An interview with Maria Luisa Fernández *

Beatriz Herráez: Your first works were made under the acronym CVA. What was behind this project? Were you aware of practices with an institutional critique that were unfolding in the international arena using similar strategies to those employed in CVA?

MLF: The best thing about this period was the freedom, and the “conceptual joy” with which I approached artistic practice. If there was anything we questioned it was AUTHORITY, not authorship. The discovery that everything in the world could become weird, experiencing the deviation of meaning… taking out the garbage sealed with a gift bow, writing a million numbers in notebooks, boxes with no cavity, cinder blocks with sockets a la Nauman. A big billboard we found and used to frame a tree and the ground around it, all painted green… Later we gave the same frame a turnaround and it suddenly disappeared… PV (Punto de vista) and Cicatriz en la matriz¹ are the explosion of the first frame. Postal art or mail art was regularly practiced by CVA too, a free and amusing practice that kept away from institutional spaces, with no leftovers for the market, or so we believed, because on a trip to Paris I found out that in some of the city’s galleries there were catalogues on sale that included works of mail art, and books by mail artists. When we got back to Bilbao from this trip with a couple of those catalogues to start a new course we founded the Committee for Artistic Vigilance. With more humour than efficacy CVA was out to watch over art freedom and free it from the market.

The works in this exhibition in AZ were produced in the studio on the Uribitarte Wharf in Bilbao. What did your time at the School of Fine Arts and your membership of the generation-group defined as “New Basque sculpture” mean to you?

CVA arose from practices that weren’t linked to conventional systems, both in the learning of skills and in the creative processes, and that was also possible because of the existence of a group prior to CVA, a free school that was parallel to the School of Fine Arts in Bilbao. Our group was not very big and we kept up a pretty close relationship, meeting at the School but, above all, away from it. We studied what we felt was interesting, we kept our eyes open for journals and books, we travelled to see art and familiarize ourselves with artists. I increasingly appreciate the sensation of freedom about learning that I preserve from that period. The Uribitarte Wharf, the studios we rented in the same building, were an extension of that first group, surrounded by artist neighbours. A generation from contact, sort of “unintentionally”, as someone once referred to it – or, to put it another way, let’s say that “it’s not art that makes the bond, but the bond that makes the art”.²

The figure of Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003) is especially relevant in relation with art transmission and pedagogy in the Basque Country. I’m not aware of whether you were in Bilbao at the time when the sculptor burst onto the scene at the School of Fine Arts in 1978, demanding a change in teaching models. How do you define your position vis-à-vis this figure and his influence?

“Stop and hear me, Oh sun! I greet you”, a poem by Espronceda begins…³ I recall something, a lot of movement in the School, the yard full, the “thundering” figure… Oteiza has indeed been a model for many artists in the Basque Country and he certainly continues to be today. My sensation is that there was a transition from free authorship to AUTHORITY and Jorge Oteiza represented that new authority. At that time too an important change came about in the way that artistic practice was understood which

generated tension between a huge complex about theory and an absolute dominance of passion. It was a
time that was also critical for my practice. In the first exhibition I had in the Caja de Ahorros Municipal in
Bilbao, in the month of June in 1986, the artist was asked to give a talk – all I could do, all I did, was to
take a list of things I did and didn’t like in relation with art and everyday life. I shall carry on looking for
that list, which we’ve often talked about.

In an interview in Zehar you associated your sculptures in the Máculas series with ways of going
about jobs on the land and in farming linked with a “cultivation memory”. Are there places, specific
landscapes that you relate your works with?

Tierra de Campos in Palencia is the space which has produced most wonderment in me since I was really
young: I used to pass through that place on the train every holiday time, crossing endless plains, without a
tree nor a house over many kilometres; I’ve photographed it thousands of times but the image did not
preserve a trace of what that place was. It’s not possible. Many of the works from the Máculas series in
that period are attempts to take part of that landscape into the art world, as many Castilian sculptors did
too. I was stunned when I came across the work by Walter de Maria in New York, Earth Room (1977) –
taking into the gallery the very same soil, just as material, the black earth that adapted to the contours of
the gallery, with all traces of life removed from it. Something in the blackness and in the geometry of the
pieces brings this installation close to the black works from that period.

Looking in the dictionary for the term macula there is an entry macula lutea, defined as “each of the
dark parts that are observed on the disk of the Sun or of the Moon”, which could be linked with the
title of the exhibition presented in AZ. Why is the moon such a recurring element?

