a question of making Ocaña modern, but of truly understanding the popular meaning of his way of being. Ocaña is, in actual fact, an exemplary case of a popular artist. His journey from the southern periphery to the very centre of Barcelona is fully in line with the phrase by Barbara A. Babcock that what is socially peripheral becomes symbolically central. The

hypertrophy of his symbolic representations and of his commitment to the rights of the LGBTBI+ community exists in a potpourri of tensions which still invigorate and stimulate his work. In Ocaña, the symbolic outside of politics penetrating the centre of parliamentary political representations has something of the libidinal economy, a true social push, a sort of reverse priapism in which Ocaña gives and receives at the same time. Maybe the true politics is there, in seeing how these symbolic representations, almost an oxymoron, open up a path, and even gradually lose their semiotic strength as they advance, making political and legal achievements in the society in which they exist. Sometimes hypopolitical, others hyperpolitical, it is in these frictions between the political and the symbolic, with all the contradictions that they entail, that the political body of a society is truly transformed.

And I hope that Ocaña doesn't mind that, where he put "*marica*" (poof), we now write *queer*, that we call his acts *performances*, and that his shouts of "libertarian!" are now linked to the practices of the *undercommons*. I am sure that he would accept it while grumbling. According to his friends, he got over his nastiness with a good orgy and, indeed, orgies must be the tributes, films and acclamations that he has been continuously receiving over recent years, now well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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