FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS AND THEORIES OF ART

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BODIES APPEAR: A FEMINIST READING OF PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES IN CATALONIAN CONCEPTUALISM



Women as conceptual artists

The emergence of feminist theories in the Spanish artistic arena and feminist researchers who propose new ways of understanding the history of artistic practices has generated discussion in the last few years around the work of several female artists who actively participated in what is now called conceptual art, which developed mainly in Catalonia during the 1970s.

The term encompasses very diverse works and attitudes; it was never homogeneous in this context and is obviously quite different from the North American current. Though certain attitudes coincide, Catalonian conceptual proposals presented a fair amount of heterogeneity. Broadly speaking, the use of new media (performance, video, installation...) and a critical position towards traditional art constitute the common threads among artists and work that fits under the "conceptual" label. However, the immense variety of artistic positions, media, and ways of working create enormous difficulties when attempting to assign individual practices to specific currents.

The perplexity intensifies when the *conceptual* label is added to that of *female artist*. From the time we began the historical recovery of practices in Catalonia during the final years of the Franco dictatorship and the early years after his death, no essay, exhibition or conference has ever focused on "male artists in Catalonian conceptualism". It would be redundant, since "artists" have always been understood as male in the canonical reading of Art History; its masculine discourse surpasses mere indifference to women (Pollock, 1988:15).

In light of this bias, the work and careers of artists such as Fina Miralles, Ångels Ribé, Eulàlia Grau, Sílvia Gubern, Borothée Seltz, Eugènia Balcells, Alicia Fingerhut or Olga L. Pijoan, have been re-interpreted, mainly from perspectives arising from issues of sexual difference. This forges a rather curious double-edged sword: analysing their proposals from a feminist perspective is both pertinent and necessary; however, some forms of analysis can reduce them to a female specificity that seldom cuts both ways as a feminist political strategy. Ways of seeing and conceptualising the work and careers of these artists can vary due to the inherent complexity of their contexts. This text proposes a feminist re-examination of certain works in which the bodies of the female artists acquire an absolutely central role. This makes it possible to examine the aesthetic-political implications of the "appearance" of these bodies in the artistic sphere—and thus in the public sphere—of the late Franco and early democratic transition years. More than analysing these works and artists as feminist objects, which would arguably be inadequate for several reasons, we seek to provide a retrospective view that integrates relevant contributions from feminist critical theory in order to address both the incorporation of women into the art system and the various discursive proposals implied by female bodies on stage. However, extrapolating analyses from feminist art critique based mainly on a foreign context and developed according to specific practices is not entirely effective for treating the specific cases examined here. Thus, we find it necessary to highlight certain points that question any simplistic classification that limits these artists to a national feminist artistic current, as if it were possible to establish a direct parallel with the "Anglo-Saxon" feminist art of that time.

In general, the artists we will treat in this text are reticent to have their works classified as "feminist" , perhaps because the work of many female artists of their generation was quickly forgotten and they received scarce subsequent recognition. During the 1990s, efforts began to recover conceptual art in general, which eventually included a set of female artists with no real shared initiatives or concerns that might qualify them as a group. Thanks to feminist scholars interested in creating a national genealogy of female artists, names such as Fina Miralles, Eulàlia, Àngels Ribé... began to be cited in texts and these women were invited to exhibitions and symposia. For many of them, it has strengthened their feelings regarding discontinuous recognition in the arts; they were only "recovered" for their female specificity and sometimes only in connection with issues of political correctness in the institutional sphere.

In contrast with the Anglo-Saxon world, publications in Spain concerning these matters are scarce. Accordingly, we suffer from a lack of thorough debate regarding how to historically record from a feminist perspective the entire set of specific practices of women artists in Spain during the 1970s, some of whom were feminists.

¹ Information derived from conversations between the author and the artists, with the exception of Eugénia Balcells.

