Talking Things: Joan Brossa and Nicanor Parra's Visual Poetry on the Margins of (Post-)Modernity

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1. Introduction

Horace stated, "Ut pictura poesis", and Leonardo remarked, "painting is a mute poetry, and poetry is blind painting." Titian referred to the collection of his mythological paintings from his later years as "Poesie." It seems that the affinity between poetry and painting –or visual materials in general– was already a familiar notion for so long. Indeed, it is challenging to imagine a poetry devoid of images. For instance, Vicente Huidobro demanded that poets bloom a living rose in their poetry instead of describing one and ended up constructing an image out of text himself, just as Apollinaire did with his calligrammes, merging poetic text and imagery, following the legacy of Mallarmé. These modern poets sought to negate and even fight against the phonocentric, emphasizing the very presence of the enunciating subject, thus laying the cornerstone of a new standard of the sublime.

Visual poetry is not a mere marriage of text and image. To make visual poetry is to make poetry visual, through a process of unveiling what poetry truly is. Therefore, a visual poetry that is made to be looked at goes beyond a superficial combination of a poetic text and an image; rather, it is a combination of the fundamental aesthetics of text and image, thus eliminating the border that separates seeing from reading. Free from this dichotomy, seeing and reading come together in a conversation, expanding the textual space and adding depth to the reader's aesthetic experience. In this process, the visual becomes the nucleus of the text.

With images gradually intervening into the textual, text no longer holds its absolute authority, and the line between reading and seeing becomes blurrier than ever. In this area, the works of Joan Brossa and Nicanor Parra emerge. As the title of their collaborative exhibition in 1992, "Dir poesia/Mirar poesia", Brossa and Parra share the objective of their craftmanship, despite the distance between their geographical background –Brossa's Barcelona and Parra's Santiago de Chile–: they sought to tear down the wall that separates image and text and seeing and reading, striving to expand the poetic realm from the two-dimensional surface into the three-dimensional sphere, divorcing with the definition of poetry as an artistry solely of language.

Among the vast corpora of Brossa and Parra, this paper focuses particularly on the moments when everyday objects transform into something unfamiliar. The shock in these moments detaches the objects from their everydayness. It relocates them in an unexpected context, and its aftershock questions the epistemology and the semantics of Poetry *per se.* Of course, defamiliarization is not a groundbreaking invention of Brossa or Parra. The experiments of defamiliarizing, or misusing things, have been materialized in both literary and visual arts, and Brossa and Parra take it a step further, seeking to destabilize the borders. This shapes Brossa and Parra's visual poetry as *antipoesía,* a term coined by Parra, and it gains life and prospers on the ruins of Poetry (with a capital letter). *Antipoesía* is the aftermath of *poesía.*

Some recent studies on Parra have attempted to explore the still-ambiguous concept of postmodernity through his poetic world. Their focus was on the disavowal of the Master Narrative, schizophrenic subjects (echoing Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard), and active use of mass media, which are the traits shared with Brossa. I believe the issue of postmodernity in the two poets' work has yet to be discussed, and

that it is necessary to diagnose the condition of the postmodern in this case: is it reactionary or resistant? Through a comparative reading of Brossa and Parra, which highlights their engagement with everyday objects, I also aim to share a perspective on approaching the problems of modernity and postmodernity in their world through words and images.

One of the key traits that Brossa and Parra's visual poetry –each called *poema visual* and *artefactos*– shares is how objects such as keys, safety pins, Coke bottles, and playing cards become something unfamiliar, along with text. It is neither poetry nor object, so they degrade the notion of Poetry and attack its authority. In this sense, Brossa and Parra encounter in the space of *antipoesía,* as Parra declared: "TODO ES POESÍA, menos la poesía" (Parra 2006, 420), echoing what Brossa said in an interview: "on hi ha menys poesia és precisament en un llibre de poesia" (Brossa *et. al.* 41). The refusal of poetic language for the sake of petty, ordinary, and everyday language, events, and objects, distancing themselves from creating the Sublime, Brossa and Parra manifest their profound incredulity in metanarrative, in terms of Jean-François Lyotard. In this aspect, it seems fair enough to read their work through a postmodern lens.

