

SIDE GALLERY

Text by Chus Martínez

Chairs Are Trees

It is important to understand an artist's motivation to enter the house of another, a social artist.

The marquis of Cerralbo, Enrique de Aguilera y Gamboa, was a figure who passed between many realms. He was an ambassador of the cause of Don Carlos, who claimed legitimacy to the throne of Spain as part of the anti-liberal, traditionalist Carlist movement in the nineteenth-century. By the time the marquis came into play, in 1869, Carlism had instigated civil wars throughout Spain and become the ultra-conservative, modern party. Aguilera y Gamboa was a key figure in this new phase of the movement, helping to activate and organize local assemblies, the *círculos*, and their social agendas in opposition to the political system of the Restoration. Oh, one could really write a lot about these quarrels and how they created a mind that functioned like dough in which different conservative ingredients fermented in the social ground for so long that its mold reached the Spanish Civil War and surely nourished the very possibility of a figure such as Franco...

Guillermo Santomà is an artist based in Barcelona. In a few words, he could be described as being interested in how a space is affected by the production of elements vaguely similar to furniture as well as by chromatic interventions. It seems that the force that motivates his interest in the house of the marquis is driven by the question: how does the social space of a reactionary mind look? The question is a sensitive one because we tend to ascribe the practice of art to liberal values, even though there are plenty of historical examples of artists who by no means share such principles. Yet Santomà's intervention adds another twist: the artist is not only interested in how politics shapes character and how character shapes taste, but also how, then, taste shapes the body. Do ultra-conservatives sit in chairs similar to the liberals'? Or is their sense of comfort radically different than secular, more socially progressive bodies? To invite oneself to the house of the marquis of Cerralbo could be read as a test: is there a better way of knowing if one's body is ultra-conservative (even if the mind thinks contrary) than enjoying their chairs and carpets, their lights and parlors?

I may be blamed for going too far, because, it is true, there is only so much a conservative past can say something about our current situation. Recently, I've been very interested in a small scandal that amused me. A museum in New York was planning its yearly gala dinner, as all museums do. These dinners provide a context for fundraising among certain social and cultural circles, and reinforce a double affinity that is both personal and institutional. In order for this ritual to fully fulfill its goals, the dinner should honor a personality that somehow embodies the rest of the people who attend. In 2018, El Museo del Barrio, a museum dedicated to art of those of a Caribbean and Latin American origin, announced that they will honor Princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis. You may not know who she is, or was, but in a country where the 1960s was the force field of so many antagonistic views on how the future should look, she was an icon of the party as a format that makes the necessary holes in the cheese. "Princess TNT, the dynamite socialite" and "punk princess" were her names back in the 1980s, when she was famous for her parties, outfits, and the kaleidoscopic colors of her mohawk hairstyle. At her 25th birthday party at a New York

club, she danced on tables; now she is known for breezing through her five-hundred-room German palace, keys in hand, wearing a bracelet of rubies and a Virgin Mary charm. Her Regensburg castle is a potential “gladiator school” for conservative Catholics on a crusade to preserve church traditions. The Roman palace, overlooking the ancient forum, is a preferred salon for opposition cardinals, bitter bishops, and populists like Stephen Bannon. I thought it very telling and an act of unprecedented social-design sincerity that a museum so utterly conservative, yet still so interested in capitalizing on the Latin American ideas of joy and the party, chose to honor a person who “transitioned”—at least apparently—from one world of values and aesthetics to another. I blame that new twist of conservative epiphanies about a large social body on Trump. Surely he was a source of inspiration for all those who—Gloria include—had the idea to design one’s hair to signal a flavor for excess. Like Trump, Gloria liked it extravagantly and unnecessarily expensive: the parties, the sexual Gatsby-esque way of life (her husband was openly bisexual) that placed artists at its center, and now Bannon, another affiliation she shares with Trump... Unfortunately, my hopes were misguided, since the museum sincerely apologized for its own sincerity, and decided not to honor Gloria von Thurn und Taxis.

I imagine Guillermo Santomà asking himself about the relevance of getting to know more about the way people party, both the reasons and effects that their ideology have in defining their imagination of mingling and the way that continuously partying a certain way eventually affects ideology and values.

