

ESCAPE ATTEMPT

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To Raquel, for everything

There are people who can be defined
by what they escape from, and people who are
defined by the fact that they are forever escaping.

ADAM PHILLIPS

Art is a dirty thing, and there is
no way to clean it without it losing its color.

JACOBO MONTES

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PROLOGUE

(With Hidden Noise)

I entered the room covering my mouth with a handkerchief. I could only advance a few meters. The stench was intolerable. The putrefaction penetrated every one of the pores of my skin. My stomach turned, and a bitter taste began to rise in my throat. I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth to keep down the vomit. I tried to hold my breath as long as I could. Five seconds, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty . . . a little longer, forty, fifty . . . until the nausea subsided and my body began to get acclimated. Only then was I able to open my eyes and direct my gaze to the center of the room. And there I was able to see, at last, the box, theatrically illuminated in the midst of the darkness.

The structure, approximately one meter tall by one and a half meters wide, was made of wood and had metal reinforcements at the corners. Next to it were two small screens that played a sequence of moving images. On the first, a person entered the interior of the box. Then someone approached the box and attached the lid on top. This action was repeated on a loop. The second screen displayed the closed box. No one entered or exited from it. The wooden box simply sat there.

The same one that emanated the smell that was making my stomach turn. The same one that was right there in front of me, in that exhibition hall in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The same one that had next to it a small label on which could be read: Jacobo Montes, *Escape Attempt*, 2003.

The piece was part of the exhibition that opened the new season at the art center. *With Hidden Noise: That Which Art Conceals*, more than fifty works from the historical avant-garde to the present day, which intended to demonstrate that art is always concealing something beyond what we can see. Works that were hidden, veiled, crossed out, covered, wrapped, erased, and even destroyed. Duchamp, Manzoni, Morris, Christo, Acconci, Beuys, Richter, Salcedo . . . and at the end of the lineup, as if it couldn't have been any other way, Jacobo Montes, the great socially engaged contemporary artist.

I had gone to Paris to try to finish a book. The Ministry of Education had given me a travel grant, and my intention was to bring to a close, finally, the research that had kept me occupied for the last ten years of my life: the rupture of visual pleasure in contemporary art. I dedicated my doctoral dissertation to this issue. The majority of my writing since then never ceased to perambulate around the same problem. But it was all scattered about in short articles and essays for catalogues, and I couldn't find a way to give shape to all that material. After several years of frenetic work, the moment had arrived to bring it all together, rewrite it, and assemble the definitive version of the book. The

exhibit was the perfect excuse to start fresh. And the stay in Paris would allow me to dedicate the necessary time to the matter.

I had known for some time that this exhibition was going to open in Paris. And I was able to arrange everything so that my trip would coincide with this event. The fact that a place like the Pompidou was organizing a show about concealment and occultation certified that my work on antivision continued to be relevant. The exhibit fell squarely into the field of my research. Hiding things, removing them from view, is nothing more than frustrating the spectator's gaze. To conceal, strike through, veil, enclose . . . to rupture visual pleasure.

I went to Paris to write a book. That's what I told the university. It was also what I told myself. But deep down I knew that this wasn't totally true. At least not entirely so. There was something more. Something that I clearly knew I would find in that place. Something that was now right in front of me and was making my stomach roil. Jacobo Montes, that indispensable, lauded artist, a fundamental figure of contemporary art. And his masterpiece, *Escape Attempt*, the one I had sought out so many times, the one that, ten years earlier, I hadn't had the courage to face, the one that, ever since then, never ceased to trouble me.

I wasn't alone at the exhibition. Visitors surrounded the box. They circled around it, trying to find meaning for what they saw, imagining what was inside that mysterious object, searching for a connection between

the videos that were playing and what was right in front of their eyes; asking themselves, for certain, if the figure who had entered the box had remained there, if the stench of decomposition they could barely stomach had something to do with this body that never revealed itself again. I know that this possibility was passing through their minds, that they might think that something didn't add up, that at bottom it was all pure contradiction, a game . . . a work of art. I intuited it, recognized the way they looked at it, understood their questions. I had asked myself those questions thousands of times. Again and again. Just like them. Because I didn't know what was inside that structure either.

But there was something that I did, indeed, know. Something other people didn't. The history of the box, its past, its origin. I knew this better than all those in the room at that moment. Better than the director of the museum, the curator of the exhibition, the art critics from specialized publications. Better than all of them. And I knew it because I'd been there. Because, sometime before, ten years earlier, I had been the privileged witness of that escape attempt.

At that moment, as I observed the visitors speculating about the thing in front of their eyes, images began to flood back into my head. And at that instant I became aware that there was something of mine inside there. Even though I was outside the box, my story remained enclosed within it. It was then that I remembered the day on which I'd heard Montes's name for the first time. The recollection came like a sharp blow. Montes. A hammer strike. A harmful explosion that pulverized my retina. Montes. A scream from within the wood.

And it all unfurled before me.

Like a fan, the past opened itself before me. The end of the 2003 term, Montes, Helena, the city, the lies, the disappointments, the fugitive impressions, the shadow, the escape attempts . . . and Omar, unfortunate Omar. Everything was there, hazy, blurry, voluntarily filed away in a corner of my memory. A dense iconostasis that kept me from distinguishing it clearly. But the vision of the box, the stench, the bitter aftertaste, the repressed vomit, the roiling stomach . . . they all combined on that afternoon to bring things to the present.

A lash from a whip opened the box of images.

And the story started to spring up in my head like an incessant noise. A hidden noise that I no longer knew how to silence.

