

Murder As Installation Art

Juan Villoro*

La *muerte de un instalador* (The Death of an Installation Artist), an exceptional first novel by Alvaro Enrigue, begins at a party where all the voices join together in one weave. The narrator is alert to every possibility, like a quarterback who takes the ball and studies the path of three or four possible receivers. We still do not know what the novel is about; the scene is a postmodern bohemian apartment where someone threatens to throw himself off the terrace, and there is a hint of a very serious portrait of the end of the millennium. A few pages later it becomes obvious that Enrigue has a marvelous feeling for parody, for the distance between events and the ironic voice commenting on them. The initial scene ends with the death of Simón, alias “The Utopia-ist,” but the incident lacks drama because it comes to us through the imperturbable eyes of Aristotle Brummell-Villaseñor, virtuoso of distance, dandy cum laude, irrepressible collector and one of the best exotic voices of Mexican literature.

Eccentric on a par with Raymond Roussel, Brummell-Villaseñor has the main prerequisite for refinement to the point of cruelty and making sure that all his

interests are useless: he is obscenely wealthy. Brummell spends days on end smoking and reading comic books. He shuns all activities that produce sweat and is only happy if he looks conveniently ill. In society, he lives up to the principles that Baudelaire assigned to the dandy: “the pleasure of astonishing and the proud satisfaction of never being astonished.” Pale and exorbitantly cultured, he does not fall into the vulgar trap of getting excited about anything: he is on the return leg of a trip to all orgies and avant gardes. His particular star, however, can still withstand a cataclysm. *La muerte de un instalador* is the last adven-

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ture of Aristotle Brummell-Villaseñor, the most absolute of his safaris. Sick to death of his possessions, he decides to collect a man, Sebastián Vaca, a mediocre installation artist, one of the many surpluses produced by a government that organizes biennials of careerists and retrospective exhibits of cretins. “Once public stipends for young artists go out of fashion, the genre will have come to an end: there are no installations without scholarships,” writes Enrigue on the first page. Brummell the Maecenas hires the installation artist as his pet avant garde. Once in the mansion, Vaca goes through different scales of degradation: servant, pariah, grotesque and, finally, corpse.

In *The Loved One* Evelyn Waugh satirized the funeral aesthetic that often interests the powerful. The “Rich & Famous” also aspire to success at their burials; at the funeral, the body should look as though it were going to be presented with an Oscar. The pomp surrounding the illustrious and wealthy dead found an indelible expression in Alberto Savinio: “the flirtatiousness of the corpse.” In *The Loved One* a troupe of make-up artists make death seem like a topic for the boudoir. If Waugh transformed cosmetology into taxidermy, Enrigue transforms the avant garde into funeral art. In both

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cases, fashion, aestheticism and the prestige of appearances inspire entertaining varieties of the ridiculous.

In a world where a hot dog wagon is a hot dog wagon, but six hot dog wagons are an installation, obviously, modern art is not always on top of things. Andy Warhol felt this confusion when he saw the peculiar work he received from Joseph Beuys: a box with two bottles of mineral water in it. When he got home, Warhol discovered that the bottles had broken. With incomparable candor, he wrote in his *Diaries*, “Now I can’t open the box because I don’t know if it will continue to be a work of art, or just two broken bottles.”¹ Enrigue uses this loss of reference points to show us the charlatanism of art that presents itself as something definitively new.

Brumell-Villaseñor commits the perfect murder, technically speaking, at least in Mexico. The District Attorney’s Office also has the habit of following the fads, and one of the most recent is exonerating suspects by explaining that the victim was not murdered, but “helped to die.” The idea of “shared suicide” is fully expressed in *La muerte de un instalador*. Sebastián Vaca voluntarily submits to the deal that will make him his host’s work-in-progress, which advances toward his ruin.