The question of partying may seem irrelevant to you in a time when economic contraction and a hard-to-digest turn towards ultra-conservative values are at a high. And yet to show an interest in the way ideologies create, foster, and enjoy social circles is only a matter of understanding the present and the future of relevance, as well as the nature of the networks that determine the mood of the time in which we live. Think of Princess Gloria, who returned to her palace of five-hundred rooms—Schloss St. Emmeram in Regensburg, Germany—that she’s claimed makes Buckingham Palace look like a hut.

How timely Santomà’s interest is in the palace of the marquis of Cerralbo! Now that real state imaginaries are surpassing social presence and the imaginaries of the wild party in force, it seems only normal to pay attention to such huge properties.

Though Madrid is not Bavaria, and the German Middle Ages cannot be compared to Spain at end of the nineteenth century. Yet spaces that are not for human use only, but also for the arts, for the purpose of representation, are common in both regions. Monumental staircases and galleries open to salons and are oriented towards a garden to stress the fact that a space like this is not merely a house but a *hôtel particulier* with a garden; that is, a building with a clear public mission. The *hôtel particulier* of the nineteenth-century—different from the house, or the *maison*—is a format characterized by its large scale and its free-standing structure. However, for us the name reifies exactly what it is at the core of our contemporary problems: the quarrel between the hotel and the rental of private space. If the marquis was dreaming of becoming the director of his handpicked mini-encyclopedic museum of mediocre taste, when crossing his salons today we mostly think about its rental possibilities. Actually, it is ideal, located in the very core of the capital of Spain, blessed with all the traits of its *rancio abolengo* (noble descent and solid Catholic roots), the palace is perfectly suitable for multiethnic celebrations where cultures of different descent meet. I would guess that in its ample and densely decorated spaces a modern Indian couple could find the perfect context for a wedding that combines the extravagances from two very different and yet joyfully compatible points of view. Art lovers and collectors could find it ideal for birthday parties, a context to honor the Old Masters with a refined new twist

acknowledging the plurality of media, gender, and even authorship in today's art world. Palatial comfort should serve more democratic values without losing any of its charms; every one of us should be invited to mimic exquisite Old World refinement in the stylistic language our choice, within a range of budgets. Oh, there are no better times than now, in the rise of old-Right, nationalist, authoritarian regimes and Brexit, to explore the possibilities of this extravagant context in a city that was once the control room of an unprecedented empire! In the palace of the marquis of Cerralbo we can be paired with its dazzling mirage of the radically conservative, aristocratic Madrid. One can imagine how easily a party service could turn it into a gastronomic galaxy of tastes; here is where the most exclusive high-end bars could be.

These words resonate in my mind like a romantic daydream, and yet I can imagine millions of practical questions that these lucky potential clients would share with Guillermo Santomà: How many plugs are there? Do they support high voltage? How many chairs can actually be used for seating? Is there storage, so that we could empty a whole room and install a professional sound system? Where can the caterers preheat the food? And the most important of all questions: can some of these elements be removed and replaced with new and more contemporary ones? At the end of the day, we are not living in the nineteenth century! For God's sake!

1. I need a break. I need a breath.

Did you know that the seasonal growth of trees in the early seventeenth century was affected by a Little Ice Age? This caused a change in the density of wood, which is supposedly the reason Stradivarius instruments possess such a unique sound: they had the benefit of being made with wood grown in conditions that have not been repeated since. I think about the trees trapped in all of Cerralbo's furniture. Did they accommodate the squirrels that could cross Iberia just by jumping from branch to branch, north to south and back again?

2. Mattresses Are Clouds

At one of the most fragile moments in Spain's political history, when Isabella II was in exile in France, the marquis of Cerralbo married María Manuela Inocencia Serrano Cerver. It would have been an unremarkable ephemeris if not for the fact that he was twenty-six and his wife was twenty-nine years his senior. Enrique, the marquis of Cerralbo, was a good friend of Antonio del Valle, the son of María Manuela and only one year younger than his new step-father. Enrique was surely a man of great ambition with a sense of opportunity: he was named the head of the Carlist party already at the age of twenty-four, the moment when the Isabella II was forced into exile. María Manuela was an interesting choice for him, however, for he was a young man of nobility, fortune, and ambition, yet she would not be able to grant him descendants. The question of how to produce an effective public space for his cause was his major concern, and, with the queen in exile, the production of a small palace environment made complete sense. Where else could the new king be born if not from a context and will that was crafted according to a future no longer so dependent on dynastic rights? How else to neutralize republican nonsenses than by giving the bourgeoisie and noblemen access to his handmade court?

