

Visibility hierarchies: Santiago Sierra and the *homo sacer*

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Abstract

The current article aims to assess the possibility of representing, in a visual scope, the figure of the *homo sacer*, a juridical term of the Roman law that the philosopher Giorgio Agamben recaptures when addressing biopolitical studies. Milena Tomic argues that any art project that addresses the issue of *bare life*, a condition where all the political and ethical representation was extracted by a non-mediated action of the State, must deal with its ubiquity, in the sense that Agamben sees the camp as both an anomaly of the past and the hidden matrix of the present. Tomic also argues that there is an unavoidable unrepresentability in the core of *bare life*, a dimension that this article aims to explore confronting it with the artistic project of the artist Santiago Sierra who hires illegal workers, migrants or refugees in his art projects. The economical and ethical influence that this *modus operandi* creates among the figure of the *homo sacer* will constitute one of the axes of this paper, as well as its consequences within the process of the identity construction.

The bodies selected by the artist occupy a disruptive place between subject and object, within a marginal possibility empowered by the current geo-political situation. The distribution of narcotics, between other violations of the criminal code, is punishable among the countries where the artist exhibits, operating within a political state of exception, subverting the art world, working from its character of deregulated market, structurally ambiguous and permeable.

We aim, with the development of this article, to assess the political role of the art agents and institutions within the identity making process, as well as how the gestures as the ones mentioned above, can increase or hide the visibility of the individuals trapped in transmigration areas or conflict zones.

Key words: representation, identity, violence, tolerable.

Introduction

This article aims to gauge the possibility of representing the figure of the *homo sacer*, a juridical term of the Roman law that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben recaptures while addressing biopolitical studies. Milena Tomic argues that any art project that addresses the issue of *bare life*, has to deal with its ubiquity, in the sense that Agamben sees the camp both as an anomaly of the past and a hidden matrix of the presentⁱ. Tomic also argues that there is an unavoidable unrepresentability in the constitution of *bare life*, a dimension that we will explore from the confrontation between this thesis and the artistic practice of the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra.

In order to understand the state of exception, Agamben brings out the figure of the *homo sacer*, who is built on a real basis of a non-transcendental sacred, a historical figure of the Roman law, who was once a citizen and is diminished to the status of *bare life*. This transition, which dispossesses the individual of basic rights towards the law and the State, is made possible by a sovereign regulation. The *homo sacer* can be killed without any consequence for the act of his murder, without even being considered a homicide, and by anyone. The individual becomes, through this process, a mere biological entity without the possibility of transcendence. The status of the *homo sacer* resides on the violence to which he finds himself exposed and caught. This violence, which constitutes one of the central axes of this paper, is based on a double exclusion, withholding itself from both political and divine law, and into which the *homo sacer* is brought to, being arrested into this layered and opaque dimension. Agamben's adoption of the term *sacer* is not precisely connected with religious realm as it is with the separation, *sacer* holds to being set apart. The philosopher develops an interpretation of the *sacred* as an autonomous figure in order to understand if the latter can contribute for an answer about the original structure of the *politica*. This politics, which is referred to the Roman law, occupies a place that "precedes distinction, between the sacred and the profane, between the religious and the juridical."ⁱⁱ (Agamben, 1998, 48) This place of indistinction is also connected with the notion of taboo, where Agamben invokes the Roman grammar Festus and the British ethnologist Robert Marett. "*sacer*

esto is in fact a curse; and the *homo sacer* on whom this curse falls is an outcast, a banned man, tabooed, dangerous...ⁱⁱⁱ (Agamben, 1998, 51) It is amidst this place prior to distinction that one can locate the refugee camp within its dynamical mechanism, as well as the displaced individuals and transmigration groups. On the sacred life, Agamben structures the *sacratio*, unifying two subjects: the unpunishability of killing and the exclusion of sacrificed^{iv} (Agamben, 1998, 52), which as an object of reflection for us, constitutes an important political and ethical question and thought, around the type of identity possibly built on this proposition.

Is modernity our antiquity? How do we relate this question with the representation of the *homo sacer* and memory, oblivion, historicity or political homogenization? Are we perpetuating, by recapturing and representing the figure of *homo sacer*, the ethical ground that sustained the old exclusion system?

