

Firmas invitadas

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FEMINISM(S) AND SPACE: APPROACHES TO CATALAN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL AND PERFORMANCE ART

FEMINISMO(S) Y ESPACIO: APROXIMACIONES A LAS ARTES VISUALES Y A LA PERFORMANCE CATALANA CONTEMPORÁNEA

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which space, understood as a place where dominant (hetero)normative values are enforced and visual regimes unfold, is resignified in the work of three contemporary Catalan artists: Eulàlia Valldosera, Olga Diego and Alicia Framis. The text sets the scene back in the North America of the 1960s and the emergence of feminist art to move then to the Spanish and Catalan contexts, exploring the initial reluctance in its reception, as well as its ghostly traces, discontinuities and absences. A selection of photographic series, installations and performances by these artists is then analysed in order to show how their feminist spatial interventions deconstruct systems of power. My analysis draws on a range of feminist theories, including Laura Mulvey's notion of the male gaze, Paul B. Preciado's analysis of the production of gender and sexual identity and Elisabeth Wilson's study of the gendering of urban spaces.

Keywords: feminism, spatiality, Eulàlia Valldosera, Olga Diego, Alicia Framis

RESUMEN

En este artículo se explora la reconfiguración del espacio, entendido como un lugar donde se imponen valores (hetero)normativos dominantes y se despliegan regímenes visuales, en la obra de tres artistas contemporáneas: Eulàlia Valldosera, Olga Diego y Alicia Framis. El texto sitúa la escena en la Norteamérica de los años sesenta y la emergencia del arte feminista para luego explorar el contexto español y catalán, anotando las reticencias iniciales a su recepción, así como sus huellas invisibles, discontinuidades y ausencias. Se analiza, a continuación, una selección de series fotográficas, instalaciones y performances de estas artistas para mostrar cómo sus intervenciones feministas en el espacio desconstruyen sistemas de poder. Mi análisis se basa en varias teorías feministas, como la noción de la mirada masculina de Laura Mulvey, el análisis sobre la producción del género y la identidad sexual

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de Paul B. Preciado y las relaciones de género que se establecen en los espacios urbanos de Elisabeth Wilson.

Palabras clave: feminismo, espacio, Eulàlia Valldosera, Olga Diego, Alicia Framis

1. Introduction: Feminist Art in Context, from the North American Artistic Production of the 1960s to Catalan Contemporary Visual and Performance Culture

The feminist art movement emerged in North America in the 1960s, at a time of significant social, political, and cultural upheaval. Dissatisfied with a predominantly male artistic milieu where women's views, lives and experiences were either underrepresented or simply portrayed through a male lens, feminist artists sought to redress this imbalance by actively changing established means of art production and its perception. They began exploring with procedures and materials (embroidery, needlework, textiles and ceramics) identified with "the domestic, the decorative, the utilitarian, the dexterous – that is with what patriarchal logic negatively characterises as quintessentially 'feminine'" (Pollock, 1999, p. 25). A prime example of this is Judy Chicago's ground-breaking installation *The Dinner Party* (1970), a ceremonial dinner table consisting of 39 place settings to commemorate mythical and historical female figures. Their names were embroidered on each of the runners and the painted porcelain plates featured vulvar forms. Chicago's celebratory installation drew attention to the ways in which women have been written out of the canons of history and the arts; she did so by relocating craftwork, traditionally associated with domesticity, into a male-dominated realm. Clearly, feminists understood that to carve out a place in the world of art, women had to be dislodged from the constraints of the home. This viewpoint had already been vigorously enounced a year earlier by the New York based artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her 1969 manifesto *Maintenance Art. Proposal for an Exhibition. 'CARE'*, where her radical practice-based proposal consisted of performing domestic tasks at an art gallery:

I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother (random order).
 I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I 'do' Art.
 Now, I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them as Art.
 ...
 My working will be the work. (1969, p. 3)

Ukeles's claim of art as a process coupled with her critique to the social, political, and economic discourses that bind women to the home, childrearing, and housework is also illustrative of the ways in which 1970s feminist artists were incorporating performative and body-based means of expression to interrogate art/life, nature/culture and public/private dichotomies. She performed her commitment to feminist ideals in many public actions. This attitude was

commonplace among women artists in the United States who articulated their place of enunciation, adherence and dialogue with feminist claims. In the same vein, art historians and critics, such as Griselda Pollock in the United Kingdom, developed theoretical approaches to analyse and contextualise this emerging corpus of artworks, ultimately contributing to their visibility by situating them ideologically, historically, culturally and spatially. Over the decades, feminist art and theory have been subject to several shifts, or waves, in line with specific sociopolitical contexts. In fact, nowadays, we no longer speak of feminism but feminisms.