So far, Brossa and Parra have been more immediately linked to the avant-garde and are part of the genealogy stemming from Dada and Surrealism (consider Niall Binns or René de Costa, for instance), and thus are often situated closer to the modern. Perhaps this is due to the standpoint they occupy, as they stand on the fluid border of modernity and postmodernity. For now, let me take a moment to elaborate on the idea of postmodernism I employ in this paper, which I have already mentioned a couple of times. I follow Lyotard's definition of postmodern as something that "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself… that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (Lyotard 81), and something that "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (xxv). This draws a stark contrast with the modern aesthetic, which is "the sublime, though a nostalgic one", where the unpresentable is "put forward only as the missing contents" (81).

I refer to Brossa and Parra's oeuvre as postmodern not in a chronological sense as something that comes after the modern, but rather as something that speaks for something unspeakable in the language of modernity. It could be said that Brossa and Parra are postmodern as they are modern, as "[a] work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard 79).

I highlight the way Brossa and Parra engage with objects in their work to explore the issues of modernity and postmodernity, as their attitude toward the objects challenges us to rethink the object-subject relationship, revealing the illusion of the modern and exposing its delusion. Thing Theory was initially conceived by Bill Brown to analyze objects and their relationships to the world in American modernist literature from a materialist perspective. That said, discussions on whether the scope of Thing Theory could be expanded to postmodernist literature and art have been ongoing in recent years, and my aim here is to contribute to this conversation via the objects or things employed by the two poets.

2. Thing Theory, Misuse Values and the Postmodern

Things are different from objects. According to Brown, if something causes a "pathetic fallacy" to the subject, it is an object. We can make use of these objects: we use a screwdriver to loosen a screw, a knife to cut a tomato, and a car to commute to work. Things, on the other hand, cannot connect with us and thus cannot be used. Thingness is what makes something a thing, and the property of thingness is triggered

by misuse value. "By *misuse value*", continues Brown, "I mean to name the aspects of an object –sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic– that becomes legible, audible, palpable when the object is experienced in whatever time it takes (in whatever time it is) for an object to become another" (Brown 1999, 3).

The theory further elaborates that objects are sharply recognized when they transform into a thing that does not function as it is supposed to, and the way it relates to a human subject transforms as well (Brown 2001, 4):

> [I]n the process of using a knife as a screwdriver, of dislocating it from one routinized objectification and deploying it otherwise, we have the change (if just a chance) to sense its presence (its thinness… its sharpness and flatness… the peculiarity of its scalloped handle, slightly loose… its knifeness and what exceeds that knifeness) as though for the first time. (Brown 1999, 3)

Objects are transparent, whereas things are opaque. We tend to see *through* the window, whereas we cannot help but *see* the window itself when it is smudged—this is the moment when we sense the absolute failure of its rational clarity and normative function, or *use value,* as Habermas once called it.

Of course, the postmodern is not a central theme in Brown's discussion of things and thingness, as the theory was initially developed in his study of the novels of Virginia Woolf. Nonetheless, his emphasis on the issues surrounding objects and things carries postmodern implications, recognizing how nonhuman beings have been represented and fetishized. In other words, it shifts the focus from human subjects to insignificant objects now regarded as *things*. This is where Matthew Mullins encounters a convergence between Thing Theory and postmodern fiction, illustrating how both turn to everyday objects over human subjects. In postmodern narratives, according to Mullins, characters' fixation on mundane things destabilizes the traditional subject-object hierarchy, allowing things to assert agency beyond their functional utility. Mullins further highlights how such texts foreground materiality over abstraction, thus locating a distinctly postmodern potential in Thing Theory. From its interdisciplinary beginnings, this way of thinking has been deeply rooted in diversity and heterogeneity, offering a framework with which one can reimagine postmodern critique in more material terms (Mullins).

