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#44 WE WHO ARE ABOUT TO - INTERVIEW - APRIL 2018

ESTHER FERRER

Mónica Laiseca talks to the Spanish artist who has recently performed at Glasgow International 2018





Esther Ferrer, 'Tracks, Spaces, Sounds', action from the late 1960s performed at the Pearce Institute, McLeod Hall, 23 April 2018. Presented as part of Glasgow International. Photo: Jennifer Martin

Esther Ferrer (b. 1937, San Sebastián) is a pioneer of performance art in Spain and one of the first female artists of her generation to have received international recognition. This interview was conducted ahead of the presentation of a project in three parts centred around the work of Ferrer for Glasgow International 2018 (venues: Project Ability and Pearce Institute), curated by Mónica Laiseca with Fritz Welch.

Ferrer has been invited to perform her 1960s solo action *Tracks, Spaces, Sounds*, one of her earliest and most personal works, and re-stage the work *I'm Going To Tell You About My Life* with volunteers from different cultural and language backgrounds in Glasgow. At the same

time, the project proposes a dialogue between Ferrer and UK-based artists Fritz Welch, Louise Ahl, Jessica Higgins, Sandra Johnston and Pester & Rossi, who have produced new performance work loosely responding to her practice. All artists have featured in the exhibition *House Party*, assembled in response to Ferrer's 1998 audio work *Fête Maison*.

Present, Within Life

Mónica Laiseca: Your actions are always very simple and direct, made with the most minimum elements possible. At the same time, they convey a sense of the everyday and of being present. How does this notion of presence manifest itself within your work?

Esther Ferrer: When I am satisfied with a performance it is because I feel that I have done it well, that I have been *being*. This comes from zen buddhism. When I am doing a performance I am 100% focused on what I am doing. This does not mean I am not aware of what is happening around me. It seems a contradiction, right? My mother used to say whenever we did something wrong 'you are not in what you are'. She had never heard of zen buddhism in her life, but it is a Spanish saying, my grandmother said it too.

In performance, I give myself the freedom to do exactly what I want, how I want it, and to react according to the inspiration of the moment. I am in what I am, and open to everything that may occur.

Performance is presence, yours and that of others. A lot of people tell me that when I perform I move and talk in the same way as I do in my everyday life. Of course, because I am the same person, and when I hold a glass I hold it as I always do, not in a theatrical manner. The glass I use is an ordinary glass, the one I drink from daily, because I like to work with everyday things. I am not interested in choosing a glass because of a particular aesthetic value, I don't want to distract the public with this.

ML: For you performance is part of life.

EF: Yes, it is part of life even if it begins and ends at a particular time – but life also begins and ends at a given moment. What I don't want is to protect the mental and physical space that I am creating, to place it outside of time and space, as if it was a utopia. No. It is there, in time and space, and it traverses it, for better or worse.

I like to make pieces that are clear and easy to read, both in performance and in my work in other media. A single idea is enough for me, I don't need to accumulate different thoughts to produce a piece. Rather, I take things away. I am interested in finding a form that is clear and transparent, the most direct possible. Sometimes all that is left is a structure for the public to fill in. As Lao Tse said, it is the void that gives things their usefulness.

Everything Is Music

ML: John Cage has been a central influence on your work, from the very first actions you did in the late 1960s while still living in Spain. How did you encounter his work at this particular moment?

EF: I lived in San Sebastián, very close to the border. We crossed over to France regularly to buy the newspaper. We bought art journals and books too, and went to the cinema to see films that were not released in Spain. That way we had access to information that was not available in Spain. A friend told us that he had records by John Cage and we listened to them. I knew his name and had an idea of who he was. We had also heard about Fluxus.

Later on, at the Pamplona Meetings (June 26-July 3, 1972), I met Cage personally. A year later, in 1973, he organised a U.S.A. tour for ZAJ, the experimental music and performance group I joined in 1967, founded by Walter Marchetti and Juan Hidalgo. In New York we performed in lots

of different places, including Merce Cunningham's dance studio and The Kitchen. When Cage came to Paris, we often saw each other.

I also met many of the Fluxus artists during this trip, and later on in Europe. We often performed in the same festivals. ZAJ and Fluxus were different things but we shared the same 'ancestors'.

ML: *Tracks, Spaces and Sounds* is an action from the late 1960s where this initial influence from Cage is strongly felt.

EF: It is one of my first pieces. I wrote four or five pieces almost at the same time, but this one in particular I have not performed again till much later. It is a piece I care for a lot. In a certain way, it is an 'intimate' piece.

In the world of action art the influence of Cage was enormous. In my case, the idea that everything can be music, that music is everywhere and it is only the listening that separates it, before it starts again, has influenced my work greatly. Reflecting on this piece now I can say that as well as the influence of Cage, it was shaped by a desire to make something in which time, sound and space were "the protagonists", the prime material.

