

# Juan Hidalgo

## photographic actions

*INMACULADA AGUILAR CIVERA*

### AN UNNECESSARY INTRODUCTION

Juan Hidalgo (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1927), spanish multimedia artist. He concentrates his activity on: Music, Object Art, actions, concerts, performances, atmospheres, photographic actions, conceptual art texts. He's formed part of the european and international avant-garde since the 60's. Some of his works's traits are: Strong compositional structuring with a particular attention to fragment. Keeps to the law of minimum effort and maximum production. Neutrality, channeling, ambiguity, sign. Incorporation of the East "like a perfume". Paradox as mental stimulation. Strong didactic character. Irony. Monotony. Incorporating chance within closed structures. Ceremony and rite. Rythm, measure, series, sequence. Radicalism, amorality, denial of established order. Life and death. Sex and obscenity (excess of desire).

We have before us an exceptional personality of spanish and international contemporary art history. His fame and recognition in all of its complexity is still pending; it's a question of carefully unravelling an attitude to existence that determines a plural and complex work. The marginality suffered by the artist can't be understood in a country of imported avant-gardes. His multimedia personality is a unique and unrepeatable fact. Here's an example.

### AN EXHIBITION: EROTIC PHOTOGRAPHIC ACTIONS

Juan Hidalgo shows us at last and collectively, for the first time, his erotic photographic actions.

A memorable exhibition that represents his oeuvre from 1969 to 1990. In general, avant-garde concepts deriving from conceptualism, from his actions, erotic art, art history, desire, life and death are superimposed and integrated.

### ART-CONCEPT

Conceptual art sets out to extrapolate the artistic discourse of its traditional aims and materials. The primacy of the mental process over manual ability is affirmed, of the idea over

form. Its aim is the search of meaning and significance, the idea of art is only the permanent redefinition of art.

After the Second World a great part of artistic activity works on the deconstruction of aesthetic experience and in favour of the idea, of intention. McLuhan observed the importance of the "medium", its conversion into message.

A conceptual art, belonging to the artist, could be manifested in extreme, radical situations; a direct, minimal, slight appearance; specificity, serialism, repetition; a present focus, varying levels of perception and scale; ephemeral non-commercial art.

Without language, art doesn't exist, says Weiner. An absolute condition. This radical and distinctive character of the conceptual option will open up a whole new spectrum of materials that replace traditional sculpture and painting. Conceptual gives photography an entirely new dimension within painting. A dimension that was implicit in its origin, just as the origin of painting might be seen in shadow, in the imprint, in the trace of things.

The contemporary artist, a reflection of his own history, is aware of the value of the object. Photograph is silent and aggressive like the object when its utility is taken away, yet it is immobile at the same time, it creates distances, incites desire. It is energy, process and change-transformation.

### THE NUDE

Again we face a radical work, of great beauty, temporal play and expression, a matter of life and death. The nude, fundamentally male, is demythified, fragmented, simplified, engaging in a mute struggle with history, with art, with ritual.

With the invention of photography and the promotion of the first daguerreotypes appear the first masculine nudes confined to two clear objectives: models for artists of classical compositions and pornographic images (we can't forget, as indeed Juan Hidalgo doesn't, the repression to which the mas-





Juan Hidalgo. *Flor y Hombre*. 1969. 12 fotografías. 50×60 cms.

culine image has been submitted; in comparison to the female, the former virtually disappeared since Mannerism).

Other than the amazing photo by Nadar, the 1860 “hermaphrodite”, it won’t be till after 1880 when the genre of the male nude gains popularity through the artistic vision of Thomas Eakins or with the studies of human movement by Marey and Muybridge, where the masculine nude becomes agile, manifests attitudes and expressions, effects actions. The contemplation of these bodies is no longer obscene or anti-aesthetic. The genre takes on in the 20’s.

From this moment on the masculine nude is an independent subject of creation, as we can see in the works of Imogen Cunningham and de Von Gloeden.

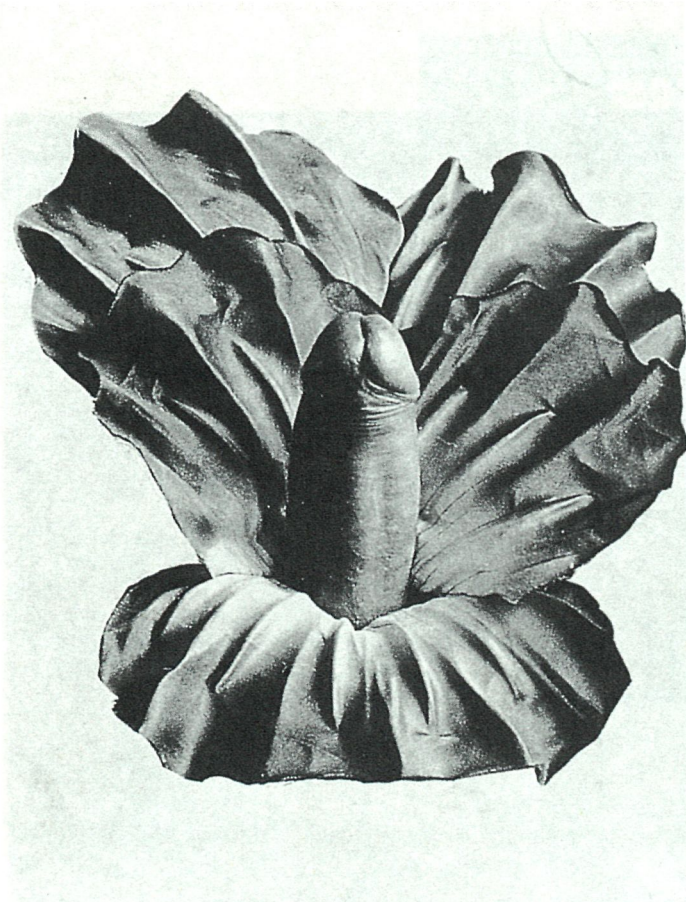
The camera is understood as an instrument of visual communication with a vast potential in the field of form and artistic investigation: Mapplethorpe, Cravo Neto, Rubén, Fregoso, Hosoe, Sedy, Hansen, Fontana, Levand, Anderson, Markou, Giacomelli, Röttgen, Gioli, Agut, Seidling, Blight... are some names that exemplify the different possibilities of the artistic contemplation of the male nude, from the sheer formal investigation of Mapplethorpe to the luminous games, with clas-

