



↑ Esther Ferrer. [Aitor Bengoetxea]

# Esther Ferrer

[M. Zilbeti + M. Otaegi]

You've been here for two weeks now and you've been interviewed many times. What is the most-repeated question that you've been asked?

I imagine that your performances have evolved with you.

[Esther Ferrer]

The most-repeated? If performance art has evolved and how I began with performance art. I think those are the things that I've been asked the most and what I always get asked.

They get old with me, they change with me. Firstly because the social and political situation changes and psychologically you also change, as do your interests, and your work evolves as a result. Also, physically I'm not the same as I was when I was thirty and there are some performances that I cannot do anymore. I can adapt them to my current state and sometimes I do adapt them because I like the idea and I don't want to leave them forgotten in some drawer. But I don't always, because sometimes I can't do the things how I did them before and I don't want to change them. These performances disappear to make way for others that adapt better to my current physical and psychological state. There are times when your concerns are more artistic and there are others, for whatever reason, because the situation is the way it is, that you have socio-political concerns or you find yourself in a slightly strange personal situation and as this influences both what you do at a plastic level and at a performance level. Anyway, I change the performances continually and even though I hold on to the idea because I like it, I do different versions; one idea can be looked at in many different ways.

**They say that there are many theories on performance, as many theories as there are performers. So you must have your own theory...**

Of course I have my own theory, but only regarding what I do myself. I do feel that there are as many theories and as many definitions as performers, but not everybody agrees, quite the opposite. There are many who synthesise, analyse, classify, exclude it, etc. I always talk about my own work. I have my own idea about what I want to do, what I consider to be an action, and based on that I can theorise about what I do.

It might be the case that those who see my performances completely disagree with my theory, but that doesn't bother me, quite the opposite, I really like it; it's taken me a lot to understand that not being in agreement can be enriching for all parties.

**Can performance art be seen as the meeting of the private and public spaces?**

Yes, why not? But it can be done in private and in public.

**But is performance a valid instrument to bring what is private to the public domain and vice versa?**

Yes, but you could also say the same about a picture, for example, or a film or a play... Very often they also exteriorise privacy... It can be applied to performance art, but it isn't exclusive. For example, very often I've read novels which contain autobiographical elements... In this case too what is private becomes public. You're perhaps right in one respect, which is that while in a novel, in painting or in other arts, it is possibly «disguised» or hidden, in a performance, in an action, by its very nature, it is more evident, given that the performer is both object and subject, and so it is more real in this sense. But it can also be well-hidden, manipulated and although I'm totally against manipulation, you can undoubtedly mystify, can't you?

**Turning to the performers of the 70s, feminists saw performance art as a tool for the distortion of reality.**

The struggle was on two levels; private of course, because there were many things to question in one's private life, everything that touched on sexuality, the relationship with your partner, the different atavistic dependencies, etc. But it was also social, fighting to gain access to areas that were denied to us socially; the right to abortion, to equal jobs, equal salaries, the right to possess our own body, the struggle against degrading advertising, etc. Many of these things are on the border of what is public and what is private, and in our discussions we tackled all these subjects, trying to see as clearly as possible.

At Arteleku, when you began the workshop, before the presentation of each participant, you said the following: «I take it for granted that all of you here are feminists» which is the starting point.

You have said on various occasions that you are a feminist, but your art may be so or maybe not.

As regards the arts world, I'm convinced that feminism has widened the subject matter and the artistic possibilities, introducing themes that had until then been considered anartistic or non-artistic, themes that in many cases formed part of the everyday world of women. In this sense, it is difficult to separate, in the feminist struggle and in the artistic field the extent to which we are defending our own self and our own identity, because we are also defending the social visibility of a new image, of a new woman, with all the rights, with an ability to react, with an ability to intervene and to make decisions, etc.

I wish it were, but it isn't always the case. Now and then you even come across some anti-feminists, who haven't considered the problem, who aren't even aware that there are limitations on women's rights, because they haven't stopped to think, or because they initially accept that that's the way it is and, even worse, that's the way it should be. They never consider it to be a problem, maybe because if they did so, so many other questions would arise and so they'd prefer not to raise the matter, It's true that for you and for me and for all the women who reflect on these issues, life is more complicated and so are, naturally, relationships with men and not only in our private lives, but also our professional ones.

