

SETTINGS WITHOUT TEXT

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Indeed, it is the face that most perfectly resolves that task of producing, with minimum modifications of details, maximum modifications to the general impression. It could even be said, a maximum number of movements in its state of rest, or rather, rest is no more than that instant, devoid of duration, in which countless movements have converged, from which countless movements will depart.

Georg Simmel ("The Aesthetic Meaning of the Face", 1901)

The works produced by Jon Mikel Euba over the last year which, under the generic title of K.Y.D. Kill 'em all, form the core of this project, include drawings, murals, publications, photographs and videos (KYDNAPPING, K.Y. D., KONTUZ KYD) representing faces and bodies: paralysed bodies, in a territory somewhere between sleep and death.

That reference to an essay by Simmel included in his *Sociology of the Everyday* is appropriate, for various reasons, for beginning a possible analysis – not an explanation or justification – of Euba's work. As a constructor of images – in any medium and often in several at once –, he uses his body and his friends' bodies and faces as a working material, and his everyday environment is the stage where he gives shape to his particular obsessions. From my point of view, it is not work designed to define an identity, even though a particular reading may refer us to quite specific realities. The search would come more from an intense process of subjectivisation of his experience, from a special relation with the situations and moments that make up his imaginary and a genuine passion for relating the intervals, the pauses, the necessary theatricality of human relations in

images. Mechanical recording, the reproduction/multiplication of images, mural drawing or monumental writing are superimposed in an intensive output that also has its origin in memory, the archive of gestures, places and images, fixed and in motion, which Euba isolates and which, mutilated, recomposed or recontextualised, will reappear transformed in his fictions. It seems obvious that his work sets out to capture a subjective experience of reality, from the insistence with which he shows us the mechanisms he uses to prepare his video works. The realism of the shots is not only heightened by the insistence of the camera on showing the scene, the representation area, in detail; the surrounding landscape, the objects, the bodies and the faces – that observation of things under the microscope, that literalness which Rossellini and the neo-Realist cinema in general showed us –, but also through their continuous presence in the field of vision, as if he wants to reassert the documentary part of everything represented.

There is another circumstance in Euba's ways of doing which insists on his interest in documenting: his way of coping with a shoot or a photo session. He does not write scripts, there is no preconceived action framework, a scheme defined *a priori* – he has spoken of drawing as a simile for his way of working: "looking for and finding at the same time" –, but there is something like a dramatic plot which is checked during the shoot, a plot derived from an accumulation of desires, ideas and concerns noted and worked on beforehand.

Euba is familiar with Godard's way of working, particularly with video, where he gives pride of place to the immediacy of the recording over the programmed coherence of the story or the perfection of the image, but also the video-performance practices of the late sixties in artists such as Vito Acconci or Bruce Nauman, for whom the camera had "the power to document and capture a temporal activity and make it real, true."

As his starting point Euba takes the action videos of the seventies, performances that helped to create a subjective psychological space – for exploring the personal and ideological in a self-reflexive, autonomous time and space, in a duration without beginning or end –, but he is interested in introducing an element of fiction, a dramatisation which is not closed in on itself but interacts with a reality which is external to the documented space. Narcissus no longer looks at himself in the mirror, or the mirror no longer returns his own image, but rather his position in the collective. In that respect, in my opinion, he is close to the aesthetic ideas of other authors from whom we have learned that, in order to be critical, the image must be incomplete and essentially dramatic, specially to Godard, who has managed to continue narrating, to keep telling stories, little stories of his own. The way of achieving those dramatisations may be where we find one of the most singular features of his work. K.Y.D. the piece that is the core of this exhibition and this catalogue, partakes of those incomplete images and stories; the fictional element is often not resolved; the dramatic tension is maintained because the drama never quite comes. Through repetition, close-ups and the movements of the camera, Euba makes us simultaneous protagonists, prowlers like him: we observe, we spy furtively in search of something, and the anxiety grows because the stories he is hinting at are closely related to the psychological representation of violence.

Landscapes

Let us go back to the beginning of this text, to the faces and bodies at rest in the installation K.Y.D. KILL 'EM ALL And let us return to the everyday too. Euba began to work, or at least to show his work in public, in 1992. Since then his whole output has had a spatial and cultural reference point, the Basque Country, and especially the complex landscape of Bilbao and the

surroundings. It is important to clarify that that reference point has nothing to do with autobiography, it corresponds more to a contemporary dialectic between local and global. Still less is it peculiar to the person we are talking about here; it is shared by a whole community of artists of his generation who, without being a group, could be regarded as an open collective, a community united by a vital and cultural drive: authors who have worked on a specific, complex social reality through performances which can integrate the local into a global critical discourse – critical in the sense of being in a crisis –, dramatising the relations between what they are and what they want to be, revealing the mechanisms with which they are to be looked at to discover their deformations and misunderstandings, not devoid of a certain ironical meaning.