As feminist art and theory gathered momentum in the Western World, Spain was still under Franco's rule (1939-75). However, in the course of the 1960s, major cracks had begun to appear in this authoritarian regime in the form of expanding opposition groups and growing social unrest. Artists across the country actively participated in the challenging of the regime, experimenting with new languages and creative practices to question the existing system. Nonetheless, these radical and innovative approaches remained largely marginalised due to redolent traditional views on cultural production which favoured the art object over more ephemeral forms of art. In spite of this rather hostile environment, practitioners continued to pursue a politically laden agenda and, by the mid-1970s, women artists such as Esther Ferrer, Fina Miralles and Eugènia Balcells, were engaging with questions of gender inequality in their video art, performances and interventions in public spaces. Despite the relevance of their claims, feminism in Spain experienced institutional neglect and a generalised lack of recognition as an effective theoretical system in intellectual circles. This phenomenon was exacerbated by the boom of painting in the 1980s which would contribute to the pushing of experimental art forms further to the limits of what was considered to be normative aesthetics. In fact, the critics and institution's rejection of feminism extended to the artists themselves, who avoided identification with it; that is, with the exception of Ferrer, who was first in overtly claiming to be a feminist. As Rocío de la Villa notes:

[...] al final de los años ochenta, generalmente las artistas en sus declaraciones en los medios se empeñaban en desligar su obra de su autoría, biográficamente condicionada por su género, rechazando la etiqueta femenina, que todavía percibían como desencadenante de su posible segregación y marginación en el medio artístico (2013, p. 265)

Misgivings about the term continued well into the early noughties, causing a considerable fissure in the development of an autochthonous corpus of feminist theoretical approaches. Patricia Mayayo observes how this chasm conditioned artists to look beyond the national context:

[...] la historia reciente de la relación entre el arte y los feminismos en España parece haberse construido sobre la base de una fractura generacional; muchas artistas y críticas feministas nacidas después de los años sesenta crecieron huérfanas de modelos propios, con la mirada puesta en textos y debates importados del mundo anglosajón. (2013, p. 33)

As a matter of fact, attitudes towards feminism would not change until the end of the twentieth century, when women artists began to embrace it more openly: “con el paso a la década de los noventa se produjo la impresión de una profunda renovación generacional. Por primera vez, las artistas españolas se expresaban sin cortapisas, creando desde su condición sexual y de género” (de la Villa, 2013, p. 267). In spite of this significant shift, engagement with feminist ideology would take longer to seep into the domain of art criticism and cultural institutions, mainly due to a legacy of depoliticisation of discourse during the Transition coupled with the art’s market favouring of more commercial genres in its effort to bring Spanish art in line with international trends (Mayayo, 2013, p. 34). The same is also true for Catalonia, one of the country’s hubs of experimental and conceptual practices, where to speak of an artist with a deliberate feminist agenda in the 1980s and 1990s certainly was a thorny subject matter. In the words of Patricia Mayayo:

En todo este proceso de revisión del papel de la vanguardia experimental en el arte reciente de Cataluña, nos encontramos —una vez más— con una omisión llamativa: a pesar de la fecunda aportación que hicieron muchas mujeres artistas catalanas al conceptualismo y de las interesantes relaciones que se establecieron [...] entre el arte y el feminismo, la perspectiva feminista ha sido ignorada por la crítica. (2013, p. 26)

Accounting for the void in feminist discourse in Spanish art, historiography was at the very core of the *Genealogías en el arte español: 1960-2010* project, an exhibition held at the Museo Contemporáneo de Arte de Castilla y León (MUSAC) in 2013. In the edited collection of essays that accompanied the exhibition, Mayayo notes the invaluable work of art critics and curators, such as Pilar Parcerisas, whose writings and curatorship have endeavoured to situate Catalan Avant-garde artists in relation to a broader international context. However, she identifies a bias towards analysis of the sociopolitical specificities of Catalan conceptualism to the detriment of its feminist concerns (2013, p. 26).

The contribution of *Genealogías* to the understating and location of feminism within the Spanish and Catalan context stands out for its thorough analysis of the social, political, ideological, and cultural conditions which led to the mistrust of feminism as a place of enunciation and as an effective theoretical tool for cultural analysis. In her article, Mayayo acknowledges the Catalan artist Eulàlia Valldosera as part of “la primera hornada numéricamente significativa de artistas con un programa feminista explícito y consciente” (2013, p. 119). Critical approaches to the work of Valldosera are worthy of attention because they are illustrative of the ambiguities that the term feminism had garnered in Spain. Her artwork undoubtedly explores the gendering of space and questions the representation of women’s bodies in visual culture. Furthermore, her processual, conceptual, and formal techniques are in line with those deployed by Spanish feminist artists of the 1970s and 1980s, however, it would take more than two decades for art historians and critics to begin to speak about her practice as feminist. In an interview to Daniel Gasol, Valldosera alings her work to one of the main tenets of Second Wave

Feminism by stating: “[p]arto de la premisa que ‘lo personal es político’ que se expande ahora al terreno de lo social, entiendo este como un tejido donde las relaciones laborales y los intercambios personales urden tramas que afectan nuestra identidad” (2010: n.p). However, in her analysis of the participatory installation *Dependences*, Mar Villaespesa is reluctant to assert Valldosera’s feminism and notes how her “oeuvre does not start primarily from these critical theories” (2009, p. 118), even though the art critic and curator draws on this corpus of feminist theory to frame her approach.

