

SIZE MATTERS

Four Secret Stories (Maybe Not So Secret) About Penises.

By Estrella de Diego

Story One: A Tale About Hands on Bodies.

Not too long ago, in one of those boring dinners one usually attends to with no great expectations, I was lucky to have a plastic surgeon as a table partner. When he told me how he earned his living, I proposed that he suggested the changes that, in a given case, could make my face better.

At the beginning he claimed, very kindly, that my face was in need of no change at all, but later on he began to draw imaginary lines all over my face with soft strokes of his fingers; amused with the game, he drew invisible lines like those ones painted in iodine on the areas ready to undergo surgery, what is there to cut, to fill, to lift, to uplift.

Afterwards, now at my home, I invited him to go on drafting on my whole body a new map that will redistribute my anatomy. I rummaged in the medicine chest until I found a coloured disinfectant. I got laid in bed –an improvised operating table in my imagination-, ‘Come on’, I said, ‘at least for tonight I’d like to be perfect’.

The operation was very precise, almost ruthless. The plastic surgeon was picturing me with the expertise of a magician, he re-created me unblemished; he marked on my skin what should be removed and what could be added. Each part of me was being transformed into a body-to-come, the immaculate body which that night he was going to bestow upon me, at least in the representational level.

Circles, arrows and marks showed the scalpel what was the work to be done. The cartography of desire unfolded all over me as my body displayed its imperfection in the game of the maps. However, as I was making it up sublime in the representation, my body fled from me, I bereft myself of it. I sensed it in pieces, fragmented, as if each of its parts-to-be had decided, so that they could be exhibited in their perfection, to abandon me, to belong to an other.

Notwithstanding, when the plan was finished, I asked him to change roles and now it was I who painted the necessary transformations on the body of the plastic surgeon.

Next day, when he was to leave, we speculated about in which way or the other we had come to forget about every single imperfection that so painstakingly we had drawn on our skins. 'This is not the operation room', he explained.

He was right. De-contextualised bodies are different each time: bodies depend on the place where they are. The bodies to be exhibited are not the bodies to be possessed.

However, since that day I wear on my skin the trace of his hand and each time that trace revives I feel myself again in pieces.

Story Two: Juan's Hand.

In 1977, Juan Hidalgo performed an action in which a hand, the artist's hand, was laid on different parts of some bodies: *Man, woman and hand*.

Two women and two men were being re-told by the trace of that hand which, in the faultless operation, was drawing the map of something that, in a first look, could be interpreted as desire. Each part of the model's anatomy was because of the trace of that hand, almost the same as when our bodies become tangible due to some pain –since the body is felt, above all, when it aches. Some way or the other, Juan's hand unveiled the anatomies that the photos pictured in their new identity: they were fragmented. There is no more than an isolated hand, just a segment of an arm, alike to those his real or fake hands outlined on the black background, a background with no background.

There was no desire in that tracing, there were no caresses –or might barely be. Juan Hidalgo's hand, like a paintbrush, like a pencil, like the imprint of a letter on the beach, like the lines of iodine in an operating room, was just touching as if it were naming. A complete scientific taxonomy, a catalogue of parts, an encyclopaedic tour: neck, chest, hip, penis, leg, another leg.

Then, in the last shot, two hands meet; they appear as narcissist hands: the artist's and the models', looking for a game of symmetries to which Juan Hidalgo goes back in his fragmentation of bodies. The theme of the mirror, which Hidalgo has been revisiting along the years, is deceptive: the shiny surface tells lies about us, and about the others –or partial truths at least. Too much or too little: to fall in love at one extreme or at the other.

And, in that appearance, in that splitting fragmentation, the hands of the split bodies were almost a bare element of representation. Only their sequence lent them a final meaning and reinstated them to the visible wholeness in the last shot. In the acting of Juan Hidalgo, like in the passion, it was necessary to get lost in order to find the other in a mirror.

