

JOSE LUIS BREA

(1957-2010)

"In Memoriam"

ANNA MARIA GUASCH

The reading, on Sunday 29th of this last August, of what would sadly turn out to be the one-before-last text written by Jose Luis Brea, professor of Aesthetics and Contemporary Art Theory at the Universidad Carlos III of Madrid, in *salonKritik*, the online magazine he founded, awoke in many of us a deep feeling of sorrow and anxiety. The article was not by any means a farewell or some autobiographical sketch, but the whole re-issuing of the text that worked as theoretical basis for the exhibition *The Last Days*, which opened in Seville in 1992. Around those years, Jose Luis Brea was ahead of his time in Spain when it came to lead the way in new curatorial practices (it was also the case with his exhibition *Before and After the Entusiasm*, Ámsterdam, 1989) and theoretical essays exploring the end of the so-called Age of the Enthusiasm and the advent of the new "Cold Auras".

The message carried by that re-publishing was very clear. All those who knew well Jose Luis were very much aware of his illness, although we couldn't imagine that the end of his life was so near and his very last days so close in time.

Just some days later, in fact, with the sadness brought by the loss of a good friend and an extraordinary and acute philosopher, we knew that that article -in which he refused any apocalyptic temptation and rejected any perception of cultural agony- was the chronicle of his own death. The death of its author but not of the World he studied and observed.

The article was published in the "free thoughts" section, which already in its heading defines the open-minded, illuminating and versatile approach of Brea to theoretical and critical discourses in the last decades: a free and, moreover, rizomatic way of thinking that was the basis of scholar essays as important as *El tercer umbral. Estatuto de las prácticas artísticas en la era del capitalismo cultural* (Premio Espais a la Crítica de Arte, 2003) or his very last book, *Las tres eras de la imagen: Imagen-materia, film e imagen* (2010) as well as experiments in critical literature as *Las Auras Frías* (finalista Anagrama de ensayo, 1990), *Un ruido secreto. El arte en la era póstuma de la cultura*

(1996) or *La era posmedia. Acción comunicativa, prácticas (post) artísticas y dispositivos neomediales* (2002).

Growing from the source of seminal philosophers such as Deleuze or Nietzsche, Brea was most at home inside reticular structures in constant flowing. Or, to put it in the very same words he used in one of his very last articles (*Por una rizopolítica*, August 14th), inside dynamic systems, permanently instable, at the very heart of thinking machines drawing the outlines of desire, openings, displacements, figures, constant happenings...

Only with those concepts in mind can be fully understood the texts he published in *Estudios Visuales*, the magazine he directed from 2003 to 2010 and which meant the arrival into our country of the rizomatic system of thought represented by Visual Studies. It shall undoubtedly be long remembered the astonishing success of the I Congreso Internacional de Estudios Visuales (Arco, 2004), which brought to the Spanish cultural system the international concepts of multidisciplinarity, turn of the image, cultural, synesthetic visuality, scopic orders, nomad concepts of Humanities and all those ideas that have so strongly participated in the de-activation of power structures inside the Academia.

Finding for himself a different perspective from that of Mitchell, Mieke Bal, Keith Moxey, James Elkins or Martin Jay (with whom he shared and discussed an epistemological approach to images), Brea built a whole corpus of thought described, among others, in his very much quoted work *Estudios Visuales. La epistemología de la visualidad en la era de la globalización* (2005), which began a new collection of series he directed for the specialized Publishing House Akal.

Brea was also interested by the idea of universality of knowledge and the new Humanities, by the relationship, not devoid of tension, between Aesthetic Philosophy, History of Art and Visuality, for the mixtures and meeting points among Art, Science and Technology. Moreover, he pioneered in the field of new curatorial practices represented by his on-line exhibition *La conquista de la ubicuidad* (2003), by texts such as *cultura_RAM* (2007) and by the art websites and online magazines he founded, such as *Aleph* or *artes.zin*. All these devoted to address the complex and fascinating mutations of culture in the age of electronic distribution.

José Luis Brea was never a compromising thinker. He didn't hesitate in articulating acute and almost heroic critiques of a certain kind of museum politics which ended up

bringing him some misunderstandings and unfair ways of being forgotten. He championed free thinking, away from Power and far away of what he called "pitiable well being". But most of all, he was adept at something quite uncommon in our field of research: generosity. Not only towards friends and colleagues, but one of the most difficult kind: scientific generosity. Checking his webpage (www.joseluisbrea.net) is enough to realise that his wisdom crosses boundaries represented by the writing, the library or the archive of the hegemonic centres of culture. All, or nearly all, of his thought and his work is based in free software and is long ago available for the "global" reader.

And all that without ever forgetting what he called "affectivity economy": a geography of affections, precise and crystallographic. It is, by all means, that mineral metaphor what beats hidden in his very last article for *salonKritik*: One that, according to his own wishes, is to be read only after his death. In his essay *Mineralidad absoluta (el cristal se venga)* and under the influx of Nietzsche, Brea uses the image of the "cristal" in order to partially hide the vertigo provoked by the idea of an imminent death. Crystals are the purest expressions of minerality, as Nietzsche reminded us when talking about our common final destiny in the Mineral Kingdom. Unbendingly courageous, Brea tells us about his conscience of a very last time, with no return, of a life in perennial flux, of an absolute materiality which, rather than the dark night of a hole in the heart of matter turns out to be the nucleus from which emerge the light, the interconnected places, the synaptic sparks that carry us to the unexpected: the final destiny.

In fact, and according to what he himself said in another of his key works, *Noli me legere* (2007), Brea brings to our minds the rethoricalities implicit in all languages and places himself in-between the priority given by Benjamin to allegory as a paradigmatic figure of the artistic discourse and the tendency to drift away from the logical-semantic values of language in order to, following Nietzsche, stress its instrumental value, in the sense that it encourages action: As Brea wrote (and this precise thought might be a good epitaph): "Language is more of an instrument of the Will of Power than of a tool for the representation of the World". Rest in peace, dear friend.

ANNA MARIA GUASCH is Professor of Contemporary Art. University of Barcelona (SPAIN).

Translated by JAVIER MONTES. Art critic.