

THE SITTERS

The Necessities of Verticality and The Absurd in Life: The Work of Ricardo Alcaide

What is important, it seems to me, is not so much to defend a culture whose existence has never kept a man from going hungry, as to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical to that of hunger.

Antonin Artaud

A tramp's clothes are bad, but they conceal far worse things.

Down and Out in Paris and London, George Orwell

There is no way of knowing why each man makes his choices in life. They call it, *making your bed*. Reasons may be given or projected, but neither they nor any other kind of silence may provide a real answer to the essential, ultimately unanswerable questions. Each man falls for his own reason, by his own account. The account is the story, and for each there are many. *I can't go on. I'll go on.*

Corns on feet differ from headaches and toothaches by their baseness, and they are only laughable because of an ignominy explicable by the mud in which feet are found. Since by its physical attitude the human race distances itself 'as much as it can' from terrestrial mud...one can imagine that a toe, always more or less damaged and humiliating, is psychologically analogous to the brutal fall of man – in other words, to death.

Georges Bataille, The Big Toe¹

We don't see the toes, only the skin of the upper parts of the body. The areas exposed perhaps reveal something common, or shared, with respect to the identity of the subjects. The bared skin reveals the spaces of the now the absent clothing. What was covered, the upper torso, is generally less damaged, relatively unscathed, with the exception of the subject whose torso is covered in bites; something has got through, inside, under the protective skin, the clothing. There is some vein damage on the forearms, but wounds and damaged surfaces tend to the constantly uncovered areas of the body; the hands and head from the neck up are the most damaged, ravaged by cold, sun, filth. There are signs of internal damage, but you have to know what you are looking for, and it is the exterior surface which is really at stake here, what we are being *shown*.

¹ Georges Bataille, *The Big Toe*, in *Visions of Excess*, University of Minnesota, 1996, p23

Whether documentary or fine art, images of the homeless are generally *difficult*. The issues raised by the subject are important and have been addressed at length elsewhere on other bodies of work: on Boris Mikhailov's series 'Case History' (1997-8); Gillian Wearing's video *Drunk* (1997-9); Serrano's series *Nomads* (1991), to give but a few examples of the furore which surrounds artist's working with, and often paying, those who are seen as not of sound mind or easily taken advantage of. It is not, however, the social implications that I, nor Alcaide for that matter, wish to address, but the aesthetic. For Alcaide, his subject lies in the relation of poverty (as philosophical category) to performance in the field of still photography. The subject of his project is the visual and its deceptive, performative surface in the photographic. The distance between aesthetics and judgement, Kant's '*antinomy of taste*', is revealed photographically through the categories of 'reverie' and 'imagination'. The empty² subject is vertical, often seated, but never prone, the surfaces of the body reveal clues, accounts as to experiences, but no answers as to individual choices. As a body of work, the series hints at a sublime encounter with the subject, in which my experiences as viewer are potentially limited in the face of a subject who has an unimaginable, or so I may imagine, perspective on experience, necessitated by survival than more luxury problems. As a viewer, the work revels in the problematics of the relationship between self and other, which Peggy Phelan has denoted as '*a marked one*', which is to say it is unequal. It is alluring and violent because it touches the paradoxical nature of psychic desire...The combination of psychic hope and political-historical inequality makes the contemporary encounter between self and other a meeting of profound romance and deep violence.³ It is this disjuncture between the essentially privileged (art) audience and the subject which brings to bear not social but experiential difference. The unimaginable and unnameable are hinted at through a limited, abstracted setting and the use of photography's distancing effect.

This setting, a deep blue backdrop and strong lighting with deep shadows produces an effect in the image of *chiaroscuro*, which comes from painting originally and was a device privileged above all others by Caravaggio, to whom the series owes much not only with respect to form but also to subject. Caravaggio was one of the first artists to work with ordinary, poor people as models, preferring their lack of self-awareness to the eloquence of the more cultured or trained sitter. The plain abstract background removes the subject from its narrative, disassociates it from its environment and suggests a symbolic meaning. Serrano used a similar technique with his 1991

² By *empty* I mean here neither contemplative nor confrontational, more a kind of being in the sense that Robert Bresson describes the protagonist, a donkey, in his film *Par Hazard Balthazar*, as being rather than acting (modelling).

³ Peggy Phelan *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London, NY, 1996 p3-4

photographic series *Nomads*,⁴ although he frames only the head and shoulders and the series is concerned with clothing, rather than unclothing, as covering for identity beyond survival.

