

# José Noguero's scenographies. Symbolic language behind 'the rubbish'.

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Translated by Mhairi Fiona Bain



Detail from Frage I  
Photograph, 90x90 cm [2]

*[In]... wretched modern habituation,  
to being no longer able to enjoy  
as whole human beings:  
the absolute arts tear us to pieces,  
as it were, and we also enjoy only by bits  
now as ear-people,  
now as eye-people,  
and thus successively.*

[F. Nietzsche, The Greek Musical Drama (1870)]

## **José Noguero. A symbolic artist.**

At a time in which retroaction from the public symbolic to the internal symbolic is taking place, art has to re-awaken the birth of the symbol [3] once again. Searching for synchrony, and placing opposites together are the artist's tasks. The artist's objective is to make an absence visible.

José Noguero [4] is above all a mystical artist. He is not an artist who can be read immediately, his work requires a slow and subtle presentation, even perhaps an initiation. He is one of the contemporary artists who is found within what Manuel Lavaniegosv [5] defines as symbolic art. In other words, it is art which aims to "touch divinity," to connect with what Rudolf Otto named 'the wholly other'[6] and which can only be re-presented or presented ephemerally.

This whole perspective is based on the idea that the divine is fleeting, it slips away, and it is hidden within a dynamic of attraction and fear. The divine is not exhibited, it can only be represented, it is never presented as itself. There are only allusions to it, momentary and ephemeral presences which through fleeting hierophants are observed through brief symbolic experiences.

The symbolic cannot be crystallised since that would not be in its nature. Rather it has a fleeting nature which allows itself to be looked at but which escapes at the same time. The sacred is therefore that which in its «numinous» nature, alludes to a profound affective experience of an ambivalent dimension.

That is, the holy is experienced as "terror which seduces and seduction which terrifies", that which is presented to man as being fully other: tremendous and fascinating. The fact is that the tremendus fascinantis in its non-profane nature, and due to its voluptuosity can only be "re-presented", but never presented as itself.

This is exactly what José Noguero does in "Scenographies", which was temporarily housed in the Fundació Suñol in Barcelona. In this exhibition, which consisted of six photographs and one installation, the territory of art was vindicated as being a space for the protection and the "exhibition" of the symbol. Although we know that it is absent, we can feel its proximity through the halo of its representation. In that way, since the mystical is the unspeakable, it can therefore only be re-presented through the language of art allied with the symbol [7].



Escenografía para un despliegue I,  
2007  
Photograph, 150x120 cm

In the case of José Noguero, while a symbolic artist his devise is doubled: he reveals the symbol and watches over it. In "Scenographies" the function of the artist is divided into two since it reveals and hides at the same time. The symbol is not "exhibited" (because it would be a contradictory intention), but is only evoked.

On a descriptive level, the photographs in this exhibition, taken in a television studio in Berlin, talk of non-presence, of detaining time in space and in the rhythm, if not the turbulence-of the events which occur in them. No more volatile and dynamic than the events which occur on the television screen, and which have a physical origin: the scenographies.



Weißes Kinderzimmer mit Speisekammer [8], 2004  
Photograph, 261 x 180 cm

However, in a space such as a television studio, which is highly profane and desacralised, Noguero sees something else: the self-control of the "empty" forms which, in the absence of the day-to-day which surrounds them, have something to say in their silence and suspension. It is in these scenographies in which the profane event occurs, but it is also where a quiet mysticism subsists. According to Jeffrey Swartz, in *Scenographies* Noguero:

Intervenes by pressing a hypothetical pause button, freezing the shot in an image of hiatus or inactivity, as if the representation space were being inspected by a security camera during the hours of rest from work. [9]

His vision in these scenographies makes them turn into something else which is no longer only their profane and secondary function of containing action. The captured images- captured through photographs- now have a symbolic strength of their own.



In seinem Mund o asomada, 2007  
Photograph, 112 x 160 cm

Each of these four photographs talk of 'something' which have inhabited these scenographies, but which is now absent, and which Noguero can only capture when located outside the (profane) temporariness of daily life in a television studio.

Noguero makes clear the innocuous and inherent need humans-whether western or not- have for symbolic nourishment. Whether it is due to his previous experience with Indian religious sculpture, or due to his personal symbolic interest, the truth is that he tries to vindicate the exuberance of symbolic strength in what is most simple: the timeless vacuum and the absence of movement.

He is therefore not interested in the normality of spaces which witness and consume images; in other words, he does not concentrate on the profane space of the scenographies, but rather on the moment of suspension, on the epoché.



