

(NOTE: This essay will be published in an in coming catalog published by La Casa Encendida for The exhibition *Nosotros y TU* by José Álvaro Perdiges) December 2004

José Álvaro Perdiges' Howling Walls

We & You (Educational Closet .../ 47 Names)/Nosotros & Tu (Educational Closet .../ 47 Names) is a dissonantly challenging 3-part installation by Spanish-born, LA-based artist José Álvaro Perdiges. It's set out like this: one wall is hung salon- or retablo-style with fourteen C-print photographs, each framed in black and for the most part scaled at human-size or larger (one more photograph spills over to an adjacent wall). The facing wall serves as a projection screen for Perdiges' 16 mm film *47 Names*, a 13 minute parade of elementary schools kids, each shouting out their names two or three times on the artist's prompt, as they stand in front of a fixed camera in the school yard. While outside this room, near the title at the entrance to the exhibition, is a single large photograph of a group of screaming children drawn from the same class, arranged in a circle.

Perdiges' current work is hinged with a remarkable series of darkly lustrous photographs taken in the dim bowels of LA's, gay bars and spas in Los Angeles, New York and Madrid between 1996 and 1997. (1) These images, each titled after the dive where it was taken (Crow Bar, Cruising Bar, Strong Center, The Zone ...) and supplied with a documenting number ("Doc. # 19, etc.), offer a textured field of reflected blackness touched with an occasional smudge of white as the camera registers the mild flare of a cigarette, a fringe of faint illumination around a door or a distant low-watt light bulb. The photographs bear occluded witness to private, furtive, perhaps anonymous, sexual encounters in the subterranean backrooms of an underground scene.

Yet they do so by precipitating only the most minimal kind of particularity and without positing any form of social or erotic declaration. Bodies, movement and decor are all held, then, in a kind of obscure suspension which subjects then, quite utterly, to a quality from which they naturally shrink: the emanation of light. We are compelled by these pictures of not-quite-darkness precisely because their compulsively arbitrated registration of light makes everything in them--events, silence, noise, desire, release--simultaneously hinted and conjectural, yet passively vivid.

We & You turns this noirist logic fully inside out. Staged for the most part in the playgrounds and classrooms of the LA district school system, its subject matter is as brazenly public and as that of the bar series is closeted and covert. Against the cave-like black of the earlier work, *We & You* is transacted in the glaring light of daytime Los Angeles, a place that seems to saturate even shadows with unremitting illumination. The protagonists now are mostly children, not adults; their activities are largely scripted rather than found, imaged clearly and close-up, rather than filtered out or effaced; and the ritual that they perform, one by one, one after the other, is the deceptively simple act of naming themselves out loud ... Jesusuuu, RobERTO, Marisol ... as opposed to the obfuscations of identity that lie at the core of Perdiges' black photos.

We & You is the latest and most complex of a group of projects, including *Pleasure and Legislation* (1999) and *Jakinza* (1999), which Perdiges has organized around the Twentieth St. Elementary School in Los Angeles at which he taught and schools elsewhere he has visited. In the former he dispatches his students on a sequence of vaguely absurd activities--cleaning the cracks and divots in the asphalt yard, instructions to sit or lie in specified locations and so on. *Jakinza*, set in a school in Euskadi (the Basque country), unfolds as a sequence of photographs documenting the irregularities and incompleteness that attend what appears at first glance to be a children's game of "hide-and-seek." The works that comprise it image classrooms and ancillary spaces each with a child caught in the act of hiding--yet never fully hidden. We see the leg of a young girl protruding from underneath an institutional carpet, or the foot of a boy sticking out from a niche or cupboard.

But this superficial identification of a 'subject' in the *Jakinza* project is only a point of departure for another set of meditations by the artist, activated by his insistent, almost archeological, capacity for metaphorical overlay. For Perdiges, the imperfect disappearance of children into the cupboards and corners of the institution to which they are bound on a daily basis emblemizes, at first quite literally, the closeted nature of mandated behaviors. Their uneven retreats become shell-structures for the intimation of other forms of partial withdrawal, forced remove or state- or self-imposed denial--whether sexual, linguistic, or social. But such references are not merely abstractions of wider personal or cultural formations, for Perdiges has built into this sequence of images a subtle register of reference to the socio-political contexts of the Basque country by constructing his photographs with hints of resemblance to work by leading Basque artists and activists from the recent past, such as Jorge Oteiza and Txomin Badiola.

