

Close Circle:  
The World of Pepe Espaliú

# Foreword

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Despite the shortness of his life, Pepe Espaliú (Córdoba, 1955–93) is one of the most stimulating and subtle artists in Spanish art of recent years, and also an activist. An intense, complex activity that can be seen in this exhibition, from his solo show in Seville in 1987, an exhibition of paintings (a practice that he soon gave up in favour of sculpture, collage, drawing and actions) strongly influenced by the work of Francis Picabia and Joan Ponç, to his public announcement in 1992 (an exceptional declaration in Spain as it was then), in a famous article, “Retrato del artista desahuciado” (Portrait of the artist beyond recovery), in the newspaper *El País* on 1 December 1992, that he had contracted AIDS and that he was homosexual. An attitude clearly expressed in his well-known public actions in the streets of San Sebastián and Madrid.

In those years Espaliú pursued a zigzag course in his work – brittle, cryptic (sometimes) and disconcerting (sometimes), but always intense, vital and concentrating on two central aspects: firstly, the male body, with its drives and desires; secondly, personal identity, always fragile and

ambiguous, and often incomplete. His practice as an artist was profoundly bound up with his personal subjectivity, that of someone wrestling passionately with the most intimate, personal issues. A path full of strange metaphors and many-sided symbols that speak and remain silent, veiling and unveiling dreams, fancies and passions which gradually shaped an existence that was always mutilated.

In doing all this he avoided obvious rhetorical devices, pamphleteering attitudes and any kind of insistence on unquestionable truths or dogmas; instead, ambiguity, doubt and constant questioning are signs of identity of his work. Even in the last two years of his life, when the activist element of his work against the stigmatisation of AIDS had a strong ideological and political component (*The Carrying Project*), his work succeeded in maintaining a close link between art and life reminiscent of Beuys at his best, when he said that “the only way to progress and perhaps heal is to become aware and to show your wounds”.

# Close Circle: The World of Pepe Espaliú

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Curator of the exhibition

The inauguration of the exhibition of Pepe Espaliú at the IVAM (1 December 2016) took place twenty-three years and one month after the artist's death (2 November 1993) and exactly twenty-four years after the publication in the newspaper *El País* (1 December 1992) of his article "Retrato del artista desahuciado" (Portrait of the artist beyond recovery), which marked a profoundly significant turning point in his life (and in that of the social movements in this country) with his public declaration of his homosexuality and of the fact that he had AIDS and was possibly going to die very soon. Many years have passed since then, but his art, his writings and his attitudes are still profoundly stimulating objects for reflection that help us to understand many aspects of our contemporary world.

For this reason, after the two great exhibitions that have been devoted to Pepe Espaliú in Spain (in 1994 at the Pabellón Mudéjar in Seville and in 2003 at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía), the aim of this exhibition at the IVAM

in Valencia is to recall (for forgetful minds), and to reveal to those others who have not yet had an opportunity to become acquainted with it, a highly significant artistic career in the art produced in Spain in the 1980s and 1990s. The short period in which Espaliú was productive as an artist seems to me especially incisive because of its singularity and intensity, its vital or (micro)political commitment and its great poetic and symbolic content, its folds and ambiguities, its silences and moments of solitariness, its doubts and sensations of strangeness, its passions and chimeras, and also for the solidarity and affectivity that it conveys. It is an oeuvre that, despite (or perhaps because of) its semantic richness, has the appearance of a loop (a "closed circle") in which themes and manners constantly return in a movement of circles that slide apart and come together, that become larger or smaller at any given moment, but that never cease to be present.

As Espaliú himself wrote, they are: "Circles in which desire is trapped in a repeated driving movement. Desire eroded by the 'inability to stop', becoming purer and emptier, as in the movements of the dervishes, the Sufi dancers.

A constant whirling of prisoners and mystics, paranoiacs and homosexuals ... all those who live without appropriating anything for themselves but simply in a feverish desire to

'rotate' the tautological circularity of 'being'.

The Circle as 'Revelation', as minimum support and maximum projection ..."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the artistic course pursued by this artist from Córdoba has the appearance of a circle that coils and develops around inquiries, attempts at self-questioning about a wounded, fragmented, vulnerable identity shaped by an existence rooted in solitude and silence. Thus the circularity of experience as a connecting theme, as an enveloping nexus, is one of the major devices in Espaliú's work; the bidding of the circularity to which he constantly returns, setting the tempo with this repetition. It is a circularity for which one of the major points of reference is the dancing of the dervishes, since it employs the constant turning of the dancers as the celebration of a movement in which one uses one's own body as an instrument to obtain knowledge and experience. This repetitive movement has a connotation of creation of distance, a desire to erase or embroil the origin, the source, and to materialise the idea of self-engendering. It is a questioning about identity that cannot be recovered, and when someone searches in the hope of finding something that constantly eludes him the result (as in Espaliú's case) is likely to be tragic. Therefore nothing is achieved, the search comes around full circle, in a permanent recommencement in

which we glimpse that life and death are inseparable, that one must be reconquered in the other.