Abbau I [10], 2008  
Photograph, 261x180 cm

From the field of social sciences the German sociologist Alfred Schütz had already talked about 'methodological suspension' as being a paralysation of value judgements [11] (judgemental in the purest Weberian style), but Noguero's epoché is different. In contrast to the discussion space for science, he is located in the aesthetic dimension. He alludes more to the suspension of the profane, attempting to capture ⇨⇨⇨the hierophany even through a cold and obtuse camera lense.

Not satisfied with that, and as if the four photographs of the television studies were taken out of the one-dimensional level, Noguero makes another installation from another scenography coexist with it in the same room. "Scenography 2008" is located in the centre of Nivell Zero [12].



Escenografía 2008 Installation  
Photograph of Ground Zero, Fundació Suñol

Surrounded by the four photographs from the Berlin television studies, this installation which alludes to an empty scenography (without any walls), is located in front of another two photographs which correspond to another story. There are no walls in the central installation. They are only evoked through brass tubes which could potentially be covered by wood or concrete. However the meaning is the same, the scenography, stripped of any material content, and reduced to the minimum, continues to evoke space. Only this time more radically: it has revealed it entirely.

Once again, the naked space alludes to the symbol through the epoché. Stripped of walls, the scenography in the television studio is reduced to being skeletal, to almost being "empty". However, there is a new presence which had not shown itself previously: a bag of rubbish containing something, which is supported by one of the tubes in the brass scenography.

The two photographs in the background (Frage I and II) respond to two moments: a first case and a second case, as reference to the name of the piece suggests. They contain a man made of plaster sitting in a meditational attitude (perhaps a Buddhist attitude), and in the second one, the same figure lies in pieces, following a destructive intervention carried out by Noguero.

Having reached this point and evoked the symbol, Noguero tends towards hermeticism. Once again he shows what contains the significant part by hiding it. And he carries out this final act through a metaphorical slip.



Frage I and Frage II, 2008  
Photograph, 90x90 cm

In the same way as with the beggar in *Oedipus Rex*, the film by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1967), or the character of the tramp in *Walter Benjamin*, under their disguise of waste, of refuse, Noguero's bags of rubbish contain mythical wreckage and the most profound symbolic dimension which contemporary society has decided to make residual. The symbol, the wreckage of that plaster figure, is kept hidden inside the bags.

Noguero's rubbish bags, which in this exhibition are shown as figures, have a different nature. In any case they are not waiting to be thrown into the bin, but rather, apparently conserve the fragmented wreckage of a meditating figure created and destroyed by Noguero himself. This wreckage involves an ephemeral presence and a potentially reborn action, in accordance with the prerogative of the creator. [13]





Noguero destroying the figure from Frage I.  
Cover of the Fundació Suñol's publication, 2008.

It is here where Noguero's criticism of Modernity comes in, since in this 'modern wretched habituation' paraphrasing Nietzsche, the West and now also a large part of the westernised East, have forgotten the symbol.

However, what it demonstrates is that the symbolic dimension still continues its own devaluation. Despite the deformations of modern de-symbolisation there is still a beacon of light. In the case of Anthony Giddens, the modern regime is still supported, suggesting that amongst the "undesired consequences of action and thought", modifications to the personal life of individuals arise. These need to deposit more reliability and trust in personal relationships faced with the Weberian "great disenchantment" and the fall of the gods.

Capitalism and rationalisation through the erotic dimension of the homo-symbolicus continues to awaken and reside inside all of the subjects who live in society. Noguero metaphorises this through leftover rubbish.

Even in modern times-sheltered under the image of the «areligious man» (Mircea Eliade), subjects continue to need the community. However this lack of connection (re-connection) presented by Western societies, still maintains a relationship with the homo religiosus, since it descends from him. "And, whether he likes it or not, it is also his work, established based on the situations experienced by his ancestors"[14].

In the modern desacralised world the symbol persists, Giddens approaches it as a need for reliability and trust in the other. "The majority of men who are «without religion» continue to behave religiously, without realising it" [15] since in their daily life they allude to «disguised mythologies», since: "a man who is exclusively rational is a mere abstraction; he is never inside reality"[16]. According to Mircea Eliade, modern man renounces the symbolic-religious dimension, but faces the paradox that consciously or subconsciously he continues to have symbolic attitudes, although in the majority of cases, this is disguised as rationality.