The research approach should begin by raising questions regarding the discipline itself, as its canonical version is inoperative when it comes to proposing new perspectives traversed by feminisms. This does not imply that the objects of study are necessarily works produced by women, nor that their content be explicitly feminist. It is necessary to re-frame our approach to artistic practices in order to design strategies that "should not fall into the trap of reducing a person to their sexual difference" (Méndez, 2010:34).

Along these lines, *Griselda Pollock* (1988:24) proposes a shift from thinking about a history of feminist art to thinking about feminist participation in the various histories of art. It would be interesting to advance in proposing more adequate critical models for conceptualising the singularity of these artistic proposals, framed within a specific context.

Currently, insufficient study of these practices and their authors presents us with an open and unrestricted field in which we may yet intervene. There is still no canonical version to argue against (Aliaga, 2004:58) concerning art and feminisms in Spain during the 1970s. However, texts and exhibitions on this theme have multiplied in recent years, and certain concepts are emerging that require examination, though the state of the question has not fully matured. One area in need of research involves the classification of artists and practices as "women", "female art", or at best "feminist", without considering the dangerously reductionist potential of such labels for treating them with identitary or political specificity rather than simply as artists or producers.

Another line of research might address the constant parallels being drawn with the Anglo context, which are pertinent at times but may not have been questioned sufficiently. Laura Trafi-Prats (2012:222) recently pointed out that "art historiography has enclosed this group of artists within the category of Catalonian conceptual art, even though their works show a diversity of themes and practices that would connect them with those of international artists linked to feminism in the 1970s" (Trafi-Prats, 2012:222).

She is right to question the use of the "Catalonian conceptual art" label and the indifference of official art history regarding matters relating to feminisms, which lead us to question the discipline itself, its ways of functioning and its categories. With few exceptions, in this context very little has as yet been called into question. Thus, a historiographic discourse anchored in old paradigms persists, dominant and unchallenged.

However, I don't think the answer lies in separating artists from their working context in order to associate them with Anglo practices linked to feminisms. Research indicates that these artists generally worked outside such currents and were unaware of their existence.

Though certain obvious connections exist, proposing parallels with the Anglo world is problematic. The Spanish national context was quite distinct: feminism as a social movement remained clandestine until after the death of Franco; foreign feminist theoretical production arrived late and took time to disseminate. Moreover, neither activist nor theoretical feminisms converged with the artistic world in Spain until well into the 1990s. For these reasons, most artists who began working in the 1970s did not exhibit any clear intent to transversally integrate feminisms into their artistic proposals, nor did artistic and feminist practices coincide. However, in spite of the absence of an organised feminist movement in the artistic sphere, at certain times artistic works and actions demonstrated a form of thinking undeniably close to feminism. Equally palpable was the presence of a feminist conscience that rebelled against an extremely chauvinistic society with patent inequalities.

Therefore, analysing whether the object of analysis was or was not feminist seems rather inconsequential, and the accent falls on how the analysis is established. What are its theoretical-critical starting points and ways of operating? From the current perspective, diverse works and actions can be seen as feminist.

Performativity and feminist theory

Performative practices are those in which the body of the artist enters the scene. Performances become a space for questioning dominant perspectives, or ways of seeing and being seen. As an act, performance art offers alternative parameters for representation. From its inception, numerous female artists have made it the central axis of their practices in diverse geographical contexts. As a relatively new

form, it lacked the markedly masculine connotations of other disciplines. In the Anglo sphere, performance art accompanied the rise and development of feminist art to become a leading strategy for questioning normative representation. The corporal is emphasized as a constructor of social space and a place for stating that "the personal is political".

Several theories illuminate the connections between performance and gender construction, with precursors as far back as English psychoanalyst Joan Riviere. In her lecture "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), she likened femininity to a masque behind which there is no essence. For Riviere, there is no 'genuine femininity' that precedes the acts that construct it. This became the starting point for several theories that since the 1990s have re-evaluated gender as a performative act. Judith Butler's analyses of performativity integrated J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts with their revision by Derrida (1998), who emphasized the notion of iterability: a term uniting repetition with alterity. She interweaves theories from the linguistic sphere with Riviere's understanding of femininity as a guise. Butler highlights the performative character of both gender and sex. Contributions from feminist film theory (L. Mulvey, T. de Lauretis, M.A. Doane...) in the final decades of the twentieth century also conceptualised gender as an iconographic apparatus.

