

# Interview with Esther Ferrer

## "I'm a Feminist with a capital F"

JOSÉ ÁNGEL ARTETXE \*

As part of the ZAJ group, as well as on her own, Esther Ferrer has taken performance art all over the world. The presence of the body and the self-portrait characterise other aspects of her work, which is comprised of everything from performances, such as *Íntimo y personal* [Private and Personal] (1990), to series such as *El libro del sexo* [The Book of Sex], *Autorretrato en el tiempo* [Self-Portrait in Time] and *El libro de las manos* [The Book of Hands].

She returned to her birthplace, San Sebastián, last summer, to teach at Arteleku, the practical seminar: *A vueltas con la performance* [Another Look at Performance Art], and we met up with her there.

**You first took part in a ZAJ concert at the Museo de San Telmo, in your home city, in 1967, at the height of Franco's dictatorship, and you were all reported to the police. Now, after being awarded the National Visual Arts Prize 2008, that museum –which is currently being expanded, after decades of slumber– wants to get hold of one of your pieces.**

I wasn't aware that the Museo de San Telmo had a contemporary art collection, nor that it was interested in purchasing works. I thought its collection was made up only by donations. If they want to buy one of my pieces, that's fine; all they have to do is get in touch with the galleries with which I work. Perhaps, if they did this, they might feed my narcissism, causing my ego to swell up like a balloon, because I was born in San Sebastián at a time when the Artistic Association of Guipúzcoa, to which I belonged, was based in premises loaned by the museum. I don't know if it's still there.

**In their work, some painters find that painting and engraving blend together, to the extent that they cannot be told apart. In your case,**

**one feels that performance art, objectual and installation work, public space works, and "artistic interventions", such as El Prado, which you conducted in Vitoria, all form part of a continuum.**

There are several "lines", or directions, in my work, which I have been following for many years: performance art, body work, installations, works based on prime numbers, etc. However, they all share the element of time, which is something that passes and transforms us. When I work on my self-portraits, such as *Autorretrato en el tiempo*, it is almost the same as when I produce a prime numbers piece, where I count and count, and time passes through me as I speak. They are like seconds of my life which travel through that infinite space where prime numbers evolve. Installations feature space as well, of course, but also objects and time, which play a part as we travel through them, visualising and even penetrating them.

Continuity is a strange thing in a person's life: one day you're active, and other times you're passive; sometimes you're happy and others you're sad, and so on. Creativity, in my case, follows the direction of my fluctuating moods, my worries, the things that scare me; it evolves alongside them. From the outside, my work probably seems very varied and polymorphous, and this is an accurate perception, as there are many Esthers in Esther Ferrer, all of whom express themselves in different ways.

**You have said that you began with your head and your genitalia. Both the body and the idea of self-portrait are present in your work, to the extent that they almost define it.**

From that perspective, you're right. It always seems that the head and genitalia are the essential elements of a body, but I don't feel this way—for me, everything is essential in the body. Don't you think,



in fact, that my work would have been more greatly “defined” if I had begun with the hand, which, ultimately, is the part of the body which signs things, and which contains the fingerprints which identify, beyond any doubt, a person?

The truth is that when I began this work I didn’t have any “personalising” intention; although it was my own body, it was just a body, really. Any body would have served the purpose, but, by using my own, I had greater freedom. At the beginning I asked friends to let me take photographs of them, but this entailed lots of problems, as nobody likes to see their face or genitalia cut, sewn up, etc. So I decided to do it with my own body; perhaps my work would have been different if I had used someone else’s body, but it’s too late to know now. In any case, I think it was the right decision.

#### What about maths?

I don’t know much about maths, just what I was taught in secondary school. I like handwriting, which includes numbers; I like them, and I don’t really know why, as I am useless at adding up. I actually began working with prime numbers in order to move away from an aesthetics which defined my string installation projects, which I began producing in 1974. The projects seemed increasingly “pretty”. One day I realised that, by following the discipline of numbers, I would find a way to liberate myself, and it so happened that I dreamt about the series of prime numbers, and thought, why not? So I began to work with them because they “resonate” in my head, transporting me to a different world, which may be infinite or non-infinite. And they remove me from this *terre à terre* life we all have. In any case, I am convinced that prime numbers are “cosmic numbers” which play a role in the mystery that it is the universe. Look, as you move through the series, the space between a prime number and the next increases; it is as if they expanded, like the universe itself.

