

## Bottom feeders

**JONATHAN GIBBS**

---

Miguel Ángel Hernández

ESCAPE ATTEMPT

Translated by Rhett McNeil

389pp. Hispabooks. Paperback, £10.99 (US  
\$16.95).

978 84 943658 7 4

---

**M**iguel Ángel Hernández is an art history academic in his native Murcia, and so the discussions of art theory in this, his first work of fiction, come with an air of credibility. When he – or his narrator – writes of Bob Flanagan, or Arthur Danto, we lean in, happy we are in safe hands. But Hernández has written a novel, not an essay, as he admits in his sly, clever epilogue, and so more is at stake. His narrative, which is in essence a thought experiment into the ethical responsibility of the artist, calls not just for insight and judgement, but for plausibility and sympathy.

At the centre of *Escape Attempt* is Jacobo Montes, a conceptual artist who has moved beyond the sadomasochistic performances of the likes of Flanagan – best known for nailing his penis to a board – to adopt a more sociological stance. In practice this means that rather than abusing himself, he gets others to abuse themselves, for our edification. (Rhett McNeil’s translation has Montes considering his

early works as “at bottom, solipsistic”, which, seeing as it comes after a description of the artist having a number of candles inserted in his anus and then lit, is either brilliant or serendipitous.) Montes gets immigrants to eat their own excrement, black-market workers in Singapore to act as literal foundations for an Armani store, lying in trenches in their hundreds and holding it up.

We meet Montes through Marcos, an art student who ends up acting as his assistant on a provincial show, driving him around town and providing research into the lives of its immigrants, including hanging out at internet cafes and the petrol stations that act as informal pre-dawn job centres. For a time Montes seems to be planning interactive recreations of the workers’ living conditions – artworks that bring to mind the oeuvre of Phil Collins, whose contribution to the Turner Prize exhibition in 2006 was an installation in the form of a fully functioning television production company that mimicked and critiqued the workings of reality television. That things take a darker turn, however, is already evident from the novel’s prologue, a flash-forward to an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, showing Montes’s “Escape Attempt”, a packing crate purportedly containing the decomposing remains of the person trapped inside. Along with Marcos, we must ask ourselves: dare we open the lid? And, more importantly, what difference would it

make to us depending on what we found inside?

As a thought experiment, then, this is a stimulating novel. Marcos is a sensitive but unreliable mediator of Montes. Where the artist walks and talks like a guru, the student is socially awkward, with “a hundred kilos of bodyweight, rapidly worsening nearsightedness, and incipient balding”. He is, in other words, ripe for exploitation, the perfect stand-in for the gallery-goers and novel-readers at the foot of the artistic food chain.

If the novel makes you think, however, there is nothing in it to beat the shiver of reading about Bob Flanagan and his penis. There is something about the author’s subject matter that calls for a deeper descent into extremity and degradation. If art is “a dirty thing”, as Miguel Ángel Hernández has his conceptual artist stating, then in the end we may find it easier to wash our hands of Montes than poor Marcos does; and by such matters of hygiene must we measure our novels.