

Tres

BLACKOUT

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Tres (Barcelona, 1956 – Premià de Dalt, 2016) had a career that defies any attempt to pigeonhole it. At the same time, however, it cannot be described as *heterodox*. From sound art to performance, from the ready-made to photography and collage, his projects are imbued with the experimental approaches to be found on the Spanish aesthetic scene from the 1980s to the present day. Nevertheless, his oeuvre gives the impression that it was produced at the tail end of the prevailing trends, and that it turned a blind eye to lesser challenges.

With one foot in agitprop and the other in tautology, in other words, flying the revolutionary flag, though bent upon reinterpreting through every work the underpinnings of art as a political and sociocultural practice, Tres's pieces can today be seen as exercises for an episteme of divergence, while the silence would be a strategy of absolute emptying, not just rhetorical or productive but also physical and spatial.

Tres's projects problematise those past and public uses that have shaped the value of words. Above all, however, they open up new realms of expression for knowledge, grammatical lines where we are called to reimagine collective subjectivity.

Consequently, Tres falls within an artistic genealogy that is as inopportune as it is sophisticated and which includes James Lee Byars and Susan Sontag, John Cage and Joseph Beuys and William S. Burroughs. On the other hand, his literary 'forebears'—Mallarmé, Artaud, Beckett and Salinger—speak of an author who extends this underground line that stems from Dada and continues along the conceptual path, eventually striking vocabularies, nomenclatures and artistic consciousnesses.

Tightly bound to a timeless radicalism, Tres's work barely masks another kind of commitment: a pact with beauty that entails a beating of wings and a rattling of sabres, a certain reinvention of the potentialities of poetry that becomes first silence and then a gunshot.

Room 1

“On 15 May 1985, I committed artistic suicide in *Cabaret Voltaire*, the pseudo-Dadaist show organised in Barcelona as a tribute to the painter Francis Picabia. I killed my own principles by participating in a ‘Dadaist’ event censored by the sponsoring bank, and I killed myself artistically by snuffing out my recent findings of the void and silence when I closed the performance by yelling from the top of a staircase. The opportunity missed by allowing to slip through my fingers the possibility of unmasking that entire farce by carrying out the only truly Dadaist act of the night took the wind out of my sails. This situation forced me to reconsider my relationship with art in drastic terms and I concluded I would not tackle it again unless the subject was silence, or rather, the void.”

And so, as if he had experienced an epiphany, Tres’s silent progress began: with a creative death after an ideological purification and on the back of an existential proclamation. This triad of art, politics and life ended up becoming the source code that provided the basis for reading his later works.

It is not difficult to see here a mission that stems from negativity, though it rapidly turns into a vitalist project. Unlike Bartleby’s famous maxim—“I would prefer not to”—Tres’s activism takes off with the revelations caused by a blackout, never by the impossibility of tackling a blank page.

Much of Tres’s aesthetic architecture was constructed between this initial blackout in 1985 and his first silent intervention, entitled *No acción Mu*, which paradoxically took place in the Palau de la Virreina as part of the tribute to Arthur Cravan in 1992. This architecture subsequently expanded by means of the faces of his various travelling companions, a veritable “gallery of silent eminent figures”, in the words of Ignacio Echevarría, which inhabited a space fizzing with energy; or following performances such as *3-3-03*, a date that we imagine to be have been

sacramental for the artist; or with his first peregrination to the Valle del Silencio in Ponferrada, that same emblematic year of 2003; and, lastly, thanks to *El libro del silencio*, a piece-cum-archive begun in 1986 that combines literary quotations and journalistic reviews on this topic.

Room 2

Far from making silence merely an aesthetic subject, Tres used it in the manner of a detonation, like a time bomb. This is how we should understand the many actions carried out through, against and for the art system: pieces of paper subjected to the discipline of emptying that are turned into balls of white silence situated, with forethought, in corners or on the negotiating tables at ARCO'07, a place where verbosity can be regarded as a common currency; magazines and catalogues also 'emptied' using holes of silence, who knows whether to bring out the muteness hidden in the images or to emphasise their constituent vacuity; and lastly a group of pieces that address the ideological aspect of Tres's work, with which the artist extracts the silence from the speculative realm in order to confront it with the vicissitudes that are rocking the social sphere.