According to Boris Groys, technology reduces life “to a pure activity that occurs during a produced and shaped artificial time”^v (Groys 2008). Groys’s concerns resonate on Agamben’s and Foucault’s thesis about biopolitics, where life is always trapped in a “indistinction limit between biology and politics”^{vi}, *zoe* and *bios*, *soma* and *techne* (Agamben 1998). Coming from these authors thesis we can situate life in a place of spatial and time indistinction, where it can be transformed into a set of actions easily framed, timed and monetarily translated, grounded on an unsettling equation between technology, biopolitics and ethic. This place of indistinction, ambiguous and undetermined, seems to be the key of capitalism that is, according to Maurizio Lazzarato, “characterized by a dual regime of subjectivity: grounded on social subjection and mechanic slavery”^{vii} (Lazzarato 2014). The author explains that the social submission includes us all in a certain way “on an assemblage that does not distinguish between human and non-human, subject and object, or words and things”^{viii} (Lazzarato 2014). The mechanic dimension refers to the assignment of pre-established roles, like the worker, the museum visitor, the unemployed or the artist. This pre-determined distribution results simultaneously on an individualization and alienation, and it is among this specific process of mechanization of capitalism that we locate the art of Santiago Sierra.

Identity making process

The identity making process and its consequences on a political, economical and social level, will sustain the construction of a relation with the contemporary artistic practice and the level of commitment its agents establish with the condition of the *homo sacer* and the representation and visibility system. We will call the artist Santiago Sierra in order to gauge the ethical sphere of influence his practice and hiring of illegal workers or migrants, paradigmatic figures of *bare life*, represent among the identity making process. The search for identity representation and the socio-political context in which it is generated constitutes one of the premises of the Spanish artist radicated in Mexico and the biopolitical field appears as one of his issues, while searching for a conceptualization and representation of this precarious field and the conditions its agents live, namely migrants, homeless people, asylum seekers or illegal workers. For his ephemeral performances the artist hires people living on this conditions, paying an amount of money for the use of their bodies and physical effort. It is also about this economic micro system, designed by the artist that we will address our attention. By the type and amount of money, the way it is given and the subsequent ethical and social consequences. These values are often framed according to the minimum wages established where the artist exhibits, a dimension that contains a possible critique to the economical system among these places. The artist, while giving minimum wage value is assuming the role of the sovereign, being simultaneously inside and outside the legal norm. This act, theoretically objectionable, situates the elected subject, and their conditions, in a position of higher visibility, confronting the economical system with the contemporary art market. The way this conceptual discourse and gesture affects the own individuality of the hired subjects deserves our attention, creating a clear distinction between participatory art and Sierras’ project. Here, we are not in the presence of an appeal of the *homo sacer* specifically for an eventual and desired reinsertion in the society but, through the possibilities of the unregulated current market, the underlining of an action area where the artist gesture appears, above all, as a continuity line between the permeable ground that capitalism originated and the ambiguity of the art market. We are not in the presence of democratic art but a cold, subversive and calculated gesture. The inequalities that Santiago Sierra explores and that sustain the biopolitical machine of the contemporary globalized world are based on a strong dismissal of democratic participation, where there the figure of the *homo sacer* is not addressed for a direct integration in society or eventually in a layer of higher visibility as a possible resolution of its urgencies.

The return to the Real

The Spanish artist assumes the internal logic of modern capitalism both as the focus of his critique and gesture as, in certain moments, his own operating model. By selecting the figure of the *homo sacer* and its own physical and psychological dimension, Sierra forces a violent, and sometimes shocking return to the *real* and his ephemeral performances and installations show what is too traumatic to be verbally communicated, the unsaid. This verbal trauma is meticulously translated to a physical, visual and sign message, structured on the rough representation of what the observer does not testifies, the unspeakable and the hidden.

The *real*, according to Lacan, is the residual dimension, excluded and unrepresentable that results from our entrance on language and symbolism^{ix}. It is also impossible for the reason that the use of language sets our irrevocable separation from the primordial space of the *real*. In the context that we have been addressing, the *real* occupies an area where everything that is too traumatic and usually unconceivable on a verbal level – the violent situation where the migrant sells his body and it is tattooed or pulverized with chemical products – is brought to the existence level through representation and imagery.

The bodies selected to these projects occupy here a torn place between subject and object, on a marginal possibility whose use is only possible, and highlighted, by the current geo-political situation. The distribution of narcotics, between other violations of the criminal code, is punishable among the countries where Sierra developed his projects. However, the artist acts on a political state of exception, manipulating the art world through its unregulated market, structurally ambiguous and permeable. Therefore we have a suspension of the law in favour of art, giving it a sovereign power, operated by the author that turns into a dictatorial figure, exercising his power on the margin of legal and moral codes, placing his subjects/objects in an undetermined ethical place, physically exposed and vulnerable. A non-place on a physical and human level, a condition perhaps necessary today that appears on an unregulated but relevant violence, direct and overwhelming that evolves the observer at various levels.