Deleuze said, “I must have a body because an obscure object lives in me”.
je, je… luna is a nod from a
lunatic to a lunatic. Being a reflection more than a source of energy, affected by the sun and affecting the
earth which is the body and also the work. The moon is a discrete power if we compare it with the sun. It
is not the sun, it is the MOON. The moon affects bodies due to its proximity, it directly affects the
physical. The sun affects life, we are part of its system, without sun there would be no life, but it is far
away, and its light is so neutral, that the sense is another, more “conceptual” and removed from the effect.

The lunar forms that you include in your works have been associated with Jorge Oteiza’s sculptures of
planes –flotaciones– but you link them more directly with the sculptor Sánchez (1895-1962), whom
Oteiza refers to on different occasions in his writings…

Yes, I relate them with the lunar forms of certain sculptures by Alberto and with the totemic nature they
display. I think it can be said that some links and relations are established with these references that
belong to the imagery of a kind of Castilian sobriety… Its dark parts, the hollows and holes, are highly
lunar forms that have always attracted me.

Going back to Bilbao… Whilst preparing the exhibition I was reading the book That Old Bilbao
Moon in which a quotation from a poem by Gabriel Aresti (1933-1975) is included which, as the
author says, “defines the city in terms of the polarity moon/sun”: “Here Bilbao. Sleeping city, life. / Drowsily successful / A moonbeam shines, and of a sudden / We forget we are children of the sun”…

There is a poem by Jorge Manrique on seduction called Escala de Amor (Ladder of Love) which begins by
saying “ Feeling sad, safe…” in which all that the senses report is that they will make sure to open his side
and let ‘loves enter there’. He feels them there – it is corporal, physical. The body also participates in art, it
is corporal, like love. Culture is ruled by projects, with ideas, clarity, sense… That “must be” which we
forget at night when the body makes its presence felt. I think Bilbao has always had more to do with night
artists than with day artists in spite of the solar project that defines the city.

From the titles of your exhibitions and works one deduces the importance of naming the things in
your work. How are the titles and works related?
The titles are bets cast in the play of art to see if they work. The words enter the art world on condition that they contribute to putting sense on hold. They belong to two different forms of language, two different worlds – if it is possible to define it this way, which is surely far too tight or too precious. The titles come from different sources and moments: *Come, tell me as we walk, as we walk, for if you bring fear, I am all a-tremble* is a popular saying, a Castilian proverb that I used as the title of an exhibition in the Oliva Arauna gallery at the end of the 1980s. The title somehow answered the phrase used by another artist who was showing at the same time in the city, it was a reply, a reaction, a comment. I also remember an exhibition in Valencia where I presented the series *Esculturas rojas* (Red sculptures). On the way there, on the train going to the opening, I carried with me a book by Aristotle from which I christened every single piece. In that text there were references to different proverbs that also turned into titles: *What is similar a God always brings together, What is similar a God always separates*. *The Virtues* also arise from these readings, which are the means, what lies in the middle, the *intermedium – Entre el amor y el odio* (Between love and hate), for instance. In some titles these “means” will be maintained, supressing the virtues. In others, it is the virtues – prudence, wisdom, justice – that stay in the centre. The *Ideal Artists* also get some of this manner of proceeding with pairs of names *consci/claro* (concise/clear), *bella/interesante* (beautiful/interesting), *profundo/profunda* (deep, masc./fem.) which give pieces their titles. Some days ago I re-read the interview you mentioned in Zehar where I said “I like sculptures to have a name”, but also that “what interests me is not so much the title as the reference to an already existing form”, the relations that are established with the word. I think it’s an assertion that is still valid today.

**There is a group of works that we haven’t been able to present in this exhibition – because we’ve been unable to locate them, or owing to their state of conservation. Among them we have *Freud’s braid*. Was this work related in any way with the series of hanging pieces entitled *Melenas* (Long hair)?**

*Freud’s braid* is a piece that existed and was linked with the kind of fetishism the title refers to. A fetishism that consisted of cutting off – against their will – young girls’ braids, and that implied – always according to the analysis of psychoanalysis – female castration! There was specific legislation against “braid cutters” who became the cause of genuine social alarm. “Braid cutters” who it must be said would always be better, or less dangerous, than head cutters in the short term, in my opinion. Or so I reckon… Replying to this question the figure of the Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland* has come into my mind, described by Carroll as an egregious and foul-tempered monarch, “a blind fury”, quick to sentence to decapitation whoever dared to offend her in the slightest. From the Queen’s “Off with their heads” to “untie their hair”. In all the mythology and in the representations that concern decapitations, when someone’s head is cut off they are grabbed by their tresses. There are exceptions such as Judith, who exhibits it on a tray. The braids become entangled with manes of flowing hair which in turn are reminiscent of similar forms, necklaces.