In what follows, I examine the construction and re-inscription of space in a selection of the work of multidisciplinary artists Eulàlia Valldosera (Vilafranca del Penedès, 1963), Olga Diego (Alacant, 1969), and Alicia Framis (Mataró, 1967). Born in the same decade, their artistic output is illustrative of some of the myriad ways in which contemporary practitioners formulate and engage with feminist issues. These women also share an interest in the socially, politically and culturally constructed body and its relation to and subversion of space. Here, space is understood as the enabling place for the transmission of dominant values as well as the loci for visual strategies that replicate patriarchy’s patterns of dominance. My aim is to demonstrate how their feminist spatial interventions deconstruct systems of power. In my view, to address how space is represented, used and lived, entails engagement with the visual relations that unfold in spatial interactions. Therefore, the conceptual thread that links my study of these three artists is the ways in which the gaze is deployed spatially in social, gender, scientific and racial discourses. I draw on a broad range of feminist theories to support my readings. The first section examines Valldosera’s re-figuration of the female nude in her early corpus of photography by drawing on Laura Mulvey’s (1973) notion of the male gaze and its grounding on spatial relations. My analysis of her rendering of the female form is based on critical analyses of the nude by Lynda Nead (2001) and Amelia Jones (2012). The following section focuses on degendering spaces and the subversion of scientific methods of observation, categorisation and normalisation of bodies in the work of Diego with reference to the writings on the production of gender and sexual identity by Paul B. Preciado (2008). The article ends with an exploration of Framis’s designs of women’s protective clothing and her spatial interventions in public spaces as a means to empower women and communities. Here, I read the gendering of the urban space through Elisabeth Wilson’s (1992) lens.

2. Re-inscribing Masculine Spaces: Eulàlia Valldosera’s early 1990s photographic series

In 1991, Eulàlia Valldosera exhibited her multimedia installation and performance *The Navel of the World* at the Galeria Antoni Estrany in Barcelona. Originally conceived when she lived in the Netherlands and described by the artist as a transition “from the brush to the broom” (Borja-Villel and Mayo, 2009, p. 13), *Navel* consisted of a large canvas laid out on the gallery floor and dotted

with cigarette butts which the artist used to recreate the figure of a woman's trunk (Figure 1). The public performance entailed the sweeping of the butts with a besom; an action designed to paint – with the dragged ashes – multiple and faint lines between each dot to create the illusion of a fragile membrane or skin. The resulting piece drew attention to the central part of the body, the navel, a symbol of the origins of life. Subsequent installations focused on other parts of a woman's figure, the breasts or chest area, the buttocks, and the sex. As part of the creative process, the artist made use of the camera lens as it enabled her to bring into focus an otherwise abstracted form. The actions were filmed, and the visual documents were shown alongside the artwork; photographic records of the process and the final outcomes were also taken.



Figure 1. Sweeping the butts, *The Navel of the World*, 1991.

The relevance of this piece cannot be underestimated. *Navel* marked a rupture with the traditional methods and aesthetics that had been favoured in 1980s Spain. The installation brought together video, photography, performance art and the use of poor – or residual – materials; it dethroned the status as well as the location of painting; reversed established scopoc economies; and performed an everyday activity – mainly associated with women and the realm of the domestic – at an art gallery, an exhibition space that historically prioritised male artists over female. Additionally, Valldosera's experimental approach to artistic expression and interest in process, her investigation of female identity and the sociocultural location of women in relation to space, the focus on her own body as central motif, and her reappropriation of the male gaze render *Navel* a feminist piece in line with those

produced by Anglo-American feminist artists working in the 1970s and 1980s. The sweeping action clearly articulates Valldosera's place of enunciation conceptually as well as spatially in a manner that is reminiscent of Ukeles's 1973 performance, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, where the American artist scrubbed the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art (Hartford, Connecticut).

Navel encapsulates many of the concerns, methodologies, and formal choices that Valldosera was to explore in the years to come. While working on this project, she had started experimenting with photography, or the manipulation of light (Enguita, 2000, p. 26), as it afforded her with a "single point of view" (p. 26) from which she could reconstruct visually the human figure. During the first part of the 1990s, she produced a series of photographs, *Navel* #1 and #2 (1992), *Burns* (1990-91) and *Appearances* (1992-94) which explored representations of the female nude. Photography enabled Valldosera to "accumulate a series of steps in time within a single negative, through multiple exposures" (Enguita Mayo et al., 2000, p. 26), a layering technique used in the *Burns* and *Appearances* series, a group of photographs described by Bartomeu Marí as evocative of "the phantasmagoria of domesticity and the association between architecture and the body" (2009, p. 109). In what follows, I draw on the work of art historians and theorists Lynda Nead (2001) and Amelia Jones (2012) to examine Valldosera's representation of the female nude in this early corpus of analogue photography. Taking into account her investigation of temporality, process, and place, I suggest that her multiple interventions on the photographic negative allowed her to disable the objectifying camera lens and reappropriate physical, cultural and political spaces traditionally associated with masculinity. In so doing, she contributes to the rewriting of the history of the representation of female corporeality.

The *Navel* series #1 and #2 are concerned with trace and material absence. In terms of composition, their simplicity is striking as both images portray a mattress covered with a crumpled white sheet. In *Navel* #1, the creases in the bedding are suggestive of the female sex, whereas in *Navel* #2 it is the imprints of a female body that can be discerned. These images are reminiscent of Anna Mendieta's *Silueta* series (1973-80), where the artist imprinted her bodily contours onto the natural landscape in various sites in Iowa and Mexico. Mendieta congealed these ephemeral moments in time and place documenting her work with black-and-white photographs and film. While Mendieta's output has often been critiqued for presenting an essentialist conception of women which conventionally aligns the female with nature, Susan Best points at the artist's intention to "assert a place in the world" and speaks of her configuration of a "feminized space" (2007, p. 72) outside the parameters of patriarchal culture. Similarly, the conceptual and physical displacement to which Best refers is also present in Valldosera's *Navel* #1 and #2 where the mattress is removed from the domestic context and the absent female body eschews the scopic economies that have traditionally dominated the nude in art.

