

Gonzalo Elvira



155. SIMÓN'S BALLAD

This exhibition uses drawings, maps and documents to reconstruct the life of Simón Radowitzky, the Ukrainian Argentine anarchist. Following the brutal police repression during Red Week in Buenos Aires in 1909, Radowitzky attacked Ramón Lorenzo Falcón, the chief of police responsible, and was sentenced to life imprisonment in the notorious Ushuaia Prison.

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In *155. Simón's Ballad*, Gonzalo Elvira adopts a highly individual way of recording history and formulates a reconstruction of memory based on the anarchist Simón Radowitzky.

Radowitzky was born in Ukraine. At the age of 16, he was sentenced to four months in prison for distributing press related to the labour movement, revealing his interest in anarchism at an early age. In 1909, the Tsarist reprisals of the time forced him to move to Argentina, where one of his brothers was living. Here he participated in the demonstration that was met with brutal police repression and so sparked Red Week. Radowitzky was profoundly affected by the event and on 14 November that same year he threw a homemade bomb at Colonel Ramón Lorenzo Falcón, the man who had ordered the repression. The colonel and his secretary both died as a result. Radowitzky was sent to Ushuaia Prison, known as the 'prison of the end of the world', and the exhibition takes its title from his prisoner number, 155.

The entire exhibition can be read as an archive in which biographical events and fiction combine with history through a kind of rhizomatic connection. Elvira invents and reinterprets; he breaks up and disorganises the archive; and even the titles themselves add to this impression, since they seem to match archive classification labels by using acronyms and numbers.

The story of Radowitzky's life is told in works done in India ink on maps and landscapes from an encyclopaedia that the artist found by chance on a street. The artist depicts Radowitzky against these backdrops, using his characteristic language of hatched lines and basing himself on real photographs.

We find the anarchist's young face on his East Europe (*SR 015*) and his eye, face and bust on Ukraine, the country of his birth (*SR 007*, *SR 008* and *SR 009*). Argentina, Elvira's own country of origin, also features prominently: in bucolic landscapes in the area of Patagonia (*SR 001* and *SR 017*); with Radowitzky fishing on Buenos Aires while wearing an anarchist's cap (*SR 012*); and a sign that reads "Simón vive" (Simón lives) on Tierra del Fuego (*SR 019*).

Drawings of steamships also appear, an allusion to the one Radowitzky sailed on for the first time from northern

Europe (SR 010) and the one on which he would later return (SR 014) from Montevideo, the place where he had remained in exile following his expulsion from Argentina on receiving a pardon from President Hipólito Yrigoyen after spending 21 years in gaol. The portraits also give an account of his journey from Uruguay to Spain to join the International Brigades supporting the Republic. He even fought on the Aragon Front, as illustrated by the drawing of him dressed as a soldier on this region (SR 006). He worked with the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) in Valencia and Barcelona. When Barcelona fell, he fled to France, as indicated by another portrait of him on a French map, and managed to escape from there after he was captured (SR 016). He eventually made his way to Mexico, where he worked in a toy factory and edited magazines for the movement until his death in 1956. In this instance, he appears illustrated with a cane on a Mesoamerican map and alongside the photograph of one of the famous murals of University City in the Mexican capital.

It is almost inevitable that this series of maps will call to mind the remark that “The map is not the territory” made by Henri Lefebvre, who, in his book *The Production of Space*,¹ pointed out that maps operate not only as representations but also as mechanisms for the social production of the space, theories that are connected with the urban models of the Bauhaus and the spatial practices of the Situationist International.

A number of sketches of the artist’s own life can also be perceived through these works, particularly if we bear in mind the comparison that Kracauer² draws between the historian and the exile or immigrant, which is what Elvira is. According to Kracauer, both are divided, the latter between his country of origin and his country of residence, and the former between his own era and the one that he is studying.

The places are mixed like a kind of timeline in the exhibition: Ukraine, Argentina, Montevideo, Barcelona, France, Mexico, etc. This is not the first time Gonzalo Elvira has



Falcón, 2016

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1974).

² Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1969).