I'm not very fond of labels, but I think that of feminism is still absolutely necessary nowadays, in order for your position to be made clear. I believe that when you are a feminist, you are one because you have reflected, because you have fought for women's liberation, because you have explored, argued, read, tried to clarify your own contradictions, etc. All this colours whatever you do. Sometimes, after having done a performance, women will come and talk with me and say, «You're a feminist, aren't you?» And I always find this surprising because the performance that I'd done was completely absurd, since I work a lot with the absurd.

So of course there must be something of the feminist stance of my life that shows through! On other occasions, I do in fact use my artistic work to protest against a given situation, which might be something that affects the situation of women, and I create a work to protest or denounce it. It's like a cry that comes out

That's interesting, because that is the relationship that you want to have with the public; in the end it's the public who interprets what it is that you are doing. Does it matter if they like it or not?

Do you think that there is a relation between post feminist-queer theories and theories about performance?

These types of media have enabled women to become subject and begin to represent themselves.

in the form of a work which is defined as feminist because it is a reaction to a set of circumstances that are against women's rights or freedoms. But what I don't intend to do is award myself a medal or fly the flag of feminist in the field of art. I'm a feminist twenty-four hours out of twenty-four and I create the art that I feel I should.

I don't care. What I'm interested in is doing what I want in the way that I want to do in a given situation. I do set out to convey a message which is able to say things as clearly as possible, especially when I try to put forward a reflection on something that I feel is important and which I think is worth reflecting on.

When action art arose it was defined as a rupture in the field of artistic expression, but, as far as I know, it wasn't born in feminist spaces—it was begun mainly by men. There were women in Gutaï, in Fluxus and in other movements, but they were in the minority, which doesn't mean to say that they weren't pioneers or important. But since it is a vehicle which enables or is suitable or appropriate for putting certain vindications up for discussion and clarifying positions in relation to the situation of women, then feminists, whether lesbians or not, have appropriated it, we practice it. For those artists who have always created feminist art, fighting, struggling... Performance art has, in effect, several elements that may be very useful in breaking moulds, as is the case with video, which is maybe why there are a lot of female video artists.

When you talk about representation, I always say that performance art doesn't represent, it presents. The intention is more to destroy those «hegemonic» positions that have led to the current state of affairs. You don't represent your body, you present your body of a woman, with all its rights, pretty, ugly, tall, short, fat, thin, young, old... It's yours and there it is and you use it as the subject of your action. But the struggle for women to represent themselves began before performance art and not only in the field of art...

Presentation... representation... Some artists claim that today we are always in the situation of representing a role which represents other roles.

Do you consider performance art as a break with the arts system?

Judith Butler regards performativity as the repetition of actions which, as they are reiterated, are normativized and respond to power. Is performance art related to this reading of performativity.

Calderón spoke of the great theatre of the world. Some time ago, I wrote an article saying that half the world is the spectator of the other half of the world and that the roles are constantly changing. From the moment that you consent to a series of social norms, that you dress in a particular way etc. you're representing a character, you're responding to what you want to be, sometimes conditioned by society, sometimes less so. The absolute, pure self? What is it? What are we? I don't know, for me almost everything is a kind of enigma...

Not as a break with art because it is almost always within the arts system. However, I wouldn't want performance art to become just another genre within art, but rather a kind of UFO, a free electron that nobody really knows where it's coming from, nor where it's going to and remains without its own fixed abode and set characteristics; performance art presents itself, in the majority of cases, in the field of art. I would like it to stay in a position of estrangement in the sense that it can still be something corrosive, working like a kind of contagious virus that no-one really knows what medicine is needed to do away with it, or to define it, systemise it. I hope that nobody finds the vaccine to manage to make this controllable, defined, structured. As we were saying in the discussion, I would like this to continue being an element of resistance inside or outside the arts system, to always be a question without an answer, in relation to the social or artistic content of the action, and even formally. I would like it to have the vitality to retain enough diversity that those watching continue to be forever asking, «What on earth is this? But is this art? What does it mean? When does it finish? When does it start? Where is it going?» And that it always has elements that make it different from other arts genres so much so that it can never become just another genre.

Well, I suppose that in some cases, yes, and in others, no. Generalisations are always reductive; it depends on the position of each performer faced by this power, which for me naturally includes some critics, curators, university figures, etc. And anyway, is there anything that totally escapes power nowadays? Unless that means utterly radical positions of total rupture, including of course that of not practicing «art» at all. The modest aim is to do something that we believe, or I believe, cannot be

Can performance art be taught?

