María Luisa Fernández

*je, je... luna*

*Artworks. 1979-1997*

Feb 5 – May 29, 2016

Exhibition galleries on the ground floor

Tuesday to Saturday (including bank holidays) from 11am to 2:30pm and from 5pm to 9pm.
Sunday, from 11am to 2:30pm

Curated by Beatriz Herráez

A project by Azkuna Zentroa

Press Release
Summary of the exhibition project

*Je, je... luna* traces a journey through the work of artist María Luisa Fernández (Villarejo de Órbigo, León, 1955). It shows different groups of sculptures, drawings and installations which to date have not been shown as a mid career retrospective. These works, produced between 1979 and 1997, are part of the different approaches around the figure and the concept of an *Ideal Artist* that is present through the artist production until her last individual exhibition in 1997.

The exhibition begins with the first works of Fernández as part of the CVA (Committee for Artistic Vigilance), a collective conceived as an “artistic company” jointly set in motion between 1979 and 1985 with artist Juan Luis Moraza. The projects of this “company” were characterized by the critical reflection they unleashed around the mechanisms for presenting and receiving art works, exhibition formats or the ideological and economic functions of representation of the art institution. After the CVA’s participation in shows such as *Mitos y delitos* (Myths and Misdeeds) (Metrônom, Barcelona and Aula de Cultura, CAM, Bilbao, 1985), its initials linked up with what was termed “New Basque Sculpture”, a group of artists located in Bilbao that became a reference point for the artistic practices and debates that marked the 1980s in the Basque Country.

In this dialogue with a concrete time and scene – described on occasions as an “unintentional generation” – this exhibition is located. The show includes documents and objects that belong to the CVA period, as well as important series of works produced after the dissolution of the collective, amongst others *Máculas* (Blemishes) (1984-1985), *Leyendas* (Legends) (1985-1986), *Melenas* (Long Hair) (1988), *Esculturas rojas* (Red Sculptures) (1989), *Burladeros* (1990) and *Corridas* (1996-1997). *Burlas expresionistas* (Expressionist Mockery) (1993) and *Artistas ideales* (Ideal Artists) (1990-1997), two installations comprising the main lines of research developed by the artist during her career, are also included throughout the exhibition.

María Luisa Fernández’s works are characterized by the use of disparate artistic languages ranging from post-conceptual and minimalism to elements coming from the intersections between constructivism and the tradition of the Basque sculpture, training ground of the artist. The use of ‘double entendres’ and puns is also frequent in her production, as well as incorporating a critical vision to official versions of the 20th century history of art. Thus, Fernández remains attentive to the influence of the 80s, which brought back notions like those of authorship, effort or *genius loci*, constantly questioned in her works. In this context Fernández also asserts that in addition to “having something to see” we can also work “so as to have something looking at us and something to look with”, thereby creating a series of alternative *Ideal Artist* models which are contrasted with the portraits of the *Figures of Authority* in the exhibition hall.
This exhibition is a project by Azkuna Zentroa, curated by Beatriz Herráez, which now travels from Bilbao to MARCO, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Vigo, the city where the artist has resided since she left the Basque Country. In 1992 María Luisa Fernández moves to Vigo, Galicia, and begins teaching sculpture at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Pontevedra. This is the first exhibition to review the artist’s production from the 90s, the time when she opened her last solo show.

On the artist


Her works form part of the collections of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (Madrid); MACBA (Barcelona); Fundació la Caixa (Barcelona); Artium, Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo (Vitoria-Gasteiz), as well as of various private collections.
1. **ILARGIA** / **DEAD MOON**