Thus the circular movement is the perfect movement, the movement of regeneration; it is the space of inner transmutation. A movement that takes us to a divestment of the senses, an isolation from the aggressive world outside, a discarding of parts of oneself; as Samuel Beckett wrote, "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me."<sup>2</sup> We might say that something similar happens in the works of Pepe Espaliú when they indicate a desire to be left with the absolute minimum: a few lines that denote a face, an empty shell, a hermetic space, some simple masks ..., rough sketches, fragments, lines. His is an oeuvre that makes very visible the representation of an absence, of a dispossession or an imprint, a residue or a trace from which one must reconstruct an experience, a landscape. Images that are shown to us as dialectic symbols between the shown presence and the suggested presence, in which there is a reinvention of the negation or questioning of the body and of loss of identity, revealing presence by the use of evasions.

I see most of his works as dramatic representations with a good deal of covert violence; Espaliú creates a collection of narrative imagery that conveys a traumatic meaning, a subject inserted in a passage of darkness, the "darkening over" of which the poet

Paul Celan wrote. It is a creative language strewn with silences (“only silence is fighting and breaking apart, a wounded angel and proof of love”)<sup>3</sup> and distances, taking up a position between paying attention and passing on, but in which quietness and silence dominate the scene, revealing the confusion of everyday existence. In this regard, the expression of the body in Pepe Espaliú’s work is insinuating, nothing is described excessively; his way of seeing does not concentrate on physical aspects but is more of a mental construction, an object of desire that is impossible to pin down. It is an art linked to physical and mental extremes in which themes of great vital transcendence are addressed, but always in a way that is complex and subtle, restrained but also forceful. “My work”, he says, “is the evidence of what makes my existence bearable, and in that way it maintains it.”

I have divided the design of the exhibition *Círculo íntimo* (Close Circle) into four major aspects (preceded by a small prologue which, in the form of “elective affinities”, shows us works by artists who in one way or another had a significant influence on Pepe Espaliú), aspects that, in my view, contain the central elements of his aesthetic experiences and experiences in life. The first of these sections refers to a divided subject in whom personal fragility is one of the basic experiences of

memory; and these works (masks, empty ovals, shells, leather objects, ...) have the appearance of mechanisms or devices to conceal the subject, revealing a wound that has healed badly. These are the scars of a self-destructive process, with the traumas, insufficiencies and accidents that the process involves. In these works Espaliú refers to a slippery identity that will not let itself be possessed, it is a symbolisation of his phantoms and desires. These are forms that mask the subject, that speak to us of strange or unknown aspects and absences, of an elusive existence that slips away between our fingers.

Thus the leather with which he made his series *Santos* (Saints) looks like living material that adapts its shape, that cracks and ages like human skin; the malleability of the material of which the pieces in this series are made directs us to the most physical and sexual aspects of the human body, to the flowing of desire. His tortoise shells are metaphorical structures that protect us and isolate us from a world that never became his. The oblong pieces, the masks and the ovals (bare, almost featureless forms) that appear in his paintings and drawings convey an elusive face or subject. They are all forms that depict a void, the impossibility of an identity that is lived as division, splitting or duality, and they refer to a wounded *otherness* that is the almost

erased image of itself or the invention of a failure.

The second section of the exhibition focuses on the theme of the physical and psychological wound and the possibility that it will heal. All conveyed by means of pictures, sculptures or actions connected with the image of *El nido* (The Nest). In these works, all made near the end of his life, in 1993, we find, on the one hand, crutches made of painted iron: some supporting each other, forming a circle, and some arranged with others leaning against a wall. The crutch is conceived as something that sustains and replaces what is missing, what is no longer there, it is a prosthesis that makes up for the limb that we no longer have. However, the two works that we see here are, in both cases, rather paradoxical works, because they seem to be intended to be elements of assistance or support, but it is impossible to go anywhere with them because their heavy weight converts them into useless objects, losing their carrying function and adapting the function of being transported. Thus something that initially looks like an illusion of support turns into objects doomed to loss of hope, to the fatality of the fall.

In this room we can also see a video with the same title, *El nido*, made in the Dutch city of Arnhem. The video shows an action performed by Pepe Espaliú on an octagonal plat-

form constructed in the upper part of a large tree. On eight consecutive days the artist climbed up a ladder to this platform and walked around the tree, gradually taking off everything that he was wearing, until finally he was walking completely naked, with all his clothes lying on the platform. It was a journey of a spiritual nature (strongly inspired by Jalal ad-Din Rumi's Sufi poems), in which Espaliú gradually set aside all covering, in which the physical part collapsed (like the people who were losing everything), and he gradually created a small metaphorical shelter with his own clothes for those who no longer had anything. Here the physical merges with the spiritual to recreate a metaphor of dispossession and loss.