However, the passion was absent in the whole action even though it has borrowed some techniques of its *mise-en-scène*. In the photos that follow the process itself –key for Hidalgo’s work-, the ‘action of the action’, Juan appears in an aseptic attitude: he is just a hand. It looks as if in the complicated procedure of naming, as when someone is searching, the artist is looking for a reflection, another hand. Yes, despite the deceptive game of discovering the bodies through the touch, the protagonist in the action is the hand: just a hand.

Just only and above all a hand, who knows. In the end, there are no visible implications of the other parts of the body of Juan Hidalgo: the artist is there as a hand, as a vehicle of a rare cartography. The desire, the first impression at these photos, has abandoned the artist and, therefore, the onlooker.

Maybe because in order to desire one needs to be complete, and in that extraordinary action of fragmentation, Juan has fragmented himself, too. The distinguished –named- parts are not relevant, but the hand that distinguishes them –or possibly the look that beholds them.

In a sophisticated game of paradoxes, Juan Hidalgo is and is not in the action –and not just because in his narcissist impulse his hand steals the protagonism to the rest of the body. Juan Hidalgo has just stopped being because, as Breton said regarding Saint-Pol-Roux, who got a sign hanged on the door of his mansion in Camaret when he went to bed: THE POET IS WORKING. Hidalgo, with his juggling of mirrored, onlooking hands –the other hand that gives us conscience of our own one-, is working, like the poet in Camaret, and when we are working there is no time for desire, or is little left, or lacks or vanishes. It changes.

A friend, director of porno movies, confirmed my ideas not long ago. He saw that plethora of anatomies that passed before his eyes as a liberating repetition, bodies reflected in mirrors: he would not desire as long as the session lasted. When I hinted, naively, at the theme of perfection, he replied savouring his cigarette that sometimes, often, the

scenes of bodies lying on the bed were fake, they were shot standing up: no body can bear the trial of lying down.

'Do you really never desire them?' I asked him. 'Of course not', answered my friend, 'there, behind the camera, I'm working. The bodies have stopped being or rather they are in some other way. It must be like in an operating room'.

And the fact is that the bodies in the photos possess an air of invulnerability: what cannot be entered, what prevents transgression. On the contrary, the physical bodies have a defenceless nuance that reminds us of a doubt, an uncertainty. We usually desire them for their special features: we want them because they require the skilfulness to learn them.

I wonder if Juan, in his action in 1977, as the action developed, had time to memorise each dimmed peculiarity of those bodies and if he still remembers them, if there is an imprint of what he could have desired, in case he had not been bound to be just a hand that traces, names, passes, inquires: a narcissist hand.

Notwithstanding, he probably does not remember, at least not right there and then. During his actions, certainly, THE POET WAS WORKING.

I look again at the series of photos. What gives the detachment to the bodies represented is not the final meeting of the two hands, no; nor is, far from it, the aseptic nature of that hand, in principle a part so poorly connoted of the anatomy, just an assistant for pleasure, at its most. Definitely, it is not the hand. In fact, to shake hands is something conventional up to a point, but this could be not so innocent as we should think at first sight. According to Juan, as he points out in *El falismo de los saludos (notas)*, 1969, the hands are metaphors, as it happens in his whole work: 'In conventional greetings, when we shake hands, we are shaking our glands, which is sometimes a great source of pleasure'

- Let me introduce you to Mr So-and-so.
- I'm very pleased to meet you.
- It's all my pleasure.

What female hand is the artist's hand shaking then? What glands? What has become glands now? Already a glands? What has been transfigured by the trace of that course and what has been offered from one or to the other?

I look at the photo once more. The clue was hinted in previous shots. In its course Juan's hand had blurred the bodies, he had erased them, at least in one point of the course: undoubtedly ambiguous, neither men nor women. The anatomies disappear, they melt: *Biozaj* may be an answer, why not?

