



Exhibition «Portrait of Barcelona»
26/04/1995 - 13/08/1995

Self-portrait

Cities have the coquettishness of people. It is no accident that it is the citizens who make them and take them apart with stones, according to the concerns of the moment, and who walk and bring alive the great avenues as well as the small streets.

Cities also work on their profile. They also look for the way to “pose” according to the whims of their inhabitants and the tastes of those who run them. Putting together the small history of the way in which a city has painted itself is an archaeology of self-portraiture. And, therefore, an inventory of suspicion: showing a specific profile, what were we hiding? Sometimes the saying “tell me what you want and I’ll tell you what you need” seems tailor-made. Often, the sought-for profile is the one which least fits in with the reality of what we are. In reality, every self-portrait is an exercise in dressing up.

We can establish a certain typology of the self-portrait. 1. The self-portrait can show what we appreciate most about ourselves and receive the general acceptance of the people observing us. What a marvellous city! 2. The self-portrait can resemble us and reflect the best possible profile yet, at the same time, must not find its equivalent in the taste of the person viewing it. What a strange city! What obsessive people! 3. The self-portrait can be the result of a gesture of authenticity in the exercise of painting oneself, and to show us as we are. With the unease this generates in the onlooker because seeing someone as they really are makes him eager to be able to show himself one day. What a bold, arrogant and pretentious city! 4. The self-portrait can be an exercise in cunning in which, curiously, we show the best of ourselves, duly offset by some touches of ugliness in order to make us a little more credible. What a humane city!

Which of these options has Barcelona chosen? Probably a bit of all of them, according to the times and the moment. It is no accident that the history of the portrait, of the self-portrait of Barcelona, is a complete inventory of the genre. Even though, for a long time—from the medieval period to the mid-nineteenth century—all the secrets are concealed behind the city walls, so that the profile is a face which insinuates but specifies nothing, the bourgeois city, too satisfied with its progress, too mistrustful due to the pulsations of history, almost forgets to show the good and best thing to have emerged from it: the Eixample district. Just like the Olympic city, it has such a strong desire to show off its finery and gallantry that it turns out to be inevitably contrived.

Nobody knows us better than we do ourselves. However, nobody is less inclined to look further into this knowledge and only an exhibitionist would be foolish enough to divulge it. This is why the language of the self-portrait is an indicative language. It speaks about the state of mind of the city at every moment, because only unbridled euphoria or absolute defeatism open the doors to Dionysian exhibitionism. And it often finds the best way of trying to deceive and captivate others in an exercise of adjusting reality to Apollonian regularity.

The self-portrait of the city is a sequence of tricks which it has generated in order to build complicities and to request the title of heir. Sometimes it has sought the complicity of the portraitist from the outside and, at others, it has kept things close to home. However, along the way, it leaves a lot of clues, a lot of indications about what the city is and what it would have wanted to be, about what has really been achieved and what it wanted to look like. A self-portrait is never innocent. This review of



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Barcelona, the way in which Barcelona has sought to show, in every era, that it isn't the same as the way it has been seen, is a good example of the secrets concealed by the signs of the self-portrait.