**Gilles Deleuze** makes a reference to these “hair despoilers” catalogued in the compendium of perversions in *Psychopathia sexualis* by Krafft-Ebing, drawing attention to the way the “psychiatrist’s nerves” seem to be torn to shreds when mentioning them…

The criminalization of this kind of fetishism is a product of psychoanalysis. We have had, and still do have, a “risk science” to continue with the *game* that living in the “risk society” involves… While technology and science have brought improvements, they have also incurred a great deal of inconvenience. The justification of science forgets the problems caused. There are exceptions to scientists’ offences through actions of “unloading”, as in the case of Valentina Yermakova, the daughter of the famous academic and physiologist Ivan Pavlov, who devoted her life to saving dogs as an act of penitence for the excesses committed by her father in his quest for scientific certainties. The relations between psychopathy and science would go a long way. As somebody said, with the arrival of psychoanalysis love was no longer spoken of…

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The critic Manel Clot alludes to your work as a place for “intuition and tracking – a feature strongly associated with the human being (...) but which far from constituting an anthropomorphic – a seemingly logical assumption – or even anthropological realm, leans more toward something we might describe as anthropometric”. The search for an Ideal Artist is a constant theme in your works. What does the figure of that Artist consist of? Does the quest for this Artist signify a critique of the disappearance of an irreducible singularity in the face of the laws and proportions of statistics?

I defined the Ideal Artist in that interview in Zehar as “a conglomeration of things, a certain percentage of different components they have to have...” Xabier Sáenz de Gorbea referred to them in the text for the exhibition Burlas expressionistas (Expressionist mockery) saying that “this employment of the uses of surveys tends to ridicule the self-obsessed ego of the artist confronted with power. Each being, with their probability of probabilities. A hypothesis”. The works in the series are compositions that conform to the logic of percentages: percentages that remain fixed, that are “embodied” in “pie” charts, generating forms in unstable equilibriums. The statistic permits that ideality, ideal artists who can be materialized, bodily. There is an ideality different to that of the statistic, which belongs to the instant when a group of professionals arrive at an agreement and say “this is the artist we want”, the artist “of consensus”. All of a sudden a collective discovers those qualities that would fit the “theoretical ideal”, the artists who are portrayed, for instance, in the photographs of Burlas expressionistas. The ideal artist is the one who never matches what you are.

Your works are associated with the use of “cold” processes as in minimal art, but they also point to the field of humour and the “uncanny” contained in eccentric abstraction described by Lucy Lippard.

How do you relate to these categories that are employed to refer to your works?

I remember a piece by Richard Serra that was one of the first I saw when I was still studying and was called, precisely, Bilbao. The piece consisted of a block of iron upon another second block. Both not very big. Two steel blocks that looked as if they’d just emerged from the foundry. They sustained an equilibrium that was very characteristic of Serra’s works at that time. I precisely recall that piece in the exhibition – it was 5 sculptors 5 architects in the Museum of Fine Arts in Bilbao – and the fascination it produced in me. I came out of the room where I’d been alone with the piece, and I had to go back in. The emotions are as intense with Bernini and Ecstasy of Saint Teresa as with Serra and the piece in Bilbao – there are no “cold” processes in art. The texts of “encounters” of the minimalist artists with objects and landscapes too – a black box in a corner, a black cube or a landscape on a trip – show that they have to do with the uncanny of the simple, with the “mystic”, they are “extraterrestrial” objects... We always have to grill ourselves as to where the emotion comes from in our relation with objects.

Quite frequently in your texts you refer to But-ism (Peroismo), a movement defined as a “yes but no” that seems to stand for a position of uncertainty and incompleteness – and which you also clearly differentiate from “any act of heroism or Duchampian indifference”. But... how do these statements of doubt and indeterminacy cohabit with the robustly affirmative presence of your sculptures in the exhibition space?