Performance as an act has provided an interesting frame in which to re-situate the critique of representation: "the formulation of the body as a mode of dramatizing or enacting possibilities offers a way to understand how a cultural convention is embodied and enacted" (Butler, 1997:305).

This conscience of femininity as an act makes action art, with its emphasis on the corporal, a privileged place from which to propose alternative representations traversed by feminisms.

Parallel, though notably distant to what occurred in Anglo spheres, several female artists in Catalonia opted for performance as their preferred medium in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As I mentioned earlier, there was no theoretical reflection locating these practices within a feminist critique of representation, and they were generally not accompanied by active involvement in the feminist movement of that time. Female artists recognised the discrimination operating at all levels; they defied norms and conventions through their presence and proposals within the artistic context. One could argue that any artistic work involving new media that emphasized the use of one's own body was in itself a feminist act in Spain during those years. This is corroborated by some of the experiences of *Esther Ferrer*, a pioneer of Spanish performance art and member of the *ZAJ* group, along with *Juan Hidalgo* and *Walter Marchetti*. On one occasion, when the three were on stage, a spectator placed a lit cigarette next to the body of the female artist. In the mid-1970s, after a performance in Bilbao of "*El caballero de la mano en el pecho*", in which Hildago put his hand on her breast, a newspaper article labelled her a prostitute². Both events show the implications of a woman's body on stage, symbolically claiming a place in the public sphere. In Esther Ferrer's words: "this is the price we women have to pay in order to be women and do what we like".

Still, most of the female artists interviewed felt that their insertion into the artistic context took place without immediately obvious gender discrimination. Perhaps this is because early Catalonian conceptualism emerged in a fairly spontaneous and cohesive manner. Since these practices had an air of novelty, experimentation and near-zero economic remuneration, it seems the environment generated was not strictly competitive. This changed as the field became more professional and some artists entered the art market or the "mainstream". However, even though female artists seem to have accessed performance without too many obstacles, most of them completely disappeared from the art system. This surely merits analysis in its own right, as it involves aspects of class that have scarcely been examined. In Catalonia, conceptual art —with its emphasis on new practices—made the artistic sphere accessible for the first time to a diversity of female artists and segments of society not pertaining to the wealthiest classes, though most derived from the Catalonian bourgeoisie.

 $^{^{\}rm 2}$ Conversation between the author and Esther Ferrer, October 2011

Bodies appear

If the body is the medium by which social existence is materialised, then on a stage the body plays out a series of questions that affect both identitary aspects and how the body acquires representativeness in the public sphere with regard to certain inclusion/exclusion dynamics. This matter acquires particular relevance when analysing performances by women in the final stages of the Franco dictatorship. Absolute State control of bodies during that regime produced disciplined bodies, in the Foucaultian sense. The female body had been heavily defined by national Catholicism; it was an alter-body vis-à-vis the truly important, virile body serving the Homeland. In spite of the changes resulting from the relatively open nature of the regime during the 1960s, female bodies were still silenced bodies. This silence became the place from which certain possibilities of corporal re-materialisation arose when artists assumed the right to represent themselves through performance practices. Accordingly, the "appearance" of these bodies very likely corresponded first to a visualisation strategy. Through performance they made visible something that the regime had sought to keep invisible.