For the dandy, nothing is as important as style and nothing so vulgar as having aims in life. His misdeeds must be art for art’s sake. In the words of Baudelaire, “If [the dandy] commits a murder, he may not feel the less for it; but if the crime is committed over something trivial, his dishonor would be irreparable.” Brumell is incapable of killing for jealousy or financial gain; his crime is an aesthetic event, the culmination of a code of honor

which proclaims, “It is in terrible taste to look alive.” If the collector aspires to look like a corpse, his works can do no less than be corpses.

In his mansion hung with paintings by Duchamp and Frida, Brumell lives to make his mistakes divine. In literature, one of the richest veins of satire is found in characters in love with their own failings. While Conrad’s heroes embark on enterprises with no future and Fitzgerald’s live only to ruin seemingly assured happiness, the exquisite, extravagant creatures of Firbank, Pitol, Savinio, Vila Matas, Roussel or Enrigue are intensely satisfied with themselves. In contrast with Fitzgerald, who speaks with “the authority of the failure,” Brumell the egotist says between mouthfuls of smoke, “I really abhor failure, the unknown.”

Narrating eccentricities has very specific risks. In characters who have no sense of the ridiculous, any outburst is justifiable. This can precipitate the narrator into excessive ornamentation and an unbridled carousel of whims and aberrations. What is the tolerable size of a mo-

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nomaniac? To what point may a deliberately outrageous voice be maintained? Alvaro Enrigue knows that he is traveling with the taxi meter running and, to a certain extent, the very brevity of his novel can be explained by the urgency of finishing the story before the narrator’s singularity becomes predictable. No fiasco would be greater than the “normalization” of maddened surroundings. In *La muerte de un instalador*, certain sub-plots could be developed more (like the operation to fraudulently reappraise Mexican painting in a New York gallery, or what happens to Enano—the midget—who disappears as though by magic). However, if Enrigue kept on any longer with the voice he wields so well, his eccentricity could become routine.

Two narrative planes flow through the novel. Enrigue uses the third person to tell the story of his operatic cast, alternating it with an old-fashioned typewritten “rough draft” penned by Brumell in first person. Although the two narrators share a few tics (like a preference for the word “infamous”), Enrigue gives his protagonist a different tone from his own. If passion can lead us to complications like falling in love with someone because of his faults, nothing is as eloquent in the exalted romance of Brumell with his own mirror than the song to his neurosis. With libational narcissism, he reviews the appropriate elixirs for each of his moods: “For a feeling of loneliness with deep unhappiness with myself: rum. Musical joy: gin. Musical enthusiasm: vodka. Musical tempestuousness: tequila. Sarcastic joy that even I can’t stand: brandy. A desire to go outside myself: Grand Marnier. Excessive objectivity: whisky. To merge with nature: wood alcohol.” The

strip tease also takes place in the unconsciousness, and the nightmares he reports in his workbook are kitsch superproductions: Felipe Angeles appears dressed as a Roman consul in the taking of Zacatecas. Brummell-Villaseñor's pen distills a corrosive mercurochrome: the world is sick and he is planning to cure it with poison.

Lastly, *La muerte de un instalador* is a singular reflection on the exercise of power in Mexico. If, in a society obsessed with fame, Andy Warhol promised a future where everyone would be famous for 15 minutes, in a country dominated by corruption and the trafficking in influence, no dream can equal that of enjoying impunity for 15 minutes. That is the paradise of Aristotle Brummell-Villaseñor.

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The allusions to the history of Mexico are not fortuitous, just as the cyclical meaning of death is not: the actions performed in the house of the collector have a corollary in reality, and nothing can stop them.

Although Enrigue writes with genuine sympathy for the devil, he leaves no room for doubt about his protagonist's twisted temperament. *La muerte de un instalador* is a tool to calibrate the era of Mexican cynicism, in which murder belongs to installation art.

Enduring literature does not reflect reality "as it is." It reinvents it in a symbolic order. The unequalled example in our century is Kafka's Prague. With humor and nonchalance, Alvaro Enrigue has begun his own assault on the castle. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Andy Warhol, *Diarios* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1992).