Burns shares many compositional elements with the *Navel* series and is set in a seemingly unlivable and neglected space, devoid of any cultural markers. Two

photographs feature her naked body lying on top of a mattress which is placed on the floor; her figure is stiff – almost out of place – as if it were a cut out image glued onto another flat surface. Multiple exposure enables the artist to recreate an intricate interplay between the human body and its shadow, which is cast against a luminous white rectangle at the background, a space reminiscent of a canvas, a screen, or an art gallery wall. Her gaze is turned towards the projection of her own silhouette (Figure 2). Here, scopic regimes are overturned, the (phallic) verticality implicit in traditional ways-of-looking is collapsed and the spectator is denied of its voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze as the subject and object of the artwork take control over the optical system. In the words of the artist, she is representing “the vision that a woman has of herself, without going through another’s gaze” (Enguita Mayo et al., 2000, p. 26). These photographs also crystallise Valldosera’s interest in process, exemplified in the overlaying of temporalities onto the same plain. In addition to this, the images speak of her ongoing investigation of representations of the female form and their location in relation to the domain of the private (mattress) and the public (wall) space. In so doing, they perform the second-wave feminist slogan, endorsed by Valldosera herself: “[l]o personal es político” (Gasol, 2010, n.p.).



Figure 2. “Mattress” from the *Burns* series, 1990-91.



Figure 3. Burns, 1990-91.

The *Burns* series also include a range of photographs where the “cut-out body” of the artist is cast directly onto the crumbling inside walls of a building. The images are imbued with a bluish-grey hue, which contrasts with the luminosity of the projections. In one of the photographs, her naked body is superimposed onto a corner of the building, where she sits with splayed legs, closed eyes, and a calm expression on her face (Figure 3). The only visible parts of her body are her bare torso and head. Distinctively, her sex is located at the meeting point of the three structural vectors and situated at the very centre of the photograph. The centrality of the female sex in this image is worthy of attention insofar as, in the history of the Western nude, female genitalia has traditionally been concealed. In her analysis of female nudity in art, Lynda Nead argues that its aesthetics betray anxieties about the “containment and regulation of the female sexual body” (2001, p. 6). Thus, the nude enframes the sexual body, hence male artist’s insistence to “seal [its] orifices” (p. 6) for they are deemed obscene, excessive, and beyond accepted codes of public visibility. Building on Nead’s argument and drawing on Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Amelia Jones uses Alexandre Cabanel’s salon painting *Birth of Venus* (1862), as illustrative of how “the white female nude must not have actual genitals: her sex must be erased in order for her body as a whole to function as fetish” (2012, p. 65). In Cabanel’s rendering of the goddess of love, she is portrayed “with its languid postcoital expression... both given to the looker, and at the same time (smooth and holeless pubis) withheld” (p. 64). Jones stresses the importance of Mulvey’s theory as it offered women artists a “radical weapon against patriarchy” as well as a critical approach to “stereotypical

images of the female form” (p. 69). The question of the visibility of female genitalia has also been raised by Valldosera herself, who notes how “la dona necessita un mirall per veure el seu propi sexe” (Enguita Mayo et al., 2000, p. 56). Precisely, *Burns* enacts the reappropriation of the gaze and the female sex, and because of this, these images defetishise the female form and free the body from patriarchy’s modes of representation and the regulatory function they perform.

Valldosera’s rejection of the enframing schemes of patriarchy is also exemplified in another image from the *Burns* series, where her body is projected as a succession of five paned windows arranged vertically. The body is fragmented into luminous square units featuring the feet, the knees, the sex, and the torso (Figure 4). The head is missing from the top unit, which is the brightest window of all. The fragmentation of the woman’s body is a recurring image in (male) surrealist artistic practice. Interestingly, Valldosera’s composition is strikingly similar to René Magritte’s nude oil painting of his wife, *The Eternally Obvious* (1930), where her body is segmented into five separately framed canvases.² Magritte’s cut-up paintings or *toiles découpées*, are illustrative of the enclosing and delimiting of the female nude. However, instead of endorsing the surrealist tradition, its erotic gaze, and violent manipulation, reconstruction and circumscribing of the body of woman, in this photograph Valldosera renders female corporeality as an opening onto the outside world. Further, this piece also speaks of her reappropriation of the medium of photography itself, as aperture also refers to the opening in a lens through which light passes to enter the camera.



Figure 4. “Body fragmentation”, *Burns* series, 1990-91.

- 2 When I asked Valldosera about the similarities between this piece and Magritte’s painting she stated she was unaware of the likeness (Eva Bru-Dominguez, unpublished interview with the artist, July 2014).

The artist's exploration of the built environment takes a different turn in the series *Appearances*, where she focuses on different rooms of the home. In these often sparsely furnished quarters, the material object becomes the centre of attention. In one image, toothpaste tubs, bottles of shampoo, plastic pills jars, boxes, one half-open suitcase and clothes are strewn on the floor alongside projections of a fragmented woman's body. Here, the female figure has been stripped of its physicality and turned into and treated as an inanimate object, or, as the artist describes it, as a container. Drawing on Erich Neumann's formulation of the vessel as "the archetypal symbol" and "essence of the feminine" (Enguita Mayo et al., 2000, p. 91), Valldosera understands the woman's body as a repository and carrier of cultural memory.³ In this series the artist places the fragmented female nude in the domestic environment, at floor level and as part of an assemblage of everyday random objects. Once more, her relational treatment of the body in space disarticulates the feminine look-at-ness performed by the camera.