SR, 2015

connected cities, geographical locations that he forges temporal and symbolic links between. The fact is that, as in any archive, the idea of time is always present here, possibly most evidently in series such as the India ink on paper pieces in the manner of private almanacs that bring us once again to the works of some of the Bauhaus artists, to the minimalism of Sol LeWitt and to the conceptual tradition of the Catalan School.

The titles provide small clues, as we can see in the title of the exhibition itself, which also corresponds to one of the drawings in this series (*SR 155*): 155 red and black lines methodically separated in the manner of vertical marks.

Along similar lines, the work entitled *20* is related to the number of years Radowitzky spent incarcerated in Ushuaia; *1909* is a reference to the year of the demonstration on 1 May that led to Red Week: this date is also illustrated in red ink and it was that same year that Radowitzky attacked Falcón. In *SR 012*, the black stripes correspond to the year of Radowitzky's birth, 1886, together with the 1956 red lines corresponding to the year of his death.

In the idea of the cyclical, it is possible to perceive a trace of Camus and his interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus, who was condemned by the gods to endlessly push a rock up to the summit of a hill, where it would roll back to the bottom again. In this myth, useless work and hopelessness are regarded as the worst possible punishment.

Camus believed that in the face of the incomprehension of the world, humans tend to seek an order in things, and so the rock continues to the roll in the same repetitive gesture that Elvira makes when he creates his drawings, when he examines other possible layers of history.

The series on laws is in keeping with this same formal, minimalist, obsessive and methodical logic: *4661*, the law on Sunday being a day of rest, passed in 1905; *9688*, the law on accidents in the workplace, enacted in 1915; *4144*, the 1907 residency law; *1420*, the 1902 law on general education; *4031*, the 1902 law on compulsory military service; *5291*, the 1907 regulations on the employment of women and minors; *7029*, the 1907 law on social defence; and *11544*, the law on the eight-hour working day or 48-hour working week, passed in 1929.

Between these two series—the one with figurative drawings and the other of the calendars—one could place the works on canvas perforated with a needle and hammer. In these works, there is not only the evident iconographic reference to the hammer but also the technique of pointillism, which alludes to the torture using needles to which prisoners were subjected in both Barcelona and Buenos Aires, needles that in all likelihood also tortured Radowitzky.

The fact is that Elvira is clear when he plays with presences and absences, as he demonstrated earlier in his series of Bauhaus buildings, in which, despite avoiding the presence of human beings, he succeeds in ensuring that their ghostly mark is perceived.

Curiously, just a few months ago Agustín Comotto published (also in Barcelona) Radowitzky's story in a comic version, a genre that interests Elvira, as can be seen in his work, in his agile line, in the hatched silhouettes and even in the way they are inserted in the manner of vignettes in books and encyclopaedias. This is even evident in the characters transposed directly from archive photos, who seem to be transformed into graphic novel characters. This influence is especially patent in works such as *Racket (Callao and Quintana)*, in which his characteristic hatching draws the onomatopoeic sound of a bomb (*boom!*).

With just a few exceptions, such as the coloured backgrounds in the encyclopaedias and maps, the exhibition is limited to the colours black and red, a clear reminder of the anarchist flag. On occasion, this chromatic range includes yellow, the colour of the prison uniforms in the aforementioned prison in Argentina, which was used to hold dangerous prisoners, who wore yellow and black uniforms so that they could easily be spotted against the snowy landscape in the region.

In addition, it is also possible to perceive certain echoes of the anarchist poster, the intellectual commitment of which is shared by Elvira, through the subtle dialogue between the image and the wording, which in some way is reminiscent of *Kriegsfibel* (War Primer), a book of photographs accompanied by poems by Bertolt Brecht. Like Elvira, Brecht was in the habit of writing comments or poems on newspaper news reports and photographs. In addition, according to Brecht's

pacifism, there are very few positive heroes, and Radowitzky was possibly not one of them.

Elvira also uses other archive materials—photographs, letters and passports—to support the array of connections and nexuses, some transposed onto other supports, such as drawings of photos, a number of documents transposed to a kind of mixed-media print, which are shown without any distinction drawn between them alongside other original documents.

