

SANTIAGO SIERRA

LA VORÁGINE

Opening:

18.01.2024

19.01 - 08.03.2024

Via G. Ventura 6 -
Via Massimiano
20134, Milano

Monday - Friday
11am - 1pm and 2pm - 7pm

For more information contact us:
info@prometeogallery.com
+39 02 68858642

Beneath modernity, hatred **Santiago Sierra and new slaveries**

Text by Marco Scotini

The manipulation of bodies (my body doesn't belong to me)

Those who would look retrospectively at Santiago Sierra's work today, in 2024, would realise that many of the contradictions that seemed to accompany his staging of contemporary capitalism and precarious work (causing scandal and outrage) were not in fact contradictions. It is now apparent to everyone that there is no longer any incompatibility between dictatorship and neo-liberalism: one is just the other face of the other. Contrary to popular belief, there is no obstacle standing between fascism and market freedom. There is even a constitutive indistinction between violence and institution, between military and civil statute, between norm and exception. It is as if Sierra, over all these years, has never ceased to confront us - repeatedly and without mediation - with the violence that has founded neo-liberalism. Is it not true that its founding act coincides with Pinochet's Chile, the Chicago Boys and the bloody dictatorships of South America? Is it not true that under the modernising façade of capital one always finds class hatred and racist, sexist, segregationist violence?

The bodies that, since 1998, have effectively crowded Sierra's works were remunerated to show nothing but themselves: either as inactive subjects (as an indeterminate power but capable of any possible determination) or through non-specific daily work services. *Linea de 250 cm tatuada sobre 6 personas remuneradas* (1999), *465 personas remuneradas* (1999), *Poliuretano espreado sobre las espaldas de 10 trabajadores* (2004) fino a *El Trabajo es la dictadura* (2013), these are just a few examples of such works. But that's not all: the more such labour acts were reduced to a minimum effort and stripped of all material content and purpose (holding up a removed wall, staying inside cardboard boxes, wearing a tattoo on your back), the more political they turned out to be: the more equivocal the more tangible all signs of subjugation to power and dispossession are. These were always 'borderline' work performances, quantified in numbers of people or working hours, in which what is the basis of the capitalist relationship of production was taken to extremes: the difference between actual labour and living labour (labour-power). But also the labour constraint as a hierarchical relationship of subordination between servant and master, between colonialist

and colonised, between dominated and sovereign power. However, with regards to this radical denunciation of neo-liberalism, what has always been seen as one of the most controversial (and still one of the most indigestible) aspects of Sierra's actions is the position the artist takes with regards to the act of denouncing. Sierra's antagonism does not lie in creating a counterbalance to something or in attenuating what is in front of us, but in taking it to its extreme consequences to the point of rendering it 'obscene', with no more pacifying solutions and no possible justification. It is clear that there is no humanist idealism in this attitude, but only the blaming of a capitalist barbarism from which neither the field of art nor the artist can escape. My participation in this project can generate \$72,000 profit. I receive a £5 pay" is the phrase/accusation that Sierra has a beggar found on a main shopping street in Birmingham in 2002 recite in front of a camera, after remuneration. And any danger of artwashing, which today is so much the order of the day, is just as far from Sierra. What we are confronted with is always a supreme barbarity of which, before becoming its victims, we have been its accomplices because we have legitimised and nurtured it in the name of something else: of a hypothetical universalist emancipation, of a supposed socio-economic progress. In this respect, each of Sierra's works is a sort of Pasolinian Salò, in which we discover - as Serge Daney said - the other meaning of the word 'innocent'. Not so much the grace granted to the first comer, nor the non-guilty, but "he who, by filming Evil, does not 'think evil'". With respect to the arbitrary power that governs our bodies under capitalism and in relation to his cursed film, Pasolini would respond: "The urge came to me because I detest the power of today. It is a power that manipulates bodies in a terrible way and that has nothing to envy the manipulation of Himmler or Hitler'.

The naturalisation of neoliberal violence: chasm, whirlpool, swamp

'Europe is indefensible' rightly inveighed the great Aimé Césaire in the aftermath of the Second World War in his 'Discourse on Colonialism'. He added: 'Apparently, this is the rumour circulating, on a confidential level, among American strategists. In itself this is not serious. What is serious is that Europe is morally, spiritually indefensible'. And it continues to be so, today more than ever, if the return in force of the old alliance between capitalism and imperialism results in the Spanish EU spokesman Josep Borrell delivering such a racist speech. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, on 13 October 2022, at the inauguration of the new European Diplomatic Academy in Bruges (the first academy intended for the future generation of European diplomats), has no doubts. "Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. [...] The rest of the world, [...] most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden. The gardeners should take care of it, but they will not protect the garden [...] the jungle has a strong growth capacity, and the wall will never be high enough in order to protect the garden. The gardeners have to go to the jungle'.