Valldosera's early series of analogue photography dismantle the dominant patriarchal visual regime and free the female subject from its enframing strategies. Her focus on the female body, performance, and process-based means of expression situate her work in a continuum with the 1970s output of Anglo-American feminist artists as well as that of a previous generation of Spanish women, such as Paz Muro, Fina Miralles, Olga L. Pijoan, and Esther Ferrer. In the next section, I discuss the work of Olga Diego as representative of the emergence of a corpus of art practitioners whose work began to interrogate heteronormativity and formulaic body shapes.

3. Embryonic Spaces: new morphologies, new habitats in Olga Diego's artwork

The output of Olga Diego is primarily concerned with the exploration of form, gender and sexual identity; and the lived and living material body. Three mediums underpin her practice: drawing, sculpture and performance, all of which often play a key part in the creative process. As the artist notes, "el dibujo es la disciplina con la que disfruto, el momento de idear y desarrollar los proyectos mediante bocetos" (Diego, 2011, p. 34), yet these pieces are not only sketches and/or diagrams but also stand as artworks in their own right. For Diego, sculpture has been "desde el principio, mi especialidad y donde me resulta más fácil moverme", whereas her interest in performance lies on its affective force and "inmediatez en la transmisión de la idea" (p. 34). In addition to these mediums, the artist also works with video and photography which she normally uses to register her performances (Jaén, 2014, p. 5). Diego's rendering and shaping of the human form in drawing and sculpture never quite conform to (hetero)normative ideals; instead, gender is never specific and body contours are often blurred. A similar approach to corporeality can be

3 For an analysis of the body as carrier of cultural memory see Eva Bru-Domínguez's "Embodied Memory: Shadow and Index in *Family Ties* by Eulàlia Valldosera", *Journal of Romance Studies*, 19(2): 261-281.

observed in her live and video-performances, where there is an emphasis on the undoing of features traditionally associated with gender binaries. Illustrative of this is her *Fuego* series, which consists of a collection of drawings and a group of rather dangerous, albeit carefully planned, video-recorded performances where she uses “[fuego] como pretexto para reflejar su preocupación por las cuestiones del rol de la mujer y su condición sexual” (Martínez Deltell, 2013, p. 213). In “Fuego en la cabeza” (2007) and “Fuego en la barba” (2008) the artist stages feminine and masculine identities by wearing a blonde wig and a stick-on beard respectively, which she then sets on fire (Figure 5). The performance establishes a dialogue with Mendieta’s 1972 *Facial Hair Transplant*, an exploration of the links between gender identity and appearance. While Mendieta asks a friend to shave off his beard and uses his facial hair to “[transform] herself conceptually into a man” (Blocker, 1999, p. 11), Diego constructs her beard with her own hair.⁴ The burning off the hair also harks back to Vito Acconci’s *Conversion* series (1971), where he temporarily changes his sex by setting fire to his chest hair, “manipulating his pectorals to produce breasts, and hiding his penis between his legs” (Blocker, 1999, p. 11). The destruction of these symbols of binary gender identity is suggestive of Diego’s interest in dismantling the social, political and sexual ideologies that give shape and form to the material body. The criticism that her artwork posits is in accordance with queer theory proposals, an approach to the understanding of gender and identity that emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century. The American philosopher Judith Butler is one of the key theorist in the field.



Figure 5: “Fuego en la barba”, Alacant, 2007.

4 Unpublished interview with the artist (Alacant, 2014).

In her influential book *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler draws on psychoanalysis and the poststructuralist theories of Michel Foucault to argue that gender is constructed through discourse and that is a performative practice by means of which the subject acquires social intelligibility and recognition. She describes gender as “a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1999, p. 33). It follows that, for Butler, gender is the body’s activation of a corpus of rules, conventions, social norms and institutional practices. Her reformulation of gender shook up Anglo-American feminist debates and helped situating the material body in relation to specific discourses of power. In so doing, it also provided visibility, space, as well as social, political and cultural recognition to a range of identities that had been either invisibilised or pushed into the margins of (hetero) normativity. While Butler’s approach to corporeality and gender swiftly entered academic discourses in the United Kingdom, this process was much slower in Spain as it would take a good ten years for the translation of *Gender Trouble* to become available.⁵ This delay is illustrative of the difficulties of rendering accurately in Spanish the concept of gender as it is understood in English-speaking contexts. In the course of the noughties, autochthonous perspectives on gender, sexuality and identity began to permeate Spanish scholarship and artistic practice by way of Paul B. Preciado’s auto-theory, and more specifically, the publication in 2008 of his body-essay, *Testo Yonqui*.⁶ In his book, he situates his thinking in a continuum with Foucault and Butler and defends his auto-experimental approach to theory: “Precisamente, porque he crecido en el feminismo culturalista *queer* americano y me he convencido, con Foucault y Butler, de que la femininidad y la masculinidad son construcciones culturales, ficciones, *puedo* y en algún sentido *debo* experimentar con estas construcciones” (2008, p. 247). It is through the writings of the Spanish philosopher that Diego first became acquainted with the critique proposed by queer theory (Bru-Domínguez, 2014b).

