

Ignasi Aballí

INFINITE

SEQUENCE

A Conversation about Museum Language

A footnote to Ignasi Aballí's
Double Readings

Joana Masó and Arnau Pons

Joana Masó In 2014, during a conversation with French-Israeli film-maker Nurith Aviv about her film *D'une langue à l'autre* (2004) at the Institut Français in Barcelona, you said that although governments or official language academies may decide, regulate or impose the use of a particular language, individuals must always ultimately account for the way in which they appropriate one language or another. Individuals are always responsible for what they say or do in the language that they choose, or that they were not able to choose.

Twentieth-century literature was marked by authors who responded to this challenge, either by literally writing in a different language (Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, Emil Cioran, Jorge Semprún, Agota Kristof, Tristan Tzara, Pere Gimferrer, Nancy Huston...), or by 'estranging' the language in which they wrote (James Joyce, Paul Celan, Clarice Lispector, Antonin Artaud, Henri Michaux, J. V. Foix, Marina Tsvetaeva, Mercè Rodoreda, Osip Mandelstam, Georges Perec...).

The reason that these parentheses resist closing is not just that the list of names is incomplete. There is also the incompleteness of the way of delimiting and defining the means by which language can be estranged, or changed. Marcel Proust believed that changing language / changing the language was always the necessary task of art and literature. He did not mean estrangement for its own sake, or the deconstruction of the syntax of great French literature for its own sake (a practice that initially earned Proust the contempt of his contemporaries and the rejection of the first manuscripts of *In Search of Lost Time*), but estrangement of the language so as to displace and transform it: to make it speak from elsewhere.

Many writers who worked somewhat programmatically on the legacy of feminism and on the exploration of forms of sexual freedom – as Proust

himself did – adopted this strategy of estrangement or displacement of the language in order to disrupt the meanings that arise from accepted ways of desiring and of looking. Marguerite Duras, Jean Genet, Hélène Cixous, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Blai Bonet and Maria-Mercè Marçal all wrote from different forms of displacement. Artist-poets such as Marcel Broodthaers picked up some of the ways of estranging reading and the gaze initiated by modernist writers – Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Gide, Magritte – to the point of creating a shared artistic-literary language that, however, also took into account Broodthaers' interests in the sixties and seventies, which had to do with the new status of artists' work in the museum, and with the mass production of value in the art market in the second half of the twentieth century. Broodthaers did not simply borrow from Baudelaire and Mallarmé as two of the illustrious writers of the legitimized nineteenth-century 'modern canon' and the cultural capital associated with it. Displacing their language to the centre of the museum's processes of validation and of speculation, Broodthaers made it speak of the new economy and poverty of artists. Through *that* literary genealogy, he enquired into the poverty of nineteenth-century artists, in order to reflect on his own.

Now, it seems that contemporary art is faced with the challenge of maintaining the link between writing and the strategies of estrangement / dismantlement / blurring / interruption / critical deconstruction of inherited languages, while also embracing these languages in the present, and all that can be explored with them.

Roland Barthes wrote that critical production contributes to the intelligible construction of its time. He considered critical writing and exploration to be the direction and the force of attraction of tradition vis-à-vis that which is still legible in contemporary life: the crossroads where the present meets

received ideas. This probably explains why one of the most impotent experiences involved in visiting a museum is to encounter critical gestures and forms of conjecture – immersed in different distancing practices – that do not fear turning into mere quotations.

The treatment of the distance generated by certain forms of dismantlement in museums brings us back to the question of who is accountable for the language that is spoken, and how: the question of the links set up with the referents that are mentioned and with the imaginaries that are evoked. In art, the choice of language – in its most limitless and most political sense – actively shapes its meaning. Experience and meaning in artistic practice are not just produced by language in the sense of a set of techniques, materials, mechanisms and traditions, but also by other factors: the relationship with the spoken language, the decision to use or not use Catalan or Spanish, for example, or to favour English or a global language in a particular register, or from a particular cultural imaginary, such as French for instance. The choice of language ends up producing meaning, along with a series of decisions that define the community that the artwork or project is addressing – local, international, artistic, amateur, *foreign*...