In March 1973, Olga L. Pijoan presented the performance Projeccions de fragments del cos in the TRA-73 exhibition, in the Col·legi d'Arquitectes of Barcelona: "In the expectant silence and darkness of the room, a girl comes up onto the stage with the lights upon her, sits indolently on a chair and remains static in the same position during the entire action. On a large screen next to the stage, a projector shows slides of nude parts of her body. We see her ears, parts of her nose, of the eye, the breast and the genitals, her toes or her fingers" (Utrilla, 1980: 72)

On the one hand, we have a real body, the physical presence of the artist; on the other hand we see a fragmented body, aggrandized and seeking a hyper-reality that ultimately turns the act into a masquerade. The artist uses a distancing strategy. The nude body as spectacle is magnified and becomes a critical tool for reflecting on the possibilities of performative acts and questioning the very structure of the representation. What is important is what becomes visible through its manipulation and conversion into something else. The projected body stops being a body. The wholeness of the artist's body is contrasted with a dispersal that turns identity into something weak and fragmentary. It appears dismembered, broken, and thus loses the unity that identifies it as an objectified female body. Only the distant, external perspective provided by the actual physical presence of the female artist can establish the difference between looking at oneself and being looked at. Olga L. Pijoan is a subject because she intentionally plays with placing herself in the place of the object. Fragmentation is taken to its ultimate consequences with the creation of a puzzle that remains after the action. A photograph of the artist decomposed into multiple pieces at different scales makes it impossible to re-construct the full image of her body. The presence of Olga L. Pijoan in the room along with the images of her body implies a rupture of a type of representational logic that opens a field of experimentation capable of destroying the subject-object dichotomy and its associated aesthetic ideology.

In the catalogue of the only posthumous exhibition dedicated to this artist, curated by Pilar Parcerisas at the Centre d'Art de Santa Mònica in 1999, Carles Hac Mor tells of the effect of Pijoan's piece during its 1974 presentation in the Instituto Alemán de Cultura [German Cultural Centre] in Madrid: "the public divided into two groups: those who were detractors in the name of the social transcendence of art and those who were so moved by these images that they began to carry out onanistic acts which the others immediately repressed" (Hac Mor, 1999:9).

The words of Hac Mor immediately situate us in Spain at the end of the Franco dictatorship, where proposals such as those of Olga L. Pijoan were problematic if judged by public reaction. The manipulation of the artist in the image was intended to visualise and de-objectify the female body by disassembling the normative image that produced sexual desire.

Olga L. Pijoan was active from 1972 to 1974, after which her name disappeared from exhibitions. In spite of her brief career, she did some of the most interesting actions of that time and used her body as the central axis for several projects. She gave up this artistic career and died in Nicaragua in 1997, where she had started a workshop and taught children to draw and paint.

Pilar Parcerisas is the researcher who has given most attention to the work of Pijoan. In my opinion, her analyses have scarcely touched on the component of critique; when they have, she tends to locate it "within the framework of female sensitivity" (Parcerisas, 2007:111). This fails to emphasize new ways of seeing and representing the feminine that were implicit in Pijoan's corporal actions.

The intent of making the body visible and reaffirming its presence also appears in the works of Angels Ribé. Exploration of space and the role of the body as a constructor-definer of space was central to several of her projects in the 1970s. Ribé formally analysed geometry, drawing inexistent lines that escaped a pre-determined framework and constructing forms that exist but cannot be seen, that transcend the pre-eminence of the material. The body of the artist itself, with all its connotations, configures and delineates that space by re-defining limits established within the context. Several of her actions portray issues that arise from the spatial location of a body and explore new forms of inhabiting that space. In "Six Possibilities of Occupying a Given Space" (1973) Ribé addressed the confinement of a body within a pre-defined space in an action that clarified how space is occupied but not inhabited. Fingers change places to show different possibilities of appropriation, but limitation is absolute. The significance of this lies in the narrow scope available to us once we accept this limitation. The action became a metaphor for the discomfort a body encounters in seeking to occupy a space and revealed the political implications of that occupation.

Ribé made her body the measure of all things, the ground on which subjectivity is constructed through failed relationships with others and the environment. That body-agent drew the lines and vanishing points that configured the spaces of "Invisible Geometry 3" (1973). Her position and perspective decided and determined how place was constructed, as something that can only start from the point of presence. Thus the body is no longer constrained by circumstances: will and effort infuse it with agency.

