

IN REM VERSO

Extract from a conversation with Santiago.

Eduardo Hurtado. September 2012

During a journey from Lisbon to Madrid in mid-September, I had a conversation with Santi about the project he would be presenting in the Jose Robles gallery at the end of the year. I asked him about the text for the exhibition, who he was going to ask to do it and what format he wanted it to have. He told me that he didn't know, that he was worrying about it because he wanted to explain it in a very direct way. Without him knowing, I recorded it all on my mobile. What is reproduced here, with some personal notes in the margin, is a transcript of that conversation.

E. Because...What are you going to work on?

S. Based on the video you saw the other day ("Por donde habéis venido" [*The way you came*]), working on it more...and on the idea of invisible interventions. At ground level... on the level of an invisible or innocuous landscape. I mean, I like interventions that can only be seen from above. And from there working on the whole idea of spontaneous constructions, coded messages and punk response drawings...

E. (Laughs)

S. ...mainly in a rural environment.

E. (Silence)

S. For example, playing with distorting hay bales in the countryside, so that all of a sudden a farmer can put them somewhere irrational, that doesn't fit in with optimising production, speed or the necessary economy of means... erm, I mean, nowadays in the countryside, especially in intensive farming, everything's structured so it's very productive, very quick and above all profitable. You always reap in the same direction; you always sow according to a logical grid... But if you break that grid you're imprinting a unique character. So, the important thing here isn't productivity or the capitalisation of the process anymore. If you change the position of the hay bales in a field so that they're not just towers of food or skittles chucked wherever the hell the bailing machine felt like it... randomly... if you break that grid you're making sense of the countryside, and it could contain a coded message.

E. Uh-huh...

S. I like the idea of a farmer suddenly breaking out of the grid and drawing something in the field with his tractor, that nobody's ever going to see and that only he knows exists, but that has a completely unequivocal and direct message for a hypothetical alien or a military surveillance system.

E. Uh-huh (nods)...

S. That... that apocalyptic element... with desperate messages... serious and useless but, on the other hand, with their undeniable comic nuance has always interested me.

E. And where does that come from? How...?

S. Where does it come from?

E. Yeah, erm... How did you get to this point? Where...? (bites lip) What was the... process like?

S. What was the process like...

E. If it stems from an initial idea that you wanted to work on or...

S. It stems from... Let's say that it's the grand conclusion of the logical process of everything that I've been doing on... roofs, in squares, on football pitches and stuff... but plus the interest that I've had recently in the countryside through working with natural materials: being innocuous, not leaving a trace, not polluting... All this is what's led me to take an active and conscious interest in the countryside.

E. If...

S. Maybe it stems from the need that I have—more and more- to get to know the countryside. It's like a research project...

E. (interrupting)...and using production materials...

S. Of course... I mean, because that has led me to understand...

E. From the production of material things to the production of... symbolic things, right?

S. Yeah, and... as well, during that research process, what happens? You really get interested in talking to farmers in order to understand when and where they go out to work, how that tractor works, what blades you need to plough that particular land, how long that blade takes to break down (it's the pencil tip we draw the picture with), what the earth's like (it's the drawing's first medium), what visibility it has on ground level, what impact that furrow has on the countryside... what happens when you remove that earth... eh, because just by removing the earth, without doing anything else, plants can grow whose seeds were latent, at rest, so...

E. Mmm (nods)...

It's really interesting when an artist talks about their work. Sometimes I feel that the problem with art is mediation (mediation that is sometimes fundamental and necessary, but that in many cases can turn against the work). I think that as artists, we should explain ourselves more, letting what we're doing speak for itself, but trying to make the effort to give a name to our own actions in our own words. That part, which perhaps we've left in the hands of others, is the part that somehow places our work in the world, and allows us to place ourselves facing it. I think that this conversation with Santi is one of these exercises, so my intention is to catch him off-guard and get information out of him without him realising. It's a wicked game, stemming, of course, from the trust between us, but I think that it's useful for me to understand him better and it's useful for him to set out some questions that perhaps he didn't even know were there. Talking out loud is healing, it's healthy, it puts things in the right place, gives us distance, perspective. It helps us, in short, to clarify spaces inside, outside and around what's happening. So, at this point, I explore this more deeply, and I let him talk... I act as the therapist, extracting thoughts, or as the oral historian, analysing from the outside. And Santi starts to unravel it all...

S. It's the same with animals... In France I carried out a small intervention (...) that I don't know if I'll develop a bit more for this exhibition and that I really liked: I was almost like a hunter, like a hunter of images... I was on a rural estate for two weeks, taking photos, and I found out where some birds were feeding, where they were eating... moles, and where the wild boars

who were wandering around there were eating. *(Silence)* What I did was go two or three times a day and leave the camera there when I knew that they were going to come and eat... to “hunt” those images. *(Silence)* But obviously, “they” can smell you from two miles away, “they” have to get used to you, “they” have to recognise that you’re not an aggressor, you’re a friend, they even have to recognise you as the guy that feeds them... that’s the only way they appear...

