



Nothing is too petty

Antoni Tàpies

... because to be born again, first you must die.

Joan Salvat-Papasseit

I am often asked the fateful questions: 'What does this represent? What did you mean to say with these spots? Do you think the people understand your ideas when you use these lines or these materials?'

I usually say nothing because I have long since given up on trying to explain in a few words, on finding the precise words for things that I have perhaps been incubating for years and years. It is like Mallarmé's response to the young woman who had not 'understood' him after several hours of reading his writings. Moreover, it is not up to me to explain, as there are art critics and commentators who could be doing it. But the twinges of conscience induced by the persistence of so many people of good faith has had its effect on me.

Still, this is not the only source of the difficulty. Generally, those who ask want to know something about a particular work, or even about a particular sign or fragment of a work. And nowadays, as I have often said, the meaning of a work cannot be found in the work itself, for one work exists in relationship to many other works of one's own and by others. To explain even one is practically to write the history of the art of our time.

But despite the difficulties, it is not impossible. And I am

sure of this because there are writers who have done very interesting analyses of the meaning of my works. I have not agreed entirely with them all, but certainly I have agreed partially.

In truth, everything can be analysed, even the most abstract works. Commentators have written entire books, for example, on Beethoven's quartets. But, as you will notice, they must often be spoken of by relating certain passages with certain others, or this movement with the previous one or the one's that follow, or one particular opus with another or yet another, or Beethoven's entire oeuvre with that of Haydn or Mozart. Emotions, as always, are transmitted just as much by the work itself as by the contrast it produces in relation to other emotions. In this way, a lyric theme achieves its fullest meaning when it comes after a more tempestuous or epic one, and a theme is all the more passionate if it has been preceded by a few calm or serene notes.

I myself would never have said that anyone could comment intelligently on something so volatile and almost impalpable as, for example to go on with the Master of Bonn, the famous Cavatina in his Quartet in B-flat Major. But it has been done, and quite well. And it is immediately evident that, as I have already said, it must be pointed out that precisely because of the fury of the preceding *danza tedesca*, the *arioso dolente* that follows is so plangent, and that the parenthesis of shadows midway through carries us into the light at the end. And this all seems strangely evident without appearing to speak of anything concrete. From the cry of the violin under the weight of the cello to the beating of the heart against an unbroken background, or from the sighs and feminine cadences of the second violin, with all its echoes, to the *appoggiatura*, the long, immensely gentle harmony, etc., etc. Clearly one is always left with doubts as to whether the explanation works because one has already heard the quartet or whether the quartet can be better understood because one has first read the explanation. But the fact is that nothing is impossible, and if pressed – even if only to satisfy my friend Carlos Franqui, revolutionary and avant-garde poet of Cuba, who says that one must offer the people 'a hint' – I could say something about particular works of my own, even though I think that this is all quite hazardous, and I always have the feeling that the most important things are left unsaid.

So I will try to do this in the name of those who have so often asked me to do so. To convince them as well that it won't make a bit of difference if, in the end, we find ourselves back where we started, because, in fact, it is all only relatively important. Moreover, it is quite possible that for me the difficulties will only multiply in the course of the analysis, and perhaps we will reach a point at which we are no longer certain which work we are talking about. And, above all, if one does not play the 'game' with a certain predisposition, no explanation will suffice, and it won't be fun for anyone.

This predisposition is the first and most decisive step in the analysis. It is, in a way, the prior condition that must exist in one who prepares to attend a magic show, a feat of prestidigitation. As Olivier Lacombe puts it, the image of the magic trick is appropriate in explaining the 'powers' of the artist because it contains both the element of 'presence' and that of ambiguity between the real and the

unreal. And if one is not willing to let himself be 'put under' these spells that constitute the convention known as art, we need not go any farther.

Just look at what happens to the spectator who enters the salon where the sleight of hand is to take place intent only on discovering the trick. The more tricks he finds, the more foolish the show seems because, in truth, it's all smoke and mirrors, a pure deceit that gives pleasure only to the unsuspecting innocent willing to be deceived. That's exactly where the fun is! And what fun it is! And how poetic! The whole ceremony, all those movements, all those colours, all that essential purity in telling us 'now you see it now you don't', and that the rabbits and the objects are transformed even as they remain the same, and that they multiply, and that they melt, and that they grow and shrink. And fish turn into birds, and an empty trunk produces a young princess, and the stroke of a fan makes flowers grow, while coins come out of the ears of the most unbelieving.

