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CABELLO / CARCELLER

curator
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A VOICE
FOR ERAUSO
—EPILOGUE FOR
A TRANS TIME

exhibition
10 march —
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A VOICE FOR ERAUSO
An epilogue for trans time
Cabello/Carceller

This exhibition by Cabello/Carceller (Paris, 1963 / Madrid, 1964) establishes a relationship between contemporary queer and trans micropolitics and the construction of historical narrative. Their method of historical inquiry involves creating anachronistic or ex-temporary portraits, as a way of combatting the logics of modern progress and normative chronopolitics. 'The present is not enough' states Brazilian artist and writer Jota Mombaça, stressing the necessity of the past as a condition for action in the present and a means to open future pathways which seem closed and cancelled beforehand. 'The future is a contested ground when you live in a body and in a way that are not part of a normative-colonial futurity. My wishes for the future are concerned with dismantling futurity as a privilege, and with breaking the industries that hold the imagination captive. They are about leading into a proliferation of futures crafted and enacted by all those from whom the future was stolen.'¹ Cabello/Carceller approach history in much the same way as they would the present: as conditions that are not 'given', as public narratives that must be fought for.



Self-Portrait as Fountain (Poster), 2001



This approach to reality, which Kathy Acker would describe as 'post-cynical',² allows Cabello/Carceller to transform time and memory into collective laboratories. They do not presume to know best, nor have they 'seen it all'. They inquire into our ways of not knowing and look for new paths. Cabello/Carceller work with queer methodologies; they evade traditional disciplines and instead invite different subaltern social and political agents to participate in their workshops, installations, performances, fictions and photo/video productions. These collaborative works are meant to question the hegemonic representations and the dominant historical storylines and offer critical narratives while allowing other bodies to be visible and other voices to be heard. Like other feminist, trans, queer or antiracist artists, such as Judy Chicago, Wu Tsang, Faith Ringgold, Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry, Cabello/Carceller invite these participants (and the spectators by extension), whom they refer to as 'unforeseen subjects' (in the words of Italian feminist Carla Lonzi³) to gather round History's operating table. There, voices and faces lost to collective visual memory are given a second chance to put on flesh and become visible by subjectivizing bodies that do not appear to belong to them. This experimental, political and mnemotechnic process has retroactive effects: it changes the historical narrative and presence of the subject evoked while also altering and expanding the possibility of future action for those who inhabit these 'bodies' or invoked them in the present.

In this case, the project began with the encounter between Cabello/Carceller and a portrait as fascinating as it is unusual: Catalina de Erauso dressed as an ensign of the Spanish Colonial Navy, painted by Juan van der Hamen y León around 1625-28. It is currently part of the Kutxa collection. Erauso was born in Donostia sometime between 1585 and 1592, assigned female gender and given the name Catalina. Also known as 'the ensign nun', Erauso's autobiography tells of their adventures as a youngster who ran away from a convent 'dressed as a man'. Erauso then travelled throughout the colonized territories of the Spanish Empire, from Chile to Mexico, as a soldier and a merchant. While the portrait appears at first to be a paradigmatic example of white colonial-baroque masculinity, it is nonetheless an anomaly for its era. It could even be considered the first trans portrait in art history, though no such category existed at the time. Erauso used a variety of male names (Francisco de Loyola, Juan Arriola, Alonso Díaz Ramírez de Guzmán... and Antonio) and through military achievement received a Papal Bull allowing them to 'wear men's garments'. They thus emerge as a local ancestor (as opposed to the dominant North American narratives) of gender transition practices in the Basque Country and Spain. Like a spectre, Erauso's portrait suspends the medical and legislative taxonomy that we have used to classify sexuality and gender since the

nineteenth century. It forces us out of our habitual interpretative framework and opens possibilities for imagining other, still invisible genealogies.

Erauso was a character made of shadows, as the portrait depicts. Their implication in the genocide of the Mapuches make the 'ensign nun' an uncomfortable figure in trans history. Erauso was a colonial traveller typical of their social class: a 'good' Christian, a good soldier, a good servant of the Crown, but above all a servant to self and personal interests. Their memoirs recount a series of duels, prison sentences, illnesses, injuries, wagers, games and murders. Erauso portrays themselves as a ruffian aristocrat who ends up fighting and killing someone in every city they visit. 'I killed, I wounded, I did harm', Erauso confesses. In patriarchal societies (from the baroque to the modern-day), colonial masculinity is defined by the use of violence. It is men who can wield weapons and kill; *masculinizing* gives one licence to *do harm*. So, Erauso recounts brawls and murders to provide social evidence of masculinity. Erauso was no heretic, no victim, and certainly no activist.