It is difficult to describe precisely the ratio between public and private space at the marquis' palace, but I would venture to say that the private quarters amount to less than a third of the space dedicated to public enjoyment. You might be mistaken to label the marquis as someone unconcerned with the possibilities of public dramaturge and display

to affect the politics of the time! I also bet you're thinking that the marquis, who began to personally supervise the construction and decoration of his palace right after his wedding, did not indulge in private life because his bride was much older than him. Both assumptions couldn't be further from making sense, however. Donald Trump bought Mar-a-Lago, in Palm Beach, Florida, in 1985 and the property survived two of his divorces. The house was built by businesswoman and philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post between 1924 and 1927, and was already conceived as a winter White House in Post's will, an allusion to the important guests the family wanted to entertain at the time. As I already indicated before, Trump has been a little bit ahead of the marquis of Cerralbo in understanding that one can enjoy the public without spending a penny on them. Mar-a-Lago is now rented and yet a place where the President of the Uninvited States can spend as he wishes and invite whoever he pleases and cash in at the same time, while all his predecessors were just inviting and spending.

Like the marquis' palace, Mar-a-Lago was created with the mission to entertain, and, even if the fun was different, Post was known for inviting the most famous circus of her time, or casts of Broadway shows, to Palm Beach to dazzle her guests. The marquis was more into a hybrid of a mini-monarchic-themed palace with sprinkles of an ecclesiastic Roman mansion. Even their spousal age gaps are similar, even if inversed: Enrique was twenty-nine years younger than his wife, and Melania is twenty-four years younger than Donald. So in both cases the questions of beds and bedrooms arise, though there is a fundamental difference: At the time the marquis married María Manuela Inocencia Serrano Cerver, she at least had the opportunity of having another woman, Isabella II, as a model of a person not scared of sexual desires or of the public discussing her list of lovers, who were often younger men, both from the court and anonymous. Much has been written about the sexuality of the queen, who had been accused by misogynists of her time, as well as by those of today, for enjoying sex as much as a male of nobility and power used to. Ah, you might say that the queen, who was openly criticized and radicalized by her enemies and the ultra-conservative minds of the time, was surely not a model for the wife of the marquis, who was almost the same age as Isabella II. But how little we know! Talk of town, burlesque conversations, and a will to stay informed on matters of the royal mattress circulated, and to the secret enjoyment of female ears, the amount of information was enormous and interesting. Isabella II should be celebrated as a sex-positive person, a female figure who created an unprecedented opportunity and imagination for a dark and narrow society that barred women from their own bodies and desires. Of course María Manuela complied at some point in public, with humble countenance, nodding along, that the queen in exile was nothing but sick, perverse, or whatever other noun those circles of men, friends of her handsome husband, wanted to use to describe the fact that this woman was, simply, enjoying sex. And yet the facts prevail: this great woman was living proof that those laughing were the ones endangered, since frequent, satisfying sexual activity actually poses a much higher cardiovascular risk for older men—beware, Donald Trump!—whereas regular orgasmic sex actually protects ageing women from certain health problems.

I know that you are close to accusing me of going too far here, and yet I gather evidence that proves my point beyond any trace of doubt. One serious difference between the marquis of Cerralbo and Donald Trump, in respect to their wives and their sexual satisfaction, is not only their age but also their mattresses.