On still another level, the partial or unfinished nature of the children's staged retreats bears a clear formal relation to the interrupted opacities of Perdiges' club photos: both foreground parts and protrusions within a scene or action that is mostly covered up. Once again, this relatively superficial continuity of appearance suggests a wider paradigm that might draw us closer to the central concerns of Perdiges' work to date: the creation of signs that somehow simultaneously deliver a surfeit and a deficit of information--signs, to put it another way, that choreograph a certain haunting of the symbolic order. Now, if the platitudes and rectitudes of the official understanding of things are to be contested, there's surely no better place to begin than with the 'transgressive' scene of sexuality or with a stage in life at which language is partly acquired, the social sculpting of school commenced, yet none of these really fixed or finalized, and both overlaid by signal ethnic differences from some putative 'norm.'

To explore how these effects are managed in *We & You*, we need to examine the complex formatting of Perdiges' film and photographs (I will concentrate here on the latter). Most of the dozen or so differently-dimensioned photos image their protagonists at roughly human-scale, though usually a touch larger-than-life. One of the leading effects of his mural of representations is, then, that the subjects who predominate in them and their localized contexts, form an apparatus of points of view, which, taken in from a distance, constitute an assemblage of actions--somewhat akin to a populated climbing-frame. The matrix of this assemblage is formed by an overlapping repertoire of techniques, arrangements and iconographies, locked in a series of possibly subversive mutual relations.

Let's start with the subject matter. Seven of the photographs picture school children: to the left in the middle, a double exposure of two kids in the playground, looking up and down simultaneously; top left, children screaming as they cast their gazes downwards across a school lunch table in a tiled refectory; bottom left, five children screaming in a row at the ground (this image is the only one repeated--in the middle, top); top right, a girl (called Yamileth, from Ecuador) grasping a table leg with an expression of hatred (as mandated by Perdiges); on the adjacent right wall, the same girl wearing different clothes, looking down in the playground, her face in shadow; and, middle right, a group of children, visible only as a mass, roped up in large piece of red felt at the corner of a school building. A syntax of consistencies emerges here between the children, their school context and their performance of instructed actions. At the same time, however, Perdiges conjugates this sequence as system of doubles: there is the technical doubling of the double exposure, which, in a quasi-filmic gesture, gives us upward and downward inclinations of different heads at the same time within the same image; there is a form of doubling based on the use of the same young girl performing two actions in two different photographs; while a third type is found in the literal repetition, though at a slightly different scale, of the group of five. There are even doubles within this horizon of doubling, as the group of five screams at the floor in a gesture that echoes that of the boy in the double exposure, and rhymes with the group at the refectory table. Beyond this there ensues an arcane numerology of singles, doubles, fives and other multiples--all set within and between the 15 photographs and the 47 names of the film.

But we have accounted for less than half of the subjects of the photographs. The remaining eight images offer another set of counterpoints to the layered representations of the school children. Two are abbreviated, peopleless, views of the school environment, one, bottom left, featuring a metal mesh ceiling partition (inverted so that the ceiling reads as the floor); the second, center right, an almost abstract photo of a white school wall, which appears as a lightly textured monochrome. Then there is a series of three photographs in which teachers perform a series of instructed actions--sitting around a table, with their heads covered; and standing upright and lifting the table above their still-covered heads. In the last image, located at the bottom right of the wall, a photograph of the adults under the table is turned upside down. Finally, there are three images that seem unrelated to the school milieu: one, top left, symbolically located at the "beginning" of a western-type reading of the wall, is another quasi-abstract photograph, this time of a fridge or ice-maker that appears to be punctured by an aperture; the second, located in the middle register of the wall, is of the naked, kneeling figure of the artist wearing a mask, his genitals tucked inside his thighs and thus invisible. And the third, hung in the bottom center of the image-wall, shows two relatives of the artist with their heads burrowed ostrich-like into the ground in a field near Perdiges' native village of Santiuste in Spain's Guadalupe province.