For this reason, the exhibit takes shape in the tension between criticism of the dominant historical narrative, its omissions and the impossibility of reconstructing a heroic history for minorities of sexuality, gender or race. It is not possible to present a univocal or pure genealogy of women, homosexuals or trans people – as identarian historiography sometimes seeks to do – who have been rescued out of historical obscurity to a new position as icons in a stable narrative of power. The history of resistance is also a dirty, melancholic, bastardized, sometimes pathetic or even bitterly nostalgic saga of errors, betrayals, opportunism and battles for survival. This erased, rewritten and overwritten history cannot be understood by simply bringing it into the light. Accordingly, the aesthetics of the exhibit are *chiaroscuro*, like Erauso's portrait.

The exhibition accentuates this blurry aspect of history and the present, placing the urgency of the question before the certainty of identification. Who is represented? Who represents? What is outside the frame of representation? Can we learn to look at a human body without assigning gender? What happens to the lives of those who are not or cannot be represented? In what time are we living? What is the time of a life? Can a life be outside its time? Can another time give life to a life which could not exist in its time?

The exhibition is set up as an analogue-digital portrait gallery in which Erauso (the historical portraits from 1625-28, and the copy from 1900, and the new collective portrait created for the exhibit) can be found alongside some of Cabello/Carceller's previous works, tracing a series of political and emotional equivalences and differences across generations.

The exhibition chronology is both inverted – starting with works from 2016 and 2020 and ending with Erauso's 1625-28 portrait – and fractal. From the colonial-baroque past to our postcolonial, techno-baroque 'present', times are dislocated, crossed and overlapped. The exhibition space takes the visitor through transitions and processes that neither start at femininity and end in masculinity (or vice versa) nor begin in the past and end in the present (or vice versa). Rather, they branch off in unexpected directions and end by announcing another epistemology, another way of seeing and thinking about bodies, and a subjectivity that surpasses the binaries of gender, sex, race or nationality.

The exhibition begins with two video installations, inviting the viewers to participate in an exercise intended to deconstruct ordinary ways of understanding the differences between theory and practice, art and politics. In *Movements for a Solo Demonstration* (2020), a non-binary person transforms a banner with Spinoza's maxim, 'we do not know what a body can do', into a skirt, a shawl and a veil. The banner, made of delicate, translucent chiffon, debunks the strength of ideology and underscores the vulnerability of bodies that explore their potential by resisting the norm.

On the other end of the room, the video installation *Dancing Gender Trouble* (2014-15) is the public presentation of the results of two collective workshops (carried out in Mexico City and Madrid) that converts Judith Butler's iconic queer feminism text from the 1990s into body movement. The video shows the transformation of political philosophy into choreography. It creates an improvised, antipatriarchal and antiracist landscape where the text can be 'seen' and bodies can be 'read' in unexpected ways. Dancing is another way of reading. Being in front of the camera is a form of political protest.

To this end, we go through the exhibition as if it were a body carrying out the functions of absorption, digestion, assimilation, transformation and expulsion. The body here is not understood as a natural organism, but a historical and political archive, both individual and collective, built from a series of images, sounds, texts, techniques and rituals. Along the corridor that is covered in thick felt curtains are side openings – alluding to the opacity of history and the cracks we can find and use to access new meanings. The first opening

lead to an encounter with the installation of the photographs and descriptions cards comprising *Archive: Drag Models* (2007-ongoing). This series contains 17 portraits taken in different cities across Europe, in which bodies assigned female gender at birth adopt archetypal poses from male images of masculinity in twentieth-century cinema. They mimic and therefore displace the likes of Marlon Brando, James Dean, Brad Pitt or Ryan Gosling. Each portrait is accompanied by images of the cities where the photographed subjects live and a written account in which some of them discuss their reasons for choosing that particular archetype or character. The series shows how cinema operated in the twentieth century as what Teresa de Lauretis calls a 'gender technology' capable of establishing normative models for subjectivization. The critical friction in this piece stems from the confrontation of these canonical visual languages and the gesture protocols they suggest with the memory, desire and gestures of female, lesbian, non-binary and trans bodies posing for the camera. *Archive: Drag Models* is also an initiation into the subversive possibilities of the aesthetics of reception, which depend on the capacity of the *minor subjects* of history to embody the dominant canons in a dissident way. The Indian theorist Homi Bhabha calls this process 'failed colonial mimicry': the practice by which colonized and subaltern peoples or minorities of gender, sexuality or race, adopt the dominant codes of power while simultaneously critiquing and sublimating them. It creates a sort of dual vision that reveals the ambivalence of power and its theatrical nature, thereby thwarting its authority.⁴

Further along the corridor, through another side opening, visitors can access the installation *Lost in Transition, a performative poem* (2016), comprised of eight videos and one poem. The project was created (as is being done now at Azkuna Zentroa) by transforming the exhibition space of the Valencian Institute for Modern Art (IVAM) into a film set. Cabello/Carceller published a casting call stating 'Wanted: Trans, drag, genderfluid, genderqueer, queer, agender people to participate in a simple filmed performance. All ages welcome.' This call gave rise to an encounter with sixteen participants. In a parody of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the artists used a staircase between two exhibit spaces as an improvised catwalk where the participants displayed the codes of gender or sexual difference that are subjected to vigilance and social discipline. In this space between private performance and public event, each moving body acquires the dimension of a political sculpture. As an external echo, the installation features a video-portrait of Saray, a trans woman whose skin appears as a historical landscape made of accumulated marks of received violence, but also of the signs of resistance and affirmation. It is this background that enables all the other bodies in the installation to exist and acquire political coherence.

