

To return, to return to your arms, my love¹.

Open letter from a visual artist who started as a painter -among other things- then became a neologist, but then relapsed... a bit.

Lurking:

First, those disagreements that triggered recriminations. Then the quarrels. Fierce, insulting ones. Soon enough the cold and harsh silences of our estrangement became habitual, scarcely intermingled by the occasional betrayal (which, considering the situation, wasn't such). Separation was inevitable, as inevitable as the curiosity which flows from unstated desire, of unsatisfied desire. I have lived other passions, of course, delirious or serene, fleeting or sustained passions. Even though I freed myself from her bonds, the sense of loss and desire lurks on.

But one morning many years later, I woke once again in her arms. Such marvel gave a special radiance to our caresses. It felt so familiar it seemed archaic. You'll tell me the very circumstances that led to the rendezvous provoked it. Who knows? I don't. Days went by as inch by inch I evoked the feel of her skin. Months passed as we recalled times shared. For two, three, then four years we gathered our tales. (How indeed does one count time?) So, even today we remain together.

At times I sense the cold shadows of betrayal. Who or what is being betrayed? I don't know, but queries flower open like orange wedges. Could this tryst merely be a consequence of deeply rooted habits or could it be an insane relapse leading me to suicide? Or might it lead – who knows- to a new liaison free of recriminations, one able to take me to another dimension, to sensations I can't even imagine?

Effects:

It all is as if nothing ever happened, as if we'd never questioned one another, never betrayed or rejected or separated from each other. Truth told, too much water has flowed under the bridge, too much. I've no more illusions. I can't forget how she always imposed her will on me (as she imposes it onto others). She's overbearing and ubiquitous, I know I must be cautious.

You're aware of how tyrannical she is. You might say to me that her strange allure, so tied to the life she's lived, holds the key to her charm today. But neither of us, in fact, barely any one, can remember the impact she had in the lives of so many people when she reigned as The

¹ Title of song written by Mexican composer Fernando Maldonado, in the 50s:

'Y volver volver, volver a tus brazos otra vez,

Llegare hasta donde estés

Yo se perder, yo se perder, quiero volver, volver, volver.'

Top Star, The Only Star. Some may still have an inkling of her origins, perhaps even of her initial calling, but that is all too easy to forget in the thick tangle of gossip and stories that embroil her. The fact is that few today really know her, or know of her past, when she was ingenious, daring, generous, surprising; few know what it was that made her so luminous. And fewer still know the many shady and mysterious reasons that made her so demean herself. For let us not dismiss the matter of money from our minds. But surely, even though you know so little of her, you must be aware of her ability to muster large, huge fortunes.

Let's face it; even when she's always been so close to us, we've never learned how to cope with her. You know her superficially, thanks to her reputation, to rumors, to what others say about her. But hey, this great lady who is the cause of my insomnia, this Madam Painting, has been everything but transparent.

Records:

Truth be said, ever since I can remember, my relationship with Madam Painting was ardently unconditional. As a youngster I delivered myself unto her, body and soul. She was my role model, my guide, my manual. I courted her relentlessly day and night, I immersed myself in her stories, I shared her hopes, and I did her chores! Phew! I actually gave her my life to the point of abdicating my other dreams, practically all of them. And thus I matured.

Committed to her and enjoying all her attentions and caresses, I remember how I gradually came to the awareness of what I saw as dalliances and hypocrisy, which is the seed of betrayal. She mocked impostors and assured me she hated lies. What interested her most, she passionately emphasized, was to learn in order to develop, to discover in order to share, to remember in order to plan for the future. She avowed she liked to express herself for the sheer pleasure of thinking. She thrillingly assured me that, together we could shake things up, that together we could jolt the lives of those around us. She never tired of repeating that the important thing was *to take delight in surprising others*.

Shadows:

Even now, I simply can't understand what happened. Though she was born in a modest crib (while still an infant she drew images on the fine sands by the sea and on the walls of caves) and though she matured and acquired such a generous wisdom, how is that she began to monkey around with scoundrels and opportunists? How did she come to conspire with thieves and schemers and commit so many outrages? How could she go astray so badly? How could Madam Painting stoop so low? There! I've said it. She debased herself! Even now, as I weave myself in her embrace and feel the softness of her breasts, I'm unable

to understand how Madam Painting, whom I worshiped so, became a slut? How on earth could she put aside all her scruples? How can she play such foul games with whoever comes along, flirting with the mighty, faking it with the weak, disdaining those (like me) who revere her?

