

Rubén Gutiérrez

The most effective way to cover up a lie

Another real fiction

by Petra Heck

Once upon a time there was a remarkable character who wandered around the city of Utrecht. Suddenly this character saw a witch flying through the sky leaving behind a trail of letters in white smoke. The message, however, couldn't be read from where we were standing. We were only told about the scenario Rubén Gutiérrez will work on during his residency at Impakt for the upcoming two months. The artist just arrived in the Netherlands (not for the first time), so this text is about fiction in the making.

Luckily, the fictional element is crucial to Gutiérrez's artistic practice and therefore an appropriate leitmotiv for this text. We started with the fairytale phrase "once upon a time", but this might be a reference that is somewhat too fictional. Perhaps the piece that is in the making will start with the sentence "a long time ago" since the artist made a video called *The best art work in the world* (2008) which began with this exact phrase. It sounds more in sync with his practice – a little less fairy like.

The best art work in the world consists of a sketched video animation that suggests the aesthetic of a children's bedtime story but is actually based on the video clip *Tribute* by the band Tenacious D who sing a tribute to the best song in the world. They don't actually sing it because they forgot how the song, which they sang for a "shiny demon" who threatened to eat their souls if they didn't, went. Gutiérrez appropriated several lines from the song, causing his video to refer to the art world: Instead of a demon, it features a "shiny curator" who demands the best art work in the world. Whereas Tenacious D sing about something we'll never hear in their video, Gutiérrez simply presents the curator with the written text "The best artwork in the world" in his. It makes us wonder if this is the real deal or, as in the original video, a tribute. In both cases the antagonists are stunned: the demon asks "Be you angels?" while in the Gutiérrez version the curator asks "Are you conceptual?". In both videos the protagonists answer "No, just men".

The artist uses a video clip that was hugely popular at the beginning of the millennium to poke fun at the art world, its players (and demons) and their incessant search for the best, the original and the new. Because of its ironic, self-referential nature *The best art work in the world* reflects on art, the artist and the dynamics of the art world and can be described as an explicit exercise in post-modernism. Because the work is so blatantly post-modern it reveals the artist's deconstructive employment of irony: like a snake biting its tail, it comments on post-modernism while using it's strategies.

The video borrows heavily from the entertainment industry or the "industry of distraction" as Gutiérrez likes to call it. He is interested in alternative layers of reality and the way Hollywood often uses reality to create fictions, which the artist, for his part, likes to

mutate into new fictions. The video *Surrender Felipe* features the same witch as the video currently in the making. Again she leaves a sky written text behind, but now we can read what it says: "Surrender Felipe". This fragment is based on the 1939 motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* where the wicked witch of the west writes "Surrender, Dorothy" in the sky. In the film the text refers to the threat of evil and surrendering to its temptations. It's also a warning for Dorothy: Stop questioning and you will find the answers you are looking for. Here, like in many of his other works, Gutiérrez appropriates the fictional message and uses it to create an ironic piece of resistance, a comment on society, by referring to Spanish culture in general and more specifically to the Mexican president Felipe Calderón and, among others, his impossible war on drugs. The artist is painfully aware of the fact that Hollywood is not the only place that creates fictions. With humorous but critical works like these, navigating the realms of reality and fiction, the artist points out that in Mexico (and all over the world) the media are political tools used to control and influence the way people perceive reality and make judgements.

Exploring post-isms and their meaning(lessness) is a prominent part of Gutiérrez's practice. He has made several series like the *Post philosophical drawings* consisting of skilful, but rough drawings with text. They aren't particularly positive – a nervous looking girl with red hair covered in blood is surrounded by the words "cynical", "depersonalised", "banal", "morally weightless", "manipulated", "but fashion conscious" – and depict the bleaker aspects of a post-modern contemporary society. *The Post everything drawings*, like the afore-mentioned video, reflect on contemporary and post-modernist art and are in fact just texts written in Gutiérrez's distinct scratchy handwriting. The series consists of works like *Odd beast* that states "This drawing is crucial for those who wish to gain insight into that odd beast called post modernism" and, of course, *The best drawing ever*. More permanent (although that's up for debate according to Gutiérrez) are his *Post-tattoos: The marks of outcasts*. One tattoo reads "occupy the flesh" explicitly referencing the location of the tattoo, i.e. the human body, while others ironically refer to the unique and personal nature of the contemporary tattoo ("the best tattoo in the world"), turning the way they generate meaning inside out.

In fact, most of his works can be interpreted as ironic reversals of what is considered meaningful and he seems to confide to us that he doesn't believe too much in philosophy, post-modernism and all these other -isms. Instead, Gutiérrez's works often refer to the philosophical "absurd" in the form of running gags that display the conflict between the human tendency to seek value and meaning in life and the inability to find any.

Although he extensively explores the notion of the absurd, Gutiérrez does not imply that we should fall by the wayside. He enjoys the idea of utopia: It's no coincidence that he mentioned that he actually also lives in the census-designated place Utopia in Texas. It's a remark that should be taken with a grain of salt. According to the artist the world as we know it will collapse and when that happens art and the artist should be prepared. This is also why Gutiérrez founded Object Not Found, a much needed and practical residence programme for artists and curators in the Mexican city of Monterrey. More remarkable are *The End Biennial*, an exhibition, which revolved around the "fantasy of

the end of western civilization via the aesthetics of mass media and entertainment”, and *Into the wild*, an extreme residency programme which invites artists and curators to live in complete isolation for a period of three weeks. Residents are not expected to produce artworks but “to survive”. In short, the residency questions the meaning and necessity of art in extreme conditions and tries to invoke new perspectives. Is there room for art and aesthetics when you’re trying to survive? It’s a serious question based on a humorous and absurd situation where reality and fiction go hand in hand.

Gutiérrez will explore these subjects in his soon to be completed artwork as well as the idea of teenage utopia. Contrary to the cynicisms that gradually overrun our thoughts in adult life, young people, naively perhaps, trust in their capacity to change the world. The piece will most likely involve an ironic twist, it’s probably doomed from the start since everyone will have their own notion of reality and utopia, causing it to fail. But it’s better to try and fail than never to try at all, right?

Whether this project will actually be part of the end result is still under consideration, but the piece is definitely going to be a single-channel installation. Surely the video by Rubén Gutiérrez will display concepts sitting on the fence between science fiction, documentary and reality. One might also expect to see different versions of reality made in the Utrecht area possibly relating to ironic post-philosophical stories about Holland’s current (political) state of affairs and offering the artist a great excuse to explore the city.

But there is no need for more speculation. Ending the quest for answers might mean finding them. It is definitely the answer to ending this text.

Author: Petra Heck (NL) works as a curator and head of exhibitions for the Netherlands Media Art Institute (named MonteVideo before) since 2006.