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## Juan Cruz: Application for Planning Permit Proposal to Build a Metaphor



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Application for Planning Permit  
Proposal to Build a Metaphor

## Homeless Tales, or, Juan Cruz's Castles in Spain

Alexia Defert

ARTISTS AND WRITERS ALIKE HAVE ALWAYS TRAVELLED; either to seek exotic inspiration from the unknown or to gain a distanced position from which to access their everyday environment with increased clarity. Whatever the purpose, for it to be productive, travelling should procure an acutely renewed sense of perception. The deliverance from one's own quotidian must be guaranteed, despite the fact that what constitutes the exotic is no more than a short lived insertion into the everyday of some culturally distant other. To use travelling as a source of inspiration from which to write or make art poses questions of authenticity pertaining to the production of knowledge engendered by the traveller's experience. But there is more to it.

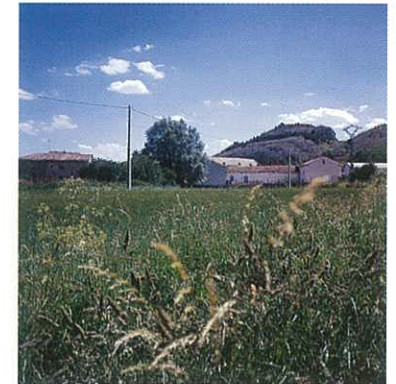


Such interrogations, when informed by a post-colonial survey of tourism, have the effect of scrutinising the authenticity of all positions, not only that of the traveller, but also of the autochthon, as well as the reader. Familiar to those informed by a post-modern discourse is the recognition of the abundant distortions at work throughout travellers' accounts that have informed the production of modern art and literature. These stories signal travelling as a prime locus through which, under the cover of poetic or artistic licence, the West flexed its imperialistic muscle. Showing itself as not so much curious to meet the other, as to phantasise and represent radical difference.

Recent modes of artistic practice indicate that, walking in the footsteps of the disenchanting post-modern tourist, we may find a particular breed of artist who, through deliberately espousing the

figure of the visiting outsider, manage to secure a perfect platform from which to elaborate hybrid forms of post-conceptual practice. This position allows for the making of critically engaging objects which, while coloured by the last 30 years of post-modern debates, nevertheless draw from the enriching visual economy of the country of adoption. All this time though, the disenchanting post-modern tourist must face the fallacy central to the ideology of tourism: that the category of the 'authentic' is essentially imported by the tourist themselves, alongside the demand for an industry of authentically non-genuine local cultural artefacts.

The fate of the post-modern tourist goes as follows: preoccupied with tracking down an authentic experience away from the global village, the tourist is in fact condemned to endlessly visit new sites through preexisting and pre-organised sets of knowledge: guidebooks, travelling agents' recommendations and previous visitors' accounts. They are destined to walk other streets in other cities featuring other statues bearing the same names and dates. The tourist therefore becomes the unwitting negotiator of a whole wealth of conflicting historical accounts (that of the coloniser's versus that of the colonised, the victor's versus that of the vanquished), on top of having to carefully avoid an itinerary of film-set déjà-vu, and partially recalled simulacra.



The specificity of Juan Cruz's intervention in Melbourne brings forward a series of questions pertaining to the displacement of knowledge occasioned by travelling that is anchored in his own relationship to writing and story telling. Throughout the city of Melbourne twelve touristic sites have been chosen by the artist. Flinders Street Station, The Block Arcade, The Statue of Joan of Arc, at the State Library, The Old Magistrates Court, the World Trade Centre, Melbourne Museum, Federation Square, Crown Entertainment Complex, The Sydney Myer Music Bowl, Colonial Stadium and The Sandridge Railway Bridge. Each location is to receive a development proposal announced

on a pro-formatted poster, pretty much similar to regular Planning Permit Application Forms usually affixed to sites for public consultation. Having provided the necessary preliminary information, and described the way he intends to use the land (nature of the development, detailed plans of the proposed development in relation to the current use of the land), the applicant (Cruz) subverts the whole procedure. Departing from the usual administrative protocol and planning descriptions, Cruz breaks into a short narrative. If the latter seems to bear a degree of relevance with the site at stake, it soon becomes clear that in fact each text needs to be considered in relation to the remaining eleven sites

scattered throughout Melbourne, across which a complex network of interwoven tales has been distributed. They constitute the written portrait of a Spanish village.