Returning to Brossa and Parra, the objects they use become postmodern *things* by being *misused*, transforming into something that speaks not at the margins but at the core, subverting the anthropocentric and phonocentric traditions. As Lyotard said:

> [A] postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work (81).

Hence, Brossa and Parra's misuse of things that go against the rules that govern their use as objects, and their visual poetry with them, resists being read but intends to be seen. These transgressions and provocations lead them closer to the postmodern.

3. Misused Things in the Visual Poetry of Brossa and Parra

In one of Parra's visual poems, we see a red fruit penetrated by a rusty nail. Is a fruit something to be nailed? Perhaps, but that is not what we first and foremost anticipate doing with a fruit. And the nail? We have seen more nails on the wall to hang something, but not in a fruit. Furthermore, what happens to the letters, "naturaleza muerta", which are tagged as the image's title? The name of a type of painting often

understood as embodying religious allegories now strikes us with its literal, macabre aspect, evoking a dead nature. Nevertheless, these words now present seem to initiate a conversation with the rusty nail: Is this the nail that held the body of Christ on the cross? Is the Judeo-Christian implication still valid, then? Then again, the death in this composition strikes us even harder when it comes to our knowledge that the fruit, supposedly a tomato, is actually a fake, plastic one: it was already dead, as René de Costa puts it, "cuando vemos que el tomate es de plástico, resulta ser una naturaleza doblemente muerta" (31). The nail was not the cause of death.

Likewise, we cannot travel through time with a typewriter, and a broken lightbulb cannot light up a dark room, in the ways Parra shows us things before our eyes. A book is no longer a book when its pages are all torn out, which explains why Parra published his first *artefactos* in 1971, not in the form of a book, but in a box full of postcards, without page numbers, in no particular order, without a binding, just postcards. All these things, which were once objects that we interacted with, now reside in an unfamiliar orbit, distant from us. Parra's assimilation of *artefactos* to the fragments of a hand grenade after the explosion well captures the moment of violent break and awakening from the ordinary (Binns 107).[1]

Brossa also experimented with poetry using everyday objects, such as playing cards, hammers, and, like Parra, nails. However, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the letters in Brossa's corpus of visual poetry. The letters, the micro-typographic elements that are supposed to facilitate the readability of a printed material, are the objects of Parra to Brossa. In other words, Brossa sought to use the alphabet itself as *things* in his poetry. Alphabet as an object communicates meanings to its reader, the subject who is reading it. It interacts with readers, interferes with their thinking mechanism, and even shapes our perception of the world around us. But in the world of Brossa, an alphabet is just a thing, a petty thing. Alphabet becomes the teeth of a key, the barrel of a pistol, the body of a fish, a series of convoys, or a moon waning and waxing on the printed surface, and they escape from the surface and sometimes take refuge in the three-dimensional.

In an untitled poem included in *Poemes públics,* Brossa takes another step to degenerate the absolute point of departure of linguistic representation, symbolized with a capital A, asking: "No és un cap de bou girat de l'inrevés / la A, punt de partida de tota expressió lingüística?"[2] with an image that has a striking resemblance to the bull's head by Picasso, a found object made with the seat and handlebars of a bicycle. Brossa is also aware that the letter itself is also subject to the trap of representation, as he presents capital A this way: "La lletra A té dos traços rectes i inclinats que, partint del punt més alt de la lletra, es dirigeixen als extrems de la base; un petit traç horitzontal complete el dibuix d'aquest signe."[3] Brossa titled the poem "Retrat literari", as a portrait of a letter or a portrait composed with letters –here, Brossa is playing with the ambiguity of linguistic representation, of how language always slips away from our understanding, despite its use value in terms of readability.

Now we may ask, why would Brossa have chosen letters to deliberately misuse over tangible objects, like Parra's constant experiment with the *artefactos*? This inquiry

[1] The statement originally comes from Parra's interview with Leonidas Morales, as cited in Binns as follows: "Los artefactos son más bien como los fragmentos de una granada. La granada no se lanza entera contra la muchedumbre. Primero tiene que explotar: los fragmentos salen disparados a altas velocidades, o sea, están dotados de una gran cantidad de energía y pueden atravesar entonces la capa exterior del lector."

