



Drawings by Felipe Ugalde

Death Of an Installation Artist (Fragment)

*Alvaro Enrigue**

Aristotle Brumell-Villaseñor sat down at the table at 3 o'clock sharp. Adela heard him getting comfortable in his chair just as the soup began to simmer. As she came into the dining room, tray in hand, Aristotle was finishing decanting the wine. The boy—she still called him that in public—had inherited his grandfather's punctuality and obstinacy.

She went to the side table, left the tray and advanced on him, tureen in one hand and ladle in the other. Aristotle stared—as though he didn't know it by heart—at the Motherwell that adorned the wall across from his chair; he looked at it with those bovine eyes that Don Andrés, his grandfather, used to have when he was thinking that something of somebody else's should be his. The woman served him with less formality than usual. She left the basket of fresh baked bread on the table, poured water into the glass, covered the soup tureen and turned to go. She was just picking up the tray when Aristotle came out of his stupor and said, Adela? She turned back with a deep sigh. What? Nothing, but I was thinking. That's what I was afraid of. Am I that transparent? Yes. Wouldn't you like a vacation? No.

Despite her impeccable professionalism, Adela was far from devoted to her work. Her aunt used to tell her that you mustn't let the Brumells feel more important than you, because right away they'll look down on you. If she never left the house, it was simply because she didn't feel like it. She had been born in Zacatlán,

Puebla, the only daughter of the last of a long line of cider manufacturers, Maximilian and Carlotta brand. By the 1930s, what for decades had been a modest but generous cottage industry distillery had become a withered relic unable to compete with the other cider producers that survived on government subsidies to machinery imports. Adela's mother died a few weeks after giving birth to her, the victim of a chill that under other economic circumstances would have been nothing more than a cold. The father, already showing the first signs of alcoholism, thought to send the little girl to Mexico City to be raised by her aunt, who worked as housekeeper to Andrés Brumell-Villaseñor. While it was true that in the capital the little girl would lack for nothing (in the service of the Brumells, said the aunt in her correspondence, you live better than most professionals in this country of donkeys who think that cider is the champagne of children), it was also true that iniquity and infamy flourish in big cities, and even more so in the proximity of great fortunes. In addition, thought the grieving father, the house of Brumell-Villaseñor had a terrible reputation. Around the time the child was born, a reporter from the daily *El Universal* had been murdered in a street fight the day after he published a scandalous account linking the origin of Don Andrés' growing fortune with the sale of rifles and munitions manufactured at the National Arms and Cartridge Factory—whose production was for the exclusive use of the Federal Army—to certain groups of rebels during the Cristera War. According to his inquiries, the ammunition had gone through a bordello Don Andrés owned in the time of President Calles in the Zapopan area of Gua-

dalajara. These and other more alarming reports about the way Brumell had made his economic ascent delayed the little girl's trip to the capital, until the aunt, in desperation, went to pick her up. Adela arrived at the mansion, pale and skinny, a little more than two months old.

At the beginning of the 1960s, just when it began to be clear that Aristotle's father was never coming back from Cuba, the aunt died. Adela took her place without being asked.

MEMORY OF DECADENCE

It's hard for me to imagine the mansion in its years of glory. I don't remember it without the austere contours that I enjoy so much. During my adolescence, the servants quarters, which had housed up to 10 workers, was gradually left with only the indispensable staff: Adela, of course, and a woman from Oaxaca who still helps in the kitchen. There was also a sickly young boy—nobody knew where he had come from, although rumor had it that he was the offspring of my calamitous grandfather—who took care of the garden until an infection that originated with an epileptic attack among the rose bushes expelled him from this world. Adela, a perfectionist, had manias that by the time of the death of that improvised gardener had concentrated so much that no one was hired to watch over the plants. She herself took charge of keeping their disordered growth more or less at bay. One morning at the time, my grandfather looked out his bedroom window and considered the garden with attention. The romantic scene of that jumbled, dark expanse seduced him to the point that he began to receive his mid-afternoon guests

* Mexican novelist awarded the Joaquín Mortiz Prize for a First Novel in 1996 with *La muerte de un instalador* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1996), 163 pp. This fragment was translated and reproduced by permission of Editorial Planeta.

in a set of leather *equipal* chairs installed in the corridor that gave onto it. As the years passed, his visitors became fewer, and so Adela put his *equipal* and the little table with a plate full of *pico de gallo* (chopped chili peppers, tomatoes, onions and coriander), a bottle of Herradura tequila and two shot glasses—in case I came home in time—in the sunny part of the broken down old garden. He spent his last afternoons at the center of the garden, protected from the sun by a decrepit creeping vine. He dreamed, he told me when my duties allowed me to be with him, about bringing Edgar Allan Poe's remains from Baltimore to bury them right there.

The sharp “no” Aristotle got as an answer didn't even faze him; he was obstinate and Adela knew it. You've never taken vacations, have you? he insisted, playing with his spoon. What for? I don't know. To visit your family. You're my family, Aristotle. That's sad. Very. Anyway, I need the house empty for a couple of months. Are you sure you wouldn't like to see Zacatlán from end to end? Adela swallowed her laughter. No. What about Salzburg? Your trip would coincide with the Mozart Festival. Then you could go on to the opera season in Berlin. All expenses paid?