But-ism is my game with art, not to mention with art and with life, because practically all my life is related with art, except for a bit of daily life I hang on to out there. I wrote the But-ist manifesto at a very special time, when I was already in Galicia, and was able for the first time to speak ironically about tragedy. But-ism is my tragicomic style. I said in a catalogue: “I, inhabitant of misfortune, opposition or contradiction, have created ‘but-ism’ for my own use, which amounts to just the thorough usage of the adversative conjunction: ‘but’. Having nothing to do with the assertive or negative heroism from either any of the vanguards or any message art, ‘but’, the same as ‘no’, congests the face, contracts the stomach, it never occurs without emotional waste but it is more dissembling than no; it seems no but yes. Yes but no to believing in ideologies. Yes but no to desiring a new artistic identity. Yes but no to models from other languages being useful. Yes but no to wishing to be a critic. One tries to construct, but, it turns out to be most difficult”. Re-reading it now you might say the “yes but no” is a hymn to the vertigo, cherished now.
because of its familiarity, of what does not cease to change, and does not let anything completely settle. Thought is that steady continuous to-ing and fro-ing. Something that does not occur in the doing. When it is being done one may hang suspended; the murmur, the cry, that vertigo stops, it halts.

In a (self)-interview carried out for a retrospective in the Artium museum16 (2004) you asked the question: “Why stop doing it? Eleven years later I’m asking you what it means to be experiencing “the doing” once again?

In the construction of thought it’s as important what one does as what one doesn’t do. Stopping is an important and rich possibility. I have the same passion as in the old days and at the same time a tranquillity that I didn’t have back then to understand it better. I’m motivated, I’ve got the get-up-and-go and I have a good space, can you ask for more?

This exhibition journeys on to the MARCO museum in Vigo, to the city where you’ve lived since you left Bilbao to work as a teacher of sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Pontevedra. You also form part of the first teaching faculty launched in an experimental school managed by a group of artists in Donostia-San Sebastián.17 What’s your relationship with art teaching?

I’m interested in the fact that the students live together in an intensely charged space in every respect. I’d like them to experience it feeling themselves to be free; for them to build bonds with one another; and learn what can be learnt without too much interference… But (talking of but-ism), meanwhile, my years of experience in the faculty at Pontevedra tell me that transmission is not an easy task. There are no perfect formulas or ideas that are taught, that can be taught. But there is a way of working. It’s possible to question the space, the materials, or work with the objects in one way or another. It’s through those questionings that you see reflected your estrangement before the world.

What decisions led you to work as an artist?

I am a typical vocational artist, a clipped expression that has fallen completely into disuse because of its associations with the religious but that we still understand, and which helps us not to get muddled up with other kinds of intelligence that have become buzz words today: emotional, social practices…”

Notes

1. Titles of two installations made by CVA.
4. Interview Maya Aguiriano held with the artist, in: Zehar, Boletín de Arteleku, 7 (November-December 1990).
5. “I must have a body, it’s a moral necessity, a ‘requirement’. And in the first place, I must have a body because an obscure object lives in me.” Gilles Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque [1988], trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 85.
6. A chuckle can be represented onomatopoeically in Spanish by ‘je je’.
8. Jorge Manrique was a 15th-century Spanish poet.
9. “To cut off a pigtail would not seem in this instance to imply any hostility toward the fetish; it is merely the necessary condition of its constitution. We cannot allude to hair despoilers without drawing attention to a psychiatric problem of historical importance. Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis, revised by Moll, is a compendium of the most abominable perversions for the use of doctors and jurists, as the subtitle indicates. Assault, crime, bestiality, disembowelling, necrophilia, etc., are all treated with the appropriate scientific detachment, without passion or value-judgement. With case 396, however, the tone changes abruptly: ‘a dangerous pigtail fetishist was spreading anxiety in Berlin....’ And this comment follows: ‘These people are so dangerous that they ought definitely to be subject to long-term confinement in an asylum until their eventual recovery. They do not by any means deserve unqualified leniency.... When I think of the immense sorrow caused to a family in which a young girl is thus deprived of her beautiful hair, I find it quite impossible to understand
that such people are not confined indefinitely in an asylum.... Let us hope that the new penal law will remedy this situation.’ Such an indignant explosion of indignation against a relatively harmless perversion seems to indicate that powerful personal motivations lay behind the author’s departure from his usual scientific objectivity. When he reached case 396, the psychiatrist allowed his feelings to get the better of him – let this be a lesson to all.” Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism. Coldness and Cruelty* [1967], trans. Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 135-136 (note 5).


*Beatriz Herráez. An interview with María Luisa Fernández. je, je... luna. María Luisa Fernández. Bilbao, Azkuna Zentroa, 2015*