In April 1997 *Artistas ideales* (Ideal Artists) was presented in the Sala Carlos III at the University of Navarre: the exhibition was to become the last individual show by artist María Luisa Fernández after almost two decades of uninterrupted work. The exhibition acted as a provisional conclusion to the different practices and approaches to the figure of an *Artista ideal* (Ideal Artist) that is already present in the first works of Fernández as part of the CVA*² (Committee for Artistic Vigilance), a collective conceived as an “artistic company” jointly set in motion between 1979 and 1985 with artist Juan Luis Moraza. The projects of this “company” were characterized by the critical reflection they unleashed around the mechanisms for presenting and receiving art works, exhibition formats or the ideological and economic functions of representation of the art institution.³ After the CVA’s participation in shows such as *Mitos y delitos* (Myths and Misdeeds) (Metrònom, Barcelona and Aula de Cultura, CAM, Bilbao, 1985), its initials linked up with what was termed “New Basque Sculpture”, a group of artists located in Bilbao that became a reference point for the artistic practices and debates that marked the 1980s in the Basque Country. This group’s proposals redefined the languages of sculpture linking the aesthetics of post-Minimalism and the “allegorical impulses” that were circulating at the international level with references to figures in the context such as the sculptor Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003).


The works of María Luisa Fernández are marked by the incorporation of a diversity of artistic languages ranging from the post expressions of conceptual art and minimalism to elements whose origins lie at the crossing points between constructivisms and the sculpture tradition in the Basque Country, where the artist received her training. In these pieces there is also frequent use of the double entendre and plays on words, alongside the incorporation of criticism directed at the official accounts of art history, whose interpreters can be traced among their “citations”. The artist continued to be mindful of the influence exercised in the 1980s by the recovery of notions such as authorship, endeavour or genius loci, themes that are permanently questioned in her works. In this context Fernández asserts that, in addition to producing so as to “have something to see”, it is possible to work “to have something that looks at us and to look at with”,⁶ devising for the purpose a series of alternative models of *Artistas* (Artists) which are set up against the portraits of Figures of Authority in the exhibition room.

Fernández’s *Ideal Artists* are sculptures made in the main in polychrome wood and are built through correspondences that the artist establishes between geometric forms reminiscent of graphic representations of statistics – circular fragments, “pie charts”… – and others that allude to the human
scale. These collections of data and abstract proportions “take on life” when presented in galleries as three-dimensional figures, animated mathematical bodies. In their first appearances the Artists stood upright in the spaces where they were shown, vertically. However, in 1993, in the installation Expressionist Mockery, this layout changes and they end up slumping on foam rubber mattresses that are arranged charting perpendicular streets. Furthermore, Fernández brings these figures, reclining on soft stands, up against other typologies of artists; protagonists of groups and isms in art history who are portrayed in different photographs deployed around the gallery walls.

The positioning of the pieces upon these platforms – beds – stands in contrast with the artist’s first works when, through the CVA, she insisted on “giving the framework a turnaround” until it was made to explode to “widen the gaze toward the rest of the world”. An operation that was very familiar with the “expansions” performed in the field of sculpture in previous decades. This explosion of boundaries had its reflection, among other works, in PV Punto de Vista (1982) or Cicatrize en la matriz (1983), works in which fragments of frames and pedestals – “devices of discontinuity and emblems of artistic mediation” – were spread out directly over the floors of institutions and museums. Nonetheless, and in spite of this “recovery” of pedestals and frames – as soft dais or in the shape of Burladeros, vertical structures that protected the visitors from the Artists –, in the layout of the elements the horizontal occupation of the space prevailed.

Many of the artists who appear in the photographs of Burlas will coincide with those included in the lists drawn up by other artists who have also asked themselves about the absence of women in the group representations reproduced in art manuals. In 1972, Louise Lawler recited in Birdcalls the names of her contemporaries imitating different species of birds: Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Richard Artschwager, John Baldessari, Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Mario Merz, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Ed Ruscha are among the (28) chosen in her litany. Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Andy Warhol and Lawrence Weiner are some of the names that will be repeated in the works of both artists.