In the Far East, they know a great deal about all this, as about so many things. The Japanese, for example, are well aware that the artistic object must be enveloped in a certain amount of ceremony and a certain reverential mystery in order to fulfill its function. That is why they keep everything packed away and under cover and only take it out when we are ready to give it the necessary attention. At that point, a wooden box emerges and must be contemplated, admirable as it is in its very simplicity. Inside is a package made of precious cloth, knotted and folded with exquisite art. Mystery and expectation grow along with wonderment at it all. It is the thrill of seeing, as if for the first time, the pure existence of things. A new enveloping. And after a long suspense, all the beauty of a fragile ceramic appears, overwhelming despite its simplicity. It is an entire cosmos, the whole universe turned presence, to be deposited sacramentally upon a sort of altar, in isolation from everything. One must sit before it with devotion. It demands meditation. Bit by bit you must discover in it all the intimacies and grandeurs, all the sentiments and ideals that its maker has placed in it. And even its ephemeral fragility has great import – as does the paper or silk of all Oriental painting, or the art of flower arranging – urging us even more to bestow loving care and vigilant attention, to esteem things in their mortality, to understand that, unfailingly, everything must change.

It must be because I too suffer from this love for fleeting things that anything that represents the contrary in Western art has always seemed absurd to me, be it its very abundance or assembly-line manufacturing, or its too solid or overly technical materials. Perhaps it is also because I believe in the 'ritual' of contemplation – of knowing how to read – that this desire to send art out onto the street, as is said nowadays, seems absurd to me, for art thus loses the character of a conventional game, which is one of its fundamental devices.

All this must be hard to accept for those who revere the scientific spirit, the technology of abundance, the amassing and enslaving speed of the Western mind for which two and two make four. The very idea that in a tiny, insignificant piece of clay one could come to see the whole universe...

To begin with, today we do not know how or have time to see things. Our senses slide over the excess of preoccupations, neons, muddles, and noises that always surround us. We must conquer and understand the most primordial things: to be able to contemplate, to

learn to reflect, to concentrate on what we are doing, to have time to meditate, to have a minimum of decency and freedom in our lives, with enough hours of repose to be able to practice them. We do not yet have that chamber that the Japanese call *tokonoma*, where they set apart and give importance to *objets d'art*, and for which their sensibility has been educated since time immemorial. Of course, despite our Western ordinariness and our vulgarity as hurried observers, even we can learn intuitively to place ourselves in that prior receptive state in which to receive the impact and the unleashing of the association of ideas that constitute artistic emotion. But what is, or had been, relatively common in the East is practically a phenomenon to which it seems only the privileged should have the right here.

And so it goes. Let us suppose, in any case, that our first step should be to enter an exhibition hall or a museum with these prior conditions more or less developed. If this is not the case, there's no point in going on. Finally, we look at a particular work of mine, for the reader must want to know once and for all how I'm going to deal with all of this. And we'll choose a 'difficult' one so that it will be a bit more challenging. One that has been discussed, about which a certain person has told me that, even as one of my greatest fans, he can't see anything in it. This is a work made with vegetable mane, a very curly type of straw filament usually used in upholstering or as mattress stuffing. The title is *Palla i fusta* (Straw and Wood).

May the viewer not lose heart on recalling that I have said things are better understood when they can be related to one another, because we must also not forget that each work has a special 'sound', a peculiarity that makes it different from the rest. I say this because it must be kept in mind that I will be speaking of a specific work, which is, in fact, only part of all that I have made in my working life. But things continue to be difficult because, even if we just count paintings with straw, I have already done quite a few, and complementing one with another would surely make this one more understandable. And I myself am not sure whether in trying to talk about only one, I will be generalising too much because of having them all in my head.

I imagine that the greatest surprise for the viewer who comes in unawares must certainly be the fact of finding this sort of pile of straw in an exhibition hall, where until recently one went to see more 'important' things. If the viewer gives us the benefit of the 'magical spell' he will see, of course, that the artist has, from the outset, meant to make 'art' – for we are not dealing with a pile of hay in a haystack, but one that is placed in the form of a painting in a place where art is usually served up – although with a very poor material. The first clue, then, is that the 'magician' – in this case, the artist – that traditional specialist who has always dealt in the deep things of life, who once was even considered to be inspired by the gods themselves, has chosen today this humble foundation, this straw, as a topic worthy of consideration. On other occasions, the artist has chosen earth, mud, space, the hole, burn marks, pieces of cardboard, the wall, garbage, newspaper, the pastry chef's cookie sheet, the traces of the wind, the imprint of the human body, bed sheets, broken dishes, knots, the traces of the rain, footsteps, body hairs, hairs from the head, grilles, cracks, strings, rubble, pillows, soldiers' blankets, rice, and hundreds of other things. And now it is time for straw.

