

Javier Téllez. Eva Diaz

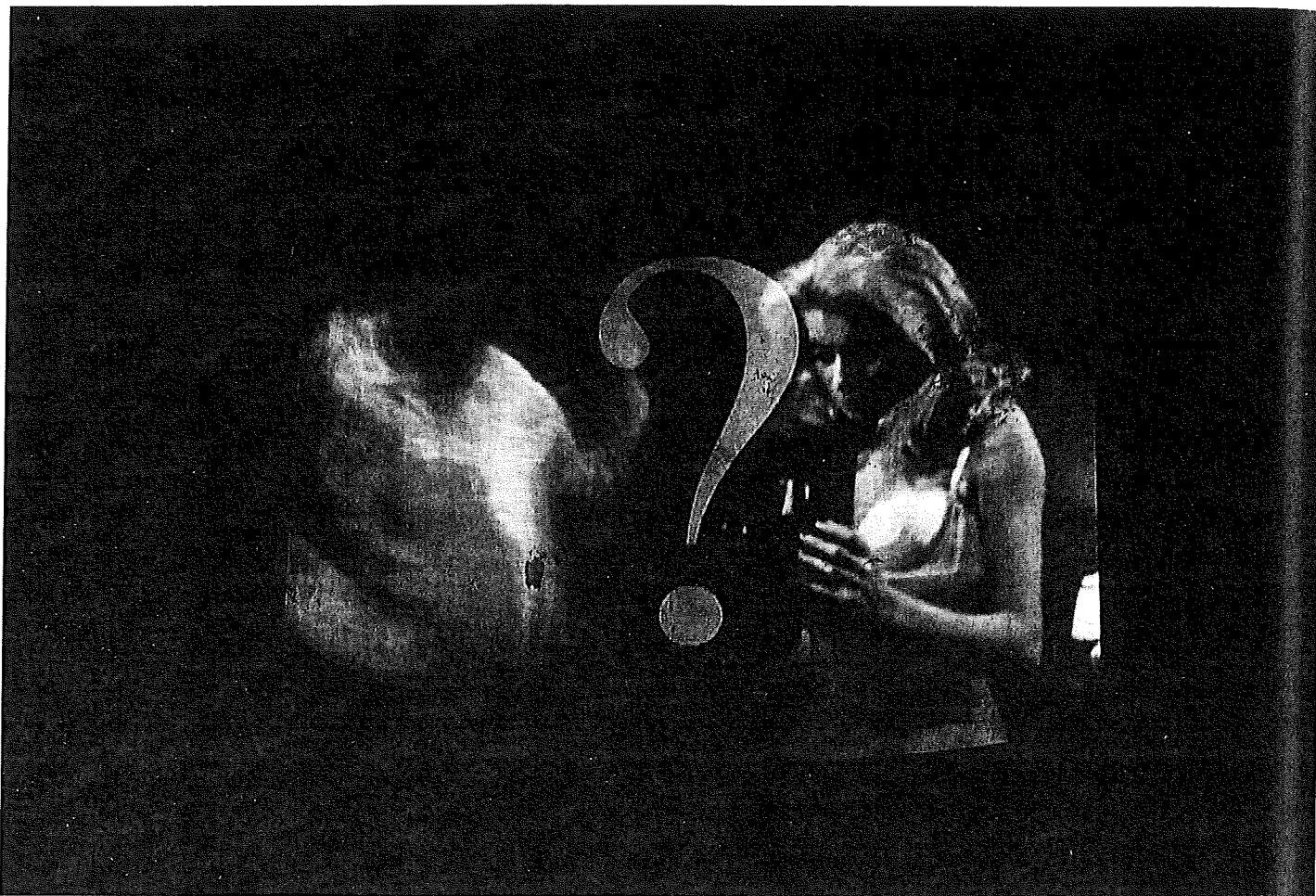
One of the most enigmatic scenes in cinema is found in Luis Buñuel's 1967 film *Belle de Jour*. The Belle of the title, played by Catherine Deneuve, is an affluent housewife. Bored by the stultifying routine of her married life, she engages in daytime prostitution in a Parisian brothel. To this chimerical figure occurs a bizarre event—in the course of her sojourns an Asian john presents her a box, which was first vociferously refused by another prostitute in the Madame's house. When opened it emits a curious buzzing sound, much like the approach of a bee. Viewers never see the contents of the box, but rather twice hear its mysterious drone. Belle initially reacts trepidatiously to the proffered gift, but then without affect appears to accept its proposal.

For his piece *La Caja Robada* (The Stolen Box) (2004), the artist Javier Téllez showed a clip of this scene to inmates in an Italian mental asylum and asked them to speculate on the contents of the box. In individual interviews, the guileless responses of those questioned range from conjectures about strange objects (a fetish, snake, gun, jewelry, severed finger, flag, vibrator, cigarettes, a robot that whistles) to inferences about the role of the box in a situation of prostitution. To one woman, the box depicts the scene of a crime; to another, the box is a tool to empower the fantasies of the offering man. One man predicts that the box contains everything that is the stuff of humanity. *La Caja Robada* intersperses these interview segments with portions of the Buñuel scene, flashing a large question mark as the volume of the bee sound increases. Some interviewees, in a move to remain anonymous (and perhaps to refuse reduction to mere representative of "insane" speech), don outlandish masks, or, in the case of two separate women, wear a costume witch hat pulled over their faces which mutes their voices.

Téllez is of course not the first artist to use the mentally ill as fodder for artistic production. From Gericault's early-1820s portraits of asylum inhabitants to Buñuel and his fellow surrealists' fascination with the derangement and asociality of the insane, madness has long furnished a zone for distinguishing and re-entrenching the boundaries of the symbolic order that the sane strive to uphold. Yet the circuit of unknowability Buñuel enacts in his paradox of the bee-sound in a box is a scenario in which all responses are equally valid, or rather, equally unlikely. As he reveals the manner in which Buñuel casts reason into doubt, Téllez humanises the remarks of the so-called insane, showcasing both the rational and irrational that exist within a very narrow continuum. Every association that is available—those of the mentally ill and those of the ostensibly sensible spectators to Téllez's film—is viable, and not one comment seems more or less transgressive or conventional.

When one woman in Téllez's film claims that the box contains something erotic, but continues by saying that she in fact wishes it were filled with differently-wrapped chocolates, she is giving away the main ploy of Buñuel's film and the way Téllez has built upon it. For in *Belle de Jour* Buñuel presents the trope of idealised prostitution—a voluntary pursuit, one to which all women, regardless of class status or beauty, are drawn in its potential for self-debasing fantasy. What Buñuel ultimately reverts to is the customary view of woman as enigma, but for Téllez's respondent such a convention of the erotic becomes superficial—what Pandora's box should contain is a vision of her own desires. At the risk of exploiting the "insanity" of his interlocutors, Téllez's film articulates a spectrum of yearnings not generally provided public voice, sustaining a democracy of desire that gently equilibrates those who are mad with those who are merely unfulfilled.

78. Miradas



Javier Téllez.

La caja robada, 2004.

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