In contrast with the official practice of paying tribute to figures such as Colonel Falcón by means of public monuments, Elvira engages in an exercise in subversion by representing the life of his attacker and offering a vision of the other side, the vision of other possible histories, thereby raising questions about who writes history, which side that writer is on, and about other readings which no-one was interested in at the time and which probably no-one is interested in today.

The document is thus of supreme importance. However, this document is a transformed one: it speaks to us of another memory and of another way of understanding time. With his approach to breaking up the archive, Elvira lays on the table the importance of understanding the map of history as a succession of unleashed events, proposing a system of relationships suggested to us by Foucault in *The Order of Things*.³ According to this French philosopher, every period in history had what he called “a regime of truth”, which defined what was acceptable and what was not, and these conditions of the discourse have gradually altered from one period to another.

The author most mentioned to date when talking about historical subjectivation is perhaps Walter Benjamin, especially his essay “The Storyteller”⁴ and one of his more famous texts, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”,⁵ composed from his notes and published by Theodor Adorno in 1942.

Benjamin was one of the first to develop formal innovations in response to the fact that classical formulae for writing

³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller: Tales out of Loneliness* (London and New York: Verso, 2016).

⁵ Walter Benjamin, in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

and representation had run their course. As an antidote, he proposed a series of hypertextual tools, the inspiration for which was the *Mnemosyne Atlas* by the historian Aby Warburg, which had possibly already become a commonplace by that time. Warburg put forward his thoughts on memory based on an archive of thousands of images ('engrams') which were open to being resituated by the researcher. As in Warburg's atlas, these engrams operate in Elvira's work as marks of collective cultural memory, as semantic triggers.

Elvira's archival narratives resemble Benjamin's aspirations to expose other aspects of particular political events by means of the seemingly incidental, gestures that are insignificant in figurative terms and which resist the totalitarianism of prevailing historiographies.

Benjamin's position does not, however, fall into the dichotomist Manichaeism of the powerful and mighty versus the humble and oppressed unjustly punished by the written historical record. On the contrary, he points to the ability to choose possible readings based on the 'ruins' that we gather from history and which we take in a particular direction. According to Benjamin, the recognition of the losers' history is nothing but a process of reclaiming those pathways that remain as a source.

It was in the seventh thesis in his work that Benjamin wrote his famous phrase "There has never been a document of culture which is not simultaneously one of barbarism", which, interestingly, is quoted on a photograph of the Parisian slaughterhouses taken by the Surrealist Éli Lotar.

Elvira has without question been consistent over the course of his career and his most recent exhibitions—*Assaig S. T. 1909-1919* (EtHall, Barcelona) and *Bauhaus 1919, modelo para armar* (My Name's Lolita Art, Madrid), both held in 2013—could also be read in this rhizomatic manner. The EtHall project focused on Tragic Week in Barcelona in 1909 and Red Week in Buenos Aires in 1919. For the Alcobendas Art Centre, Elvira made 12 *cançiones concretas*, inspired by Walter Gropius's funerary monument to workers killed during the Weimar Republic (1922), which now stands in a cemetery in Berlin.