Humour and irony will be resources frequently employed to cope with the absence of those “models” of (self-)representation through which to reflect oneself or answer back to. This will be a constant running through María Luisa Fernández’s production until the date of her last installation in Pamplona towards the end of the 1990s. Among the titles of the works congregated in that show were Ensayos, Corridas and Semen, a sculpture manufactured with “immortal substance” (plaster of Paris). The catalogue text, built from fragments of other writings, carried the title “The sex that laughs”. Two years later, on the occasion of their participation in a collective exhibition, Fernández had published “But-ism”, a sort of manifesto that underlined the permanent doubt and contradiction around her, anticipating the renunciation she would put into effect a few years later: “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’. (…) Yes but no to believing in ideologies. Yes but no to desiring a new artistic identity. Yes but no to wishing to be a critic. One tries to construct, but, it turns out to be most difficult.”
2. HOW FONDLY IS SHE ME? HOW FONDLY IS SHE ME? HOW FONDLY, VERY FONDLY, AM I HER?¹³

*Je, je... luna* is a project that was initiated in 2013 through the confluence of two different circumstances. On the one hand, an research around artistic practices developed in the 1980s and 1990s which concluded with an exhibition organized with pieces from the Reina Sofía Museum’s collection:¹⁴ this happened to allow me to meet María Luisa Fernández personally and establish a dialogue with a figure that had self-excluded herself from the space of visibility in art – the exhibition – for over two decades. And, on the other hand, there was an invitation to participate in the seminar “Feminist perspectives in artistic productions and art theories”¹⁵ organized annually in AZ, a platform of reflection on the construction of an art history informed by feminism that enabled me to present and debate the artist’s production with historians and artists from very diverse contexts.

As historian Helen Molesworth insists, in an essay published in 2008,¹⁶ the refusal to accept the norm as a natural or given thing, the questioning of the canon, is one of the greatest methodological legacies of feminism in the production of new narratives that productively and critically question the status quo of the art institution. I return to this consideration now because the assertion comes very close to the questions that have always been hanging in the air, and not just in the scenarios described in the commissioning of this research and in the development of the *Je, je... luna* exhibition project: is it possible to construct alternative accounts that question the *official status* of the dominant discourses? And, above all, how does one go about that using the exhibition format?

I should like to point out that neither this monographic publication, nor the exhibition, have in any way been defined in terms of recovery or discovery,¹⁷ wordings that we have taken pains to steer clear of due to their association – especially in the case of women artists – with the construction of narratives based on biographical aspects, on details that seem to illuminate their paths with a different light from that of their contemporaries.¹⁸ Too often these *Lives* seem to provide the exclusive reasons for the interest their protagonists arouse. This interest as it slides towards “anecdote”¹⁹ even manages to remain indifferent to the study of the works. This modus operandi, transformed almost into a formula, perpetuates an *exception* requirement in the stories of female artists as the main condition to gain membership of the official history. So I would like to underline again that rather than some kind of recovery operation or discovery of some rare bird, this project defines itself in terms of conservation. Conservation of works, but also of documents, texts, photographs or archives, the most urgent action for any possible future reframing operation of the above-mentioned group portraits that illustrate art history.

If you Google “María Luisa Fernández” on the Internet, scarcely any traces of a previous life are there to be found. A friend alerted me on this matter some days after I mentioned I was working on this project. You can’t miss what you don’t know. And everybody knows memory is a social construction that involves a process of selection and ordering what one is interesting in keeping. This was the premise for commissioning *Je, je... luna*: to make known and visible the artist’s production in a reasoned manner. This objective, however, had to be put into perspective with the decision taken by Fernández years before to abandon the exhibition space, the place of visibility we were now working with. A resolution to stay out of the way that was reached without any fuss, executed in the absence of any “act of heroism”,²⁰ and which the artist associated with the idea of “living without doing” that liberated her from the “weight of having to be”.²¹ At different moments someone might be tempted to establish correspondences – they exist, and they are many – between Fernández’s position and that taken by the community of “self-sabotage” artists who belong to a sort of *No Congregation*²². Some months ago the *Mousse* magazine²³ published an interesting article about artists such as Stanley
Brown, David Hammons, Cady Noland or Lee Lozano, all with trajectories in which issues of opposition, refusal or disappearance from the public scene have been and still are matters of great relevance. These artists’ decision to “get out of the spotlight” was compared in the text written by M. Herbert with the invisibility of other names in the literary field, such as Thomas Pynchon. The refusal of this community of the invisible to be exposed can even be considered to have caused the opposite effect, increasing the attention paid to them in their swim against the stream. But how can we allow ourselves to make such a comparison in a context that has little or nothing to do with the system of rules of “international art” – which practically all the artists mentioned belong to? The already “marginal” condition of our scene/context is in itself a fact – however much some enthusiastic voices are raised affirming the contrary – that prevents us from setting up equivalences or, at least, from doing so without being aware of that previously occupied space of invisibility. But there is something that is comparable in this circulation and in the permanence of a name linked to a work, in spite of its non-existence on the web, and it is the weave of complicities and affinities that permits transmission and that preserves the work made even though it has not been distributed by channels of note. A different circulation,24 from mouth to mouth, that resists adaptation to the canon or the insistently repeated histories, formulating not just accounts that can be described as “alternative”, but are also constructed “problematically”.