Diego’s artwork is concerned with the unshackling of the material body from the predefined categories that conform to heteronormativity and patriarchy. Her stance is also reflected in her choice of materials and processes, which are representative of her rejection of the values associated with institutionalised heterosexuality. The artist has long been working with plastic instead of employing the noble materials, such as marble and bronze, commonly used in traditional sculpture for the depiction or casting of the human figure. The use of unconventional and/or poor materials in sculpture dates back to the 1960s with female practitioners like the proto-feminist German-born American artist Eva Hesse (1936-70), who took a different approach to their chosen media and challenged extant modernist conventions, methods,

5 The first translation into Spanish, *El género en disputa. El feminismo y la subversión de la identidad* by Monica Mansour and Laura Manríquez was published by Paidós in 2001. The following year Paidós published Alcira Bixio’s translation *Cuerpos que importan. Sobre los límites materiales y discursivos del “sexo”*.

6 In 2015, Beatriz Preciado, author of *Testo Yonki*, changed her name to Paul B. Preciado and identifies now as a transgender man.

and mediums primarily associated with male artistic production. In the following decades feminist artists continued to opt for simpler materials, like textiles, rubber and fiberglass, because these elicited other means of experiencing sculpture which were not uniquely visual but engaged the other senses, for example, by emphasizing tactility through their textural qualities. The installations of Diego are populated with a variety of inflatable plastic beings and objects, and the material used imbues them with a sense of fragility, malleability and changeability, which is also suggestive of the undoing of surface and perimeter which so much interests the artist. The installation “Las Rocas” is a site-specific plastic structure built as part of her *Aire* exhibition at the Mustang Art Gallery in Elx (2011). In addition to the frailty that the plastic bestows on the rocks – visually evocative of a enormous cloud, rather than a solid and immovable structure –, the outer texture of this piece has a highly tactile, almost epidermic, quality. In the words of Teresa Lanceta (2014, p. 12):

La cualidad translúcida del plástico, a través del cual la luz pasa tamizada, aumenta los tonos y las variaciones. Dentro de estas masas escultóricas, pequeñas cámaras transmiten a unas pantallas los cambios que se producen en el interior, la riqueza de la piel y las siluetas difuminadas por el contraluz de los espectadores que recorren la sala.

The fluid visual effects as described by Lanceta, coupled with the installation’s fragile form and the structure’s textured surface, render this cavernous space with a uterine quality (Figure 6). The dim changing light coming through these soft and protective membranes as well as the slight, and almost unperceptible, fluctuations or movements of these delicate structures are all suggestive of transformation and life. In fact, exploration of the maternal imaginary is a recurring motif in the work of Diego that takes a variety of shapes and performs different functions.



Figure 6. “En la roca”, MAG, Elx, 2011.

In 2003, she produced a series of drawings, significantly entitled *Habitáculo para un encuentro limitado*. The group consists of three drawings coloured in matt palette which narrate – in a manner reminiscent of cartoon vignettes – the impossibility of touch between two individuals. The first one features a fragile-looking cube with a slit on the right and left panels and small window at the front. The two consecutive pieces show the frustrated attempt of two people to meet at the centre of the unit due to the limitations presented by the elastic skinlike membrane that envelops their bodies and prevents them from connecting physically (Figure 7). The idea of a semitransparent malleable structure as an enabling space for encounters is a recurrent theme in Diego's work. For *The bubble woman show*, her sensory participatory performance at the Matadero in Madrid (2014), she created “[un] habitáculo de plástico/Un espacio propio, casi mágico [que] se abre en ocasiones para invitar a una persona” (Diego, n.d.). The *habitáculo* here was a cloud-looking fragile plastic shape which comfortably fitted two bodies, enabling them to pace around the performance space. The enshrouding bubble provided a certain degree of intimacy to the couple as the world outside still permeated this porous and frail wrapping. A similar principle is applied to “Escafandra” (2020), Diego's contribution to the cycle *Radicantes. Danza y otras especies* which takes place annually at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM). The dance workshop was held during the Coronavirus pandemic. In this occasion, the artist's proposal responded to the social distancing measures that had been put in place by designing individual plastic spacesuits which allowed the participants to move around the museum's room and safely establish close physical contact with each other. The movers could see through a rectangular window an opening resembling the computer and mobile phone screens that mediated most communications at the time. As we have seen, in these variety of plastic enclosures that I have briefly discussed, converge technological, social, political and medical ideologies.

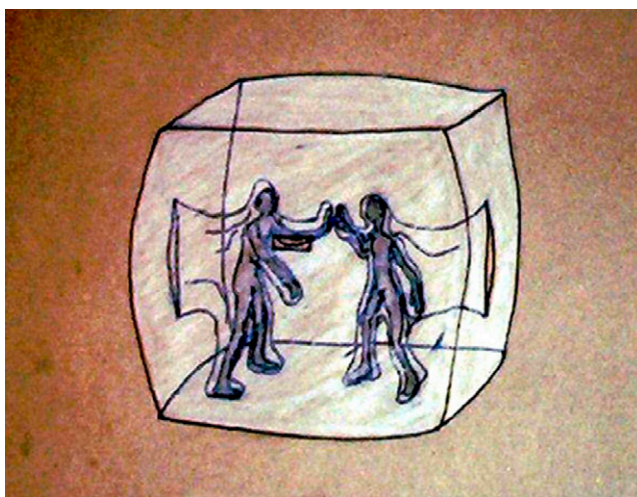


Figure 7. *Habitáculo para un encuentro limitado* #3.