The individual is necessarily only a fraction and a distortion of the total image of man (...) If he aims to isolate himself, whether through actions, thoughts or feelings, he will only manage to break away from the source of his existence [17].[18]

## Conclusions

Noguero's "Scenographies" are a well-thought out sample, laden with symbolic meaning. It is not therefore a piece of superficial postmodernity which limits itself to a critique of power and the status of the individual within discourse in the manner of Michel Foucault and his like. On the contrary, it is highly laden with religious content. Here religious is understood in the most epistemological meaning of the term, in that it seeks to reconnect (join once again) the pieces of the broken symbollein.

The modern condition, in its desire for progress, as was indicated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, has been disassociated from the myth that, "the myth is already the Enlightenment; the Enlightenment relapses into mythology"[19]. In the same way as these authors from the Frankfurt School, Noguero stresses time and time again that we have become disconnected from the symbol.

Based on the philosophy of art, Noguero, as a symbolic artist, remembers this fact and is inclined towards contemplation. Contemplation which, far from vindicating discourse, alludes to silence, to the type of "epoché" in Schütz, in which modern dynamisation-more crystallised in large cities and through television channel-flicking-is suspended. In the words of Jeffrey Swartz:

this suggestion of «theatricalism without action» is particularly pertinent in the work of Noguero, in which he insists on ostensibly representing empty scenes, boxes which have sides which fit badly and badly defined edges in which priority is given to the composition of the figure, and where the contingent action, even when the figure is present, can only be represented as sublimated potential.[20]

Noguero evokes, he does not enunciate. And here he reaffirms his symbolic artistic character once again, since he understands that his work has to activate a paralysing action. Once again the Holy is reaffirmed as being appealing and scary at the same time, since this 'tremendus fascinantis' can be known, but only through contemplation.

In "Scenographies" talking is carried out through silence. It exhibits through language in the same way in which Wittgenstein gives way to silence. However this suspension of discourse is expressed through symbolic language, which is even more potent than that of linguistic rationality. It will never therefore be discursive, it cannot be. For that reason, it does not come under the category of modern logos, but rather criticises it through its reductionism of things, trying to activate a symbolic mechanism in the spectator.



However, is this symbolic event for everyone? "Frontier art"[21] which is opened up through the limit of what is sacred, is abstract art [22]. The language of what is sacred is mythical, ritualistic, and, in the case of Noguero, is not easy to read, nor are impressions and 'translations' of it immediate. It is not a type of art which can be explained.

Although it is true that homo-aestheticus puts fundamental dimensions of humans into action in profound artistic tasks, this task is not 'decipherable' for everyone. The artist "makes the sacred appear" in the phenomenic dimension, in art's attempt to touch God, synchronising the 'fence of appearance' with the 'hermetic fence'[23] puts a communicative power into play which breaks away from historic time.

However, the whole previous discursive aspect gives way to one of the questions asked by some of the visitors to the "Scenographies" exhibition. This question, beyond the level of anecdote, reflects the situation which exists in relation to the consumption of the most contemporary art: Are the rubbish bags part of the collection or did the cleaning lady forget them?



Detail of the rubbish bag from Escenografía 2008

Pierre Bourdieu already discussed the idea of 'cultural capital' as the interpretive basis on which art and all cultural production[24] is "consumed." According to the author, visits to museums are effectively influenced by cultural and economic capital combined with the accessibility of works of art, since the origin and availability of art makes it more feasible or not for a person who is liable to visit museums to do so more frequently in larger cities rather than in rural areas.

Frequenting museums for Bourdieu is a process of acculturation, which the author agrees with, because in effect 'the practice of frequenting museums is intensified as the level of instruction increases', but also the degree of identification with the work between the spectator and the producer increases.

Visits or the sarcastically named "love of art" is not more determined by the supply than it is in reality by the level of instruction or cultural capital. This should alert cultural policies,

since reducing the cost of entry to museums will not ensure a lasting change in cultural consumption, nor in the degree of cultural assimilation of the information offered in museums.

Noguero addresses the modern world while at the same time distancing himself from it. A destroyer of symbolisation, the modern world can be seen through Noguero to be a schizophrenic structure which is in ourselves and which paradoxically contains the solution within its own contradiction. The response to the previous question would be: Yes, the rubbish bags were forgotten by the cleaning lady. She, and all of us, can be found in the most westernised contemporary society.

*"If knowing is not a right,  
surely it is a left."*[25]  
Silvio Rodríguez.

Marlen Mendoza Morteo.  
Barcelona, May 2008.

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#### **Notes:**

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[1]"With the support of the Programa Alban, Programa de becas de alto nivel de la Unión Europea para América Latina, beca nº E05D059503MX".

[2]José Noguero, 2008. *Escenografías* exhibition on the Nivell Zero of the Fundació Suñol building, Barcelona, 2008.