Thus the neo-Romanesque style of the Old Magistrate's Court of 1911 takes us to a small church whose entire visibility is sacrificed when the road that passes by it is redeveloped. Further along, at the New Melbourne Museum, one encounters an historian whose expertise on the Romanesque style as well as his intimate knowledge of local affairs reveals the true purpose of the new road and the local trade it was in fact meant to service.

Each sites thus operates as one of twelve stations, where an added facet is uncovered, obliquely suggesting how, unlike official discourse, the shape of the land is actually governed by little narratives. Cruz's stories are webs of seemingly unrelated, minor events that no official history book or monument can reveal, and whose true impact may only be gleaned in between the lines of the storyteller's tales.

The connection between travelling and the desire to narrate is in no way a novelty. In *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov* (1936)<sup>1</sup>, Walter Benjamin suggests a direct and causal link between the activity of travelling and the craft of storytelling. In this equation the point at which the Storyteller proceeds to tell his

story inaugurates two distinct, yet related events. On the one hand, it signals - almost in a performative manner - the traveller's return from his Odyssey, anticipating the narrative's looping effect. On the other hand it reveals how conditional both spatial and temporal distancing are to the formation of the concept of experience.

But Walter Benjamin's tribute to Nikolai Leskov also highlights the function of those who, unlike the Storyteller, stay at home. The traveller's tale is only of value if the knowledge it produces serves the purpose of those whose function is to stay put, thereby geographically charting the traveller's notion of home and mapping the matrix points of departure and arrival so decisive in the craft of storytelling. Thus the role of the Storyteller's audience is far from negligible, for by staying behind, the autochthonous contribute to validate and to confer upon the traveller's experience its use-value. They organise the social space within which the traveller's tale can be received and mediated into a communal form of experience.



Juan Cruz's art of storytelling interestingly displaces the well-oiled mechanics of Benjamin's 'Storyteller'. In the scenario of Cruz's present project, the storyteller, a Spanish-born, London-based artist, partially borrows from the modality of tourism by responding to a series of iconic, touristic sites in Melbourne and pasting onto them a series of 'home-grown' stories. Stories whose imaginary resonances happen to square with the artist's own Hispanic connections. The sequence of stories written by Cruz into the City of Melbourne's Planning Permit Application Forms is a confirmation of the impossible authenticity of the tourist's experience. Every point of Melbourne is being retold through an intimate knowledge of other sites, derived by the artist from totally unrelated experiences.

By superimposing fictional narratives onto the touristic sites Cruz brings attention to the concerns which underscore the whole

of his work, sometimes deliberately activated (*Translating Don Quixote* (1996), *Sancti Petri* (1998), *Portrait of a Sculptor* (2001)), and other times camouflaged. But to read into this an attempt to promote one cultural identity over another - an agenda artists often have to negotiate when exhibiting internationally - would be misleading.

For Juan Cruz has not travelled all the way to Melbourne to send us a series of 'postcards from home', and this is where his own relation to storytelling takes on a far more complex function than the simple assertion of a cultural allegiance. This urban installation positioned around the streets of the city has developed out of the artist's extended dialogue with his ongoing work with literary fiction. By occupying the position of a visiting tourist, having prepared his trip by consulting various maps and guidebooks, Cruz has deliberately played up his own estranged perception of Melbourne.



It is important to know that the stories appearing on the posters positioned at Melbourne tourist sites were written in London prior to Cruz's visit. As already suggested, it is not a claim on cultural authenticity which animates Cruz, rather it is his relation to names and locations. His work reflects upon the way one constructs one's own sense of identity and

the way this impacts on the knowledge one carries around with oneself. Names, proper names, need no mediation: the list of sites of intervention established by Cruz on the basis of gathered tourist information thus become the pretexts for another form of knowledge. This time much more immediate, for they are anchored in sets of memories that feed into his own sense of identity. Thus through his stories, the artist sets up a series of deliberately subjective detours. His mode of intervention clearly disclosing how constructed his own reading and filtering processes can be while attempting to experience the city 'for the first time'.

Central to Cruz's work is an ongoing interest in the deeply narcissistic and often fictitious or inauthentic mechanisms that

come to supplement, if not to frame, the fabric of an artistic practice. Much of his work appears to develop a close dialogue with cultural incidents and coincidences which he either chooses to amplify or play down. This draws attention to the actual decision-making process through which Cruz works to choose whether or not to encourage his own cultural essentialism.