Arnau Pons When you talk about the ‘estrangement of the language so as to displace and transform it: to make it speak from elsewhere’, I realize that you are using the verb *estrangle* in a somewhat unorthodox way, and that you are doing so on purpose. Because what you mean is to ‘to make the language strange’, so you are extending the usual meaning of the verb *estrangle* in the sense of ‘to make strange’. And I like it, because your statement becomes amphibolic, or perhaps diabolic. You talk about displacing language through the actual displacement of language. According to the dictionary, to ‘estrangle the language’ could mean to remove language from its customary environment or associations, or – pushing the definition – to take it to alien, strange places. It could also mean that you would like your use of language to make the language strange to itself, as if the language were a subject – which, as we know, it isn’t, or at least that is what I argue every chance I get. In other words, as though you wanted language itself to find your intentions strange, to be surprised by what you attempt to do with it, in order to displace it immediately afterwards – always within its own sphere – to change its place, its commonplace – the place of the norm – and compel it to speak from a peripheral or

eccentric position. Because I imagine that you move in the periphery of the language, as I do. There is a centre, which is the norm, and many writers position themselves (position ourselves) far from this centre. Language is eccentric, and at the same time it is centric, *in you*. It is *your* language, which can become centric or eccentric to different degrees. And if I want to talk to you, if I want to listen to you and to know what you are saying, or what you are playing at saying, I have to learn this unpredictable language. Indeed, it is the language I learn in the process of speaking to you. This means that before I read a particular writer or approach a particular artist, I have to learn *his* or *her* language.

We shouldn’t forget that language has many layers, and a great deal of sedimentation. It has a lot of blemishes too, different registers, and probably a lot of dust. I’m thinking of Ignasi Aballí’s images made of dust. Sometimes it is difficult to make anything out on the other side, other times we get a glimpse of a strip of sky, or a façade with windows. Could it be a way of saying that passageways to reality are coated in sediment that conditions them? Or perhaps it has to do with art’s tendency to overvalue depositions, and to do so by resorting to time – to the accumulation of years – as a guarantee? The artist appears to be asking whether everything old is valuable, and exploring how this precious residue makes our vision clearer or more lucid.

So, after your statement has led me to make many turns, I would add the following to it: ‘estrangement of the language in order to make it speak from another space that is probably more *personal*’.

What is strangeness? How can we define it? What does it mean to ‘estrangle’ something or make it ‘strange’? Perhaps we can begin by accepting, as Paul Celan did, that there are two different types of ‘strangeness’. On one hand, there is strange as in uncanny: that which is unsettling, inhospitable, sinister, or inhabitable, *unheimlich* in German. On the other, strange in the sense of foreign, alien, the stranger or outsider, *fremd* in German. Or at least that is the difference that Celan described in ‘The Meridian’, when he made a distinction between art and poetry. It is as if, first of all, there is an art of strings and puppets, leading us into a non-existent, artificial, uncanny world made of movement and narrative; the fascination with things that are not alive but appear to be so; art with its artefacts and machines, its dramatic effects, its perfect rhymes and metres, which hastens to speak in the sweetest and most enchanting way; art with its simian

impersonators, trained for skilfulness. It is also the fascination that art is able to exert (it should be noted that *fascination* is etymologically related to *fascism*).

Whoever has art before his eyes and on his mind – I am now referring to the story about Lenz – has forgotten himself. Art produces a distance from the I. Art demands here a certain distance, a certain path, in a certain direction.