A week before going to Brazil, Aristotle Brumell-Villaseñor gave a party to show for the last time the selection of paintings that the next day would be shipped off to New York. When he spoke to the installation artist—he was the only one he called personally by phone—he made sure to repeat three times that he should invite his closest friends.

By that time, the millionaire had a pretty clear idea of the kind of friends the

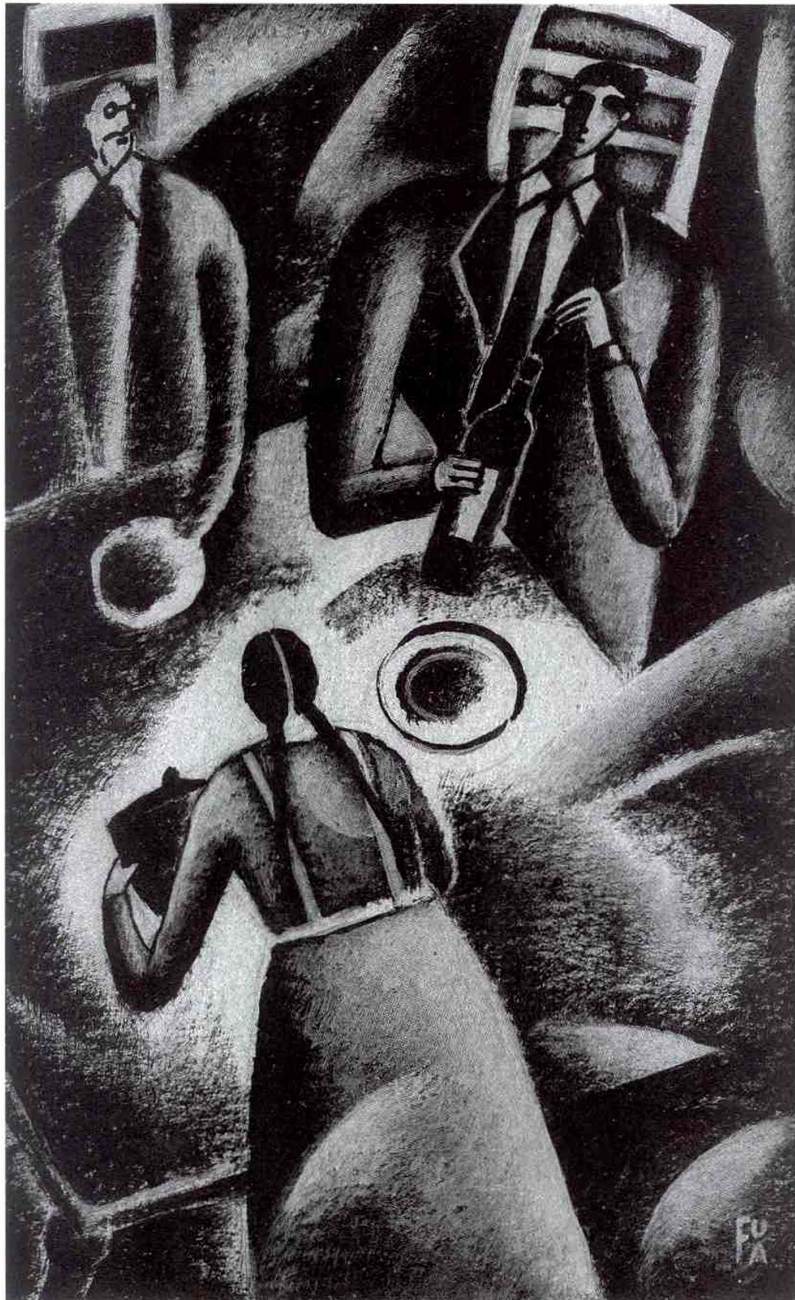


artist frequented. In previous weeks he had managed to attend the cocktail parties where he would run into him, and more than once he was right. Aristotle wanted to make sure with these investigations that when left alone in the mansion, the installation artist would organize gatherings that would have a negative effect on the house decorations. “I'm going to need reasons to keep him locked up here.” From his previous inquiries, he had learned that success depended on the zeal with which you leave a minimum number of things to chance.

He spent his days imagining the possible ways for his prey to escape and planning ways to prevent them before they happened. At the rare times when the simple genie of hope installed itself with its dusky halo in the millionaire's mind, he dreamed about the easy world of the old Villaseñors of Jalisco. He imagined himself, then, setting up galleries like haciendas, where artists—the sons and fathers of artists—would shop at a modern company store for the best quality materials, Armani jackets and ties, Osh Kosh overalls, food stamps for Frenchified restaurants. In that prodigious world, Aristode would ride his horse down Río Rhin street and local merchants would doff their hats as he went by. In the evenings, as he enjoyed a hot chocolate in a gigantic kitchen full of servants willing for him to feel them up, the painters would go to over-designed bars where they would run up unpayable tabs from generation to generation.