As I lay beside her after this late afternoon of love, I can't help thinking of what I had seen in her when we first met and how she'd changed; of how her transformations came to disgust me so, to the point that I blew up and promised myself to never ever have anything more to do with her. I can recollect, as we sleep together, how hard it was to break up with her and to regain control of my life. I have problems even now. I had to learn how to establish new bonds and to defend myself in other struggles. I actually dared believe, when I broke away from her, that she'd felt her powers diminished. Yes, her strength has waned but she still holds proud sway over those she feels support her.

Effects

I'm not naïve. As I watch Madam Painting move around close to me, nervous, busily, I know she couldn't care less over what I do with my life, ever. Or with what her other lovers do with their lives. "Of course," I say to myself, "you're into so many people, into so much depravity..." I truly enjoy her constant presence, only she no longer has any say in my life. In fact, she's well aware that she's no longer at the heart of the visual universe we've created.

In moments of lust, I remember, she allowed herself to give birth several times. Did she ever measure the consequences? We have her two principal heiresses: Mis Graphics (who often likes to behave like her mother), and Mis Photography, who early on managed to become independent and who sails gracefully through life. I've had incest-flavoured adventures with both of them. You know them well: they gave birth to Madam Movies and Madam Tevee and are the grandmothers of Mis Holography, Mis Digital Image and Mr. Adobe, all of them very active, most friendly and generous. I've also had my flings with Ms Performance, Madam Theatre's strange bastard daughter, and with Mis Installation, who though she divides her loyalties between her aunts, Madame Sculpture and Madame Architecture, deals more and more with Madame Crafts. And it being confession time, I have to admit that one bright morning some thirty years ago and free from Madam Painting's hold, I, ah... came across Madam Writing, with whom I enjoy a particularly intimate relationship. She is as complicated as Madam Painting, no doubt, but I've been able to keep things on an even keel. Might it be because Madam Writing never made me any promises?

Techniques:

On an everyday basis I get well along with Madam Painting. I no longer care if she insists in keeping her European traditions, nor do I take issue over her penchant to adopt American habits, though in view of all that she's appropriated from so many latitudes, it certainly is ludicrous to see her keeping rituals and celebrations that seem as dumb as wearing sandals and socks or decking Christmas trees with false snow in hot weather. She used to be quite fluent in French and Italian, but today, she mostly speaks American English, mixing New York's nasal accent, Texas drawl and Miami's quirky Latino English. Now and again she answers me in Spanish from Spain, full of "lisps", but never in public. (Someone told me she speaks Portuguese, but I can't confirm it).

I wonder...

"How does she manage," I wonder, "to be indifferent to the damages her sick friends inflict on her? I see her courting new friends, graphic designers who care absolutely nothing of her past achievements, and flirting with people who call themselves curators, who couldn't use their hands even to fondle her, but have the gall to order her around and manage her affairs. Not long ago, she befriended a grotesque chimera who calls herself Madame Marketing and who can be seen here and there and everywhere, a frozen grin on her heavy make-up. Madam Painting took up wearing vintage clothes and keens to appear in gossip tabloids. She contrives very strange scams to please the army of sycophants that surround her, perhaps to assure their loyalty in case they show interest in her daughters, granddaughters and great-granddaughters.

Above all, she cares after her fortune, spending time scrutinizing business reports, opening accounts here and there, transferring dirty money. She frequents speculators, drug dealers, opportunists and the new rich who may be convinced to create a new art foundation or build one more museum designed to look like a mixture between a mausoleum and a department store window! How dare she scoff at people who would be only too happy to admire her as in her heyday of old!

Veils and lights:

Though she insists in assuring me that "things will be different now", and though it is hard to believe her, yet I romp and rollick with her. I love her glamour of olden times,... let me tell you. She loves being pampered and takes time to pay me some attention. Knowing how little she cares about what I think of her makes me wonder whether this relationship can last, or better said, whether whatever brought us together again – I'm unable to describe it- can ever be meaningful.

Often, I'll stop and think about this stage of our relationship. I do believe she'd enjoy to feel the joy of our quiet walks again, to

remember the history of the remote places, the forgotten geographies, the small towns and urban neighbourhoods she once frequented. I wish she could connect to people again, in their homes, at work, when facing mountains, at sunset, to feel and to enjoy her feelings and those of others. Could I could persuade her to change her habits, to be again what she once was?

My beloved Madam Painting would have to recover her courage and take real risks, far from the madding crowd, the truculent fauna, the weird habits of the sumptuous environment she now frequents. I wish she wouldn't have to fear being ignored by the market, I wish she could repudiate senseless eggheads. I wish she could once again celebrate sensitivity and intelligence rather than knowledge. I wish she could once again engage in the exchange of ideas with the world, in full daylight and inspire musicians and poets. Could she prevail? Would she make it? Does she want to?

Felipe Ehrenberg

Text written in São Paulo, in September 2003, while I was painting my series

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