The response to the anti-war plea *Callen las armas* is the masked image of Tres in the throes of 'conquering' the Statue of Liberty. This collection is completed by his transformation into an anonymous sandwich-board man on another seismic day, 13-03, 48 hours after the Atocha terrorist attacks of 11 March 2004, while he remembers the government muteness of that time with a placard that reads "Un sospechoso silencio" (A suspicious silence).

Room 3

Tres's sound and video output, his collaborative undertakings with other artists and the various groups he founded or with which he worked over the course of his career could constitute an exhibition in themselves.

T, Klamm, UMBN Aleatoria, Zush-Tres, the Silence Science records and, in particular, *The Fake Druids* are some of the projects that gave rise to an extremely striking body of audio-visual work, in which experimental rock crossbreeds with noise music, and the dense collages of images with found footage. The figure of William S. Burroughs—an important reference for the last period of Tres's work—throbs with intensity in these video clips and, above all, in *Shooting White Silence*, a series of canvases shot with blank cartridges, again emptied, though now not by a geometrical silence but through the audio impact, as a rejoinder to the cacophonies of politics and information.

Room 4

James Lee Byars is a guiding figure for Tres. On the surface, the two artists seem to have a number of themes in common—silence, death or perfection. In depth, they are connected by a kind of apologia of renunciation, a certain messianic dimension based on the mythological nature of some of their projects.

Heir to the Dadaist charisma of Emmy Hennings and Hugo Ball, the precursor of contemporary performativities, as well as the epitome of an art sutured to its existential limits, Lee Byars represents a point of no return on the aesthetic map of the late 20th century. As a result, prolonging his legacy involves unexpected measures of daring, an awareness of participating in a single founding mission.

A practice like Tres's, sustained by absolute values, must at some point confront the 'problem' of form. The *círculas* that freeze kinetic movement, the edicts that transcribe coded messages, the balls of cinefoil—a material that completely blocks out all light—and the colour gold, a veritable emblem for James Lee Byars, a precious symbol and a golden or blinding icon, form a parallel universe in Tres's work, the result of his epic quest for



El hambre. Berlin, 1983



*72 bolas de silencio blanco encontradas en ARCO'07.
Madrid, 2007*



Acción cortar el silencio. Venice, 2006



*Kakua y Kántor, concierto silencioso para coro y mar de mercurio.
International Music Day. Barcelona, 2006*



Hombre anuncio #2. Barcelona, 2005. Photo: Lydia Zimmermann



Últimas palabras de James Lee Byars. Barcelona, 2005

exactitude, the testimony of an arithmetical odyssey in which numbers and geometry at last meet.

Room 5

On the one hand, the *Hipercubis* and *Hiperconis*, empty vertical structures that delimit the space and which are made up of cubes and cones, assembled using wire and leather, are in Tres's words, "an early suggestion of the silence deriving from its own vacuity". And on the other, we find the *horror vacui* of the countless notebooks that the artist has kept since his early days, in which he mixes thoughts, collages, drawings and personal events. Both function as two extremes of an almost obsessive monologue with art materials. Mention must also be made of *El País vaciado*, in which Tres makes the vacuousness of the media 'visible' over the course of 29 consecutive days in June 2005, applying void on top of void to it and drawing a kind of self-portrait of the portrait.

Thenceforth, this artist from Barcelona resorted to all the modalities of the ready-made and the *objet trouvé*, all the forms of fetishism and aesthetic recycling. The apparent dysfunctionality of these tools conceals an unforeseen purpose, which is to introduce blackouts among the discourses, expectations and things.

Room 6

Contrary to appearances, *Estoy muerto*, the series in which we see Tres motionless yet travelling through a number of cities, is not a *boutade* on lifelessness or death, nor a gibe on how to turn the body into an object and, what's more, an irritating obstacle. It is a matter—we could say—of defying the comings and goings of the world with a simple subversive gesture: suspending any and all physical and mental activity.

