

Esther Ferrer. Interview for Roskilde

It's all about looking – Entrevista con Marianne Bech , directora del Museet for Samtidskunst (Museum of Contemporary Art) Roskilde (Denmark) - Entrevista realizada para el catálogo de la exposición personal de Esther Ferrer en el citado Museo en Septiembre/febrero 2001.

M.B.: Looking at the works you will be showing at this exhibition, do you see a chain of connections going back, perhaps indirectly, to your first years with the ZAJ group?

E.F.: When I began working with ZAJ in 1967, it was because we were all already on the same path at this time. My work as a visual artist was already defined when I found ZAJ. In fact, each of us was working completely independently. Certainly there was mutual influence, but I think this was unconscious. The fact that we had the same artistic preferences, derived from Duchamp and Cage, among others, was of course a determining factor for our meeting, and as a result of this, we could work together. But our pieces were always signed by one person, one author. Our acciones, were the products of individuals, as were our visual works. At the moment when we presented a "concert" (at this time, for various reasons, we called our programs "concerts") each of us decided certain acciones to do, and then we put together the program.

In reality, when I joined ZAJ, I was already thinking about the possibility of doing ephemeral work – work that would leave no traces except in the memories of those who saw it. This was a period when I began to plan ephemeral installations with thread. So the idea of performance, which is even more ephemeral, appealed to me very much. At this time in Spain, often not even photographers and journalists were present at performances.

M.B.: Does the self-portrait interest you as a genre in art history?

E.F. : I have always loved looking at the self-portraits of other artists, but I think more for psychological than for artistic reasons. One thing has always amused me when I see an exhibition of any period of an artist who did self-portraits, is to observe whether the techniques change, and how.

Is there a different sense of color in the self-portrait? How does the subject of the painting condition the way the artist does it? For the photographed self-portraits, I especially like the *"Multiple Self-Portrait"* that Waclaw Szpakowski photographed with mirrors in 1912, a technique followed by others later. One of these others was Marcel Duchamp, whose photo of "Rose Sélavy" I like very much too. This for me is really a self-portrait, even though it was Man Ray who took it.

M.B. The self-portraits you will be showing in Roskilde seem to refer to time and changeability, but also – in spite of the expanded use of time – to the fact that "I am seeing you, and you are seeing me." But we do not actually see each other. There seems to be the same kind of situation as in performances – a distance in the mind between the performer and the audience, in spite of the intense closeness. A special kind of attentiveness? I would also like to know how you work with time and duration in your works.

E.F.: In reality, it is simply the act of looking that interests me, the act of looking and seeing, others looking at me, me looking at others. For me, first of all, there is an intimate looking, a looking directed at oneself.

There is also looking at the world, at people, at things, but the intimate looking is always the first. The outside comes later. Doing performances has led me to view others very differently. I look at someone, the person looks at me, and suddenly there are many questions, many interrogations, beginning with the simplest but the most fundamental ones in the whole realm of performance: Who is the viewer of whom? Is there only one viewer? Is there a face-to-face, I facing someone else, and this person facing me? Or are there simply two views that somehow cross one another?

This tension of looking, the complicity of looking, is interesting for me, especially when prolonged in time. In my performances I consider time to be raw material, and in fact it is – inseparable from the other essential elements, space and presence. When I began the self-portraits, they were not really self-portraits. I wanted to work photographically with all the parts of the body. I began to ask friends if they would loan me their bodies. I wanted to work with *the body*, not necessarily *my body*. I didn't want to be too concerned with *me*.

But that became difficult, because I was going to cut, sew, cover up photos of faces and body parts, and the people who I asked to be the model were reticent, sometimes had rather superstitious reactions. I guess it reminded them of voodoo dolls or something. So I decided I had to do this project with my own body, my own head, my own sexual organ, and so forth. I was conscious that this was going to change my way of working, and above all, that it was going to change the interpretation that the viewer could have of my work, especially in light of the fact that I happen to be an identical twin. The interpretations (psychoanalytic and otherwise) of my self-portraits are endless, and all are correct as far as I am concerned. I am pleased to have done the series with my body, and I am especially with the "Autoportrait dans le temps." It would be very difficult to take a new photo of someone's face at five-year intervals and so on.

You know, the self-portraits are in a way like the performances. A face on the wall looks at the gallery visitor and the gallery visitor looks at the face on the wall. That's like the performer who looks at the audience who looks at the performer. It's all about looking.