So what's going on? Do those once favored by the muses no longer paint heavenly things? Do those who had always dealt with the great solemn occasions no longer glorify their lords nor anyone else who is in their grace? Well, no. Artists, who consider themselves the most refined, the most sensitive of beings, haven't believed in all that in years. Neither gods nor lords. No one is important enough for them, and they would like society to believe this as well. Instead, they fall in love with straw. And now the viewer's right of imagination can begin to go into action.

We have all seen clumps of hay in a stable. But perhaps on finding them here, on the scene of 'important' things, who knows whether those old solar myths that have always been born precisely in the straw of a stable, will not echo, through some archetypal process, in the spirit, emerging from what has been called the 'collective unconscious'. The spark of the Vedas who leap from the sun and bring fire to the earth by means of straw and the breaths of the ox and the mule that preserve it. The highest wisdom incarnated in the poorest body. And even in straw mixed with manure: the final substances in which, by a rare miracle, the origin and strength of life emerge anew. The circle closes. To reflect upon straw, upon manure, may be important nowadays. It is to meditate upon the first things, on the most natural things, on the origin of force and of life... That is why it must also be remembered that, in the world, there are still many straw pallets, and that the artist takes more interest in them than in the beds of gods or their messengers or the wealthy who adore them. Because the artist feels, and this is nothing new, that this origin, this life source, this fertiliser that makes the earth fecund, the 'salt of the earth', truly resides in those who struggle from below, who sleep, even if just symbolically, in the straw of miserable huts, or on the pallets of so many prisons, or amid the stink of the manure in stables for 'heretics', or in the fields where those who are considered trash leave behind their sweat. And this is not out of sentimentalism nor any 'artistic' taste for poverty, but to allow for an understanding of the 'primary nature' of the dialectics and struggle of all things, naturally including, if you will recall, the class struggle. Because, what's more, the painting I am describing also contains a piece of wood that divides it in two. Two. Students of symbolisms in art – even though, prudently, they almost never draw conclusions for practical life from all of this – would, of course, say much more than I about this 'two'. They would speak of opposition, conflict, reflection, balance (or potential imbalance), creator and thing created, black and white, male and female, yin and yang, life and death, good and evil, high and low. In the painting, there is, in effect, a division that forms the space above and the space below. And both spaces are white. White. The colour of the beginning and the end, the colour of one who is about to change his condition, the colour of absolute silence, which, as Kandinsky put it, is not the silence of death, but that of the preparation for all living possibilities, for all the joys of youth. Two white spaces full of swirls of straw that seem to want to jump from one side to the other. Two gigantic young heads of hair that mesh, two pubes that touch. The mane, which is incredibly tightly curled and twisted, like a corkscrew, accentuates this sensation of movement and expansion, a veritable tempestuous cloud of nerves that entwines itself or crashes into another, the world above against the world below, and vice versa.

So. Clearly, all of this is relative! And naturally there will always be someone who will say: 'What is this guy talking about? There's nothing there but a bunch of straw mane stuck to a white canvas with a plain old stick in the middle!' And we'll have to say he's right. He saw through the trick. All this show in fact is nothing unless we want or are able to see more than what is there. But the artist doesn't feel frustrated by this any more than the prestidigitator thinks he's a failure, or the magician feels ridiculed. Why, we ask, must it be precisely this positivistic viewer who sees things clearly? What right does he have not to allow others to give free rein to their 'imagination'? In fact, there are others, beginning with the author himself, who, on contemplating the voluptuous curls of the straw divided in two, continue to see more and more things in bigger and better flights of fancy. And they say, yes sir, that the world sure is all screwed up, like this mane, which also suggests the ruffs of nobility, or the straw scrubbing sponges that cleaning women use, and also that everything is divided in two, into light and dark, earth and sky, positive and negative, dualism, you see, and complementarity, as in all cosmic processes, the thesis and the antithesis that come together in the synthesis, or in the embrace of lovers. For in the most primordial, the most simple, of things, in straw or in manure, in death itself whether we like it or not, there is potentially a whole new source of life. For those below, the excrement of society, who are oppressed and rebel against what is above, are right to do so, and we must even be grateful to them for they give us this new font of life. And it is essential to show this. For from this struggle of antagonistic nerves something new is born. It is the sexual act, it is rebellion, it is a child...