In these words from ‘The Meridian’, Celan tells us that art can take us outside of the human sphere and into an *uncanny* world facing the human. Using the example of Hermann Lenz, he argues that those who only have art before their eyes and on their minds forget themselves. Art produces a distancing and a forgetting of the self. It is, I repeat, the world of automata, of the (petrifying) head of the Medusa, of the strings that move the uncanny puppets that Heinrich von Kleist speaks of. It is basically about mechanisms and play, about language for the sake of language and rhyme for the sake of rhyme, about measurements and calculations. Artifice and technology. When deciding to take the path of art, the artist – who has forgotten him- or herself – must necessarily move towards this type of uncanny strangeness, probably with the intention of seeking freedom. But the artist may also turn towards another kind of strangeness: that of the stranger or foreigner. In any case, Celan says that poetry must not take the path of the automata, given that it involves breathing and, as such, becoming part of life, ergo a commitment.

You mentioned the inoffensiveness of art that is only based on the uncanniness of automata and on measurements, on what you call ‘dismantlements’, which could also be ways of voiding reality, or of evading history. Similarly, you raise the question of language, which can be foreign, although perhaps it should be said that the art world tends to prefer a certain *foreignness by convention*: that of English, French and Spanish. *Museum* languages. Foreignness and strangeness are such a nuisance and so unsettling that there is even a convention for dealing with them and presenting them. But there are also hegemonies of this convention, so that a convention of tradition is dismantled, in turn, through convention.

In any case, estrangement makes it possible to discover alterity within oneself, and the dialogue with this self-alterity is what makes writing possible (through the displacement of language on the page). It is as though the person needs the uncanniness of the mask – not because *the mask is the person* but because it is somewhere between the two. The

mask makes it possible for the face behind it to be revealed. Not all writers experience this alterity in the same way, however, and not all writers become aware of it. Some yield to language, abandoning themselves. Or perhaps we should say that they surrender their actual powers to it, so that it becomes *language in itself*, in the Heideggerian sense. Others have a critical relationship to language, and need it in order to contradict it. So their work is nothing but this confrontation.

I am less interested in language itself than in that which a language (a subject) conveys. And I am disturbed by the hegemony of museum languages when we speak of art.

Joana Masó In the context of the contemporary conventions conveyed through the museum language used in art centres, artists like Moyra Davey focus their work on the question of what to read, and how to speak about it. The essay entitled *The Problem of Reading* (2003) opens with one of her recurring dilemmas: ‘What to read?... what is the crucial bit of urgently needed knowledge that will save her, at least for this day?’

Her answer to this question includes various selections of writers and readings past and present, and also expresses concerns, doubts and anxieties about how (and in what language) to convey the urgency of having carried out these readings. The video essay *Les Goddesses* (2011) shows Davey in her apartment, talking and exploring different ways of approaching her readings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Goethe. We see her testing her voice and pacing around the domestic space, and views of the windows and façades of other buildings. We notice repetitions and errors, and we also note the urgency, the questions and, above all, the sense of expiration: What do I need to read, even if only on this particular day?

Boris Groys recently spoke, somewhat disturbingly, about this notion of the expiration of readings. Readings die. The readability of books expires, insofar as we can no longer perceive their medium, the strategies and distinctions that their language conveys. We cannot take the reading of them for granted. Through what is only seemingly an inverse gesture, twentieth-century contemporary art took the form of the unstoppable exploration of anything with the potential to become readable and meaningful: images, objects, readymades, bodies, sounds and voices, public space, the home, work, the museum. This is where the process of *signification* – the fact

that everything is susceptible to signifying – situates some of the battles that are still to be fought in the shared space of language.

Arnau Pons The *shared* space of language – I emphasize *shared* – is certainly the kind of space that we find in the cultural capital of Proust, Perec and Joyce, but also in more direct politics. Thus, we should also think about how politically incendiary or explosive material could find its way into the museum and, from there, challenge us, even if it does so through minority languages and micropolitical affairs. I am thinking of Roe Rosen’s *Out* (*Tse*) (2010), for instance, a film in Hebrew with English subtitles that is a caustic and sarcastic indictment of the xenophobic remarks made by Avigdor Lieberman, then deputy prime minister of Israel and leader of the extreme right-wing political party Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home). *Out* raises a series of questions about domination and violence, particularly about the natural coexistence of sexual transgression and reactionary or extreme right-wing ideologies, and therefore about the demonic possession of a society through its politics. It explores the way in which our voice can be possessed by other voices, and by discourses that we do not fully control. In 2007, Rosen made a film that criticized the hegemony of English and of the obsession with Nazism, and its attendant abuses and taboos; in *Confessions Coming Soon*, a young boy is asked to read a transcription in English – a language that he doesn’t understand although it is assumed that the viewer does. The boy thus reads out a series of declarations that are shocking coming from the mouth of an innocent, manipulated child.