In this piece I walk, traversing step by step a space that I have delineated with tape on the floor and producing sounds which can be continuous or not. I may add spoken word or not, in reality I can use any sounds I like. As I traverse the space I leave tracks behind me that are completely ephemeral, like "writing on water" or, as Antonio Machado said, "walker, there is no road, the road is your tracks." All of these ideas, which I was making sense of, materialised here.

ML: Where was it first presented?

EF: In Paris, at a sugar warehouse in the Ourcq that was scheduled for

demolition by the Mairie de Paris. Artists had studios there for some time and one of them invited other artists to perform in his studio every month, or couple of months. I think it was here where I first performed it, or one of the first times.

ML: The audio work *Fête Maison*, which you recorded in your own home in 1998, repurposes the Cagean notion of the everyday as music within a domestic setting.

EF: I made *Fête Maison* for an exhibition. Instead of producing an object I decided to make a record: *Mes sons fait maison*, ‘my sounds made at home’. I told my partner Tom: “let’s clean up and arrange things, put the recorder somewhere.” At one point you can hear Tom playing the piano but the rest are ordinary sounds: you hear me speaking on the phone, sweeping the floor, doing the dishes. The things I do when I am in the house cleaning. Sometimes I am nearby, at others far away, I move, maybe I go to the bathroom, etc. The “instrument” that we play is the house: the pans, the broom, the Hoover and Tom sometimes the piano.

It is an immensely boring record to listen too, of course. It is music, but the best way to experience it is while making your own sounds, which enriches the ambient sound. If you can record this, even better, so sounds can accumulate, yours and mine. It is a pastime, you can make denser recordings each time.

Collective Possibilities

ML: Your participatory pieces often visualise possibilities of social interaction and transformation, reminding us of our capacity as individuals to assume our own freedom. In *I’m Going To Tell You About My Life*, which you are restaging in Glasgow, a group of people tell their life to an audience, each of them in their own way and using different languages, both verbal and signed. How did this work come about?

EF: I have always been interested in introducing sign language within my work, but for a very long time I could not get it to happen, to such extent that I stopped trying. Years ago I contacted sign language schools in Madrid in Paris, but not many people knew about performance art back then and I think the tutors were concerned we might be using their students in some way, which was never my intention. In this performance they are the protagonists.

Happily, many years later, in 2014, I had the possibility to do this piece for the first time at MAC/VAL in Vitry-sur-Seine. I had a solo exhibition there and proposed it to the curator, Frank Lamy, who contacted a local sign language school that had also a theatre group, and they were delighted. Of course they were working with theatre and knew about performance art, as many years had passed [by that time].

The piece is intended as music of languages of the world, a bit like the Babel Tower, where everyone speaks in their own language. Sign language adds an interesting visual aspect for me. Every person signs differently and I say that it looks as if they were writing in the air, and this writing merges with the voices of the others. Waves from images, movements and voices traverse one another. I like to think of it like this.

ML: This work advocates for a pluralist society by presenting language as a palpable manifestation of diversity. Following Vitry-sur-Seine, in the space of four years it has been performed in Geneva, Metz, San Sebastián, Gdansk, Madrid and now in Glasgow. Why do you think it is generating so much interest? In Glasgow the backdrop of Brexit obviously has weight. What does it suggest to you?

EF: That mixing up is always good, for everyone, and no one can live in isolation. From the woman and man sapiens till today, we have always mixed together and enriched one another. This is an interesting notion, considering the situation of migrants and refugees today.

Tied To The Feminist Struggle

ML: You have been an active feminist all your life — as you say “even when sleeping”. Anarchism has also interested you a great deal. In 1991 you wrote a letter to John Cage, the year prior to his death, on ‘The Future Of Anarchism’[1]. In this letter you argued a connection between both movements, a way of seeing anarchism through the prism of women’s liberation.

EF: Cage considered himself an anarchist and had read widely about the Spanish civil war and the anarchist movement in Spain. When we saw each other, sometimes we talked about this. He was preparing a lecture for Stanford University and asked me if I could write a text considering whether anarchism had a future or not. Instead of going off to read books and make wise quotes, I thought I would think by myself what future anarchism could have. Because it was a subjective response and I did not want to give it too much importance, I replied in the format of a letter.

I told him what I thought. The anarchists were patriarchal, as sexist as others, but they fought against pyramidal power, which in our society is represented by the *pater familias*, the macho, the patriarch, the god, the king, the ruler. Here we had a point of commonality because the women’s liberation movement precisely fights against this patriarchy. Feminism has a present and a future, because the ones taking the initiative are us, women. It has a long road ahead of itself, and the future of anarchism is tied to the feminist struggle.