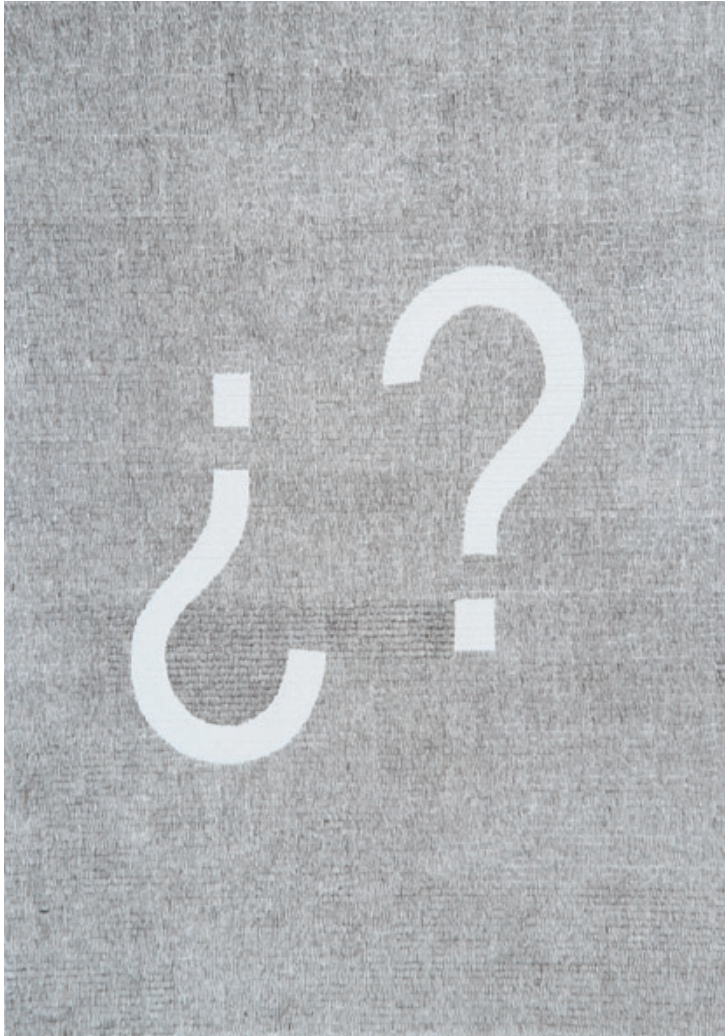
This is not the first time that Elvira has addressed this period of history; this period of the decline of the big utopias,



SR 155, 2015



Kick-off, 2016



Untitled, 2017

in which the world and its ideas seemed to find themselves on the verge of collapse; a time when every civic right began to hatch; a moment of upheaval which, in the artist's eyes, laid the foundations of what we are going through today, a present over which, once again, hangs the shadow of a world and its ideas on the verge of collapse.

This would link up with 'postmemory', that device in historical narrative consisting of a character who compiles events from the past even though he did not experience them himself, a tool often used to analyse the conflicts that the left in Latin America went through. Elvira's work connects with the idea of postmemory by rethinking the experience of the representation and mediation of the past in the present, by its determination to connect with the political landscape of Radowitzky's time and with the mental tools of that era, or the epistemes—to use Foucault's term again—of our form of analysis and thinking today.

However, as Agamben reminded us in *Infancy and History*,⁶ we know today that "the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, and that humdrum daily life in any city will suffice". In the chapter "Time and History. Critique of the Instant and the Continuum", Agamben comments: "The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also—and above all—to 'change time'" (p. 91). He goes on to say, "But it is not a question of abandoning history; rather [in keeping with Benjamin's theories], of achieving a more authentic concept of historicity" (p. 97). In his essay "Language and History: Linguistic and Historical Categories in Benjamin's Thought",⁷ he also says, "This is why universal history has no past to transmit, being instead a world of 'integral actuality'" (p. 61).

In turn, the 'museumising' of this type of postmemory would, by being contextualised in an art centre, open another pathway for discussion. In *En busca del futuro perdido. Cultura y memoria en tiempos de globalización*,⁸ the German critic Andreas

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (London and New York: Verso, 1993).

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁸ Andreas Huyssen, *En busca del futuro perdido. Cultura y memoria en tiempos de globalización* (México: FCE – Instituto Goethe, 2002).

Huyssen points to museums as watchtowers keeping an eye on expressions of the culture of memory, while criticising the inflation that the cultural industries have gradually habituated us to with the current rise of all kinds of what we could term the ‘cultural practices of memory’ in their various nostalgic fetishes through numerous versions of photographs, archives, documentaries and television broadcasts.

The strategies for representing memory that Elvira presents us with speak of a latent tension between images and history, thereby encouraging us to rethink the event and to open a new pathway into the narratives of the archive.

In this way, by taking the life of a man such as Radowitzky as his starting point, Gonzalo Elvira offers us a kind of jigsaw puzzle of untold stories, inviting the spectator to recompose the absences and silences and to look for narratives that have not been narrated, using a particular way of linking knowledge with the past, reality and fiction that questions the accounts of history that predominate.

As a result, the artist to an extent takes on the historian’s mantle of ‘rescuing’ ordinary folk, especially those who have been defeated, from the past, from the “enormous condescension of posterity”.⁹

Blanca de la Torre

⁹ Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

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