As you said earlier, one of the most impotent experiences in a visit to a museum probably involves seeing gestures of dismantlement and dissolution that are by no means critical and do not attempt to express any kind of conjecture. Instead, they appear to seek to show or expose innocuous, formalist relations based on a deconstruction that points to the uncanny in the inner workings of art, the strangeness of things that do not breathe but appear to move and to emit signals. What specific truth hides behind these artistic forms? There was *art for art’s sake*, so why not dismantling for its own sake? Does time exist if there is no hand to turn the hourglass and no eye to see the sand trickle down?

In the short essay ‘On the Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger’s Philosophy’ (1948), Günther Anders showed how Heidegger’s philosophy

had lost all interest in ethical-political implications and interventions. Anders argued that *Dasein* (being-there) was not defined or determined by relationality. Instead, he said, the pre-existence of *Dasein* subsequently generated relationships with the world. Hence, we can wonder whether artists are ‘reality-wounded and reality-seeking’ – which is how Celan described himself as a poet – or whether their interventions as artists are merely conservative, in the sense of only (or essentially) acting upon things with a fixed, agreed-upon value (cultural capital), which their interventions thus conserve (in other words, artists who invest in sound cultural capital in order to become, in turn, sound cultural capital). According to Anders, Heidegger effectively shows that it is possible to philosophically construct a ‘disinterested interest’ or a concern (*Sorge*, care) for existence (*Dasein*) that curiously disregards certain things that thoroughly affect existence. For Heidegger, concern would lie in *oneself* and in *one’s own* relations with the world. This is a far cry from the concept of relationality and responsibility that we find in other philosophers (Martin Buber, Hans Jonas, Jeanne Hersch and Emmanuel Levinas, for example).

Even so, I have the sense that Aballí’s opaque windows, with their series of words, may perhaps hold the seeds of a new way of thinking about accessing the world, in relation to each language. I don’t know whether we should think of a Humboldtian declaration, in this particular case, or whether they are simply *key* words when speaking of boundaries or areas of meaning: *fetish* words of probability and of probing.

Going back to what you said about the fragility and the ephemeral nature of readings, I am not sure that reading-writings, or reading-works, fade so quickly. Henri Meschonnic’s reflections on translation come to mind, for example. The kind of reading that then becomes a work, as opposed to ephemeral readings that barely leave a trace. I think that artists fail to leave much of a trace if they settle for a kind of transgression or approach that adapts easily to the general discourse or to the control that museums exert over the value of shared cultural capital.

Joana Masó Michel de Certeau dedicated several essays in *La Culture au pluriel* (*Culture in the Plural*, 1974) to exploring confidence in cultural capital as a conservative gesture, in the etymological sense of the word. The conservation required by the kind of cultural capital historically associated with literature and art is based on a traditional logic

of safekeeping or care in which everything remains intact, untouched. The idea of trusting culture or literature as secure assets suggests the image of a culture based on saving and patrimony. In this sense, de Certeau writes that '[w]e have too many commemorations and not enough of the present', an excess of remembering the past and a shortage of the now. If we consider the present as a reality that generates needs, culture can only be some kind of activity, a certain kind of practice or of writing. Something that offers no guarantees.

