

# Word is a gun for rent

Cécile Bourne

“Like they say here, and poets know it well, the devil loads the gun,  
and the word is a hired hand, a popular Spanish saying”

Txuspo Poyo is a pluri-disciplinary artist, who has the great ability to anticipate and stimulate the viewer's imagination. Any medium is therefore conveyed to achieve a certain level of poetic aesthetics with 16mm films, videos, celluloid's, photographic words and processed images. One recurrent aspect of the artist's work is the strong cinematographic references, from XX Century to virtual animation. In a word, I would say that Txuspo Poyo's work is about inventing a system of self-imposed limitations and to explore its aesthetic possibilities. All forms of his work depend on the suppression or revelation of story information. Txuspo Poyo chooses when and how to share facts with the reader or viewer, so as to generate anticipation, mystery, suspense, or surprise. In this sense, all his narrations have game-like features. By emphasizing either the play of constraints or the play of asymmetric information, one can treat his work as a form of play.

The artist frames his contemporaries around their psychology, about the constraint and the state of mind one can easily identify with. The absence of proper narration in most of the work of this emerging Spanish artist can range from a fake, scary bank robbery titled *Safe*, 1998, to a 16mm film loop of the one-of-a-kind image of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's roaring lion. Txuspo Poyo says his life has been surrounded by American influence, by comics and TV series from which he extracts elements that embody American hegemony.

Once Txuspo Poyo finished his studies, in 1989, he went to Canada and to New York where he was living in Brooklyn, in the Williamsburg area. On Sept. 11th, he bore witness to how populations from the “first world” in a state of panic ran away from the city: “a scarring phenomena which was emphasized everyday by the government”. Based on the traumatic experience of the attack and the exodus it provoked, Txuspo Poyo's realized different projects. For example, in his film *Cruzando Puentes*, 2003, protagonists are self-absorbed as if the message they are throwing into the water could sink and reappear, as if History repeats itself. The film is edited according to symbolic linear and vertical XIX century metallic-engineering architecture of five bridges<sup>1</sup>. The use of the light is weaved through this construction as if it was on a grid, which is reminiscent of Modernist black and white photography. During the same year, he installed the light boxes EXILE/EXIT/EXIST on a building as a way to refer to these very scary words which are emblematic of the way governments deal with catastrophes, trying to rationalize and categorize human situations.

In another film, *Cruzando Vías*, 2003, which takes place at Prince Metro-Station in New York, sound and images emphasize the context where everything and everyone becomes potentially suspect. Time remains the same although images interweave between each train. Here the artist emptied space between the doors of the wagon while he focused on the omnipresent poster which indicated two versions either in English or in Spanish of the imperative: If you see something, say something. Txuspo Poyo brings emblematic elements for reconstructing the state of psychosis that people were constrained to live in, under threat, bounced between the anticipation of a drama and reality. The question of whether an artistic piece of work can break out of the magic circle and become part of our everyday environment remains a fundamental topic of debate. Many artists preserve the magic circle, which offers a protected space wherein to explore alternative identities and ways of life in a safe manner. Other game designers, however, deliberately undermine the boundary between games and life. In contemporary art practice, activities ranging from Futurist and Dada provocations to Fluxus Happenings already generated frameworks of play outside all institutional restrictions. This subversion of the distinction between “art” and “life” has also reappeared in current debates about the direction of game design. Radical designers use communication technologies to blur the boundaries between playing and ordinary reality. As games pervade everyday life, new forms of experience become possible. Conspiracy games can, for instance, afford paranoid experiences. The experience of risk will become a central problem in all work that blurs or subverts the boundaries of the magic circle.

The stages of action in his moving images are either located in constrained spaces like space-ships, the metro, elevators or are very loose like in his last film *Ambientes Hostiles*, 2005, where objects are floating in a void between an upside-down wooden-floor and the ground made out of cement. Here Txuspo Poyo brings another feature of play, which has received ample attention by theorists, pertaining to the “magic circle”. The pioneering sociologists, like Huizinga and Caillois, argue that all games take place within a self-contained space and/or time. There are clear spatial boundaries (the stadium or the boxing ring, for instance), and more frequently, temporal boundaries (such as a specific duration for each match). The activity itself is governed by rules that apply only within these precise spatial and temporal borders. Games are thus isolated from “serious” pursuits. The experience of a game is thus essentially

connected to its separateness. Here, the spectator is left within a strange environment accompanied by sound tracks, which reinforce the constrained atmosphere. The experience of folkloric rhythms like the African sounding Txalaparta<sup>2</sup> is for the artist a representation of the history of the Basque Country and its systematic tempo reminds one of a 16mm projector.