I. FUGITIVE IMPRESSIONS

In the beginning was the image. The penis, in the foreground, held against a wooden board. Then, the brutal act. The hammer, the nail, and the sharp blow, which pierced the piece of flesh and secured it to the wood. The image, a flash across the screen that managed to topple me. And much later, the voice: “Those who are overly sensitive can leave the classroom.” The warning, as always, after the image. First sight, which disturbs, then sound, which warns. Too late. As ever.

The image, the darkened classroom, the last visual arts course, and Helena, her voice, warning us of the rawness of the images and putting a title to the film being shown: *Sick. The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. Kirby Dick. 1997.

Nailed, the Bob Flanagan performance piece that was projected onto the screen, also nailed itself to my pupils and never left that spot. The strike of the hammer pierced my retina, as it certainly did with all of my classmates. Some turned their heads away. Others even closed their eyes. No one could bear the sight of the punctured penis. And if someone’s gaze remained

fixed on the screen, it disappeared completely when a few small drops of blood splattered across the lens of the camera that was filming the action.

The image formed part of the film. It couldn't be understood outside of its context. And the context—the life of Bob Flanagan—the life that was revealed by these images, revealed that the artist liked pain, he took pleasure in it. It was his salvation. Facing the torment of illness—the cystic fibrosis that the artist had suffered from childhood—he resisted it with his own pain. A pain inflicted on himself, that not only gave him pleasure, but made him feel alive as well. The pain of illness smelled of death, pus, and mucus. The smell of blood, of the wound he caused, was pure vitality. When, in another fragment of the film, Flanagan's partner sliced a knife through his testicles, inserted a steel ball into his anus, or tightened a rope around his neck until she almost asphyxiated him, the artist seemed to feel liberated. And when he moaned in pleasure it shattered the surgical scene of the pretend autopsy.

The majority of people diagnosed with cystic fibrosis die before reaching the age of twenty. Flanagan lived until he was forty. And his pain, the sovereign pain, was the thing that kept him alive. At least until the end of the film. Because at the end, as if it couldn't be any other way, Flanagan was dying in a hospital, trying to escape the role of artist that he had played during a large portion of his life.

In that moment, Flanagan seemed like a miracle to me.
A macabre miracle.

When the film ended, someone turned on the lights. There she was, next to the screen, leaning against the desk, Helena, dressed in black, with dark hair, long bangs, sharp profile, her forehead pale, fragile, weak, haggard, as if she were ill, as if she had escaped from one of Flanagan's performances.

With a frail, breathy voice, she said:

"Reactions?" And then she stood staring at the class, searching for a response. No one responded.

Again:

"Nothing to say?"

Just a few murmurs. Indistinguishable. Then the words came.

"Fucking crazy."

"He should have been locked up."

"Crazies are everywhere."

Everyone seemed to be in agreement. Flanagan was disturbed. He was crazy. He wasn't an artist. This film shouldn't be shown. I understood their comments. There was something in those images capable of upsetting anybody. But I intuited that there was also something that went beyond insanity. Something that was worth the effort. I could see it, it was clear to me. Which is why I decided to participate.

I outlined my argument on a piece of paper as if it were a speech, raised my hand, and started to speak, with a feeling of fear more than anything else:

"What I think," I said, "is that if the image surprises and outrages us, it's because we didn't expect it. The complete opposite of the cruel images on TV. We're used to living with those."

My classmates looked at me. Few of them shared the sentiment I was expressing. I looked at Helena. And she, for one, appeared to follow the line of argumentation. So I continued. And said that those terrible images were a basic part of our diet and that these days no one could have proper digestion without a daily session of hungry children, suffering mothers, and dismembered bodies. I said that it was possible that food wouldn't agree so well with us without this spice that serves as a condiment for our food. Salt, oil, vinegar, and, of course, blood, guts, arms, legs, and sobs. We must find some inner satisfaction in these images if we continue watching them, if we keep eating as if it were nothing, and we don't take up arms and go out and start shooting at people in the streets in order to set things aright.

My participation in class made me emotional. And though I already wanted to stop, I couldn't find a way to do it. It's always taken a lot of work for me to start talking, but often it is even more difficult to stop.

"I don't believe that we are blinded by images and that we can no longer see anything," I continued. "It isn't the media that's deceiving us. We're the guilty ones, the ones who, deep down, want to eat with these images in the background. We're vampires who take pleasure in blood, and it only seems like our existence makes any sense when we know that the other is a fucking piece of shit and is constantly being blown to bits. The screen is what saves us. And sometimes we pretend that we're moved by what we see. But we aren't the least fucking bit moved. Sometimes we even shed a tear. And the tear falls into our soup, and then we start eating again, and we notice that the soup is even more delicious, and that

our tears make everything taste better. But it's not our tears. It's the blood of the other, the blood spilled. This is what truly makes it salty. This is what seasons it. Our tears are fucking shit next to this blood seasoning."

After saying all this I felt exhausted, as if I had pulled something out of myself that had been in there for quite a while. No one said a word. Someone snorted. People looked down at their desks. A few short seconds of silence. Eternal seconds. And only after these ended did Helena thank me for my participation.

The remaining lights were turned on—before that we had been sitting in a half-light—and I began collecting my notes. In the midst of that minor racket, I again heard Helena's voice.

"Just a minute," she said. "Tomorrow is the last day of class for this course. We'll end the course with the work of Jacobo Montes. If Bob Flanagan was hard for you to take, I don't know what terms you'll employ to describe the work of Montes."

Jacobo Montes. It was the first time I'd ever heard this name.

I didn't yet know that I would never be able to get it out of my head.