It has also been debated whether or not this fact may endanger both performance art and the students themselves as they run the risk of being formatted.

completely recovered and, wherever we appear, to fight for this freedom. For this reason I defend total hybridity, illegitimacy and confusion in the practice of performance art.

Sometimes I think that maybe what can be taught is the history of performance art, its evolution... But even for that you have to «define» what performance art is, given that you're going to analyse it, and since I think there are as many definitions as there are performers...

Of course, if you decide that performance art «is this» and not something else, that could have, and has, form «x», «y» or «z», then it is like any work of art and you can analyse it accordingly, or even systematise it: form, volumes, spaces, content, composition, technique, etc. But I don't know what validity this teaching would have. Performance art is not a discipline; it doesn't have «a technique»...

The question is whether or not you need a teacher to study history. You can learn the history of art by yourself in a library, by watching videos... And reaching your own conclusions, but that isn't teaching you how to carry out performance art, although maybe it's teaching you to copy or to follow the path of...

The best thing is for each person to invent and that's why when I give seminars... I don't take videos, I don't talk about my work unless they ask... Sometimes I refer to one of my works because one of the participants has done something that is similar to this or that action by another artist. I do so simply because it might lead them to find out about or investigate the work of artist «x» who has worked in the same area and it might help them clarify their own position but not to accumulate knowledge, which is why I never select the participants nor ask for their CV... I like people to come from wherever and I don't want those who attend to be conditioned by any artistic school of thought or by university studies, etc. I think the best thing is to mix; university students, artists, those who have no artistic speciality, etc. That way it's more enriching for everybody.

Could it perhaps be an alternative method of de-learning?

When Cage gave some courses at the New School for Social Research, he asked the participants on the first day if there was anyone there who had never studied music. I think it was Al Hansen who raised his hand and said, «Me», and Cage answered, «Excellent, that way you don't have anything to forget».

You mentioned earlier that you have performances put away, which you modify... Are these modifications, which you make yourself, made in order to suit you?

When I think about performances, I never think about «the other», they respond to my own needs. In Vitoria, they said to me, «yes, but sometimes you have done political performances». Yes, but these also respond to a need that I have at the time of doing it; something has happened that affects me and this reaction, as I said before, is perhaps a work of art. I believe that we have to protest and my protest is this, but it responds to my own needs. First I'm a person and later an artist.

Could you say that it is the artistic practice of necessity?

Yes, I feel that we, or at least I, do things out of necessity, out of desire... Even charity is done out of a need that you have and that's great. Why not? If it's useful and helps people... Let's not analyse. If you do somebody good, for whatever the reason, you know to what extent it's useful for you and art is something similar. I do it because I want to do it and if it also serves a purpose for somebody else, then marvellous, but other times I really want to say **this** and not something else and I want people to understand it as clearly as possible and so I try to use all means for that message to get across. On other occasions it's more ambiguous, more secret... And I like that it can be interpreted in different ways, so different that they don't have anything to do with what I think I've done and I enjoy this and find it interesting, but other times, as I say, I don't. In these cases, it is almost a militant act; well, I believe that all art created with freedom is militant, is political.

Valentín Torrens commented that performance art is a practice of self-evaluation.

It's up to each person. Whenever you create a work, you're demonstrating to yourself that you can do it, conscious or unconsciously. I think that this happens to everybody. Will I be able to do this, to organise it, to carry it out as I want to?



Am I able to do it, not only intellectually and philosophically, but also physically? It's something that you do in front of people, and so you ask yourself if you'll be able to hold it together. But also when you paint a picture or make a sculpture... In everything we do, whether we want to or not, we are affirming ourselves. The thing about performance art is that it has this «spectacular» *coté* in huge inverted commas. It's clear that the way we look at a painting, which is a separate product, or we see it as completely separate from the artist, including physically, is not the same way that we look at performance art; here there is no distance, the artist is the subject and the object. For this reason the interpretations by those who accept or reject the proposal are much richer, more direct, but perhaps more confused... The object is a subject of flesh and bone, it isn't a painting, it isn't the result of.... In a picture, for example, the result is fixed there, but performance art is being made before your eyes, it can transform *in situ*. Nobody knows the result, it's being made; you could even say that there is no result, simply the development of a proposal, of a situation... You can judge a painting in relation to what is defined, finished, but very often in a performance you don't know when it starts, or when it ends; it doesn't have the same elements as regards a traditional plastic work of art. Your mind is in movement, it isn't still; you have to be alert at all times.



↑ *La primera media hora...* Esther Ferrer. Centro Cultural de la Villa. Madrid, 1983.