

Adrián Villar Rojas: La fin de l'imagination

by Alexis Dahan (October 2020)



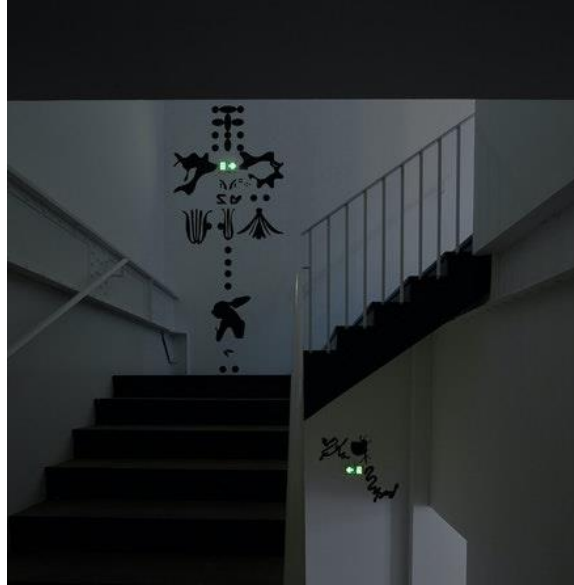
Installation view: Adrián Villar Rojas: *La fin de l'imagination*,
Marian Goodman, Paris, 2020. Courtesy of Marian Goodman.

Imagine an artist who is so obsessive about the specificity of site where he exhibits that he usually moves in months in advance, with an entire community of collaborators, family members, and colleagues to study the historical, sociological, and architectural structures and come up with unique exhibition strategies and monumental works of art.

Now imagine a world with a global pandemic, hard borders, tough US immigration laws, and almost no traveling. There you have it, welcome to Adrián Villar Rojas's latest exhibition at Marian Goodman in Paris, conceived and installed remotely by the artist from his New York base: Not one, not two, but five different bodies of works! All of them site specific and using mixed media, coexisting and interacting over two floors. Reviewing such a diverse and expansive exhibition in a digestible, fair, and concise way is a hard task, not least because the artist and gallery have made available a large quantity of supporting information, which works to expand (or perhaps confuse) our understanding of the installation rather than to help us pin it down.

As one enters *La fin de l'imagination*, and while the eyes are getting used to the ambient obscurity, one first notices Villar Rojas's signature move: he has removed all traces of the gallery itself. The lighting, the office, the staff, the electrical outlets, the usual entrance. Everything is gone.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



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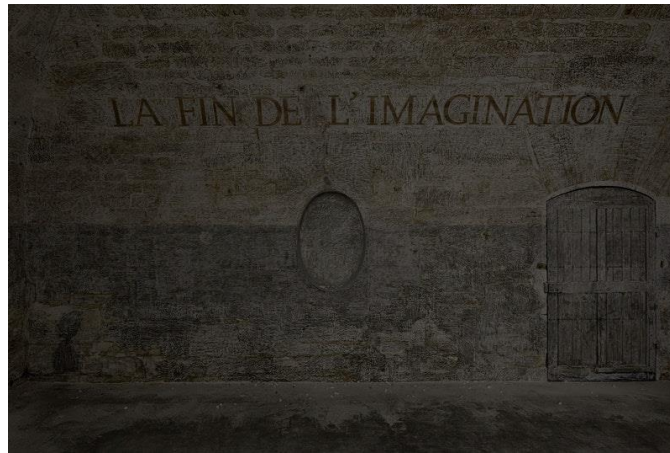
What you notice next are tattoo-like black shapes directly painted on the threshold leading to the main room. These abstract graffiti are scattered throughout the exhibition. They seem to be contaminating the “in-between” spaces, the corridors and the stairways, as they spread onto the various closets and utility doors the artist could not make disappear like the rest of the gallery. Some are very organic, like the four massive totemic figures—reminiscent of “tribal art”—of the main floor room, that black out the large windows and thus become agents of the ambient obscurity. Others are more geometrical and systemic, evoking some type of alien ideographic language (the gallery suggests it may be a language for the future) like those blacking out the gallery’s giant skylight. There is a feeling of freedom coming from these shapes, especially when they are located on doors and playing along ventilation shafts. One could see a nod to Gabriel Orozco, an artist Villar Rojas is known to admire, and his staple circular shapes.



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Opposite the blacked-out windows described hang four large, vertical flat screens that were sourced already broken. They broadcast the French Revolutionary Calendar, a failed attempt to reset the global Gregorian calendar and make time start at the beginning of France's First Republic on September 22, 1792. Broken screen patterns made of breaks on the surface alter the colors of the displayed images. Downstairs, 12 more screens are stacked vertically three-high to create a central column, and as custom-designed numbers (Art Nouveau lines in the style of the graphic design team M/M) count the time, the broken screens' faint and flickering light illuminate another massive body of work on the four walls: four gigantic, low-resolution, hand-made reproductions of major AbEx works by the likes of Rothko and Pollock printed over an assembled puzzle of the gallery's own envelopes, correspondence cards, invitations, and other corporate collaterals cover the wall. Think "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936) meets cave paintings.



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The parietal art analogy takes a more profound meaning when you enter the last room of the exhibition, a 43 square meter vaulted brick cellar with no light and impossibly thick air. As you stand in the middle, in total darkness, the title, *La fin de l'imagination*, appears on the wall. You get closer and realize that the Garamond-looking letters are actually the negative of a meticulous intervention: every single square centimeter of the entire cave, from the wall base to the four meter-high ceiling, has been covered with white chalk, except for the letters forming the title. The feeling is one of contemplative immersion towards this sentence. It's almost magical. Somehow the tiny amount of ambient light that found its way down there vibrates around the letters like a visible aura as the white chalk gives a surface to bounce from. The air is saturated with dust, though, and even with a face mask, it's hard to stay in the room long.

As you walk your way back to fresh air and luminosity, passing through all the previous artistic propositions, and nodding to the other masked visitors, there is a bit of confusion as to what the exhibition was about. In the press release, the exhibition has something to do about COVID-19. In the academic-sounding booklet, it's about the resistance of 1960s Argentinian artists against the consequences of the mechanical reproduction of visual art. Some works had to do with the French Revolution and the control of time. And that's just scratching the surface! Let's just state that *The End of Imagination* is many exhibitions in one, a confusing but efficient way to escape reality in times of distress and incertitude.