

THE MAGICIAN. *By Jacinto Lageira.*

Numerous texts dating back to the early days of photography refer to its magical character, imputable to the strange phenomenon of an apparition where previously there had been nothing. Probably never before had pre-Socratic ontological thought — deeply rooted in Western discourse — and its assertion that non-being is unable to engender being, been so thoroughly thrown into question. Certainly, from Aristotle's comments regarding the camera obscura right up to the initial photographic fixing of light and shadows, it had been well established that images could indeed be produced. But these images imitated things and beings, and were not things and beings in their own right. Though aware of the chemical processes linked to the new discovery, the pioneers of photography had to do with a public fascinated above all by the fact that this apparition was an image which — or so it was thought — preserved the nature of the object, and revealed it. When he developed the calotype in 1840, Fox Talbot spoke of a "latent image", and one reporter wrote the following account of the invention at the Academy of Science in Paris: "There is no impression to be seen, not even the slightest beginning of a picture. And yet the picture already exists in all its perfection, but in a state of complete invisibility. By means of simple procedures, which I shall bring to the reader's attention, the picture is made to appear as if by magic." Given this curious comparison between photography and painting, understood under the generic term of "pictures", Paul Klee's famous remark springs immediately to mind: "Art does not reproduce the visible, it renders visible". The photographers' goal was doubtless to render what truly existed in nature, but that was also what painting had been after by different means for centuries. And it is above all in the Western history of the image that the question arose as to what was present and what absent, what belonged to the realms of the visible and the invisible. The question even spilled over into the domain of sculpture: did Michelangelo himself not claim that his figures were already present in the marble from which he had only to deliver them? Whether it stems from painting, sculpture or photography, such remarks are merely the expression common to a whole aesthetic: that the world's being is already there, and all that is required is to give it appearance and form. The idea has endured from the early non-figurative paintings to some of those produced today. What then is the status of an image which is revealed and which reveals itself? Which surges forth from nothingness and nevertheless shows that its essence is beyond the physically perceptible (the icon, but also Kandinsky's or Newman's painting)? Or that it is the mere trace of an entity which is no longer as it is shown (photography as a whole)? Through his photographic references to abstract painting — generally to the variety which is linked to an aesthetics of transcendence — as, for instance, in the works *Carré noir* and *Who's Afraid of Red, Blue and Green* (1997), Agut highlights this paradox of the emergence of a form of pictorial visibility claiming to be the emblem of an "objectless world" (*Gegenstandlos*, to use Klee's term). In spite of the material differences between them, the discourse of photography — that "mirror which remembers" as Arago put it — shares an epiphany of the visible with a whole current of abstract painting.

Less frightening than Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children*, which it nevertheless evokes, *El Mago* is closer to the *Giant*, also by Goya, who can be seen emerging from the mist, beyond the mountains. Ironically assimilated with a sort of Mandrake artist, thanks to some kind of supernatural power, our giant magician will make neither handkerchiefs, flowers, doves nor bunnies appear before our astonished eyes, but rather an "artwork". If his conjurer's outfit hides a Pep Agut in full action, with the bemused mimic sleight-of-hand of the trickster able to pull one over on his viewers, it is less the sociological traits of the artist's function that interests Agut — understood by the amateur and even experienced public — in terms of the myth of the creator, who, blessed by the gods, makes something out of nothing, than the status of the nothing itself. The sort of reflection in which Pep Agut invites us to engage is bound up more with the status of the visible and the image than with photographic or pictorial media per se. The magician himself

stands in for the act of apparition, the moment where one brings something into being where previously there had been nothing: exhibition being the art of making the invisible appear. The photographic image no doubt exists, as does the person who posed for the shot. But what we look at is not the image of the magician, nor even his hands: we look at what is not. The whole excitement of watching magic shows lies in the fact that they are done for a play of gazes where the viewers spend more time contemplating the manipulations than the object or the animal which suddenly bursts forth. True magic is the art of showing and getting people to look at what does not exist.

A photograph belonging to an installation entitled *La artificialidad de la nada*, the scene of *El Mago* draws its strength from an absence. Or, more exactly, from what can be supposed to be one. For nothingness is an artifice. In other words, the artwork is a fiction, a completely made-up world, in which existential, moral or political realities can be dealt with, without it ceasing to be a fiction. But an important current in Western philosophical and artistic thought asserts just the opposite: the artwork is a privileged point of access to the ultimate reality of things, the true emergence of the visible, the site of the revelation of truth. And thinking of this kind was only able to evolve in opposition to the fictional status of the artwork, thereby identifying reality and the imaginary. In the face of this collusion, whose artistic and sociological consequences are well known, *El Mago* symbolizes a fundamental trait of Agut's aesthetic: fiction is a form of reality, but it is not reality itself.

With regard to a sizable part of current artistic production in the post-neo-sociological vein — which, like Pop Art a number of years ago, could be labeled “capitalist realism” — a position of this kind lacks neither prevalence nor pertinence. Artistic literalness is not necessarily the best way to talk about the concreteness of the world. The frontiers between document and pure invention are at times so indeterminate that one falls back into the perpetual aestheticization of the political or the politicization of art, thereby annihilating any critical distance. The simple fact of producing fiction is no guarantee of attaining either a critical let alone an aesthetic dimension. Hence Agut's questioning of the artificiality of the nothingness that he compares with art: art as an empty place where everything is to be constructed without either negating or ignoring the reality upon which it is built or from which it stems. For in the final analysis, what, if not reality itself, is actually being talked about in a work of fiction? However, the status of fiction — such as that proposed by Agut in the role of an empty-handed magician — still remains to be defined.

Whereas fiction is often considered as a supplement to the state of things existent, as the emergence of a new world, it is worth considering the converse operation which would consist in taking something out of the world to place it in fiction. The nothingness at issue here would be not so much the metaphor of creation, the passage from non-being to being, as disappearance; in other words, the passage from being to non-being. The magician is not going to make something appear, he has just made it disappear. His hands are empty because something hitherto present in the world has just passed into the unreality of art. In this sense, there truly is an artificiality of an artistic and fictional nothingness. Reality has become fiction without having ceased to be reality. **JL**