Now, this speech excerpt - sampled, replicated and altered - is repeated ad nauseam like a mantra for the 30-minute soundtrack accompanying Santiago Sierra's new black/white video, shot in Gambia in May 2023. *The Maelström*, this is the title of the video, is like a rimbaudian 'saison en enfer' or a hallucinatory and psychedelic bad trip between Europe and Africa in which 48 Gambian youths from the local football team Tallinding United repeat police arrest positions, against a wall or on the ground, as if they were training exercises. In reality, again ad nauseam, they are repeating a script already written by the bodies of the first 2000 prisoners imprisoned in the mega-prison of Tecoluca in El Salvador. Commissioned by its president Nayib Bukele to house up to 40,000 inmates of Salvadoran criminal gangs, built in a state of emergency and within six months, and inaugurated in February 2023 as the largest prison in the Americas, the CECOT (acronym for Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo) presents itself as a new model of concentration camp being tested. The initial inverted shot, in which the 48 young black men begin to enter the scene without ever showing their faces, immediately begins to provoke a state of unease that will be amplified in the course of the video, when the anonymous silhouettes of the young men will be reduced to patterns of a dizzying kaleidoscope in permanent motion that will conclude in a black graphic vortex. To refer here to Busby Berkeley, the most reputed, imitated and famous dance director of the so-called 'classic era' of Hollywood musical for his filmed sequences in which girls and boys, framed 'plumb' from a lofty height, compose abstract, kaleidoscopic, moving forms, might seem misleading. Yet these decorative morphologies made of dozens and dozens of figures refer directly to the 'mass as ornament' that Sigfried Krakauer spoke of in the late 1920s to denounce Hitler's geometric mass parades in stadiums. Remember when he wrote 'it started with the Tillergirls'?

If *The Maelström* is the first lysergic journey that Sierra presents to us in the *LA VORÁGINE* exhibition, *Los Embarrados* is none other than the second: equally hallucinatory, identical but opposite, however, completely complementary to the first. It consists of photos and drawings of an environment conceived as a backdrop for a fashion show staged in France in October 2022 for a well-known luxury fashion house of Spanish origin. On this occasion, Santiago Sierra will set up a new version of *House in Mud*, which was realised at the Kestnergesellschaft in Hannover in 2005. The ground floor of the German institution had been covered (walls and floor) with 320 cubic metres of earth, 55 of which were mud and 265 peat, as if extracted from the sediment of the nearby Maschsee lake, in memory of the years between 1934-36 when the water basin was created to compensate for a time of mass unemployment. This initiative of the Nazi regime gathered 1650 improvised workers who, for little money, managed to find employment that would lead to no end but would be self-imposed as a sign of servile labour. In this new apocalyptic scenario for Paris, representatives of Europe's upper classes, in limited numbers, were invited to witness a temporary staging of luxury and wealth. Or, rather, of that disproportion of power which today has refounded and re-naturalised class differences. Who can say that, here, the manipulation of bodies is soft? After all, even the mark of the mud would have left its mark on the spectators and ended up connoting them with the definition of 'dirty elite' - which, on the contrary, one tends to get rid of.

Sierra's workers have always belonged to a precise geopolitics and different ethnic backgrounds, but they are recruited, anyway and always, among the minorities of the new world order. Tzotzil Indian women, Finnish homeless, unemployed Ukrainians in Warsaw, Sans Papiers in France, Senegalese workers in Cadiz, Eastern European prostitutes, Puerto Rican junkies, Maghrebi and sub-Saharan immigrants in Barcelona, Iraqi workers in London, castes of untouchables in New Delhi, Mexican workers in Los Angeles, beggar women in Bucharest, illegal Chinese street vendors in Italy, Peruvian immigrants in Chile, Roma in Ponticelli: all of them forced to work with no choice, having only their time to sell and possessing no property other than their labour-power, inseparable from their immediate bodily existence. It is only in more recent years, in Sierra's work, that the conditions of the economy of precarity are transformed into an economy of war so that refugees and veterans increasingly take the place of the former migratory subject. Today, the authoritarian evolution of neo-liberalism has reached such a point that even the democratic appearance that masked it has been destroyed, so as to normalise the history of authoritarianism and the authoritarianism of history. So the naturalisation of fascist violence, on the one hand, and the difficulty of assimilating radical insurrections after 1968 are two sides of the same coin. The point of no return - a real abyss - that capitalism has reached today is marked by the transformation of market flows from historical agents into geophysical forces. *LA VORÁGINE* exhibition is nothing less than a harsh response or blow to this dramatic situation in which the return of fascism is now a fait accompli.