From the start of our conversations María Luisa Fernández insisted that it would be no easy task to locate works, documents and images that had been in circulation for almost a quarter of a century, scattered in galleries, private collections, forming part of awards and competitions, or in the collections of institutions that had passed through very different stages. Oral accounts have frequently been the main historiographical sources – sometimes the only ones in existence – for tracking down works and documents collected in the book and the show. The job of searching – at times it might be more appropriate to classify it as “trawling” – and the ensuing restoration that was necessary – carried out almost in its entirety by the artist in the months prior to the exhibition – constituted crucial stages in the process conducted during these months. In specific cases of disappeared or damaged works where it was deemed important that they form part of the exhibition, they were reproduced on posters in their real size and displayed in the exhibition rooms using images from the artist’s personal archive or belonging to other private individuals. Likewise, there are three sculptures that were newly produced by the artist to make them available for the exhibition. The result of this work of conservation, cataloguing and archiving, is reflected in the structure of this book, which functions as a compilation of images and texts from the period. This monograph is organized in four differentiated blocks: the first with specific texts and an interview with María Luisa Fernández; the second section that includes photographs of works and exhibitions from different private archives; a third block with essays published in vintage catalogues reproduced as facsimiles; and a fourth section that consists of a photographic journey round the exhibition organized in AZ. This monographic publication and the exhibition Je, je… luna are the replies to those questions raised exactly two years ago.

Beatriz Herráez
[Text by the curator for the publication María Luisa Fernández. je, je… luna, Bilbao, AZ, 2015]
Notes

1. In some interpretations the word _ilargia_ (moon) in Basque is associated with a “light of the dead” (_hil_: death; _argi_: light). Cf. http://www.euskomedia.org/aunamendi/96329

2. The CVA archive is deposited in Artium, Centro-Museo Vasco de Arte Contemporáneo (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country).

3. Some of the projects are reproduced in facsimile in this book: _Pintura sobre playa, Superficies topológicas pintadas, Emisión de pegatinas, Cuadrados rectificados, Nombres de artistas._


5. There are some double meanings at play here. _Burladero_ originally had the meaning of ‘buffoon’, but now, in bullfighting, it refers to the covert, the barrier behind which the bullfighter protects himself. In close connection, _corridas_ means ‘bullfights’, but in slang alludes to the ejaculation of semen.

6. Interview Maya Aguiriano held with the artist (Zehar, Boletín Arteleku 7, November-December, 1990).

7. See Michael Taussig, _The Magic of the State_ (New York: Routledge, 1987), 3: “Take the case of God, the economy and the state, abstract entities we credit with Being, species of things awesome with life-force of their own, transcendent over mere mortals. Clearly they are fetishes, invented wholes of materialized artifice into whose woeful insufficiency of being we have placed soulstuff.


10. _Birdcalls_ came into being while the artist was helping on the venture _Projects: Pier 18_ (1971), in which only male artists were taking part. See Stacey Allan, “Role Refusal: On Louise Lawler’s _Birdcalls_”, _Afterall_ (Spring 2009) and Rosalyn Deutsche, “Louise Lawler’s Rude Museum” (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/deutsche/). The work was published in the double issue of the _journal-cassette Tellus_ #5-6 (1984). The complete audio for the piece can be consulted at: http://www.ubu.com/sound/tellus_5-6.html (seen April 22, 2015). The piece is on show in the gardens of the Dia Beacon Foundation in New York (http://www.diaart.org/exhibitions/artistbio/104).