The question remains as to how we might interpret this intricately articulated grid of photographs; and how, further, they can be read against the iterated name-calling staged in double and triple self-nominations and set against a background choreography of lingering incidentals (a passing plane, trucks on Central Avenue, pigeons, palm trees, parking lots) that make up the film *47 Names*, projected on the facing wall. What Perdiges has organized in this exhibition, it seems to me, is an envelope of cultural variables comprised of institutions, pedagogy, expression, memory, sexuality and symbolic utterance--and gathered around two central (and unequal) coordinates: the artist's self (by turns technical, instructional and aesthetic) and, more emphatically, the signifying surplus of his temporary wards and actors. Each variable is bound to multiple conditions, engendered by the dispersive performativity of the children, yet administered by images, still and moving, that are rigorously staged or formally artificial (or both). It would be too simple to claim that the final effect of this installation is to offer a dissident calibration of the surrender of determination to becoming as symbolic forms are unexpectedly split and re-catheted. But to put it another way--the main achievement of *Nosotros & Tu* is clearly to liberate different kinds of surplus from a visual regimen of grids, repetitions and reductions, and to meditate not on what is remaindered beyond the performance of a task, the institutional site of a school or the filmic or photographic apparatus, but on the very contours and texture of that which is always more than "said" or "done."

The kind of work made here depends, to some extent, on the formal language of post-minimalist installation, on the more self-consciously critical practice of 1980s as well as on some of the reactions against these orders in the looser, often diaristic art of the 1990s. Yet its dependencies are organized as a system of defaults, so that at its most successful Perdiges' work is actually staged between the assumptions of these traditions, eclipsing one with intimations of another so that what is shown and heard in *Nosotros & Tu* is already articulated between reflexive understandings of form, critique and performative selfhood.

Despite all the subtlety of Perdiges' negotiation with his own personal history and sexual identification or his scrupulous attention to the construction of frames and platforms for his off-stage instructions, the central concern of *Nosotros & Tu* is with the child and the school. Contemporary art practices include many attempts to represent or examine the activities of children and childhood in general, both in the elementary school age bracket taken on by Perdiges and the infant before and adolescent after. While there are occasional overlaps of form or attention, including Mike Kelley's *We Communicate Only Through Our Shared Dismissal of the Pre-linguistic* (1995), another project based on a sequence of 15 images, most of these practices are differently organized and projected. (2) In *We Communicate*, Kelley made a series of color photographs that document some of the more unusual paintings made under his tutelage by Kindergarten students while he was an undergraduate art student at the University of Michigan in the early 1970s. Each photograph was accompanied by a written analysis accessible from an adjacent computer station. Based on extensive readings in child art analysis and art therapy, the analyses were all written by Kelley himself. Part of Kelley's larger project, *Missing Time*, *We Communicate* explores the general tendency in this literature and the psychological practice it informs, to explain unusual aesthetic traits as byproducts of psychic or physical abuse. The contradictory nature of these texts allows for a significant amount of projection on the part of the analyst. Kelley, however, sets up a situation in which art viewers can counter his analyses with their own projected readings of the paintings by means of a computer program that enables them to edit the texts as they wish. The children's "unconscious" productions may now be consciously interpreted by viewers to fulfill their own ideological needs.

Kelley's concerns here are clearly with the imbrications of the products of children's play and representational activity in a world of adult constructs through which they are so analytically over determined that they end up as mere effects and afterimages of the monitoring ideology itself. Unlike *We & You*, in which adult intervention is limited to a loose mise-en-scène and control of the technical apparatus (film and still cameras), *We Communicate* dwells on the hermeneutics of childhood foregrounding what is in effect the interpretational abuse of the young, and calling into question the process and products of their "play." If Kelley delivers childhood in the form of a specific representation made in another time and place, which becomes fixed by exegesis, Perdiges' role is to prompt apparently simple actions, like shouting a first name three times, or clinging to a table leg, which are eclipsed by the performative and texture of what becomes semi-improvised events. The elements that Kelley leaves unstable in *We Communicate* are all on the side of the signified or message of the children's paintings, while Perdiges' film and photographs concentrate more on the process or articulation of the signifying, performing, doing--thereby underlining the particularities of the action as event staged by his little subjects.