But, listening once again to the background, we still hear those who cry: 'Words, the imaginings of an impotent magician! No one will ever see so much philosophy in this! It is the art of pretension and vanity!' And the author must confess, once again, that they are right, that he too agrees. And perhaps it is precisely for this reason, for this fear of vanity, that he has decided to make a painting out of straw. Because he no longer believes in anything that can be glorified today but the most elementary, the purest, the most unpolluted, and even the most innocent things, on condition, of course, that these things be ready to catch fire and to receive the spark of the solar flame that we spoke of before. Because he sees that this is the only thing that keeps the world alive. That this is life. And he doesn't want to hear anything more about the hierarchies and disguises assumed by those who think they are important, but who are really dead. For the painter there is nothing more than a pile of straw, and a 'two'. And a 'two' that is really a 'one'. And everyone has the right to tell him, if he wishes, that he's a farceur, that this is all a he, a deceit. Because he thinks so too. A painting is nothing. It is a door that leads to another door. Art, no matter how excellent, will always be just one more manifestation of *maya*, of the deception at the core of everything. And the truth that we seek will never be found in a painting, but will only appear behind the last door that the observer learns to open with his own strength. And the more important the painting, the more important the personages painted in it, and the more colours and coats of paint there are, the thicker will be the veil that darkens the truth, and the less we will find the path.

So then one thinks that it would be better to turn one's back on everything and sit in a chair, just as his companion once told him she had done in a dream: in a chair, floating amid the whiteness of infinite space, suddenly she looked down to earth and felt an emotion so

intense and sublime that it made her cry profusely to see there, scattered about, just a few shards of things, nothing, some flimsy fragments, a few blades of straw...

And only by the light of this inner whiteness that seems to rise up to tell us what we really are, do we manage to find once again the strength we need in order to rediscover the beauty we believed to be definitively lost to this world. That moist earth our friend the poet speaks of, that kiss from the woman to her daughter that describes us, a mirror hanging on the wall that, in the best sleight of hand, turns out to reflect within us that very same light, now transformed, of the world that continues to spin.

But we will still hear the cries of those who say: 'And just suppose that all this madness were true, what do those men you claim to love so much get out of all of it? And what of justice? And liberty?' And one can do nothing more than agree that all of this is most important. And remember once again and repeat a thousand times the words that Paul Klee wrote to his friend Franz Marc, who was fighting on the front during World War I, to indicate that, for him, the small, banal things were greater than heroic acts: 'Perhaps it will be difficult for a warrior on campaign to understand that I am making small watercolour paintings and playing the violin. And to think that I think this is so important! And, in a general way, the Self! And Romanticism!' In another letter, he clarified, naturally with an absurdity, that the Self referred to the 'divine' Self, the 'universal center'.

No one in the world of art and poetry really believes in gods today. But, whether we like it or not, in our destinies there always remain – as Manuel Sacristán said – those 'entanglements of the things of Orpheus with those of Prometheus', that is, the affairs of the seducer of nature through bewitchment (who always fails), the pursuer of those ideals that cannot be attained unless everything else is truly renounced, versus the affairs of the god of rebellion, of the will to intellectuality, which in the end always prefers to choose the earth over the vagueness of the spirit.

But let it be clear that nothing has been hidden here. We have always said that these things were very important to us, but we have also said, right from the start, that they are not serious in the manner of those who think themselves too wise. Because art is like a game, and – who can say if this is not true of all human acts? Only on condition that we become quite innocent will we truly capture its deep meaning.

All the same, we are convinced that this special innocence of the world of art and poetry – let us say it one more time – is by no means such a gratuitous or inoffensive thing as the 'erudite' think it is. In truth, it belongs to that way of thinking that, following the Marxist reading of archaic cultures, Tristan Tzara long espoused. In effect, states the author of *Sept manifestes Dada*, this way of thinking reproduces, on a more elevated plane, certain mythical forms and rituals that are spontaneous in the primitive mind, that is, in the 'undirected' mind, precisely with an eye to the real liberation of the spirit and the attainment of human nature itself, from which 'a bad moral and social organization – taken advantage of by a minority – has systematically distanced it'.

Antoni Tàpies, "Res no és mesquí" (Nothing is too petty), *La práctica de l'art* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1970)

Painting: Antoni Tàpies, Palla i fusta (*Straw and Wood*), 1969