One of the major revolutions affecting the bodily function of sleeping took place during the first years of the nineteenth century: the invention of metal bedsprings to support the mattress. Instead of the previously used ropes or wool straps, bedsprings gave more

support and stability to the mattress. It is true that they were also annoyingly squeaky, not least because they respond to the movements of the sleeper, which is apparently essential for a better sex life and more comfortable performance. We should actually analyze the impact of metal springs in the love lives of the ultra-conservatives of the nineteenth century together with the debut of that galactic material memory foam, whose revival I blame on the ultra-conservatives of the twenty-first century. Its real name is temper foam and it was developed by NASA around 1966 to absorb shock and offer higher protection and comfort in airplane seats, and later in helmets. It then hit the bedrooms, treating hips and lower backs as if they were about to collide with another planet, acting like a soft case for the bodies that can barely touch anymore since it is designed to keep every bone trapped in a cosmic softness. The foam will never create the conditions for two bodies to meet. Its great and amazing memory cannot forget any of us to help the both of us or more; it will always and continuously produce, throughout the night, two martian valleys but never the most desired Venusian prairie. I believe in the body and its millions of forms of silent resistance, but I also assume that, for decades now, this foam and its memory have treated millions of bodies with a viscoelastic intolerance of our sexual bouncing, producing a tsunami of catastrophic after parties, putting an end to millions of nights by forcing to settle with a depressing foam hug. But it is not only its texture and its little bounce that resist bumping while merging with one another: its viscoelastic universe rehearses a micro-climate-change disaster every night if you attempt to share it with others. As soon as the foam perceives a body, it remembers why it has been created: to insulate! It is impossible to develop good feelings in such extraordinarily bad conditions, created by a material invented to avoid accidents. Sleeping in the hands of a device that reduces all impact is having an impact on all the bodies that cannot share beds any longer, bodies that need extreme air conditioning to survive their happily restful sleep, and that start gaining weight since the hips may no longer be able to walk without feeling pain. In other words, I think the body of Trump is not a cause for a conservative storm, but the cause of a revolution that created such a body. He is, as the German state advertises the standard citizen, just a *Peter Pattern*, a prototype of this evil memory of the conservative values and ways that are far from never returning, for they are already here, and will likely stay for a while all over Earth, as if envisioned by NASA.

3. Bowels Are Birds

At some point I hope you understand my point in addressing the work and the will of Guillermo Santomà to be a guest in the house of the marquis de Cerralbo as an exercise of confronting himself, his work, and us with all the aspects of this house and its former inhabitants. But the exercise of inscribing oneself, today, in the house of a politically active member of a conservative, religious party in a society in crisis and unable to face its challenges in any other way than polarizing the already existing tensions offers an indirect but certain way to ask a simple question: Can art, through its straightforward desire to temporarily modify environments, alter our behavior? That is, can we become aware of the diverse social ways of transferring and keeping power and influence over the past, and of our own challenges regarding the way we want to preserve certain ideals that are centrally relevant to the production of art and culture?

No project or exhibition can do this by itself, and there is a long list of propositions like this that have been done by artists in the past. Creating a light, showing a bulb, producing a chair, changing the circulation inside the palace, it is all added to the many artworks that reflect on the importance of thinking about the construction of real space to be able to reflect on virtual space. And yet to mention all these historical aspects in relation to present ones through the uncommon lens of things like memory foam relates to the need to

observe not only the politics of the place through the actions of those who inhabit it but also the origin and political performance of each and every material in our lives.