Cage used my letter, translated to English, within the poem ‘Overpopulation and Art’, which he wrote as a mesostic. He made a pamphlet that he sent to me, and there was also a German edition.

ML: If you had to write about the future of anarchism today, from a similar angle, what would you say, taking into account the

transformations that have taken place within the feminist movement and the recent conversations around sexual abuse being sparked by the Me Too campaign?

EF: The only thing that matters is that the struggle carries on. The feminist struggle happens every day, we fight in all aspects of life, including work and sexual abuse. What happens is that all of a sudden an event brings this struggle, that is continuous and often anonymous, to the media and for x amount of time people will talk about it. But we have to keep our eyes open, because all of a sudden “it is forgotten”, it stops being news, and it seems as if the fight slows down, but it is not true – the fight continues. We can’t put our arms down, we have to continue. We have achieved a lot, it is true, but watch out because when we drop our guard, the reaction takes advantage and questions achievements, such as the right to abortion, among others, that we thought were permanently won.

As I have told you, what anarchism and feminism have in common is the fight in favour of freedom for all, and to end pyramidal power as incarnated by patriarchy, in all of its social and political ramifications. The only thing that matters is that each of us can live off our own work with dignity, with our own responsibility, in a world where we all have the right to decide how we want to live.

[1] *English translation available at:*

www.anarchicharmony.org

ML: In the face of the rampant commercialisation of the art world over the last few decades, it is encouraging to see that you have maintained a practice for most of your life virtually outside of this.

EF: I have never applied for funding, I don’t want to. Perhaps it is an inheritance of Franco’s era, why would you ask your enemy for money? I

have always paid for my work, except when a museum invites me to make a particular project that costs money. I have no need for it. For me the models I make are sufficient, so if a museum wants to make a work from a model they have to pay for it.

I have worked all my life. I am 80 years old and have only lived off my work as an artist over the last 20. But this has given me great freedom.

ML: From your own experience, how do you think this commercialisation has affected performance as a radical art form? What opportunities and difficulties do you see for younger artists working in performance now?

EF: Performance, like everything else, had to evolve and it has, in different directions. One is commercialisation, it was inevitable from the moment when galleries and institutions started being interested in it, and began circulating derived products such as images, videos, etc, which can be sold and purchased. At the same time, today's world is not the same as that of the 1960s. Artists are faced with very different social, political and economic situations, and thus forms and content evolve as well. In some instances performance is becoming more theatrical, in others largely participatory. For better or worse, technological elements are introduced that did not exist in the 1960s. The risk, on account of the institution, is the formatisation of performance to fulfil the needs of the institution rather than itself. But in this scenario it is a matter of individual responsibility, each artist is free to choose if they want to accept this, and if they don't, they have to accept the risks this entails, such as marginalisation etc.

***Mónica Laiseca** is a mother, curator and lecturer based in Glasgow. She has worked with artists including Anne Collier, Duncan Campbell, Ines Schaber, Redmond Entwistle and Ruth Proctor. She is the author of a monograph on art and politics in Spain in the 1960s (published by*

CSIC, Madrid, 2006). She has held curatorial roles at Open Eye Gallery (Liverpool), Belfast Exposed (Belfast), Instituto Cervantes (Tokyo) and the University of East Anglia (Norwich). Mónica leads the MLitt Curatorial Practice (Contemporary Art) programme, jointly run between The Glasgow School of Art and the University of Glasgow.