Kelley's deference to the adult subjugation of the products of childhood is just one of many art world strategies that tend to eclipse the self-performativity of the young person. Another arises from the introduction of child surrogates, such as the religio-mythological youngsters of Judy Fox (the infant Jesus, baby Buddha, a pre-teen Cinderella etc), or the quarrelsome, racialized porcelain dolls of Kim Dingle (e.g. *Priss*, 1989). (3) By posing the child in relation to a wide aperture of defer locations located at the intersection of history, mythology and ethnicity, these gestures either defer the specificities of their subjects altogether or work to accentuate the difference between the typical and the particular, setting both in the context of static, mannered gestures. With Perdiges, once more, the valences of his images tend to reverse the flow between these poles, at the same time emphasizing what eventuates--in the process and unfolding of the piece--as the uncanny particularity of the child/subject.

In *Nosotros & Tu* Perdiges has successfully negotiated between the rigidities of paternalist exteriority or formal over-elaboration and the spectacular catharsis of unmediated self-declaration. One might go so far as to claim that he has delivered an ironic message to the arbitration of religious difference according to western systems of belief--that he has attempted to decompose the grid, with its minimal, putatively Protestant gravities, by foregrounding a kind of pan-Catholic irregularity. He has stated, for example, that the doublings and recirculation of figures and gestures in his work relates to Spanish Mannerist paintings, such as El Greco's *Martirio de San Mauricio* (1580-82, El Escorial--comissioned but finally rejected by King Philip II), the protagonist of which appears several times in the same image under different narrative and iconographic circumstances. (4)

The signatures of Perdiges' negotiations are everywhere apparent, yet never over-assertive: we find them in the decision to make technically accomplished photographs or a formally consistent film, but to relinquish artificial supplements like Photoshop or documentary editing; in the artist's use of a "master" position (as the place of origin but not the arbiter of instructions) that is set alongside constructed fragments of his own history and identity. We see it in the corporal and institutional cartographies of the piece, in the bodily register of cardinal positions, up and down, gripping or standing, hiding or yelling, noise and silence, effaced or open-mouthed; and the delineation of institutional space as simultaneous abstract and confining, but also caught up in the social flows of the city. And we see it in the counter-ethnographic finesse that renders mute to (most) art world ears the hybrid linguistic differences of children from Mexico, Latin America or LA-basin suburbia. This last effect is particularly important, as it delivers *We & You* (perhaps quite literally you and me, depending of course on who we are) to a position that is not what I have just referred to as paternally exterior, but rather one that forces us to participate in exteriority itself. For if we reflect on it, these effects of language and gesture--indeed most of the clamorous implications of Perdiges' howling walls--might be comprehended better on the street than in the gallery.

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Los Angeles, September 2004

Notes:

- Five works from this series were shown in *Different Looks: Reconsidering Vision, Authorship, and the Mark of Pleasure*, Sweeney Gallery, University of California, Riverside, Oct. 3, 1988-December 13, 1998.
- For Mike Kelley's wicked and delicious satires of child visual psychology, see Kelley, "We Communicate Only Through Our Shared Dismissal of the Pre-linguistic: Fourteen Analyses" in *Minor Histories: Statements, Conversations, Proposals* ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 258-73. My description of this project is drawn from the head text.
- For a discussion of Fox and Dingle in the context of narcissistic representation, see John C. Welchman, "'Peeping over the Wall" in *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001); based on the catalogue for the exhibition *Narcissism: Artists Reflect Themselves*, California Center for the Arts Museum, Escondido, February-May 1996.
- Perdiges, conversation with the author, September 2004.