

# Cromocracy

Abel Herrero

Andrea Cortellessa

The room that can be glimpsed from the shop windows facing the street, the canal, the world, is empty. But just a while ago the room did witness a struggle, an aggression; perhaps a deflagration has even occurred: the furniture is knocked over, objects are strewn all over in pieces, everything is in shambles. A television set has been left on, but it does not show anything, just white noise. Above the bed, a picture has been left undisturbed; it shows something quite unusual for a bourgeois *intérieur*, which however might explain everything: an earth-shaking, menacing as well as seductive atomic mushroom. A few steps through the shambles bring us to the next room, where the walls are covered by four resplendent monochromatic canvasses, swarming with unintelligible signs around a single recognizable image, made with the same technique but depicting the face of a man. The *ensemble* may recall an iconostasis, a space similar to the famous Mark Rothko Chapel in Houston: in the center, however, unlike that sublime nihilistic suprematism, a human reference remains.

We recognize the face from the news images of a decade ago (even if its current appearance, after an odyssey seemingly far from its conclusion, appears to be quite different): it is Julian Assange, the controversial founder of WikiLeaks who in 2010 made the headlines (and has gone down a judicial tunnel at the end of which he has not yet seen the light) for having uncovered the Pandora's box of digital *enfers* of the neoliberal and "democratic" world. If some are keen to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize, for the United States' government he is guilty of high treason, so that he may be convicted with a penalty no longer applied in the country since 1953: the death penalty. However you want to read this story, in which there are many dark sides, there is no doubt that Assange is paying dearly for the *hubris* of having questioned the Manichean division of a free and open West and an authoritarian and dark Rest of the World.

This narrative has now come to the white heat of a military confrontation which, lurking at the time of the Australian cyber-activist's exploit, had long rumbled in the background to finally explode with a ferocity and brutality that have surprised the most astute Solons of international geopolitics. After so many *glamorous* dystopias, which in the last thirty years have heralded seductive, invisible and aseptic Star Wars, the war we are witnessing now is an old-fashioned one: an insane butchery of tanks crawling in the mud, battleships sinking offshore, hand-dug trenches, and bombs that are anything but intelligent. In short, a desolate twentieth-century war. Albert Einstein used to say that he had no idea what weapons would be used in World War III, but that certainly the Fourth one would be fought with stones. It seems that we have skipped a step here.

What has struck Abel Herrero – as the artist told me – was, above all, this *regression*: like a journey back in time that suddenly plunges us back into the pre-1989 nightmares made up of Balances of Terror and Atomic Mushrooms, lurking on the horizon. In the artist's work, Assange's enigmatic icon is placed right in the middle: tormented in the unbreathable bottleneck between the bellicose darkness of the *demokrate* of a neo-medieval East, which does not hesitate to put its hand to the cudgel, and the false transparency of a West which complacently defines itself as an "open society", governed by public opinion, and then envisages an electric chair for those who dare to bring its flaws into the open: cutting off the finger pointed at it, so as not to look at those ugly spots on the face of the moon.

The canvases in the "chapel" present again a technique long adopted by Herrero, that of *saturation*: the pure colours of the four-colour printing (cyan, magenta, yellow and black) deny all figures, but if we approach the surface of the four great monochromes we realize how the "noise" obscuring them is produced by a chaos of numerical algorithms, web digital codes, namely the hieroglyphs that today secretly rule information and, through it, all of us who use it; and the visual buzzing of the out-of-tune television set alludes to the same returning darkness. The merging of these techniques finds a precedent in *Éter*, the last exhibited work by Herrero, two and a half years ago, in the Ipogei Motta in Matera: the same function of Assange's sacrificial icon was fulfilled then by that of Enrique Irazoqui, the charismatic warrior Christ in the *Vangelo secondo Matteo* by Pasolini (the film shot in location in the Sassi of Matera).

The installation in the room in shambles has a more sarcastic value: here the unexpected eruption of a furious historical violence, which we misleadingly thought to be left in the rearview mirror, has almost ironically destroyed the pretentious order of our reassuring domestic intimacy, where the media-driven echoes of the ongoing tragedy penetrate more and more disturbingly. Let us mention here the memorable photomontages of *Bringing the War Home*, by Martha Rosler, who in the late Sixties projected on the pastel-coloured wallpaper of the most candid American Way of Life the naked and raw *imagery* of the Vietnam carnage: namely, violence supported and substantiated by the complacency and blindness of the time. (Rosler presented, anew and with different *media*, the same short-circuit during the US intervention in Iraq in 2003.)

If not Rothko's terminal despair, Herrero's apologue can induce a sort of paralysis of volition: the artist, with the laconic severity that has always distinguished him, seems to tell us that no space of freedom is conceivable today. Yet a detail, only seemingly naturalistic, tells us perhaps something different. The coloured sandbags that he has added to the ensemble, in fact, are a sign of resistance: a resistance entrusted to the same colour which, in the adjacent room, saturates us with its noise. Where there is danger, always, what gives salvation also grows.