In keeping with the model of his blackouts, in which Tres literally and gradually switches off, as in a choreography of disappearance, each and every one of the struc-

tural elements that ‘give life’ to a building, in *Estoy muerto* he also extinguishes movement in his organism, veiling his face as well, something that is very significant for an artist who cultivates portraiture with such enthusiasm.

It is a project of unproductiveness that explodes that overproduction through which life is penned in. Perhaps it would be possible to interpret in this way the images of an unidentifiable body—any body or all bodies—found out in the urban open or in places of conflict, in the centre of cities or in their *terrains vagues*, or perhaps a body abandoned by someone after a certain metamorphosis, like empty chrysalises without their occupants, like the skin that snakes slough off and leave at the edge of paths.

It is worth recalling here the figure of Diogenes in Raphael’s fresco *The School of Athens*. The philosopher lies carelessly—like Tres in *Estoy muerto*—while Platonists and Aristotelians, astronomers and mathematicians dispute among themselves over who discovered the most arcane truths of the world. An apocryphal legend has it that someone asked Diogenes the Cynic what his chief skill was, to which the philosopher laconically replied with a single word: “Ordering”.

Room 7

Among Tres’s silent actions, individual performances alternate with other formats that could be classified as choral symphonies. Collectively producing silence is the equivalent of founding something resembling an unavowable community, to use the words of Maurice Blanchot; by celebrating silence there where the din imposes itself, in the hustle and bustle of the streets or in places of public congregation, he creates islands of possibility, parentheses of meaning.

The extraordinary beauty of these urban happenings, always presented as if they were an opera performance or a silent film, invites us to think of them in utopian terms, a

silent utopia that is, at the same time, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art.

Room 8

This room features two significant figures in relation to Tres's work. One is Joseph Beuys, whose fluctuation between the clown and the shaman, between the propagandistic tirade and the impenetrable aphorism, is in perfect keeping with many works by the artist from Barcelona. The other is Susan Sontag, whose *Aesthetics of Silence* provided him with the spur of theory and even an existential stimulus.

On display alongside Beuys and Sontag are the *Silencios embolsados*, a collection of cut-out press photographs in which various personalities are shown demanding silence of others. Each image was placed inside a bag with professional sound insulation materials, thereby reinforcing the gesture that characterises them and commenting ironically on it.

According to Tres, "these bagged silences constitute a kind of humorous commentary on seduction and on the fake solemnity of the gallery of illustrious silent figures", a dialectic exemplified by the masked portraits of Mallarmé, Beckett and Maria Callas on display.

Room 9

The written word, and more particularly, the ambivalence of the alphabet, its permutations, its palindromes and its silent letters like H, which Tres addresses in a number of pieces, also have a place in the work of an artist devoted to silence. Perhaps precisely because of that there is in his oeuvre a certain poetic structuralism, a way of deconstructing or emptying the agreements that bear the meaning, passing on to them the virus of non sense.

At the same time, a very significant aspect in Tres's work is his extraordinary talent for creating images and of endowing them with a new meaning by leading them

in other plastic and conceptual directions. This is how we should understand the series *El silencio es sangre*, a collection of almanacs of Japanese girls subjected to slight and delicate drawn acts of modding.

Visitors to the exhibition will also be able to see a documentary compilation of a number of Tres's blackouts and silent cocktail parties, in which the artist switches off buildings and empties social events of their voice. Both types of work embrace the reifications deployed using objects and bodies, as well as his performances and collective happenings.

The exhibition closes with two pieces intended to establish a poetics for Tres's work: the sculpture or plastic haiku—if this term may be used—entitled *Verbis diablo*, a piece of the demonic organ that Satan uses to speak to his subjects, and three masks that can be employed to practise the art of figurative disappearance, since one of them does not conceal the face it should hide but, on the contrary, exalts it.

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Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
and public holidays, noon to 8 pm
Free entry

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