#### Creativity and pleasure come together, conditioned by nothing but oneself, “the same as Anarchism”, you have written.

Yes, for me, creation is the only space of freedom I know; at the risk of repeating myself, its limits are defined only by my own limitations. However, it does give rise to many intellectual problems. I often wonder whether or not what I do serves anyone other than me, and whether I should carry on. Art, if we are to call it that, transports me to a world where I feel free. When I work I don’t think about anything else at all; first of all I simply reflect on whether the idea seems valid or not, and then I deal with the technical issues and the production of the work, but it is as if I were somewhere else. If the result seems right, I truly do not care about what people say about my work, or about the way they interpret it. I also believe that all interpretations, even the negative ones, are valid, and have as much or as little weight as my own.

**The last few years have seen a revitalisation of performance**

**ESTHER FERRER** in Arteleku, 2009. San Sebastián.

Photos: Aitor Bengoetxea (Arteleku\_tv). Creative Commons Licence. R: Courtesy: Arteleku.



*Recorrer un cuadrado con sillas*, 1990. Performance at the Polyphonix Festival, CIPM, Marseille. Photo: Jean-Marc de Samie. Courtesy: Galería Àngels Barcelona

**art. You are now teaching a seminar at Arteleku where, among other things, you'll be discussing whether or not it can be taught as a specific subject.**

That is one of the issues to be debated during this seminar. I believe, and this is only my opinion, that performance is not something one can teach. When I teach a seminar "on performance", I don't teach students how to plan them, but how to invent them, in the same way as we do; to help them analyse what they have done, why they have done it and whether or not they have succeeded in reaching their objectives. In other words, to enable them to determine, ultimately, whether or not performance interests them, and whether or not it is something that they would want to do professionally, if so, they can invent their own way of going about it. I tend to repeat myself a lot, but, once again, I will say that performance is the "open opus" par excellence; that everything can be part of it; that there is no single theory on performance, but many different ones; that there is no single definition of it, but many –the more the better–, and that each person should choose his or her own. I love the idea of creating an Art which is hard to define. However, if they want to teach it as a subject at universities and Fine Arts schools, that's fine, but I'll never do it.

**Can that discipline be taught? Is it possible to train disciples?**

I think I have already answered that question, but I will add that nothing is further from my intentions than setting a trend; it would be horrifying, given the way I feel about it.

**You have previously said that you have never produced feminist art. What is your assessment of feminism in the field of performance?**

I repeat, once again, that I am A FEMINIST, with capital letters, 24/7, i.e. my whole life. But I don't systematically produce feminist art. When I work, in general, I don't think about whether or not I am producing

feminist art, except on certain occasions. For example, when something happens which makes me want to scream, or protest, it comes out in the shape of a work, which may or may not be artistic—it does not matter. And yes, as it is the consequence of an event which goes against women's freedom, it can be described as feminist, which is great. But I can also act in regards to any other type of exploitation or injustice; it does not necessarily have to be related to women. To be a feminist means fighting for freedom, everyone's freedom, both men and women's. What happens today is that, despite everything which has been achieved thanks to the struggle of the suffragettes and the feminists, women find themselves more likely to be exploited, humiliated and deprived of their rights.

To give you a more specific answer, feminism has caused 20<sup>th</sup>-century art to evolve. This is not only as a result of the reinterpretation it has conducted, thanks to feminists critics, academics and intellectuals, of the History of Art in general, and, more concretely, to the role played by women in this field. In my opinion, this has taught us a lot about the criteria, rules and limitations imposed on us. In addition, feminism has introduced in the field of artistic practice issues which had been seen as non-artistic, as well as ways of thinking which are free from sexist constraints. On occasion, feminism has explored "old" issues in a new way, offering a new vision of beauty and the body, both male and female, sexuality, applied to lesbianism, homosexuality and heterosexuality, motherhood, etc. It has introduced new methods, and even legitimised techniques which had been disregarded as "feminist"; it has dismantled many ideological taboos, expanding the experimental field of art in a diverse and unique way, offering, likewise, a diverse interpretation of feminism. And, undoubtedly, this also influences the field of performance.

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