Txuspo Poyo uses recurrent objects or symbols like the Hammer and MGM's lion which embody powerful, twentieth century cinematographic images perpetuated in our collective memory. Both seemingly obsolete, the lion and the mechanical sound conveyed the viewer to deconstruct representations of such iconic titles of his films such as *The endless*, 1994, which refers also to a written convention not used anymore<sup>3</sup>. This archaic and powerful image of the lion associated to the 16mm projector sound plays a key role in real-time in the artist's presentation, especially as he chooses to present it during an art fair he was invited to participate in the Project Room at Arco.

Txuspo Poyo's way of using fragments of the world of cinema can be noted in his collages made of 16mm or 35mm celluloid bands woved in a grid. As the artist is saying, the works done with celluloid "are not exactly collages, but much more associated with the idea of sequences, the same as the editing structure of a film: I keep in mind the image of Eisenstein cutting his films, sticking them". The artist's passion for cinema is given to us like keys to enter into the medium. His ability to set up situations lies in the idea of leaving the viewer to find his own space particularly with his way of using words or symbols often set like a game. The viewer's goal is therefore to participate, to find out the rules of the game for his own sake without any moral constraint at the end but according to a certain poetic and ideological intention. From this perspective, every work of art is to a greater or lesser degree informed by the spirit of play to revalorize the pleasures of detective fiction as a model for playful literature. The play ideal pervades many areas of contemporary art. Queneau, Perec, Calvino, and other members of the Oulipo group, for instance, regard the invention of rules or constraints as a form of play. The artist invents a system of rules that constricts the creative process. The rules were often drawn from combinatories, graph theory, and other mathematical disciplines. The creative process thus becomes a conscious interplay of freedom and structure. Paradoxical as it may sound, the artist's freedom is expressed in the choice of a structure.

There is nothing particularly novel about use of games and words in contemporary art. People have enjoyed using words and playing in virtually every culture and historical period. Games and words have been a recurrent feature in human history. First of all, "play" can be treated as an umbrella term for a class of artworks, mainly "toys" and "games". Secondly, it is also possible to think of narration as a core feature of playfulness in all art. In this sense, there are "ludic" elements in every form of artistic creation. Thirdly, play can be seen as a fundamental principle of culture and as a basis for political activism or interaction. It can be understood, for instance, as the highest expression of human freedom and creativity and also as a way to create mental space to transmit something and to dedramatize with humor the most tragic situations. In the same spirit his other film called *De Carne y Hueso*, 2005, evokes in a very poetic way the decomposition of words. Titles of Txuspo Poyo's works also play a fundamental role: *SAFE/STARLUX/HERRORISMO/CONDOMNATION/3 FEET 4 DEAD*, etc. The titles themselves introduce the atmosphere he wants to create. A word might also be for him a moment where the viewer can find his own psychosis in the logic of the story. In that respect, Txuspo Poyo borrows stereotypes of what is the paroxysm of American architecture or of cinema by his references to major filmmakers like Stanley Kubrick<sup>4</sup>.

In 1998, Txuspo Poyo participated in a traveling show in different cities<sup>5</sup> according to time differences, titled +8+7+3+1-1-5, numbers that correspond to each different time zone. Artists were asked to be part of a video-program and to make site-specific projects related to what came to their mind according to each city in which the show took place. The purpose was to 'assume' how each artist constructs his desire or fantasy about a place they may not be familiar with, in an era where tourism has never been so widespread, particularly in some places, like Bangkok, Moscow or Paris. The idea was therefore to question folkloric and cultural aspects one associates with these different locations. Bangkok, for example, has a strong connotation with the idea of cheap labor and tourism. Txuspo Poyo was very much interested in the interactive aspect his pieces would have within each context. Therefore, he conceived post-cards of computer keyboard letters on rings. These funny street-wear-looking accessories combined infinite possibilities of compound words and evoked street codes that can be found anywhere. The rule of the game consisted in the public sending back the post-cards with annotations, reactions in order to complete (ideally) the set at the end. At the time, this type of aesthetic had not yet invaded Asiatic countries like Thailand, even if RNB's street look attitude was still quite strong<sup>6</sup>. What is interesting is how the proposal stimulated the desire of reacting to words and codes for people who wanted to take part in something different and at the same time quite common. In this example Txuspo's work showed his own way of playing with words wherever they may be, by fixing simple rules within a global world. This set of postcards carried a process of exchanges associated with the idea of 'souvenir'. "This project offered me the possibility to create a piece of work, which could be connected with the archetypes conveyed by cities like Paris or Moscow. For Moscow in the prolongation of the agony of communism, the drawings I realized proceeded from Western magazines where communist iconography transformed itself into a capitalist design, recording the hammer and sickle, in the shape of Coco Chanel. For Paris, it was a reference to colonial cultures, through a very popular singer, of Algerian origins, called Cheb Khaled, in a period where Jacques Chirac spoke about how bad African food