From this gallery of contemporary non-binary portraits, we access a documentary space in which the artists display the historical elements relating to Erauso's mysterious portrait and the surprising tales of their adventures in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Only then we encounter the Cabello/Carceller piece *A Voice for Erauso: An epilogue for trans time* (2021) - produced with (and in) Azkuna Zentroa – Alhóndiga Bilbao in Bilbao, with the collaboration of Doxa Producciones for camera work and Alberto sin Patrón for costume design. The piece is a new portrait of Erauso emerging from the confrontation of three trans and non-binary people (Tino de Carlos, Lewin Lerbours and Bambi) with the baroque painting. They speak to this historical spectre, who answers through the portrait using the voice and music of the artist Mursego (Maite Arroitauregi). The installation functions as a time machine through which the erased faces and voices of the past can encounter other bodies, other places and other languages. 'Call me Antonio', replies Erauso through the voice of Mursego. 'I was a gender that will never wear out, that does not remain captured; I was what many of you would have liked to be.' In these two video screens, we find ourselves in the complex, dynamic, provisional time of history in the very process of being constructed. This piece is also a multifaceted self-portrait: Cabello/Carceller, Tino de Carlos, Lewin Lerbours and Bambi contemplate themselves in Erauso's portrait as if it were a quantum mirror distorted by time and they see in it a punk, non-binary version of our own collective present.

The notion of 'temporal drag'⁵ or 'temporal transvestism', developed by Elizabeth Freeman and Rebecca Schneider to understand the processes by which sexual and gender minorities reappropriate obsolete objects and meanings from industrial capitalism, seems more appropriate than the concept of gender transvestism for explaining the displacements that occur in the series of works leading up to Erauso, including the collective confrontation with their portrait. Mimicking the emblematic codes of masculinity creates not only gender transgression but an unstoppable process of temporal transgression: 'a disruptive anachronism.'⁶

Only after having seen *A Voice for Erauso: An epilogue for trans time* do we come to a room with two oil paintings: the original portrait by Juan van der Hamen in 1625-28 and a copy of it from 1900 by Luis Gómez de Arce. Comparing the original and the copy side by side underscores how Erauso has endured in the history of the modern Spanish state, while also manifesting the impossibility of 'seeing' Erauso's difference from within the modern binary epistemology. What about us, today? Can we see Erauso differently? If so, how does this way of looking at history transform our way of seeing in the present? Who are the Erasos of today that we cannot see or do not know how to picture?

At the end of the room, as a way of making this complexity our own, we find a petition drafted by the artists and the curator asking the Donostia city council to change the name of Catalina de Erauso Street to Antonio/Catalina de Erauso Street. This request expands the scope of the exhibition beyond the gallery space and into the urban political geography by questioning the patriarchal and binary norms that govern the city's nomenclature.

The exhibition comes to a close 'post-ironically' with *Self-portrait as a fountain* (2001), a photograph – captured from behind and reflected in a dirty mirror – in which the artists occupy a male bathroom, posing as if they were peeing standing up: a choreography politically coded as male. In a recontextualized double reference to Duchamp's urinal (1917) as gender normative 'ready-made' and Bruce Nauman's *Self-portrait as a fountain* (1967), Cabello/Carceller critique the self-referential positioning of male artists in art history and in cities, and invite us to continue doing this series of gender and sexual displacements, mimicry and subversions outside the exhibition.

Paul B. Preciado

- 1 Jota Mombaça, "The Present is not enough", HAU Manifesto Projects, Berlin, 2019.
- 2 Kathy Acker, *Bodies of Work. Essays*. Serpent's Tail, London and New York, 1997, p. 11.
- 3 Carla Lonzi, *Let's spit on Hegel*, 1970.
- 4 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- 5 On 'temporal drag' see Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010; Rebecca Schneider, "Remimesis: Feminism, Theatricality, and Acts of Temporal Drag, directed conference in ReAct: Feminism, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 22-25. January 2009.
- 6 Mathias Danbolt, "Disruptive Anachronisms: Feeling Historical with N.O. Body", in Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, *Temporal Drag*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2011, pp. 1982-1990.



Allan as Billy Elliot, 2016 (from the series Archive: Drag Models, 2007-ongoing)