In the third section or third room of the exhibition we come to various sculptures, *Carrying* (1992), which pose the same questions about mobility and support as the crutch sculptures in the previous room. The *Carrying* works are dark, heavy, closed structures that transmit the painful sensation that they are concealing and enclosing a person (a sick person) who cannot be touched or seen, a person (someone infected) whom they isolate from the world for the "good" of other passers-by. They are gloomy empty boxes that are closely related to the natural shapes of human beings, but they are cold blocks or walking coffins

that represent the nearness of death. As Espaliú himself wrote: "Transporting and bearing the unbearable ... a blind box in which you do not see a traveller who is only a supposition (nobody can get in or out, see or be seen, speak or listen, request or refuse, infect or be infected, move or stop in these vehicles). They are like an absolute wall, an anonymous, blind weight; perhaps they are only about a certain idea of love."<sup>4</sup>

AIDS was the accursed disease in those years, and those who suffered it were like plague victims who deserved no attention or support. Indifference, discrimination or outright rejection were the commonest attitudes displayed by the health, educational and political authorities. That was in the early 1990s, and when Pepe Espaliú discovered that he had contracted the disease he decided (after some hesitation) to confront the social stigma and perform actions with profound symbolic qualities in San Sebastián and Madrid; establishing artistic experiences understood as therapy that would serve to create awareness and heal wounds, at least symbolically. Here we can see a video of those actions, *Carrying*, 1992, in which the artist, barefoot, is carried in the arms of various people, two at a time, who do not let him touch the ground, emphasising the defencelessness and lack of protection of AIDS sufferers. A human chain carried the artist through the streets of two Span-

ish cities to demonstrate the baselessness of the fear of contagion and to relocate the threat of death. The sedan chair sculptures and the street actions are two very different instruments, but for Pepe Espaliú they served the same purpose: to construct subjective metaphors that engaged with the social dimension without lapsing into triteness or triviality.

I have left *Jaulas* (Cages), 1992–93, to the end. These sculptures have a very powerful, solid presence suggesting the most profound solitariness. They are small "empty" cages, in some of which (such as *Rumi* or *Luisa II*) there is a certain desire for communication and/or relationship. In others, such as *Tres jaulas* (Three Cages), the distance is greater, and as the bottom is open they might symbolise a desire for freedom or flight. But what all of them ask of the spectator is to look a little more deeply below the surface of each one, to try to listen to the words and sounds that these structures may emit, bringing us to the brink of absence, immobility and the most utter silence.

Cages hanging from the wall; weak, rounded shapes that "look" empty but that possibly refer to an absent presence, to something that is not there but that is sensed as missing, to the very varied metaphors of the body. A body that often imprisons and encloses the most diverse physical and mental processes: which whisper to us about individ-

ual and collective dimensions, the feeling of emptiness, the ties of love or solitariness, the intertwining of very different realities, the splitting of oneself; and about how we often find ourselves united by very varied attachments and yet we feel profoundly separated or isolated.

Summing up, this is a collection of strange and sometimes absurd objects that are of a hybrid nature (in terms of form and genre) which makes them undefinable. They all exude a strong poetic content that endows them with many semantic levels. An oeuvre that was developed in a climate of risk, making constant references to a profound personal feeling of being wrenched apart, and one that had a tragic end, with the death of the artist when he was still very young and at the height of his creative activity. An oeuvre in which the body, divided and wounded, is constantly present (even though we do not see it) in a fragmented, displaced, dual way. All of which is accompanied by a rich individual mythology that ranges from the most abject, Jean Genet, to the most sublime, St John of the Cross, in which desire and sex mingle with sacrifice and mysticism. As the artist himself indicated at the beginning of this text, "mystics, paranoiacs and homosexuals" continue to establish relationships in a *close circle*.

And now, "Finally, I want to tell you, Andrés, that at least we know that nobody can reproach us with

anything ... with sailor's blood we did not drink, knives we did not use, a hummingbird flight we did not make, lips like rims of silver that we did not kiss, bodies beneath the sheets that we did not enjoy. Nothing can reproach us, not a single moment, nor a single beautiful experience, nor the clinging ivy and bitter broom of a breath ..."<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTAS

1. Espaliú, Pepe, in *Pepe Espaliú, 1986–1995*. Junta de Andalucía, Seville 1994, p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett, Samuel: *The Unnamable*, in *Trilogy*. John Calder, London 1994, p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> Espaliú, Pepe: *En estos cinco años (1987–1992)*. Estampa, Madrid 1993, p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Espaliú, Pepe: *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Espaliú, Pepe, in *Pepe Espaliú, 1986–1995*. Junta de Andalucía, Seville 1994, p. 182.