Euba's case is paradigmatic for his way of working within that natural, cultural, social and political landscape in a state of permanent ambiguity. And of course because his analysis of violence is set at the heart of his work. The first thing one notices on seeing his work in perspective is the expressive capacity, the iconic power given off by his settings, normally the lonely spaces of the woods around his city. He has frequently said that "as opposed to the American system of image production, which has imposed a landscape on the world, I try to apply the same thing to a landscape I know well and which I regard as still being untapped from a merely iconic point of view." Literature and later the cinema have given the image of the wood a precise meaning. A setting for love, the haunt of elves and fairies or the lair of evil spirits according to Romantic tradition, the woods are also, from experience, places for hiding, marginality and silence. And most of all the wood appears as the perfect place for seeing without being seen. In Euba's case those settings convey the experiences of loneliness and defencelessness, the

suspicion and disquiet of his furtive peeping at the bodies, but they also become a counterpoint to the essential bucolic landscape, referred to by a limited construction of identity of the Basque people. That iconic power he referred to in his statement above also includes the city suburbs and communication centres, which make up a complex and far from idyllic territorial reality.

Cars

If the settings provide his images with a strong expressive power, Euba's actions, especially in the works before K.Y.D., exhaustively documented in this publication, define a story where the processes of personal identification emerge from a collective ritual, from moments and situations which are almost always banal, but identified by the spectator with clandestineness, furtiveness or danger. That is the case of *Negros* (1999), where some boys dressed in and painted black are drinking a black liquid in a black car; the image gives way to a slow-motion sequence of other boys dressed in and painted black, surrounding the car in a woodland exterior. Or in *Gatika Doble Final* (2001), where two hooded figures are painting the names of others on the windows of a car, also in a lonely exterior. Or in *AMOBIL* (2001), where the same car with the names painted on the windows roars off along the road, with the risk not only of reduced visibility, but of the legal penalties that can be the consequence of that action in any part of the world, an unquestionably more serious risk around Bilbao. Being aware of risk is one thing and experiencing it is another, and that is where he does use the sociopolitical conditions of his surroundings to experience, in a similar way to other seventies authors such as Chris Burden or Gordon Matta-Clark, the risk of a clandestine action.

In one of his first recordings, *Los ojos como una boca* (1997), Euba is driving

a car along the Bilbao-Santander motorway drinking a glass of milk, which arouses a certain perplexity in the spectator, who would expect to see him drinking alcohol. Later the camera moves and places itself behind a milk lorry, with the brand name CLESA written on the back door over a drawing of an idyllic landscape, a total cliché of nature and health. After watching the image of the lorry-landscape driving through the industrial suburbs of Bilbao for a while on the monitor we no longer know what to think, but we begin to imagine that there is probably something other than milk in the lorry. Or, like an allusion to Spielberg's *Duel*, the recording clearly shows Euba's narrative strategy: to generate a psychological violence in the spectator, to introduce the tension of an explosion, even though the explosion never occurs. He is well aware that violence has nothing to do with the noise and action-packed images of the television series; that real violence is repressed tension, that it must be silenced and has more to do with the establishment of precise situations of tension and sustained waiting than the sparking of aggressive action.

Faces and bodies

After the war, then, a second function of the image was expressed through a completely new question: what do we have to see in the image? "Not: what do we have to see behind it? but rather: "Can I keep looking at what, in any case, I see, and which is deployed in a single shot?".

In that way the whole set of cinematic relations changes.

(...) The images are no longer linked according to the univocal order of their cuts and connections; they constitute the object of a new linkage constantly reconstructed and retouched above and beyond the cuts and through breaks in continuity. The relation with the bodies and the actors also changes: the body becomes more Dantesque; it is no longer

considered in its actions but in its postures, with its specific links (...) And the relation between the image and the word, the sounds and the music, also changes through fundamental dissymmetries between sound and vision which will give the eye the power to read the image, but which also give the ear the power to pick up the tiniest noises. In the end, this new period of the cinema, this new function of the image, is an education of the perception of the world which has collapsed and fragmented: a seer's cinema which no longer sets out to embellish nature but to spiritualise it to the highest degree of intensity.

Gilles Deleuze (*Letter to Serge Daney*, 1986)

The works grouped under the generic title of K.Y.D. Kill 'em all (*Kill Your Darlings*, "a quote from Faulkner used by Bergman to explain that, in order to embark on a new project or film, the essential thing was to annihilate the memories of earlier results"), a video-installation which includes KYDNAPPING, K.Y.D. and KONTUZ KYD, from 2002, are more complex and propose a motionless fiction which, in my opinion, refers to what is expressed in that quotation.