Many of Ribé's actions were performed during the time she lived in Chicago and New York, from 1972-1979. Her case is somewhat unique, as her contact with the US artistic sphere gave her access to information that had not yet reached Spain. Ribé travelled several times to Barcelona and participated in some of the Catalonian conceptualist exhibitions. In the US, she established some contact with the feminist movement and even published photos of an action in the journal *Heresies* (n°5, 1978). She states that her artistic practices never converged with feminist theories, nor did she actively participate in feminist groups. In her early years, she signed her works as A. Ribé, out of concern that her work would not be valued in its own right, but judged by the fact that she was a female artist³.

Imposing the appearance of the body and confronting the gaze of the other with a silenced body seems to be present in most of the performative projects of these female artists. Olga L. Pijoan addressed the appearance/disappearance of the body in *Herba* (1972), where she plays with disappearing from view while leaving a silhouette of her body that testifies to her absence. As in the works of Ribé, emphasis seems to fall on the difficulties that the body faces when seeking to be present and exercise agency by occupying a space that in some way does not correspond to it. *Herba* shows the fragility and inherent precariousness of that occupation.

In the 1973 Prada Summer University exhibition, *Alicia Fingerhut* presented a series of photos that documented several actions. One of them took place in Barcelona's San Gregorio Plaza, where the artist appropriated public space by placing herself face down on the asphalt of the road and stopping traffic for several minutes with the sudden presence of a body that complicated and blocked, that made itself forcefully visible. It was also a de-contextualised body, cast aside and laying on the ground, that sought to illustrate exclusion from a systemic machinery that continued functioning in spite of this disconcerting presence. Again, materialisation and presence of the body become the central element of the artist's act. Fingerhut performed several corporal actions at the height of conceptualist activity in the mid-1970s and then abandoned this artistic practice entirely, like many other female artists.

The appearance of the body also constituted a relevant element in the career of Fina Miralles. In the series entitled *Relacions* (1974), her body came on stage through material insertion into nature, and eventually occupied a central place. Fina Miralles then focused on giving artistic status to daily acts such as eating, smoking, gazing at the sea, walking or touching a bird (*Relacions. Accions quotidianes*, 1975). Through performative repetition, these routine actions gradually lost their original meaning and became a significant means of re-thinking

³ Conversation between the author and Angels Ribé in the summer of 2011.

the act from an external and therefore remote perspective. Black and white photographs remain of these actions, but capture them as decontextualized instances: distant from their mainly performative structure.

The body of *Fina Miralles* appears in a position of privileged agency. With her sudden presence on the artistic scene in the early 1970s, feminist theories established the bases for a critique of representation that emphasized the corporal as a builder of social space. The body of the artist, which had generally been ignored by the hegemonic discourse of modernity, abruptly appeared on stage during the 1960s; giving rise to the first attempts by early feminist artists at subversion/inversion of the normative imaginary. The problem of self-representation using the body was—and in some ways still is—a central issue at the intersection of artistic practices and feminist theories. Corporal acts by Fina Miralles identified through representation the problem of daily life focused on the body, as an axis upon which the construction of subjectivity revolves. The body that acts exists, because we can recognise it; recognition carries a series of pre-existing identitary adscriptions which are not based on that moment. These adscriptions pertain to a series of socio-cultural conventions that are subject to citationality, with implicit connotations.

Relacions. Accions quotidianes has not received the attention it merits, as researchers and curators have mainly focused on analysing works with more explicit feminist content, such as Standard. However, it is important to highlight the relevance of proposals such as these mentioned, which emphasize placing the body of the artist on stage as the element that structures socio-symbolic space and as the repository of identifications that assist in the re-examination of basic questions within a critique of representation that is traversed by feminisms.