E. Mmm (nods)...

S. It was great because just at the end of those two weeks I was able to capture some of the images I wanted. I was lucky, really. I can imagine how difficult it is for a photographer or someone who makes nature and wildlife documentaries to do their job, because it’s all about patience...

S. What I did was draw, on a feeding trough for wild animals (a feeder shaped like a funnel that releases food little by little), a person on all fours, leaning with their head exploded... like that, animals eat from their waste and abandoned ideas, not just symbolically... The idea that justice is returning to the countryside. A poetic justice, again apocalyptic, yeah, but in the form of natural payback.

(silence)

S. There’s a legal statute, a concept in Roman law that to my mind connects aesthetically with the idea I’m talking about, and it’s the “action of reimbursement” or ACTIO IN REM VERSO. We’re talking about an action of reimbursement after a legal but unjust enrichment... *(silence)* with property, but also with land, or with land speculation, or with natural resources, because who does the countryside belong to? The ACTIO IN REM VERSO is intended to reimburse this impoverishment in certain cases of illicit net enrichment.

E. And is that the title of the exhibition?

S. I don’t know. I still don’t know what the exhibition’s title is. I like “IN REM VERSO”. Do you?

E. It’s cool.

S. *(Pulls a face)* Just imagine. It’s happened a lot on land where it wasn’t clear that it belonged to a member of the nobility, an aristocrat or a landowner, that was communal land, or land used communally that was being used and maintained effectively by cooperatives or local organisations and that suddenly –through legislation- were privatised, registered or taken into ownership without warning, with malice aforethought. Someone turns up and tells you... no, look, this thing you’ve been using (your land, your table, your bed) belongs to me, and here are the deeds. Then they impose completely unfair conditions so that you can keep working, eating and sleeping using resources that were giving sustainable wealth to a whole region... fairly. That’s when the need for JUSTICE appears, when it is considered that the LAW doesn’t apply. And IN REM VERSO actions happen and come into force in areas the law can’t reach, to resolve a *legal injustice* or an act of legal but unjust enrichment that is not considered fair and that therefore cries out, and demands, to be *reversed*.

(Santi indicates left... we’re on the motorway, we overtake a lorry...)

S. Hmm, this statute could also be applied, why not? To make up for or repay in some way the environmental damage done caused by a private oil installation to the surrounding region,

degrading its life system in favour of a bigger and imposed cause. Who pays that affected region for the damage caused by an oversized private installation?

E. And for its cancer...

S. Of course!

(silence)

The production system has changed for us. It's already changed. It's not that we're a lost generation, like some people say, it's that we don't have the key to understanding the change. We probably don't have the historic distance, or the courage, to do it. Those ahead of us have their life structure organised, those who come after us will have time to organise it based on the new production methods. But we won't, because we're caught in the fucking middle. But I think that a change has already taken place that's going to lead us to a new system of material, symbolic and power relations. It's a change that's taking place to balance the system, from inequality, and that's responding to a global logic that we're not able to see, or understand. This lack of understanding is what makes us messed up as a society, and is what's meaning that a few, who do understand the logic, are getting rich. It's bleak to know that, for us, what's coming is worse than what's been, or at least won't be better than what we've already experienced. We're entering a new era when we'll see great mechanical, technological and economic progress that won't be accompanied by social progress from the individual to the collective. Maybe this isn't a bad thing; maybe it's an opportunity to change from the bottom up. To realise that we should do less, spend less, live more slowly, produce at a different rate. Walk more. Maybe it's time to bail out.

S. So, it's possible that IN REM VERSO came about in ancient Rome because the senators and patricians used to do whatever the hell they wanted. They moved goods and belongings from one person to another with no justification, becoming incredibly rich for no reason, stealing fields away from the common good; leaving them to die...

E. Uh-huh (nods)...

S. It's a very nice statute, natural justice, to put it one way, where the impoverished person can try to get reimbursed for this impoverishment, to the value that the other person... or business or state, has benefited, for no reason.

E. So basically, what you're talking about is taking back control of the work system, right? Of your own production system... (...) But, in one way, starting from...

S. Yeah, right, but it's also about a STRIKE BACK, a real and formal poetic restoration. That is to say, when I do this (the drawing with the tractor in the field in Salamanca) it's the field, with its own tools, that's leaving a message for outer space and also for the system that contains it...

E. Uh-huh (nods) ...And working with the people there, in the countryside? How was it? Did you tell them about the project? How did they experience it?