If our own mechanisms of interpretation decide on the ways in which locations and names become synonymous with cultural differentiation, Cruz's work seeks to scrutinise this process not only in the reception of his work but also in the way he chooses to conduct his own practice. Thus this initial line of inquiry brings us to a tertiary concern. Through his work Cruz continuously questions the logic of what constitutes an artistic practice and interrogates the way internal connections are constructed to signify and made to work their way across an artist's intricate web of homespun textual and visual objects. In the context of the Melbourne Festival, his placing into such a global cultural orbit this set of modest local stories furthers Cruz's preoccupation with what could be described as 'the Degree Zero' of both the production of meaning and knowledge in the context of art making. But to stay clear of intellectual endgames, this reflection is concealed, almost folded into the writing process so central to his approach.

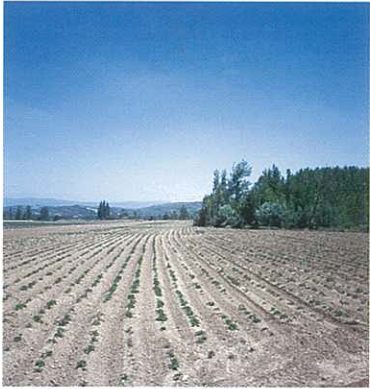


Thus while asking questions of methodologies specific to his own practice, Cruz's investment into the ongoing critical process at work reveals a kind of meta-practice. It functions alongside the work to scrutinise the role of coincidence and reveal the way art can signify things. Despite the fact that art thrives on extremely arbitrary sets of connections in order to develop. Here Cruz is as much reflecting on the logic of the visual in its relation to the textual, as he is pursuing his own preoccupations with how to negotiate, or shall we say assist, the irruption of encoded autobiographical references. References that may

subsist within the mechanisms of signification played out by his work. These can resurface in the reception of the work or indeed in the audience's desire to track down seminal moments determinant to the work of art, or better still, determinant to the artist's vocation.

Juan Cruz's decision to display his stories on Planning Permit application forms positioned around Melbourne could deliberately alienate the stories from a straightforward reading and reception. The stories become curiously homeless, culturally specific but site-less. Detached from a context where they might, by geographical analogy,

make more immediate sense. The deconstructive metaphor at work here is all the more poignant since the format holding the texts constitutes the first step towards adding or expanding one's territorial occupation of land or place, thereby ontologically committing oneself to the fabric of the city. But the reception of such homeless narratives also impacts onto the artist's own assumed position of power and knowledge. What becomes of the Storyteller's tales when no longer fashioned nor reflected by local or national geographies? The same way the Storyteller's very experience vacillates when deprived of its autochthonous audience, the disseminated distribution of the artist's stories runs the risk of bearing no direct relevance to the chosen sites of implantation.



Possibly jeopardising the original ethnographic value of the stories, Juan Cruz's intervention in fact opens new metaphorical possibilities. By deliberately fragmenting both the narrator's and the audience's function, Cruz's playful and dislocating metaphor generates an exciting social space where local and visiting constituencies are yet to respond to the artist's homeless tales and contribute their own to the story of the land.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana Press, London, 1992.

## Works

Narratives on A2 Application for Planning Permit posters at various sites in Melbourne

## Juan Cruz

was born in Palencia, Spain, in 1970. He studied painting at Chelsea School of Art in London graduating in 1993. In 1992 he attended the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin as an exchange student. Cruz's work has taken various forms including performance, wall-drawings, tape/slide installation, books, CDs & photographs.

Cruz has had solo exhibitions in various venues in Britain and abroad. These include: Matt's Gallery, London [1998 - 2001] Galeria Elba Benitez, Madrid [1999] Kettle's Yard, Cambridge [1999 & 2000], John Hansard Gallery, Southampton and Camden Arts Centre, London [2000]. Group exhibitions in which he has taken part have included: Squatters, Serralves Foundation, Porto & Witte de With, Rotterdam, *From Where - To Here, Art from London*, curated by Svenrobert Lundquist & Henry Meyric Hughes, Konsthallen Göteborg [1999], Lucy Gunning Juan Cruz, Curated by Susanne Gaensheimer, Künstlerwerkstatt, Munich 1999], *Other Arrangements*, Curated by Catsou Roberts, Stichting Duende Aktiviteiten, Rotterdam [1999].

Between 1995 and 1999 Cruz was a regular contributor to *Art Monthly* magazine. Cruz is a lecturer in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College London and is currently a recipient of a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Artists.

Juan Cruz is represented by Matt's Gallery, London and Galeria Elba Benitez, Madrid

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