[2] "Sense títol (10)", *Fundació Joan Brossa.* https://fundaciojoanbrossa.cat/el-poeta/la-obra/sense-titol-10/

[3] "Retrat literari", *Fundació Joan Brossa.* https://fundaciojoanbrossa.cat/el-poeta/la-obra/retrat-literari/

prompts us to reflect on the ontological crisis each poet faced during their time, which shaped their focus. Parra, in his *artefactos,* was experimenting with the names of things, creating meanings, and, above all, attacking the poetic language of his predecessors. The specters of Rubén Darío, Vicente Huidobro, and Pablo Neruda were undoubtedly haunting Parra, and even the specter of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer was lingering around him; all these figures are pointing to the history of poetry in the Castilian language, and as another poet writing in Castilian, it seems fair for Parra to seek for an antithesis to stand against these big names, which ultimately crystalized into *antipoesía,* and into *artefactos* as a form of *antipoesía* with powerful images supported by coarse and firm words in the same language. So, in this case, we could say that the struggle is monolingual.

This was not the case for Brossa. His misuse of letters to make them more poignantly recognizable demonstrates the anxiety he felt about everyday language, which is Catalan, severely oppressed by Castilian hegemony during the dictatorship. Brossa's bold letters, Catalan words, and symbols serve as a form of resistance against imposed silence and oblivion, particularly prevalent since the Revolutions of 1968 and throughout the Late Francoism (Audí 2010). Having experienced the Civil War as a combatant at a young age, it is not surprising that Brossa's perception of reality was shaped by the extreme and explicit violence against the nation and its language, similar to that of his contemporaries, such as Antoni Tàpies and Joan Miró. Just as Tàpies painted with soil and straw, and Miró with simple brushstrokes and colors, Brossa aimed to vindicate the quotidian things and words that were forced to be erased in his time by incorporating elements from everyday life into his poetry.

In this backdrop, linguistic elements are used as things to be seen and to shock rather than to be read in Brossa's poetry. "Una manera d'anar contra la retòrica és precisament potenciar aquestes coses que veus cada dia, però que no t'adones del valor que tenen", said Brossa, encapsulating the necessity of empowering everyday things, including language, from the margin to destabilize the master rhetoric (Mattalía, 20-21). This belief of Brossa is also found in a poem written in Castilian in the 70s when Francoism was still in its power: "Se restablece la bandera bicolor, / roja y gualda, como bandera de España. / La tradicional bandera bicolor, roja y gualda, / la gloriosa enseña que ha presidido las gestas inmortales de nuestra historia. / Hay un sello" (Brossa 2019, 13). What makes this short poem matter is its title, a single word: *ESTANC.*

René de Costa provides a fitting interpretation of this composition, analyzing another version of the identical poem, where the word *estanc* appears not as the title but at the last line: "The final word, *estanc,* appearing at the end almost as a typo, transforms the familiar logo of the state-controlled tobacco monopoly into a symbol of imperial domination" (Costa, 37). A single word in Catalan amidst a composition entirely composed in Castilian seems like a typo, evoking the common image of tobacco shops on every street in Spain. It also implies that it has no political message, neutralizing censorship by evading it and ridiculing it. De Costa also relates Brossa's *Estanc* with Parra's epigram in another *artefacto*, "USA, donde la libertad es una estatua" (Parra 2006, 415). Both are undoubtedly political, but they are also saying something so obvious that the poetic mechanism of metaphor is utterly confused.