In KYDNAPPING we see five bodies, four boys and a girl, totally motionless with their eyes closed, inside a car, in an exterior, daytime. They have a cat with them, the only one with its eyes open. In KONTUZ KYD, the same night scene is repeated, lit only by a spotlight handled by the artist. From inside and out the camera films all the parts of the bodies and the interior of the car full of bottles, but lingering on the faces, like an eye caressing the necks, the mouths, the eyes, the profiles leaning on one another. Then it withdraws and returns to them, zooms in so that they suddenly fill the screen: it is the face turned into landscape once again. We do not know what is happening, because nothing is happening, but the tension mounts. What are they doing? Why are they there? Why that sensual, almost pornographic insistence of the

mechanical eye on showing us those bodies? What are those voices, those noises of cars or planes that have nothing to do with the scene? We discover that the faces are blinking, that the bodies are breathing, but it no longer matters, the dramatic action catches our attention without stopping us or pointing us towards a naturalist unity of action. In that dreamlike, almost hypnotised, state we let ourselves be carried along until we realise that the tension will not be resolved. In the night-time recording KONTUZ KYD, our perplexity is heightened by the increased use of the mechanisms (tricks) of the shoot: the light of a spot, the only point of light in the image, creates chiaroscuros with a strong expressive power; the sounds and silences, more exaggerated than in the other video (cars arriving, others driving off, footsteps that do not correspond to the image, sharp cuts between silence and noise), and most of all the artist's body opening the doors and moving around the car, lighting the bodies and the faces. At the end, in the last seconds, some of the characters open their eyes and look at the camera. Once again the tension does not slacken, the suspense is not resolved. In K. Y.D., Euba handles the motionless bodies we have seen inside the car, dragging them and leaving them lying on the ground. One by one he places them, turns them over and rummages through their trouser pockets. The action is minimal and absurd, if we bear in mind that at a given moment he takes money out of a pocket and immediately puts it back. The whole recording becomes a minimal theatre of gestures and the bodies inanimate objects, moved by a person whose face we do not see; we only hear his remarks to the camera:

- Are you there?
- (...)
- Yes.

- (...)
- Come on!
- (...)
- Okay.

Referring to those works, Euba has expressed his interest in a scene from Renoir's film *The River*, where a group of people are sleeping, some scraps of writing by Pasolini, and Warhol's film *Mario Banana*, where Mario Montez, a famous transvestite, eats a banana provocatively in front of the camera. If we remember that Warhol filmed at 24 frames per second and projected at 16, we can imagine the erotic effect heightened by the slowed down projection. Placing the camera in front of individuals or groups and filming their faces, as well as the portraits, not of actions but of postures (the case of Edie Sedgwick in *Vinyl*, 1965, one of the most impressive) or the recordings of staged and completely static scenes is one of Warhol's most important legacies. The force of those *fixed monitored images*, which turn bodies (*Sleep*, 1963), faces (*Screen Tests*, 1964-1966) or buildings (*Empire*, 1964) into genuine pop icons, is by no means alien to Euba's work. But there is still one more feature of Warhol's work, no less characteristic than the faces filmed by Pasolini, which also emerges in the videos KYDNAPPING, K.Y. D. and KONTUZ KYD. If Warhol and Pasolini's films have become invaluable documents for analysing a period and its protagonists, the characters in these videos are also icons of another group of young people and documents of other human landscapes.

“Two in a car: idyll. Three: adultery. Four: kidnapping. Five: crime. Six: shootout with the police.” Ramón Gómez de la Serna (*Greguerías*, 1910-1911)

For Euba the interest of this verse lies “on the one hand, in the cinematic nature of the text, since it corresponds to the movement of a zoom opening up. I like the idea that, the more information we are given, the better we understand the situation it refers to, but at the same time each movement in time denies the meaning of the previous image.”*

Reading that verse and recalling the recumbent bodies in K.Y.D., it seems impossible not to think of *The Trouble with Harry* by Alfred Hitchcock, another of the film directors examined under Euba’s magnifying glass, especially for his absolute belief in cinema as image and in narration as a representation of the relations between people, above the word, and his mastery in using the everyday as a background to suspense. As Hitchcock himself has expressed it so wonderfully, “In *The Trouble with Harry* I rescue melodrama from the dark night and bring it into the light of day. It is like showing a murder on the bank of a stream with a drop of blood spreading in the clean water as it ripples by. From those contrasts a counterpoint emerges and perhaps even a sudden heightening of the ordinary things of life.” But furthermore, if we return to the film, we also realise that the fiction develops like a snippet. Every time they dig up Harry’s body (four times, if I remember rightly) we find out a little more about the story, but each revelation denies the previous one. There is something more in the film that brings out the director’s capacity to allude to objects or bodies without showing them, and the fact is throughout the story we only see the corpse’s face once and then it is a drawing (done by some exaggeratedly phlegmatic person who draws a dead body as if it were a still life). That drawing, which is the only piece of police evidence, is destroyed in a magnificent twist, a great metaphor for representation: the artist takes the drawing and changes the expression, opening the eyes and giving it life again. Euba’s videos may

have something to do with that: "Nobody's dead, it's only representation."

Euba has worked that verse on paper and space and decomposed it cinematically, just as he has always used the word as a monumental image inserted in the architecture. In the installation at Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona, he has projected certain parts of the verse on different walls, so that the movement of the film sequence is substituted by the real movement of the spectator's eye in space (pp. XX-XX in this catalogue).