I would suggest that Alcaide's interest in these men stems not only from an ongoing interest in issues of performance and poverty (material and spiritual) in photography, but also from his upbringing in South America. His earlier work reveals an affinity with the materiality of Arte Povera, and with the philosophical category of the Absurd, in particular the absurdist theatre tradition of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco or even Bergman. In an early black and white photographic series, a bald, overweight figure with evidently unloved love-handles bulging out of dirty sagging Y-fronts and a Dunce's hat, inhabits a blackened-out corner of the world. His only possessions a four legged stool and white chalk stumps. He writes on the wall, "*Tomastes mis manos en las tuyas, y cerrando los ojos, yo me deje besar. Y nunca pense que en otra noche sin ti pudiera estar.*" ("Take my hands in yours, and, closing your eyes, let me kiss you. And never imagine that there will be another night without you being there. / And thus it will be every night." I would suggest that in the setting of London's Holborn, where all the subjects were approached, Beckett's minimalist, philosophical, abstracted world of the prone and the hopeless, in which resistance, refusal and the base materiality of things are everything, would provide an useful angle on Alcaide's work for anyone encountering it for the first time through this series.

Models sit for artists; the word covers all manner of poses and positions. Although a few are standing in his photographs, the majority of Alcaide's subjects are sitting. The dangers of being prone on the street are manifold. Better to be upright, verticality providing at the very least a minimum but existent form of both exclusion from danger and of social inclusion. Beyond appearances, it is the fact of being upright which bears protectively on the subject. Unable to stand, the subject can waylay the horizontal by sitting, maintaining an essentially vertical position. Using the image of the candle's flame, Gaston Bachelard aptly demonstrates how verticality is model of the survival instinct in man- at the level of the physical and imaginative - both complicating and incorporating what other have relegated to the horizontal, without denying the relationship of the horizontal to the everyday:

Dreams of height give sustenance to our instinct of verticality, an instinct which is repressed by the needs of the everyday, prosaically horizontal life. Vertically-tending reverie is the most liberating of all...Living at the zenith of the

⁴ Although Serrano took his studio backdrop out into the IRT subways of New York. There is an interestingly similarity here to the way that the British 19th century plant photographer Charles Jones worked with nature; dropping a backdrop in behind the subject (plants) in situ. For an illustration of Jones' technique see p19 of *Plant Kingdoms The Photographs of Charles Jones*, published by Smithmark, NY, 1998

*upright object, gathering reveries of verticality, we experience the transcendence of being. The image of verticality brings us into the realm of values. In communing through imagination with the verticality of an upright object we experience the beneficial influence of lifting forces, we participate in the hidden fire dwelling in beautiful forms, forms assured of their verticality. The simpler their object, the greater the reveries. The flame of the candle on the solitary man's table prefigures all the reveries of verticality.*⁵

The paradoxes and politics of poverty and freedom with regard to the subject can be well approached by means of language, the law which produced them. The origins of the word 'poor' had always been used in a derogatory (moral) sense until *ennobled by the gospel*. The word *ani*, which is generally translated as 'poor', acquired a special and distinctive meaning in the devotional literature of the Old Testament. In his exposition on the Beatitudes, William Barclay examines man's contradictory and often misconceived understanding of the word *poor*. In Hebrew it underwent a four-stage development, from meaning *no power, prestige or influence with which to defend oneself against the insults and assaults of the world...being downtrodden and oppressed and pushed to the wall in a competitive society, but poor also meant that a man, in spite of everything, may retain his integrity and his devotion and may be convinced that it is better to be humiliated with God than it is to be prosperous with the world.*⁷ George Orwell came to a similar conclusion:

*...A beggar, looked at realistically, is a businessman, getting his living, like other businessmen, in the way that comes to hand. He has not, more than most modern people, sold his honour; he has merely made the mistake of choosing a trade at which it is impossible to grow rich.*⁸

In her last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, before her untimely death last year, Susan Sontag re-appraised her earlier writings on photography, in which she privileged the documentary mode with regards to truth telling, concluding that a more creative, fictional mode could come closer to meaning in the aftermath of the 25 years of media saturation of war and poverty which has passed between books. My approaching these sitters more as (meta)fictional, metaphorical subjects, beings who are potentially wilful and vaguely free, an image more of the stand-up comic, dying on his feet, than the helpless social outcast, dying on his feet, is probably as good a way as any. We already

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, Spring Publications Inc., 1987, Connecticut, p106-7.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Beatitudes*, Fontana Books, Glasgow, UK, 1963, p19

⁷ William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Beatitudes*, Fontana Books, Glasgow, UK, 1963, p19

⁸ George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Penguin Modern Classics, 1972, p154)

understand the lameness and horrible dangers to society of the politics of correctness. As Alcaide approached them, so I approach his images. Is he taking advantage of these people? Thirty pounds is, after all, a fairly standard modelling fee.

In the spirit of the absurd I will end with one last joke from Orwell, but which could just as easily have come from Beckett:

*'The worst thing in life is the cold, and the next worse is the interference you have to put up with. At first, not knowing any better, I used to copy a nude on the pavement. The first I did was outside St Martin's-in-the-Fields church. A fellow in black – I suppose he was a churchwarden or something – came out in a tearing rage. "Do you think we can have that obscenity outside God's holy house?" he cried. So I had to wash it out. It was a copy of Botticelli's Venus.'*⁹

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⁹ George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Penguin Modern Classics, 1972, p152