S. Yeah, of course... and they loved it. Although at the start they said "what's that crazy guy doing out there on the hill?" Then we did a showing of photos and videos in the town, showing the whole creative process, from the smallest detail to the biggest, widening the focus and finishing with the bird's-eye-view image of the intervention. That way, they fully understood the scale of the project. For me it was really important for them to have a real emotional involvement and to know that it had happened in their town... that they looked at themselves from another perspective. Of course, if they went to see it on the ground they couldn't see anything at all...

E. What the hell is that guy doing?

It's strange how society approaches the work of the artist, as if we were aliens. I don't like that idea. I don't like how we're so far from everything, and in general, I don't like the attitudes that spread that idea. That's why it's interesting when someone, like Santi in this case, decodes the art process and brings it back down to earth- almost literally, putting it in the hands of people who, until now, had never felt the "need" to create. Interesting things emerge in this exchange, because everyone learns something and because when the exercise is over, the world is a better place. When I met Santi and saw his work, I have to admit I didn't feel very comfortable. The same thing happened to me as to the farmer, who couldn't find the key. That was until affection, empathy and being closer to it produced a kind of more intense, truer, knowledge, that allowed me to understand Santi and his process- in part, I suppose. Our contact is good, our relationship is good, because it's frictional. There's tension. There's fracture. And, although what Santi does and what I do are very far apart formally, in the end, there are the same preoccupations, the same depths, the same desire to break structures. There's an interest on Santi's part to put himself in the centre from the outside, and for me, that's fundamental. That's what makes Santi better than the rest.

S. ...from a normal viewpoint you can't really see anything, just furrows that don't make sense, an enormous anamorphism...

E. (inaudible word)

S. ...you have to imagine it, I like that. When you do an intervention on the ground thinking about how it'll be reflected on a map or from the air, you've got three views of the work... four! They're three layers that overlap in a fourth layer of understanding. I mean, first you have the normal view, deformed and incomplete, kind of at ground level; second you have the aerial view, colder and more objective, that you can see from a light aircraft, balloon, etc... third you have the mediated view...

E. ...with the "thing"

(The "thing" is the octokopter that recorded the aerial images)

S. ... yeah, with technology, both off- and on-line (Google Earth and things like that). And lastly the documentary view of the stop-motion video, overlapping all the layers within the timeline. That way it creates a view of what happened there that's always incomplete...

E. So what you're presenting in the exhibition is the result of all these experiences?

S. I'm presenting that video, drawings and a series of photos of hay bales. I've been playing around with them all summer. Even though a bale can weigh a tonne, we could move them with a tractor to make "sculptures" of fingers doing that (*Santi raises his middle finger in a "FUCK OFF" gesture*). When you're on the road or the motorway in summer, at the side you can see those mounds, those messages. There were some that already had those latent finger shapes; we just modified their layout a bit...

(Lorry horn)

S. Let's see? S... PAIN... This way...

(We take the diversion, we're about to cross the border between Portugal and Spain)

I'm thinking about how this work of Santi's, in the context we're living in, is timely. It's in the right place. It's literal. And I like that. I like literal things, more and more. We've been too preoccupied with making something complicated out of something simple, but I think that it's

the opposite, that complexity should be discovered in simplicity. We must be literal. And we must say "fuck it" more often and do it so everyone can hear us. Because not everything is worth something. And not everyone's good. Not everyone is worth something. Not everything is useful. Not every way is valid. That's been the mistake; thinking that things could be done in any way and that things would end up in the right place. And it's not like that. We've got to start by throwing it all out, saying no, being sceptical, being literal, stop seeming like we're being, in order to be, what every person thinks they should be, but being. And for art it's the same, it should be. And that's it. So this work of Santi's is a hit. It is what it has to be. It is what Santi is. And for that reason, it's good.

S. In the end we managed to get five rows of hay bales, moving one up and change the height of *this finger* (Santi raises his middle finger to the sky).

E. *Hmm (laughs)*

S. The truth is that managing to make a living sculpture, that's apparently invisible, that degrades naturally and that also only disintegrates or is destroyed when you have to feed the animals is very gratifying. It's them, the animals, in winter, when they need forage, who lower *this finger*.

(silence, and the sound of the left indicator)

S. It's nature that owns the countryside... I'd break the chain of progress as we understand it today, I'd slow down the machine that's taking us towards disaster, for me, the revolution is going back to basics.

E. *I was recording all of this.*

S. Shall we stop for a drink?

(...)

It's not nice to record someone without them knowing it. But in this case it's been useful for us to find a way to clearly, concisely and precisely string together the discursive elements that Santi wanted to highlight. I can't find a better way of presenting a text than this one. And it's difficult to find a better travelling companion than Santiago.