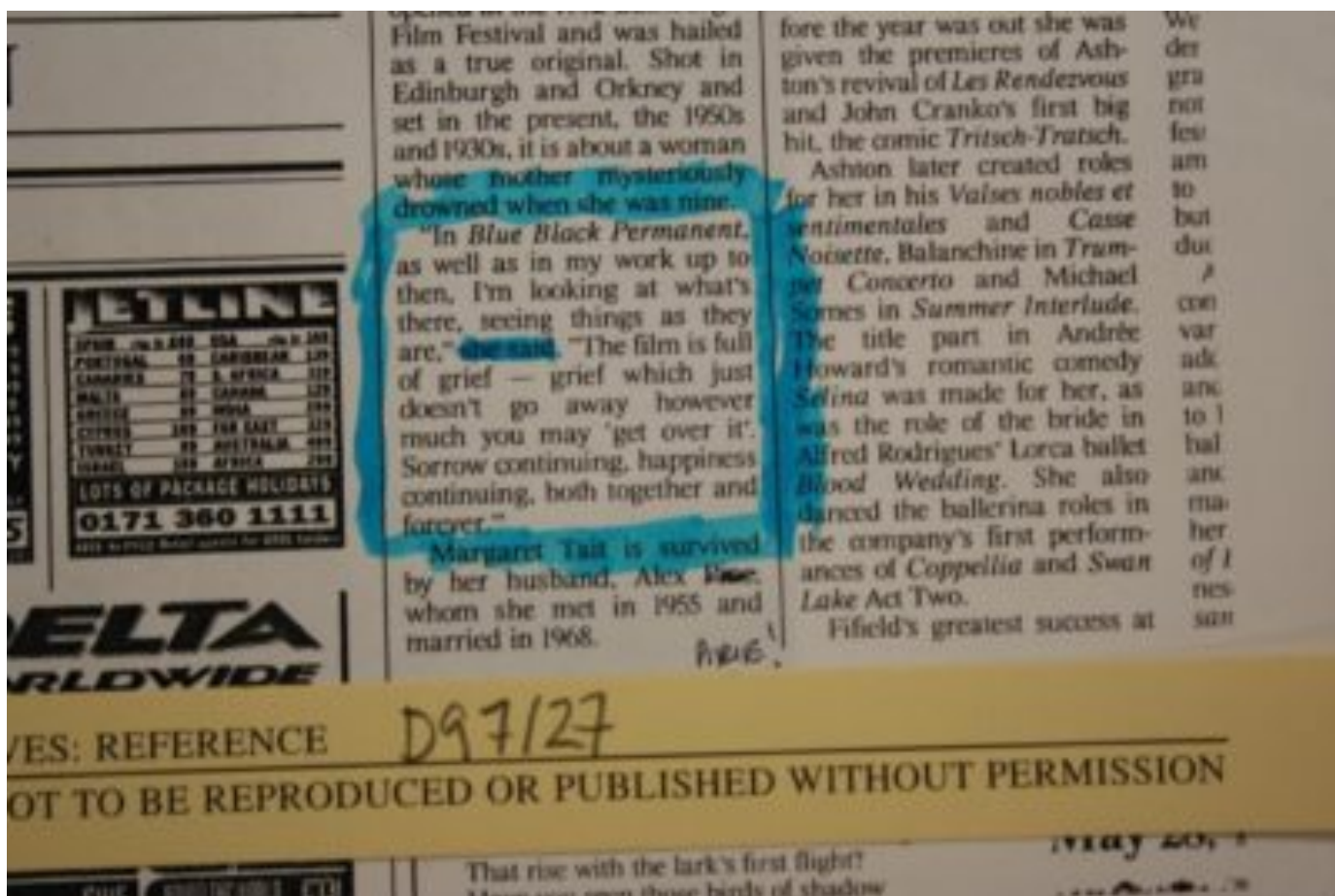
Esther Ferrer (b. 1937, San Sebastián) is a Spanish Basque artist living and working in Paris. A proponent of free expression, confrontation, feminism and authentic experience, Ferrer is best known for her performances, her principal form of artistic expression since 1965, both as a soloist and as a member of the pioneering experimental music and performance art group ZAJ (formed in 1964). Her work has always been oriented to ephemeral artistic action rather than to permanent artistic production. She created, in collaboration with the painter José Antonio Sistiaga, the first Workshop for Free Expression, in the early 60s, an activity that was to inspire other similar groups in Spain. Beginning in the 70s, she has also been quite active in the visual arts: reworked photographs, installations, canvases and constructions based on the prime number series Pi etc.

Her work proposes a particular kind of minimalism, which she sometimes terms “rigorous absurdity”. Ferrer has performed across Europe (Yugoslavia, Poland, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Hungary, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Spain, etc), as well as in Cuba, the United States, Mexico, Japan, Thailand, Korea and Palestine. She has exhibited widely, including at Galerie Donguy (Paris), Statsgalerie (Stuttgart), Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea (San Sebastián) and Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo (Sevilla). In 1999 Ferrer was one of two Spanish artists chosen to represent Spain at the Venice Biennale.

In 2009, the Spanish Ministry of Culture awarded her the National Fine Arts Prize. In 2012, the Basque government awarded her the Gure

*Artea, a prize for artistic creation. In 2014 she was awarded the MAV Prize—Mujeres en las Artes Visuales [Women in Visual Arts] and the Velázquez Prize. In 2013, the Regional Contemporary Art Fund in Brittany (FRAC) hosted the first major retrospective exhibition of Esther Ferrer in France, *Le chemin se fait en marchant (Face A)* [The path is created as you walk], followed by *Face B. Image/Self-Portrait*, at the MAC/VAL in 2014. A new retrospective titled *All Variations Are Valid, Including This One*, curated by Laurence Rassel and Mar Villaespesa, opened in Madrid at Museo Nacional Reina Sofía in October 2017.*

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