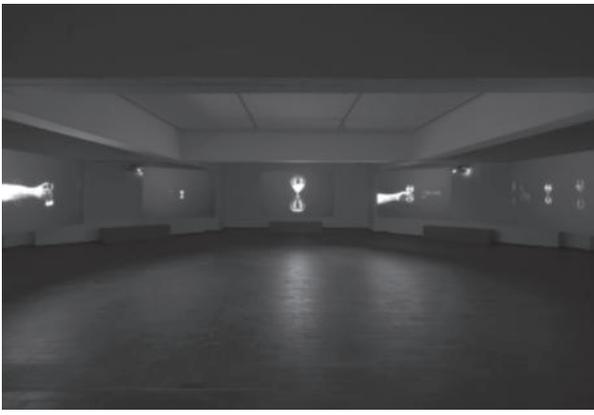
The artist Alejandra Riera has used those words to describe artistic practice in certain long-term projects: 'work without guarantees'. Her projects are full of explorations related to textuality: dialogues, extensive footnotes, reports for academies, quotes from Rimbaud and Simone Weil, documents, archives and images, breaks and digressions of self-translations that reveal an investigation into multiple writings that can neither end nor be subsumed into a single authorial voice, and that attempt to shape the collective thinking of traditional and contemporary texts. They are works that exist far from the confidence and conventions of museum language. They attempt to position themselves beyond the field of possibilities defined by the intrinsically predictive language of the museum. They do not operate on the basis of the consensus regarding the neutrality of global language.

Arnau Pons Just as I mistrust the neutrality of global language, I also mistrust the genuineness of dialects in art (with their pride in being minor) when accompanied by the question of identity. I never tire of repeating that Pasolini learnt Friulian as an adult, and that he ended up using it as a kind of political strategy against the hegemony of Italian, and of English as capitalism's battering ram.

Joana Masó We would have to see how museum language and the *dialectal* practices of the region of the world that is art affect or reflect each other: how global language and the global imaginary have come to be spoken among few, in the artistic context.

Arnau Pons I don't know whether I would use the word dialectal; codified perhaps. That makes me wonder about the continuance of the critical reflexivity of poetry in today's society, and, as such, about poetry as a force that challenges or dissolves cultural capital of any kind.





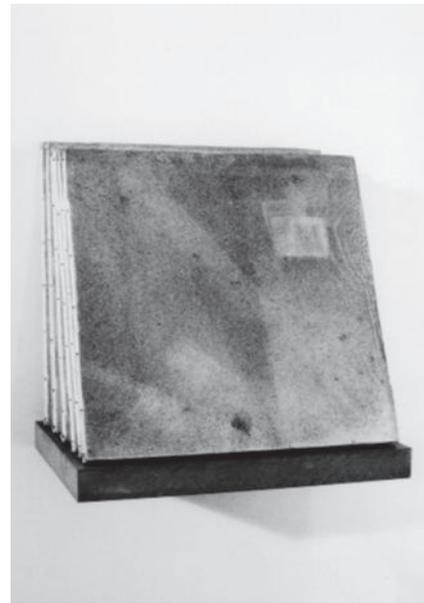
10 *Time as Inactivity*, 2016

Set of colour video loops,
120 min., 60 min., 30 min., 15 min., 10 min., 5 min., 1 min.,
no sound
Courtesy of the artist



Dust I, II, III, IV, 1996

Dust, glass, iron frame
100 x 100 cm
Museu d'Art Jaume Morera, Lleida



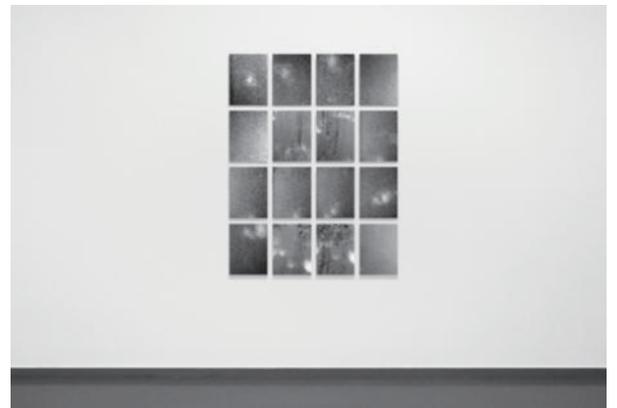
Dust (6 Pieces), 1994

Dust on canvas and shelf
6 pieces, 30 x 30 cm each
1 piece, 32 x 24.5 x 3 cm
Col·lecció Estrany–de la Mota, Barcelona