11. Definition provided by Fernández.


15. Seminar run by Lourdes Méndez and Xabier Arakistain. The second edition of the Seminar held between 25 and 27 October 2013 also included papers by: Julia Varela Fernández, Mignon Nixon, Whitney Chadwick, Fabienne Dumont, Maryam Jafri and Bojana Pejic.

16. “For instance, can we accept the challenges of (or the dismissal, or refusal, or even outright ignoring of) minimalism and conceptual art in future accounts of art of the 1970s? What sense can we begin to make of feminism’s most important methodological legacies — the refusal to accept the norm as natural or given (…) this rejection of the status quo has led to the productive and critical questioning of the institution of art…” in: Helen Molesworth, _Solitaire: Lee Lozano, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Joan Semmel_. Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University Columbus, Ohio (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 11-12.

17. During the preparation for the exhibition an interesting essay concerning these issues was published in this connection, signed by Ashton Cooper, “The Problem of the Overlooked Female Artist: An Argument for Enlivening a Stale Model of Discussion”: “At first these recognitions might seem laudable, even a continuation of the efforts of the Women’s Movement to dig into history and pull out disregarded women who have achieved remarkable things. But after reading several of these stories, a troubling pattern starts to emerge: this type of article does not truly advocate for women artists, but rather belatedly elevates women or minorities to the canon, instead of questioning canonicity itself.” Seen in _Hyperallergic_ , January 2015: http://hyperallergic.com/173963/the-problem-of-the-overlooked-female-artist-an-argument-for-enlivening-a-stale-model-of-discussion/14

18. One could ask whether the biographies of male artists might not suffer, if the same amount of (excellent) details were brought to bear on aspects such as their family background/origin familiar, medical history, sentimental past and various pathologies...
19. Giorgio Agamben holds that the question is not that gossip may not be interesting: “to the extent that it entertains a nontrivial relation to truth that eludes the problem of verification and falsification and claims to be closer to truth than factual adequation, gossip is certainly a form of art.” Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 8.


22. See: www.enriquevilamatas.com


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**On the curator**

Beatriz Herráez is an art historian and curator. Her field of research includes the construction of historiography stories linked to contemporary art languages and feminist theory. Some of her recent exhibitions include *Areonzana, Imaz, Intxausti, Montón, Peral*, jointly curated with Peio Aguirre at CCI Tabakalera, Donostia-San Sebastián (2016); and *Mínima Resistencia. Entre el tardomodernismo y la globalización: prácticas artísticas durante las décadas de los 80 y 90* at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid (2013-2014). She has curated solo shows for artists Susan Hiller, Néstor Sanmiguel Diest and Juan Luis Moraza. She is now working with artist Erlea Maneros Zabala on an exhibition which will be opened next April at MNCARS, Madrid.

Since 2014 Heráez is member of the Basque Council on Culture at the Basque Autonomous Government; between 2011 and 2014 she was member of the Technical Commission for Eremuak Program; and between 2007 and 2011, she was chief-curator at Centro Cultural Montehermoso Kulturunea, in Vitoria-Gasteiz, a centre which integrated the feminist thought in a transversal/crossed way, in the centre's program.
Venues & publication

je, je… luna an exhibition organised by Azkuna Zentroa, was held in AZ Bilbao between June 18 and September 13, 2015.

On the occasion of the opening at Azkuna Zentroa, Bilbao, a book has been published, including texts by Beatriz Herráez (exhibition’s curator), Lourdes Fernández (Azkuna Zentroa’s Director), and an artist-curatorial interview. This volume brings together facsimile documentation by the CVA (Artistic Surveillance Committee) collective (1980-1985), texts by Manel Clot (1991), and writings written by María Luisa Fernández between 1993 and 2004, together with the works displayed in the exhibition.

María Luisa Fernández. Je, je… luna
130 pp. Euskera, Spanish, English
Bilbao, Azkuna Zentroa, 2015

Information & guided tours

The gallery staff welcomes queries from visitors regarding the exhibition and offers the usual guided tours:

Daily at 6pm
‘A la carte’ group tours, by appointment only. For bookings, call +34 986 113900

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