MEMORY OF DISSIPATION

The best thing about the unfettered consumption of stimulants is that it gives the



skin a persistent yellowish hue that allows the debauched to recognize each other. The installation artist, it should be said in his favor, possessed this elegant characteristic. At the end of his life, he had acquired another,

er, even more elegant one, one which I enjoy from time to time: extreme sweatiness.

The difference between my artist and myself was that I never use substances that require a syringe; I'm not afraid of the sub-

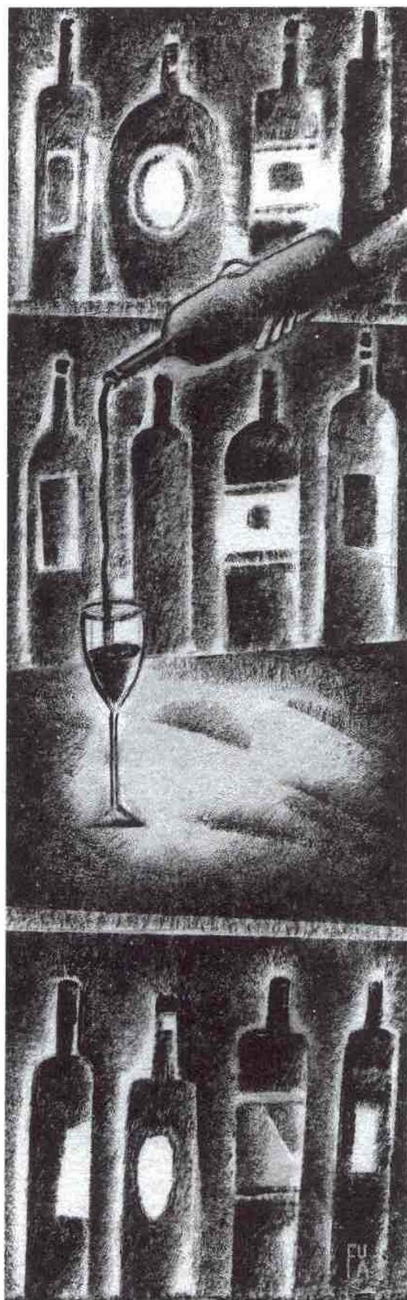
stances, but of needles. This, I know, makes me unfashionable, but it really doesn't worry me at all: nothing further from true nobility than depending on others to change drugs or wardrobe. About the latter, I must

say that I never run the risk of appearing in public badly dressed. I have a very safe method: I always wear the cut that was in fashion a century ago. My contemporaries buy rags like *The Face*; I consult the encyclopedia.

Under no circumstances do I drink water, that abominable mineral. I think beer displeasing: you burp a lot when it's cold. Well administered, however, it can be useful; it allows you to savor the most capricious tastes of a spicy meal all afternoon. I also should say in favor of this beverage that the city of Baltimore—I have a strange fixation for that port, not worth commenting on here—has a series of neighborhoods once inhabited by sailors. On their streets, there are still taverns identical to the ones Edgar Allan Poe must have visited in his voluntary ascent toward delirium tremens. In those places, they preserve the good Irish custom of drinking stout at room temperature.

With wines, I usually follow Hoffmann's counsel: champagne when my soul is wandering in an ambience of operetta and Burgundy when I'm feeling heroic. For religious experiences, the romantic German recommends Rhine wines. There I draw a line: my grandfather taught me that sweet drinks are for faggots. I prefer wines from Rioja for solemn occasions and De Toro for matters of life and death.

I also drink spirits according to the state my soul is in. I have categorized the relationship between moods and drinks on the basis of Hoffmann's considerations also. He says that the possible feelings are: 1. A slightly ironic humor tempered with indulgence. 2. A lonely humor, profoundly unhappy with myself. 3. Musical joy. 4. Musical enthusiasm. 5. Musical tempestuousness. 6. Sarcastic joy that even I can't stand. 7. A desire to go outside myself. 8. Excessive



objectivity. 9. Merging with nature. I have come to think, as I think the divine Baudelaire did, that this barometer of the soul is nothing more than a reasoned description of a drunken debauch. Following in the steps of my teachers, I have designed a table of spirits that lend me their souls. To reach a light state of irony tempered with indulgence: dry anise. 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. When aspiring to more complicated moods, a mixed cocktail suffices.

I use non-alcoholic stimulants less frequently: two or three times a week. I would never ever smoke marijuana, that magnet for idiocy. When I want to softly decrease velocity, I take valium. When melancholy makes me excessively languid: Prozac. I take no acids: the idea that my visions have been prepared in a modern laboratory horrifies me. On special occasions, I lie down on an old divan that has been gathering dust for who knows how long in the greenhouse and take a few grains of laudanum. Lately I have tried—with little success, I must admit—to drop this luminous custom. A few months ago as I enjoyed a dreamy vision in which General Felipe Angeles appeared dressed as a Roman consul in the middle of the taking of Zacatecas, Adela came in to wake me: a Malaysian was waiting for me at the door with who knows what invitation from the embassy of his country. I sent him back to the hell from whence he came, not without first treating him to a goodly dose of the narcotic I was enjoying at the moment. **NM**