sical understones, of Blight’s languid body, or Hansen’s or Markou’s everyday scenes.

Furthermore new aesthetic trends use the body, frequently the nude, as subject of visual speculation for the expressional media. Perhaps those that went furthest were the members of the viennese actionism, Herman Nitsch’s “theatre of orgies and mysteries”, and the erotic rituals of Otto Mühl, for their radical intention of freeing and revealing the anarchy implicit in life.

Juan Hidalgo’s photographic nude similarly depicts that erotic impulse, of life and death, representing the human being in full volume, in his full voluptuous potency. The feminine is subtle, soft, it models space. The masculine obscenely manifests its attributes. In this way sex demarcates the vertical the diagonal, symmetry and axuality. Narcissus’s virtual gaze doesn’t regard his face but his sex. Flowers aren’t put in a vase but in a condom. Biozaj surges, superposition of the masculine and the feminine, Hermaphrodites? Sexed androgynes? It dominates and excites us by turns. Irony. Beauty. There’s tension spawned by the distance between the visible and the untouchable. Excess of desire.





Juan Hidalgo. *Barroca alegre y Barroca triste*. 1969. 2 fotos. 50×60 cms.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC ACTION

With utter coherence, masterfully, Hidalgo incorporates into his photographic actions a synthesis of artistic vanguard codes. Many artists have worked with photography (for example, and randomly we can mention Rauschenberg, Warhol, Hockney, Gette, Messenger, Monory, Gerz, Rainer, Appelt, Friedman, Adzak, Oppenheim). Juan Hidalgo fuses the concept of action with the act of photograph. We aren't simply beholding the photograph of an action, it isn't a question of registering the events that have ensued as direct presentation of a mental process expressed through theatrical means: performances, happenings, actions.

"For me, photographic action is defined by an instantaneous image, and if the material means permitted, a frozen image, representation of death. A dead image, and therefore pure, aseptic, ritual and minimal", says the artist. Here photography is the action per se, and its own canvas.

In them we see a play on time and intensity, on the subject, on the mask, a matter of death and dissolution. The photo certifies, ratifies, indicates, yet simultaneously it doesn't explain, nor interpret, nor comment, it's barren and dumb. It reveals signs, it is essentially enigmatic.

The image is instantaneous, it is in effect frozen, yet it has a before and after; it contains an energy, a process, a transformation, and in this evolution choice and decision are the prerogative of the artist.

Thus, Juan Hidalgo organizes series, creates sequences. He suggests symmetries, fragmentations. He generates tensions,

misunderstandings, ironies. He employs artificial, industrial, povera materials: mirrors, glass... transparent things always. He uses emotive objects: jade, necklaces, chemical vessels... science and joy. He signals symbolic objects, flowers: crysanthemums, narcissi, life and death.

Then, he fixes and immobilizes image in time. There's only an instant, but to capture it, he composes, fractions, chooses, extracts, isolates and traps, cutting a section of space-time. The image remains simplified, fragmented, or suggested; the process reveals virtual presence, its silence also communicates, creates longing and desire. It is up to the spectator to complete his image. These works offer cultural options that are perfectly legible: images taken from art history, egyptian art, greek, roman, medieval, mannerist. These characteristics appear in the formal aspects of the photographs, sometimes being mentioned ("improper vase"), at others underlying the historical process.

Finally, his mythologies. Narcissus, Eros, Thanatos and Medusa are his mythical and ritual figures.

Thus, Narcissus is interpreted as the origin of painting (according to Ovid, Philostratus or Alberti), proposing that every act of pictorial contemplation is narcissistic, while Medusa, introduced in the last of the twenty two photos, "Estrellamar", mentally brings the circle to a close. Philippe Dubois, commenting on J. P. Vernant's studies of Medusa or the Gorgon, tells us that "The ambivalence of the figure (Medusa) is total in this sense and constitutes in fact all of her power as void and junction, attraction and repulsion, terror and violence, life and death, erection and castration, masculine-feminine".

I am thankful for the help of Pere Borrás and Fernando Mut.