Identitary acts

We are confronted with important political and feminist connotations by the very presence of those bodies —traditionally excluded from hegemonic representation and dispossessed of any possibility of self-representation. Just after the death of Franco, the bodies of the first feminist activists also began to invade the public square through marches and protest actions that emphasized visibility. People chained themselves to government buildings and streets were taken to demand amnesty for over 350 women who in 1976 remained incarcerated for the specific crimes of adultery, abortion and prostitution; women occupied the public square with torches in nocturnal marches. These protest actions were conceptualised as performances, even though they fell entirely outside the artistic sphere of the time.

Appearance became a strategic act, a first step from which to derive new ways of doing. It offered discursive proposals for re-thinking how the body is presented and represented.

The construction of identity through reiterative acts was explored in proposals such as *Standard* (1976), a performance by Fina Miralles at Galería G in Barcelona. Tied in a wheelchair in the centre of a room and gagged with a mantilla⁴, she gazes, unable to react, at slides and a television showing images related to culturally stereotyped constructions of femininity. On the screen, a mother dresses her daughter as a metaphor of how education constructs and limits us; on the television we see ads specifically targeting a female public.

The mechanisms for constructing the "standard prototype" of a woman are exposed in detail while the real, trapped body of a woman helplessly suffers the violence of the power machinery surrounding her. Violence is exerted from specific places: the family as a nucleus and guarantee of hetero-patriarchy, the church (symbolised by the mantilla), media publicity and mass media controlled by societal powers... The violence is structural, making some of the implications subtle and difficult to unveil. Miralles mainly staged acts that are repeated so often they become commonplace and establish a normality that resists subversion. Standard also analysed structural chauvinist violence, emphasizing the construction of male and female stereotypes as the solid foundation it rests on: something feminism has drawn attention to for decades.

⁴ T.N.: lace head covering traditionally worn in church

Dorothèe Selz, another female artist active within Catalonian conceptualism, explored the masquerade of femininity in a series of photoperformances entitled *Mimétisme Relatif* (1973). Selz used erotic photos of women and re-produced them with her own body in a performance full of irony and kitsch aesthetics. By exactly imitating the poses in the photos she exposed the gestures and citational dynamic that construct a specific type of dominant female representation.

The contributions of Carlos Pazos, undoubtedly a pioneer in Spain, critiqued the representation of masculinity. Through the construction of characters, or alter-egos, his actions mixed vital and artistic experiences that challenged both the traditional representation of masculinity and the progressive, bearded aesthetics typical of 1970s activists. His appearances and photo-performances in the Barcelona artistic context offered elaborately staged images of an identity that distanced itself from socially accepted representations of the time and showed how masculinity also materializes through reiterative acts.

The proposals described here provide a small sampling of how artists used performative strategies to show the centrality of the corporal in questioning hegemonic representations. Several works of Spanish art in the 1970s, especially in Catalonia, emphasize the importance that the body of the artist began to acquire on stage. We must remember that the demands of the Spanish feminist movement during the 1970s and 1980s resembled those of Europe or the United States and often focused on matters related to sexual and reproductive rights, making the body a symbol and device for many of those demands. If "the personal is political" and political commitment and activism were closely linked to the corporal for feminists, through performance female artists re-appropriated their bodies in a way that more or less consciously defied the uni-directionality of the dominant view. They created space for thinking about other ways of locating oneself within the subject/object dialectic that defines the representation of the feminine.

Perhaps it is time to leave off asking ourselves whether certain objects of study are feminist or if their producers used artistic practices to transmit feminist ideology. It seems more important to return female artists, their projects and the presence of their bodies to their context and the systemic art logic of the time. We need strategies that allow us to re-examine their production from new angles, transforming feminine or feminist specificity into a tool for critical analysis rather than a bias. Historically accounting for the artistic practices of women or feminists does not in itself guarantee a political/feminist intervention in art history. A critique of the discipline itself, along with our ways of doing and researching, should serve as the starting point. Here, we have emphasized analysis within the manifold aspects and relations of a specific context. Our approach involved art mainly as social praxis, integrated within a totality and influenced by multiple factors: something the feminist critique of art has asserted for decades.

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