smells."As the artist says, "I wanted to speak about the dialectic of GOOD and EVIL". The work of the rings incorporated the idea of love and hate, as in the famous movie *The Night Of The Hunter* (1955, where one can read on Robert Mitchum's tattooed fingers the same words). Within the influence of urban tribes in New York vindicating though hip-hop, it is about urban culture (which is not only about music, but the way of using words as transgressive songs, like a kind of mix between poetry and popular culture). Txuspo Poyo started the idea of the rings, as a mix between the Hunter, street words and the influence of Internet in our lives. The idea was to transfer this context into another. The project of the rings made with computer letters transferred digital data into 'sensitive' world. For this project the artist also prepared a straw-mat in which he cut in negative the text BANK, where the public was invited to clean their shoes at the entrance of the show; here again it was meant to be used before entering into a different magic circle!

Txuspo Poyo's intention to alter or even burn key words or icons (the word Love, Freedom, Goldwyn-Mayer's famous lion or Superman logo) is a way to refer to every day's reality reduced to its inevitable American dialectic. The interest of the work recreates the symbol of Superman with an immense drawing made with matches coming from the States and Cuba. The combustion of the piece demonstrated the cooperation of the burning sticks. As the artist mentions: "a Cuban citizen told me the night of the inauguration of "S en la Havana" one could refer to the history of la Havana with simple burning matches"! At a glance this work embodied a utopian dream, which emphasized the power and vulnerability symbols convey. Always on the edge of blasphemy. He follows the same attention by reacting directly to Newspapers<sup>7</sup>, by drawing on them: it is an ongoing project, like a diary, a way of expressing his counter-position against American foreign policy, in Iraq in particular.

Txuspo Poyo has found a great opportunity to confront himself with other modes of interacting in a global world; he feels very much concerned by that very space of the imagination, which belongs to everyone, the space of the democracy of the image. Txuspo reveals this notion in setting up a 'mise-en-abîme' (infinite perspective) in displays of the analogical system of computer, which could be analyzed in the idea of game. Artists and technologists have long called for a more participatory approach to technology based on the ideal of free access to knowledge and participatory self-rule. Technological piracy, for instance, is a form of appropriation; top-down technologies are subverted (or "detoured") for the sake of bottom-up needs. New media art often blurs the boundary between "knowledge workers" (who invent ideas) and "data workers" (who manipulate symbols). Data manipulation itself becomes a cutting edge medium of content creation. Visual creation becomes fundamentally experimental. In this context, our sense of beauty, already altered by the rich functionality of modern industrial design, deserves to be further revolutionized.

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## NOTES

1 Queensboro, Brooklyn, Williamsburg, Manhattan, Georges Washington.

2 Txalaparta: Basque Country music.

3 The artist indicates that it is a pretty strange coincidence that *The endless*, with its genre typology (drama, war, romance...) tends to disappear in films today.

4 Sala Montcada de la Caixa de Barcelona 2000-2001.

5 +8+7+3+1-1-5, it took place in Paris, Moscow, Bangkok and San Casciano dei Bagni in Toscana, Italy.

6 And still is: one can always mention images of Isaac Julien, *Love and Hate*, 2002, gal. Yvon Lambert, Paris.

7 Here I refer to the on-going project on Spanish Newspapers since 2004 and particularly on America's position towards the Far-Eastern situation and the threat of Islam on the Christian West. These kind of impulsive reactions have in common a great way of revealing the moralistic approach of American Imperialism illustrated by combined words like: ALA-DI-NO: MUNDO/MALO; ARMAAMERICABLANCA, etc.