These hybrid discursive spaces hark back to Diego's installation *Cultivos* (2004-05), which explores life forms at an embryonic stage of development. In *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* (1974), Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of semiotic chora – a maternal or pre-symbolic space inhabited by indefinite forms, rhythms and pulsions – as an alternative to the phalocentrism associated with language and form. In *Cultivos*, the bond between the uterine space and the sensuous and transformative maternal body is severed. Here, I suggest that this dislocation of the womb enables Diego to draw attention to the ways in which strangeness, physical difference, and gender and sexual identity are constructed through medical, political, social and cultural discourses. My reading of the installation is informed by Preciado's critique to the politics of body conformity and his study of the incorporable medical technologies that affect the production and design of genders and subjectivities.

Cultivos is a plastic installation which features a group of beings of indeterminate sexuality, each of them inhabiting a sort of hovering fishtank or sphere – reminiscent of Kristeva's semiotic chora. In her preliminary studies for the installation, Diego drew squarish balloons precariously connected to the earth with a string, quite possibly, a reference to the umbilical cord (Figure 8). While the strings are not visible in the installation, *Cultivos* undoubtedly presents a maternal imaginary that is dissociated from a woman's body. In fact, these uterine spaces are situated in and exhibited at an art gallery's white cube, a rather clinical and sanitised environment designed exclusively for the showcasing of objects. Moreover, as the title of the installation suggests, *Cultivos* is also about laboratory techniques, processes, and the controlled observation of organisms at a microbiological level. The production, control and commodification of gender and body identity through technology and media has been studied by Preciado, who observes how the new pharmaceutical and media technologies that emerged in the 1950s postfordian production system expeditiously entered domestic spaces, invading ordinary lives and taking control over the body. He coins the term *farmacopornografía* to describe this phenomenon:

Si en la sociedad disciplinar las tecnologías de subjectivación controbalan el cuerpo desde el exterior como un aparato ortoarquitectónico externo, en la sociedad farmacopornográfica, las tecnologías entran a formar parte del cuerpo, se diluyen en él, se convierte en cuerpo. (2008, p. 66)

A reading of *Cultivos* through Preciado's pharmapornographic lens sheds light into the metabolization of technologies of surveillance, regulation, control and their effect on body morphologies. Indeed, the title of the installation's allusion to laboratory techniques and the observation, experimentation as well as exploitation of living matter, cannot be overlooked. Placed in transparent hovering soft membranes, these beings are displayed in a manner reminiscent of the antiseptic glass jars and tubes found in laboratories, museums or medical schools which contain and preserve rare, amorphous specimens (Figure 9). Precisely, the strangeness of these beings, their non-formulaic morphology and indeterminate sexuality are suggestive of the bodies that exist on the periphery

of the pharmapornographic economy that Preciado speaks about, in other words, they have not fully internalised the systems of surveillance and have resisted “estas nuevas tecnologías blandas de microcontrol [que toman] la forma del cuerpo que controlan” (Preciado, 2008, p. 67). Diego creates fragile plastic structures that shield individuals from hegemonic patriarchy and its seemingly innocuous strategies of control of the body and sexuality. In the next section, I explore Alicia Framis’s engagement with the fashion industry and the scopic regimes that govern it. I look at the artist’s design collections which uses unconventional, stronger and more resistant fabrics and textiles to provide safe garments for women.



Figure 8. *Cultivos*, preliminary studies, 2004.



Figure 9. *Cultivos*, installation, 2004.

4. Safe Spaces and Safe Dresses: Alicia Framis's Social Sculpture

Speaking about the political scope of artworks and how these can affect the spectator, art historian Claire Bishop notes that “any discussion of society and politics in relation to installation art ought to begin with the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-86), whose work is in many ways a crux between politicised art practices of the early and late 1960s” (2005, p. 102). The artist coined the term “social sculpture” to explain his expanded conception of art, which describes a politically motivated art form that takes place in the public sphere, requires the participation of the audience, and is envisioned to transform society. In his own words: “My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture... or art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone” (Beuys, 1979, p. 19). Beuys’s aesthetic-affective technique was based on the premise that political activism was an extension of art practice, a view that has come under scrutiny by left-wing art historians as it is perceived to weaken political discourse (Bishop, 2005, p. 105). In any case, “social sculpture” has had a lasting influence on later generations of artists, precisely – Bishop notes – because it “presupposes a politicised viewing subject” (Bishop, 2005, p. 106). Beuys’s conception of political art and its affective power is at the basis of my reading of the performances and installations of

multidisciplinary artist Alicia Framis, whose focus on race, gender inequality and, more generally, social relations in contemporary urban societies requires that her work is also situated relationally within the framework of feminist space theory.