5 *Colour Chart (History) I and II*, 2008

Acrylic and vinyl on canvas
2 series of 10 pieces, 50 x 50 cm each
I: Private collection, Switzerland
II: Colección Isabel y Agustín Coppel, Mexico



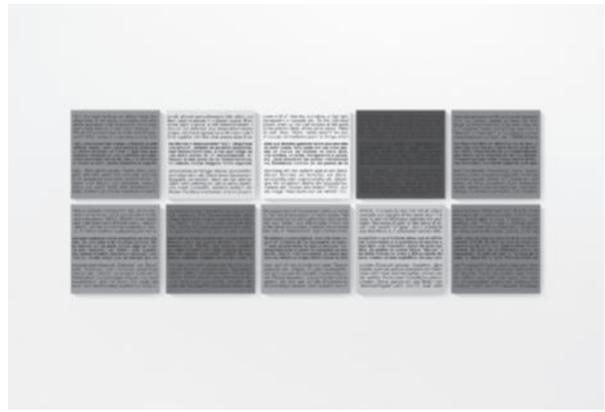
1 *Window (Sky/Dust)*, 2014

Digital print on photographic paper
Series of 16 pieces, 42 x 27 cm each
Colección Kablanc, Navarra



2 *Window (Studio/Dust)*, 2015

Digital print on photographic paper
Series of 16 pieces, 42 x 28 cm each
Colección Valzuela, Madrid



6 *Colour Chart (Theory) III and IV*, 2008

Acrylic and vinyl on canvas
2 series of 10 pieces, 50 x 50 cm each
III: Courtesy of Galeria Estrany-de la Mota, Barcelona
IV: Courtesy of Fundación Helga de Alvear, Cáceres



11 *Repainting Miró (Working Title)*, 2016

2 colour video loops, 90 min. each,
no sound
Courtesy of the artist



Double Readings, 2014

Digital print on paper and glass
Series of 12 pieces, 100 x 100 cm each
Courtesy of the artist and
Meessen De Clercq, Brussels



*Seven Identical Paintings, Seven Similar Paintings
and Seven Different Paintings*, 1989

Oil on canvas
3 series of 7 pieces, 30 x 30 cm each
Cal Cego. Col·lecció d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona



Colour in the Newspaper, 2016

Newspaper cut-outs
150 x 300 cm
Courtesy of the artist



Objects in Mirror, 2011

5 digital prints on mirror
100 x 100 cm each
(Smaller and Further): Courtesy of the artist and
Galeria Estrany-de la Mota, Barcelona
(Darker and Like): Courtesy of the artist and
Meessen De Clercq, Brussels
(Brighter): Collection Bruno et Marie
Christine Saverys



Wrong Idea, 2012

Tipp-Ex correction fluid on mirror
100 x 100 cm
Private collection



3 *Taking Measures (Gas, Moisture, Air Particles, Atmospheric Pressure, Radiation, Sound, Time, Wind Speed, Temperature)*, 2010

Digital print on photographic paper
Series of 9 pieces, 40 x 27 cm each
Courtesy of the artist and
Meessen de Clercq, Brussels



7 *A Thousand Words (Julià Guillamon, Marla Jacarilla, George Stolz)*, 2016

Digital print on paper
3 pieces, 70 x 50 cm each
Courtesy of the artist



Tentative d'épuisement I, 2014

Digital print on photographic paper
100 x 67 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Thomas
Bernard – Cortex Athletico, Paris



Attempt at Reconstruction (Without Glasses), 2016

Glass, sand
25 x 25 x 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist



Permanent Latency, 2014

Glass
2 pieces, 98 x 30 cm each
Courtesy of Galeria Estrany-de la Mota, Barcelona



Sequence, 2016

Glass and Plexiglas
65 x 40 x 25 cm
Courtesy of the artist



Double Reading, 2013

Digital prints on glass
110 x 80 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid



9 *Less Transparent*, 2013

Stainless steel and digital print on glass
390 x 120 x 5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid



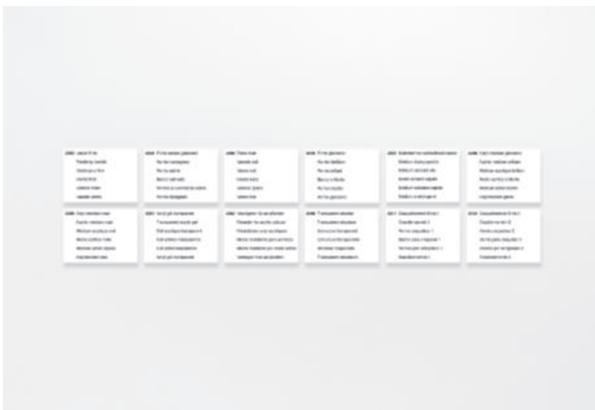
Seven Transparent Paintings, 1995

Clear acrylic gel on paper and mirror, iron frames
Series of 7 pieces, 100 x 100 cm each
Colección Fundación Caja Mediterráneo,
on loan from the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo
de Alicante (MACA)



Tentative d'épuisement II, 2014

Digital print on photographic paper
100 x 67 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie
Thomas Bernard – Cortex Athletico, Paris



4 *Colour Chart (Transparent)*, 1996

Acrylic and vinyl on canvas
Series of 12 pieces, 16 x 22 cm each
Courtesy of the artist and Galeria
Estrany-de la Mota, Barcelona



8 *Index (Twenty Words)*, 2016

Vinyl on glass
435 x 670 cm
Courtesy of the artist



Skin, 1995–2011

Clear acrylic gel and wood
100 x 100 cm
Museu d'Art Jaume Morera, Lleida



Available, Reflection ('Passion'), This Is Not the End and Film of an Image, 2016

Digital print on paper
4 posters, 100 x 70 cm each
Courtesy of the artist



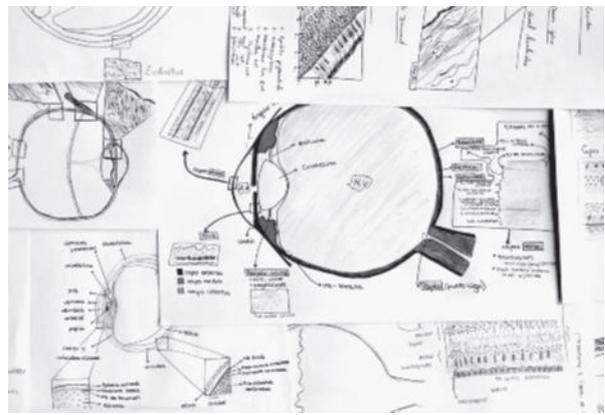
12 *Available*, 2016
 Colour video loop, 10 min.,
 no sound
 Courtesy of the artist



This Is Not the End, 2012
 Black-and-white video loop, 10 min.,
 no sound
 Courtesy of the artist and Galeria
 Estrany-de la Mota, Barcelona



13 *Film of an Image*, 2016
 Colour video loop, 20 min.,
 no sound
 Courtesy of the artist



Eyes, 2016
 100 drawings on paper
 21 x 30 cm each
 Courtesy of the artist



14 *Reflection ('Passion')*, 2009
 Colour video, 88 min.,
 no sound
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Galería Elba Benítez, Madrid



15 *Sign (Please Do Not Touch the Books)*, 2016
 Digital print on photographic paper
 50 x 70 cm
 Courtesy of the artist



Joan Miró Prize 2015

An international jury comprised of Nimfa Bisbe, Rosa Maria Malet, Alfred Pacquement, Vicent Todolí and Poul Erik Tøjner unanimously awarded the 2015 Joan Miró Prize to artist Ignasi Aballí.

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The artist would like to express
his special appreciation to the
members of the jury of the 2015
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[cat. 10]