Then, we should not wonder at that distance and that detachment. The hand of Juan Hidalgo names, re-tells, and colonises some bodies which, under the view of the artist, are representations. Indeed, THE POET IS always WORKING.

Story Three: The Hand and Its Naked Eyes, Included.

He has placed a pile of porno magazines –*Blue Music*– on a pedestal. It looks like a monument or an anti-monument, to be more precise, since anyone is able to pick up one and leaf it through on the bus back home. They are there, it seems, to be stolen, just like a kiss; there in order to make the work unstable, in order to make time go through.

The artist is speaking about pornography, but through its banishment. There, on the pedestal of the anti-monument, pornography is just a constructive element for a formal use, literal, we should say.

The minimalists spoke about the objects like places of literal significance and not like vehicles to speak about passions, but this did not get the approval of some critics. Michael Fried, very young then, wrote an article in 1967, overquoted today, *Art and Objecthood*, in which he showed his concern about 'the literal use' of the objects. Fried explained how painting has been traditionally the place for the progressive revelation of the essential objecthood, and he accused the minimalists of being literal in excess, and leading the public towards a relationship with the artwork that he calls 'dramatization'. Basically, it is something linked to a temporal problem, to the course, to *being right there and then*.

Later on, the minimalism and its absolute maxim, repetition, were taken as a liberating practice –almost oriental-like we should say.

Juan would get angry with me if I called him a minimalist –and I would have nothing to reproach him for, because his work is full of metaphors–, but sometimes, before works like *Estrella de Mar*, I can't help a thought crossing my imagination: Is that representation of the penis, that game where the penis is and is not, a way of freeing from the body, at least in representational grounds?

Last Story: Some Good Men and Other Better Ones.

The man is getting undressed: the jacket, the shirt unbuttoned one by one, the trousers, the underwear, the penis that unfolds... It is the hand again that doses the visual tension. Without a hand there is no action.

The photo in black and white catches the look of the observer, although the most desirable body, the body that undresses and unveils, moves away from the sight. There is something in it which is too quotidian, too close, and even distant to a certain extent.

In his work of 1969, Juan Hidalgo has reintroduced an iconography excluded from the History of Art –a naked male body exhibiting. But not only that. Just like in many of his works, he has displayed it straightforwardly, far from the heroic mood usually adopted by the classic tradition.

No matter how, Hidalgo's look does not get trapped by those anatomies. Whereas his hand are the dispassionate vehicle of the tale, his eyes scrutinise without getting involved, at least not involved in desire.

His is a look opposite to John Barrington's, a mysterious man who in 1938, in the middle of war time, walked by the streets of London, attired like a dandy and carrying a photo camera, looking for personages in the bars and cafés. He talked to them, he seduced them, and then went back home to a quiet married life.

Barrington's was a trick: perhaps he didn't even want love or sex. He just wanted models. And he photographed them as nobody had portrayed the male anatomy before: provocative, tempting. He portrayed them for a genre called "physique photography", a sweet sister of the pornography of the 70s. The knack of his success is relatively simple: the models were desirable, first of all because they stood for 'the guy next door' –the tennis coach, the postman, the newspaper seller...-, in short, what is accessible –or nearly. Alain Delon and Nureyev stood before his camera to be also turned –by the eye of the photographer- into 'physique'. Looking at those suggestive photos by Barrington, I wonder if the poet is also working. Maybe not: the territory of desire and the one of representation are too mixed in the photographer's walks.

1969: the action of Juan Hidalgo is repeated in colour shots and is shown in a series of photographs with slight variations. The last image of the coloured series the *Barroca alegre*, which occupied the closing

shot in the black and white series, has been replaced by an erect penis that the hand has blurred. It gives us a wave with an opulent wink, proud, intense: in spite of all the stories we have been told, even in the representation, size matters. The eyes of Juan Hidalgo must surely know because, right there, while they go by, THE POET IS WORKING.