Another visual poem by Brossa that could be read in the same context is *Espanya,* made in 1970. In the image, the absence is present, and the silence is potent. One could read this image as a representation of the erasure of the land, its people, and its language by the regime, both visual and material. However, it is also a powerful political message, stating that Catalonia is not Spain, a sentiment reiterated in another visual poem created twenty years later, "Al President Companys." The aesthetic is precisely

what Lyotard employed in his reading of the white of Malevitch: "it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please us only by causing pain" (78). Lyotard also elaborates that "[t]he postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (82). This invites us to read Brossa's visual poetry in a postmodern context, decentralized and vernacular, where the order of representation is deconstructed, and to connect Brossa along with Parra to Hal Foster's idea of anti-aesthetic which "signals a practice, cross-disciplinary in nature, that is sensitive to cultural forms engaged in a politic … or rooted in a vernacular, that is, to forms that deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm" (Foster 1987, xv).

4. Coda

In the foreword to *Poemes de combat,* a selected anthology of Brossa's poems, Joan Minguet Batllori accurately pointed out that the poet's oeuvres can and must be read from the contemporary viewpoint: "Hi ha poetes que només permeten lectures arqueològiques; Brossa, en canvi, ens deixa o ens obliga a llegir-lo des de la contemporaneïtat" (Batllori, 9). Batllori continues:

> Brossa va fer una poesia de combat. I, si l'executant ho vol, ho continua sent. Quan el poeta escriu en contra de la iniquitat del poder, o fa lloances als rebels del seu temps, parla també de nosaltres, de la rebel·lia del present. Quan descriu els signes alarmants d'alienació de l'individu, de la població, sembla que caracteritzi la nostra època (11).

Making a silenced, unspeakable language visible is a radical form of resistance, a way to engage in combat against centralizing power, and here we find the postmodern and contemporary aspects of Brossa. By contemporary, I am thinking with Giorgio Agamben, who considers the contemporary as "who firmly holds his gaze on his own time to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness … the contemporary is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him" (Agamben, 44).

Suppose Brossa, along with Parra, is contemporary, as Batllori argues. In that case, it is precisely because they had a keen sense of the darkness of their present and could transform their conception, putting it in conversation with other times, which is, in this case, our time. Today, we still sense an irresistible gravity facing Brossa's iconic graphic *VOLEM VIURE PLENAMENT EN CATALÀ,* which is itself a conjugation of Senyera, echoing Tàpies' "L'esperit català." The bold-faced red letters, as part of the image against the deep yellow, have their own voice; we hear it with our eyes, and we need not read it out loud. We sense its vitality because the adversity Brossa dealt with in his moment is still ongoing, and it remains our problem. Parra's political criticisms and further concerns on the environment that accompany *artefactos* are still, and even more relatable in our moment today. Then, it seems that what Lyotard said about the artist and the writer of the postmodern as those who work "without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done* (*ce qui aura été fait*) " (81) is an apt definition for Brossa and Parra. Their untimeliness makes them both postmodern and contemporary. Because they are out of time, they seem to have also transcended the category of historical avant-garde. That is, they are not *just* avant-garde, but closer to neo-avant-garde, reconnecting and reenacting the tension between art and life.[4]

I am well aware that a discourse that relies heavily on the postmodern entails a risk of sounding anachronistic, as it was a topic of the late 1970s and 1980s. Still, any reflection on the postmodern era remains relevant today and may be more immediate to

[4] On neo-avant-garde, see Foster 1996, 1-34.

certain issues in our everyday lives. We can, and to some extent, we should continue to reflect on the postmodern as the margin and an antithesis of the imposed, fake, and illusory modernity, because it lends gravity to the minoritized and trivialized *petit récit* against the center. Non-languages become a compelling voice in the margins of modernity, and the marginalized are rendered unmistakably visible in that liminality.

We observe reason, language, and laws failing us and falling apart daily, and we ask, what truth is left with us? Brossa and Parra, by misusing things and words, materialized this crisis in the form of visual poetry, allowing us to see what would arrive in the near future, finally, that is, our time. In place of a conclusion, I cannot help but repeat Lyotard's powerful declaration that echoes and encapsulates the two poets' constant inquiries in their works of art: "Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (82). This was precisely what Brossa and Parra have been fighting for and defending through their visual poetry with misused things.

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