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Porto.



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Ruben Santiago
16 September – 21 October 2023

RUBEN SANTIAGO (Sarria, Galicia, 1974), through his work, critically examines the mechanisms by which collective memory is formed and reflects on how institutions regulate the granting of symbolic value. Strategically embracing long-term processes and ongoing methodologies, Ruben materializes his practice as an expanded experience that permeates every aspect of his daily life. Public presentations of his work become instruments of negotiation through which he seeks to challenge and analyze definitions of the real. Ruben Santiago creates installations, site-specific projects, online mechanisms, video works, objects, publications, and other cultural artifacts. His work and his approach to the processes of meaning production constitute one of the most unique and significant paths of his generation. He has exhibited his work in international institutions, galleries, and independent spaces since the late 1990s.



B

A

A

A

One fire 1.1, 2023

+/- 5227 wood flooring pieces, tar and acrylic paint

Variable dimensions

B

A lock is the weakest link, 2023

Photograph on Hahnemuehle Baryta 300g paper;
two glass capsules and iron oxide, wood flooring pieces, tar

Edition of 2 + 1 a.p.

150 x 100 cm (x2); 6,5 x 2,4 cm (x2)

Thought and action in public clandestinity

More than a creator of artistic objects, Ruben Santiago is a manipulator of situations that he directs with an effective intentionality towards a territory where art is critically scrutinized.

Though many of the conceptual practices of so-called institutional criticism are present in his way of working, what this artist is really looking for is a way to position himself in the context of a politically and socially engaged art, without falling into banal pamphleteering.

When I first met him, during the project *The Interpreted City*, curated by Pablo Fanego, in Santiago de Compostela in 2010, I was surprised by the material and ideological daring of a project that I was able to carry out at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, which I directed at the time; allow me to recall the words I wrote about it: "Visually daring and conceptually complex, Ruben Santiago's intervention is structured around the perception that art must be critically articulated with history and with the social fabric in which it is inserted. Thus, the starting point of his work is the geographical location of the CGAC, from an aquifer running along Bonaval Park, to construct a metaphor woven from the very water distribution system as a public service. If, on the one hand, the artist diverts part of the water flow that runs through the park into the museum through a channel that becomes a sculptural element with an important presence in the basement rooms and in the surrounding outdoor area, on the other hand he modifies, albeit in protocol-acceptable quantities, the levels of chemical additives that determine the quality of drinking water, a process that the artist records in a video work that is shown inside the CGAC. The museum becomes a kind of membrane between public and private space, an element of mediation between pragmatic functionality (the distribution of water) and artistic intentionality, which is materialized on the level of pure instrumental subjectivity."

Choice, analysis, research, and plastic translation. A recurring process for this Galician author who has been living in Porto for some years. Here, he is looking for a dimension of the city that favors undefined spaces, spaces in transformation, and administratively and socially forbidden spaces.

André Cepeda, in his 2010 project *Yesterday*, photographed some of these spaces and others that have since disappeared in the vortex of a city undergoing reconversion. In the case of Ruben Santiago, his drift is exacerbated precisely by the acceleration of these disappearances.

The exhibition *A Fire* is built on the full awareness of the urgency of its materialization. In the flow of his wanderings through the inaccessible geography of the city, the artist enters an old bourgeois house in Porto which, like so many others, is destined for demolition in a process of real estate speculation. Inside, he noticed that the house had been occupied by one (or more) homeless people. There were visible marks on the wooden floor from a fire, probably used for heating. These marks thus assumed a dystopian dimension in relation to the possible memory of parties, gatherings and socializing of a typical, wealthy family nucleus from times gone by.

From there, Ruben Santiago decided to draw up a work plan that turned that space into an unusual atelier. The goal was set: to remove all the wooden tiles from the floor and put them back in a place devoted to contemporary art. Working hours would have to be carefully adjusted to the clandestine nature of the operation. The heavy silence was a tribute to the emptiness that would be created there.

The piece *One fire 1.1* thus takes on a very peculiar thickness in its presentation at Sismógrafo; an act of courage, of critical positioning and procedural obstinacy, it lives off its anti-spectacularism to anchor itself in a distressing level of reception. To walk through it is to step into the very core of history, especially of all the untold histories of the urban mutations we are frantically witnessing today, sometimes in complicit silence, sometimes in discouraged helplessness.

There are many ghostly presences: the original owners, the homeless person who left the fire marks, the artist who, to carry out the work, had to bet on maximum invisibility.

In his mind, the linguistic peculiarity of the fact that, in Portuguese, the word *fogo* (fire) also refers to a housing unit constantly resonated. This coincidence, revealed in his parallel research into housing cooperatives, underlines the strangeness of his gesture.

In a second piece, *A lock is the weakest link*, two images of padlocks are shown, padlocks just like so many others that close the entrance to uninhabited houses. Symbols of the private that aggressively permeate the public space and, paradoxically, invite to transgression to a certain extent, as they are a sign of precarious building security.

The artist appropriated two of these padlocks and, through a process of electrolysis, decomposed them into iron oxide, which in the exhibition can be seen in two small glass ampoules.

The memory of the boundaries between public and private is thus reified in aesthetic objects that conflict with the composition traditions of the disciplines in the field of art. Here, it is the process that prevails over the result, it is this ability for a deviant mnemonic that validates the absolute relevance of the form.

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