In an era of augmented reality and unmeasured fear towards terrorism and social collapse, the relevance of Sierras' work reaches critically the contemporary urgencies. His art evolves a fundamental displacement of the current political situation, giving visibility to one of its most critic economical and ethic fissures. The place and time of the body exploitation, its forced application appears through an interval, a relocation of the subject inside the gallery space, one which we must rethink and where the artist intervenes, critically and necessarily.

Conclusion

The (un)representability of the *homo sacer*:

Appearing as an antithesis of the relational aesthetic proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud, Santiago Sierra enters the international art scene in the late 1990s, articulating the concept of antagonism with the social urgencies of *Arte Povera* and minimalist reduction.

Relational antagonism appears as response to what constitutes the appropriate aesthetic response to social fissures and urgencies. This gesture doesn't aspire to alternative ways of speech or engagement, Sierra's practice aims to reproduce and amplify these fissures as a spectacle. This is where we find the opposition between participatory art and, as Claire Bishop explains, "interventionism to heightened critical awareness, from utopian idealism to an ethnographic realism, wherein the outcome of Sierra's actions forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works."^x

The artist frequently uses illegal workers or migrants on his projects and the wage they receive can be seen as a critique to the global capitalist structure that, in the first place, allows him to hire the migrant as an artistic human object. In this context the artist does not hesitate on using the human body as an object, since his work is also about the conditions that facilitate the total objectification of the stateless individual. The artist argues that he uses the body as a tool for energetic consumption, in order to point out a position towards the unbalanced economical power. He explores the working capacity of the body on a level that confronts the observer with one of the artists' premises: "People are objects of the State and Capital and are used as such. This is precisely what I try to show."^{xi} (Santiago Sierra: 2002). He continues adding: "I do not use the bodies on a different way than any other material. They can be ordered, changed or drawn"^{xii}. This reconceptualization of the subject can be seen on the project 3

Cubes of 100cm On Each Side Moved 700cm (Santiago Sierra: 2002), where six albanian refugees, legally unable to work in Sankt Gallen, Switzerland, were paid to move cement cubes inside a gallery. Illustrating how easily can the body be exploited, Sierra paid only a small amount for the exhausting work. These men did not work in favour of an aesthetic purpose, they were simply instructed to move blocks inside the exhibition space. This collision between visibility and futility shows how the individuals' body was marked by their alterity and lack of social value.

The concept of antagonism characterizes Sierras's work, from the visibility given to those who do not have political representation, based on a physical enlargement of their absence, through the illegal work. The refugee or migrant assumes here a dichotomic position outside the art sphere, by the demarcation of their alterity, and inside the art market by the use of cheap and illegal labour. The physical commitment established within Sierras' projects with the body of the rightless worker creates something that Alan Badiou called the "production of evil"^{xiii}, arguing that every time that someone is obliged to occupy the place of the excluded is generated a huge potential for the production of evil.

Coming from the sovereign power and the figure of the *homo sacer*, Santiago Sierra becomes simultaneously the author of the crime and the accident. He assumes the sovereign role since towards the hired individuals he represents the role of the explorer, at the same time that his projects use a possibility that only a fractured socio-economical sphere could create. The author decrees paradoxically the state of exception since he incorporates the law and overcomes legal and moral codes, producing on theoretical level the literal appearance of the *homo sacer*, by the exploitation of the migrant both as subject and artistic object. Other conceptual and ideological tensions are here possible to refer, since the artist sells photographs and documentation of his ephemeral performances and installations. With the use of this medium the artist objectifies the excluded individual that becomes sufficiently visible, on an artistic level, to be consumed. What results from this exposure is that the author defies the binary logic of value and non-value, exposing the most profound fissures created by the advanced capitalism, those who exclude the individuals from social and ethical protection.

Bio:

Pedro Massena has a Bachelor Degree in Painting from Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade de Lisboa. He has also studied Architecture and Art Education. He is currently a PhD candidate at the mentioned university in the Fine Arts Doctoral programme and a Researcher at Centro de Investigação em Belas Artes. Currently investigating the artistic practice within political commitment, migration phenomena and the and ethical and aesthetical problematization associated with them, in terms of representation and visibility. He is also working as a teacher and a visual artist in Lisbon, Portugal.

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