M.B.: What considerations lie behind your choice of the everyday objects and materials you are using in your installations and performances? And have your reflections about these objects and materials changed throughout the years?

E.F.: In our acciones we always used everyday objects, things we could find wherever we went. For my part I can say that what I love the most is to do a performance without any object, uniquely with my body, my presence. That doesn't mean that all my performances are like that. Not at all. But that is what I prefer. When I do use objects, they are always "poor," they cost very little. That's something I really stick to, except on rare occasions. On the other hand, when I make installations, one very important thing is the ephemeral quality. Each time an installation is reinstalled, it is different, even though it is the same. The idea is the same, but the materials are completely transformed, and the meaning of the work may be influenced by these transformations. Chairs, envelopes, metal scraps, toys, cabbages, or other objects are replaced and transformed each time, because it is never possible to find exactly the same chairs and envelopes and whatever. That is very good. Everything is transformed. As in life. Another thing I like is the idea that such elements, once the installation closes, return to their own "everyday life," fulfilling once again the functions they were intended to fulfill.

M.B.: There seems to be a clear relationship between your way of thinking and that of John Cage. I am here referring to Cage's special use of the concept silence – where he prefers the surrounding sound of everyday life and perceives it as a musical instrument. He structures and frames these sounds by using chance operations such as tossing coins, as well as the old Chinese book of wisdom the I Ching, to abandon control of the will and to avoid the predictable.

E.F.: In fact, the first thing I learned from Cage was basically just to listen to the sounds of the world. Cage changed my way of listening, and not only to music. My work generally develops within "a silence full of noise." (Cage taught us in this way that true silence does not exist.) Noise may be accidental or not. It pleases me simply to place a rhythm on the time that passes, on the time of some acción, which is also the time of my life, and of the lives of everyone else present. I like to make others conscious that we are passing the time of our lives together. Time is flowing by, time that will never come back. I like to mark this time by means of a non-accidental sound element: a voice counting the passing minutes, for example, or something else.

Sometimes a performance implies a particular sound or noise, and then the sound can be an object from daily life, a folding chair, a brick, a series of little bells, blowing my nose, sirens, megaphones, eggs, whatever: noises and sounds, individual or mixed, often contaminating one another. I think it was Eric Satie who said "en art rien est pûr." Nothing is pure in art.

Another thing I learned from Cage is that music, and consequently art in general, is not necessarily an expression of emotions and passions. Perhaps it was that which led me to work with the prime numbers (a series theoretically aleatory), to want to eliminate, as much as possible, the subjective element in my work with thread. My desire to eliminate subjective choices has rarely taken the form of using chance systems, however. If I remember correctly, I have only two performances where the structure of the work is made by chance.

M.B.: You seem to be using everyday objects (objets trouvés) in the sense of Duchamp, but as I see it, you do this within a tight performance structure. In regard to installations, your experiments with architecture and prime numbers seem to be related to music and to the composition of a score. Do you see a relationship? How important is change and unpredictability?

E.F.: I like everyday objects and unstructured, absurd situations. Sometimes I say that my work is "a special kind of minimalism, based on the rigor of the absurd," and I like structured things as well, but structured things may be also absurd. I structure my performances, especially the time, a very important element in my performances, in my installations, in my photos, everywhere). The time passes, transforms, changes things, changes people. That is clearly expressed in "Autoportrait dans le temps", and in almost all my performances. Within a performance there are many sorts of time: chronological time, clock time, psychological time (my psychology and that of others), the performance time itself, and so on. The fact that there is a strong structure in my performances allows me to improvise something if I feel like it when I am performing. For me, performance transforms itself on site. I conceive it, I organize it, I write it, I even make what I call "scores." They aren't rigid scores in a musical sense, but I call them "scores," because for me that's what they are, though afterwards, they sometimes become completely modified, become something else, maybe something more important than the original "score." This is the unpredictable element that makes performance so close to everyday life, anchors it in the real, rather than in fiction or illusion. Sometimes the change is the result of an accident, an accident that perhaps transforms the work. But as Cage always said, "the accident is an integral part of the work."

M.B.: Have musicians ever used your prime number installations as a score for a piece of music?

E.F.: The only composer I know who has composed a piece with the prime number series is my husband Tom Johnson. He has written many things logical sequences and mathematical structures, but he always said that the prime number series was too chaotic for him. Then one day he changed his mind and wrote "Eratosthenes' Sieve," which he dedicated to me.