One of my favorite books is *Il Barone Rampante* (1956) by Italo Calvino, translated as *Baron in the Trees* (1998). It begins with twelve-year-old Cosimo retreating into the trees after a disagreement with his parents, vowing never to come down, determined to live his life on his own terms, under his own conditions. The book is too often interpreted as a description of the utopian impulse: Cosimo's adventures and retreat to an anachronistic realm—the trees—serve as pretext to the narrator's pessimism about and nostalgia for the dark times of Mussolini's Italy. However, there is another aspect of the text that links to the biography of the author, but from another angle. Italo Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923 to Italian immigrants. His parents were both botanists who moved to Mexico to pursue careers. When Calvino was two years old, the family moved back to Italy, settling among the exotic plants and trees in the small town of Sanremo, on the Ligurian coast. Despite his literary interests and ambitions, Calvino initially tried to follow in his parents' footsteps, enrolling at the University of Turin in 1941, and then the University of Florence, to study agriculture. It is through the work of Claudia Comte that I feel that the presence of the trees in the text is not only a way of creating a scenario, but that the scenario itself is part of an interest that connects the individual to nature, to a law of species coexistence, which the urban can never deliver. The trees that are present in Comte's latest work are very intriguing figures. They not only embody the presence of who they are in their natural habitat, but they also carry in their hearts a sculpture made of their own flesh. Trunk and sculpture are both *tree*, and hence, in this one artwork, we can trace the genealogy of the death and transformation of the life that is so crucial to the organism. A suspended tree with a wood sculpture inside appears to us like an enigma placed inside a mystery. Can art produce the conditions not only for us to perceive the qualities of the works but also to reflect on the continuity and discontinuity of nature? And if yes, can it be done so that it surpasses the utopian impulse that propels again and again a wave of useless nostalgia towards the loss of the natural world? Nostalgia is another name for the authoritative, a sorrow that just perpetuates the unwillingness to change the way we connect with life, the way we imagine the coexistence between the realm of nature and culture without separation. Donna Haraway starts her text *When Species Meet* (2008) with the meaningful question: "Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?" This inquiry should be extended to all matter, organic and inorganic, not to enter a mystified world but to learn how to leave behind the great divides that mark our relationship with nature, and to enhance our possibilities of animating culture with a new experience of itself. It is not that we need to "redefine" culture—the task is far more complex than the necessary and continuous exercise of critique—but that we need to introduce new experiences inside the experience of culture.

The will to be at the palace of Cerralbo responds to a will to merge; with metamorphic impulse, it corresponds to the vision that one could keep all that is positive and good and get rid of all that is negative. Art at the beginning of the 2000s was very keen on appropriating the language of welfare political discourses that produced the fiction that participation and dialogue were the tools to dissolve differences and conflicts. I don't want to be part of the universe of Enrique de Aguilera y Gamboa, and I am even less interested in a dialogue between his views and the values presented and at work in his house. And I don't think this was or is the intention behind Guillermo Santomà's presence in the house. I read his insistence on placing his work there as act to study the nature of transformation, of the relation between human agency and power, as well as nature (present in all the materials) and technology (as in all of us in relation to the space and its objects). The different works he decided to introduce in the palace act as the containers of the main

problem the house and its past poses to us and our time: the importance of the simultaneous representation of existing and non-existing phenomena. How can art or an artwork sustain a double vision between the tangible and the intangible?

Ey! But I need to end by telling you something else. For years I have been observing how certain fruits—kiwis and plums, for example—have been prominent in the lives of many people, and mostly women. I have also been observing how poor gluten has been blamed for slowing down the metabolisms of millions, preventing weight loss or stability, and, even worse, causing chronic constipation. And what about the liters of (often store-bought) water that we have been advised to drink? Are we going to pretend that this isn't just a Western (capitalist) take on the ancient Chinese wisdom of drinking warm water once in order to help the bowels? Finally, a few days ago I saw a very well-produced Indian movie in which the main character, a progressive father pushing his daughter to study and to build a career, was obsessed with intestinal constipation. His life event—always conscious and half successful—demanded the help of his daughter to administer all the remedies, to be able, as a core member of the family, to listen to his intestinal concerns without a trace of shame. The film, amusing and intelligent, as well as so positively far from the North American take on the subject, ends when a private driver recommends him to stop sitting. As the protagonist is wealthy, he does it as we (Westerners) do it, and yet it is in the squatting of the less wealthy classes that the secret of healthy intestinal rhythms remains intact. He tries, and it works, and he dies. He dies happily.

Does anybody know if the toilets at the palace of Cerralbo are gender neutral?

Chus Martínez

Guillermo Santomà

Guillermo Santomà's work encompasses design, architecture, sculpture and scenography. His work has been exhibited at Etage Projects Copenhagen 2015 and 2017, Side Gallery Barcelona 2015 and 2017. Architecture for the exhibition "After the end of the World" at the CCCB in Barcelona 2017. Among his colectivas exhibitions are New York 2015, Saloon New York 2017, Nomad Monaco 2017, Nomad Sant Moritz 2018 and Miami Basel 2018, just to name a few.

Santomà was born in Barcelona in 1984. He lives and works in Barcelona.