[3]Based the etymology of the symbol as a *symballein* the symbol is understood to be that which points to meaning, to the limit and which tries to communicate the most difficult, the most intimate experience. Contrary to the *dia-bolic*, the *symballein* manages to achieve "fits together and coincides in its two parts, as a "fragment of a coin or of a broken medal which only fulfils its mission when it reunites with the misplaced half". (See Eugenio Trías, *Diccionario del espíritu*, [The Dictionary of the Spirit] p. 183 and 185).

[4]José Noguero was born in Barbastro, Huesca, in 1969. He studied in the Escola Mas-sana, Barcelona (1985-1992), in the Bristol Polytechnic (1989) and in the Rietveld Academy in Ámsterdam (1991). He carried out research visits to Rome and Naples, 1993, and in 2005 to the Hindu sculpture workshop in Lingaraj Maharana in Orissa, India. Some of the most recent individual exhibitions he has participated in are "Desde Orissa" [From Orissa], SEA-Alicante, 2006, and "Vastú", in the CAC, Málaga, 2005. He has been living and working in Berlin since 1999. (Taken from Jeffrey Swartz, *Acto 3: José Noguero, Escenografías*, Publication, Fundació Suñol, Barcelona, 2008).

[5]Manuel Lavaniegos. Course entitled "Símbolo y mito en el arte y la cultura contemporánea" [Symbol and myth in contemporary art and culture] México, CRIM-Unam, 2004.

[6]Cf. Rudolf Otto. *Lo Santo* [The Holy] (1980). From the perspective of Eugenio Trías, "Lo santo hace referencia a lo más alto y encumbrado: lo que no puede ser tocado ni rozado por el testigo (ni tan siquiera «mirado»). Lo sagrado, en cambio puede ser tocado; puede operarse con ello (en el objeto de culto o sacrificio), con lo que puede consumirse o destruirse" [The holy makes reference to what is highest and most exalted what cannot be touched or brushed against by the witness (not even «looked at»). The sacred, on the other hand, can be touched; one can operate with it (through an object of worship or sacrifice, with which it can be consumed or destroyed")]. E. Trías, *Op. Cit.*, p. 180.

[7]Ludwig Wittgenstein in his critique of language also talks about 'the unspeakable' as a respectful silence which, in contrast to the 'speakable' cannot be expressed in proposals and can only be demonstrated through mystical silence. It is about the limit of language located in the field of science in front of the unassailable frontier of the mystical. See *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, Madrid, Alianza, 2003.

[8]English translation: "Children's room with pantry".

[9]Jeffrey Swartz, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

[10]English translation: "degradation".

[11]Alfred Schütz, *Fenomenología del mundo social*. [Phenomenology of the Social World.]

[12]"Ground Zero", the basement floor in the Fundació Suñol.

[13]las bolsas de basura de -Noguero, que en esta exposición se muestran como figura, pertenecen a otro orden. No esperan en ningún caso ser arrojadas al contenedor, sino que, aparentemente, retienen los restos fragmentados de una figura meditativa de la propia creación y destrucción de Noguero, de presencia efímera y posible tema renaciente, según la prerrogativa del creador.

[14]Mircea Eliade, *Lo sagrado y lo profano* [The sacred and the profane] p. 148.

[15]Ibid. p. 149.

[16]Ibidem. p. 152.

[17]El individuo es necesariamente sólo una fracción y una distorsión de la imagen total del hombre (...) Si pretende aislarse, ya sea en hechos, pensamientos o sentimientos, sólo logra romper las relaciones con la fuente de su existencia.

[18]Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 337.

[19]T. Adorno y M. Horkheimer, *Dialéctica del iluminismo*, p. 56.

[20]Esta sugerencia de «teatralidad sin acción» es en particular pertinente para la obra de Noguero, en la que se insiste en representar ostensiblemente escenarios vacíos, cajas con los lados mal encajados y cantos mal definidos en los que se da prioridad a la composición sobre la figura y donde la acción contingente, incluso cuando la figura está presente, sólo se puede representar como potencialidad sublimada.

[21]In the sense used by Manuel Lavaniegos as art which bridges the gap between the sacred and the profane.

[22]I refer here to the etymological definition of the term abstract, as an abstraction of reality, and not in the sense of abstract art as a concept taken from art history connected to the form.

[23]This is a translation of the “cerco del aparecer” and the “cerco hermético” concepts created by Eugenio Trías.

[24]Pierre Bourdieu, “Las condiciones sociales de la práctica cultural” [The social conditions of cultural practice. In: *The love of art.*] en *El amor al arte*.

[25]“Si saber no es un derecho, seguro será un izquierdo”.