In the early 1970s, Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) proposed a new means of understanding space which accounted for social and cultural interactions. Despite his emphasis on social practices and perceptions, Lefebvre's account has been criticised from within feminist quarters for failing to address a gender perspective. Indeed, feminist social urbanists and geographers have energetically voiced out the fact that gender inequality is expressed, enforced and reproduced through built environments. Because of this, Elisabeth Wilson notes that many of the feminist analyses produced during the 1980s render the city a hostile environment for women and overlook the possibilities that the urban space can offer for women's emancipation. The feminist author warns against this tendency to restrict analysis of women's access to the city to issues of "safety, welfare and protection" (1992, p. 10), instead of regarding urban environments as enabling spaces that can free women from normative (patriarchal) sociocultural constraints. Wilson's view is illustrative of the conceptual turn in feminist urban studies that took place in the 1990s, which also led to an increased awareness of how women's right to the city was also conditioned by social and ethnic background (Bondi and Rose 2003). The artwork of Framis performs the dichotomy noted by Wilson, insofar as it raises awareness about the fear and dangers that women face in urban environments but offers empowering alternatives to act in response to questions of violence, vulnerability and inequality. As art historian Rachel Mader notes, "Framis's approach sets gestures of resistance against the violence lately present in everyday life, gestures that make less use of accusation and more of proud, confident self-assertion" (Mader, 2008, p. 81). Furthermore, the artist – who is a native of Mataró (Catalonia) living and working in the Netherlands – has an interest in making women from migrant communities visible and has organised site-specific interventions in spaces with a history of social and racial conflict as well as gender exclusion. The collective performances and installations analysed here engage with woman's fashion industry, problematising the power relations that govern the sector and its dependence on the scopic regimes that objectify the body of women and promote certain types of physique. Her fashion show inflected actions, such as the series of performances *Anti-dog* (2002-03), require that models showcase *haute couture* inspired garments made with bulletproof material. In her installation *Lifedress* (2019), she uses mannequins to exhibit her collection of dresses designed with the nylon textiles used to manufacture car airbags, and the catwalk *Is My Body Public?* (2018) raises questions about the public location of women's bodies in contemporary culture and society. If these collections for women are conceived as outer layers that prevent and ultimately safeguard women from visual as well as physical violence, her *One Night Tent / Mueble: refugio para sexo inmediato* (2002) consists of a set of clothing for a couple which turns into temporary shelter for impromptu sexual encounters. The outfits are accompanied with detailed instructions on how to put the tent together.

Anti-dog is a brand of women's clothing first conceived by the artist while she was living in Berlin in the early noughties. Framis learned that groups of racist skinheads and their dogs had taken to the Marzahn district of the city causing migrant women to confine themselves to their homes because of fear of violent attacks (Plate and Rommes, 2007, p. 22). As a response to this, she developed the collection, manufactured with Twaron, a material that resists fire, bullets and dog bites. The range combined evening dresses inspired by luxury fashion houses – such as Chanel, Dior and Gaultier – and outfits designed by the artist herself. Framis's main motive was to celebrate women's desire and right to wear flattering, elegant and/or fashionable clothes and to enable them to be seen "not as victims, but as strong unique individuals with the freedom and protection to go anywhere" (Annet Gelink, n.d.). *Anti-dog* was initially exhibited in the form of installations and fashion shows until 2002, when Framis decided to have the first set of nine outfits modelled by non-white women in a 10-metre-wide passageway in front of Amsterdam's Football Stadium after a match. Framis's choice of location for this performance requires consideration. The stadium, named in 2018 Johan Cruyff Arena, is home to Ajax Football Club and its supporters, who identify as Jewish and are often the target of anti-Semitic attacks by rival club fans, which include chants like "Hamas! Hamas! Jews to the gas chamber", combining a Holocaust reference with an invocation of a Palestinian revolutionary group (Stratton, 2015, p. 297). The history of both the club and the stadium provides Framis with a setting saturated with political and racial tension. In fact, despite being kitted out with dresses manufactured in highly protective material, four of the original performance artists dropped out of the show as they were too scared to participate (Plate and Rommes, 2007, p. 29). Framis – a dark-haired immigrant herself – posed alongside the other eight women and has admitted having been quite apprehensive about the performance (p. 29). On the 13th of October 2002, as the models solemnly posed in stillness at one of the exits of the stadium, they were met with either indifference, scorn, or contempt by the football fans, most of whom circumvented their motionless bodies as if the women were mere obstacles on their path. The background football chants provided an intimidating chorus to an already unnerving set of circumstances, however, apart for the usual "go back to your country" phrase, there were no racially motivated incidents (Plate and Rommes, 2007, p. 29). Even when Framis herself fell to the ground, a football fan simply stepped over her body as if nothing had happened (Figure 10).

Framis's *Anti-dog* collection gradually increased, and some of the designs started featuring embroidered insults and phrases that lovers or partners say to each other, most likely during an argument, such as "fuck you", "get out of my life you ugly bitch" or "I swear I won't do it again". Between 2002 and 2003, the clothing range was showcased in various cities including Paris, Madrid and Birmingham. Mader situates Framis's antiracial stance within a spatial, political and social web noting how her interventions



Figure 10. Still from recording of *Anti-dog* at Amsterdam's Football Stadium, 2002.

literally design models of resistance, then test them in the reality from which they are derived. Symbolic elements, socially connoted models of behaviour and activist strands of plot are mixed to produce an intervention with activist overtones and reflexible pretensions. (2008, p. 82)

Indeed, her performances are about establishing a fruitful dialogue with the sociopolitical history of her chosen location; reaching out, touching and/or affecting those who are somehow related to these spaces and providing a safer alternative to occupy spaces for women who have been affected by racial or gender violence. Like the feminists' messages, short texts and poetry pieces that Jenny Holzer exhibits and projects over landscapes and architecture, Framis seeks the complicity of its readers and spectators. Her intervention in Madrid, *Anti-dog against domestic violence* (2003), organised by the Galeria Helga de Alvear and held at the square where Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía is located, paid homage to the twenty-seven women that were murdered that year in Spain. The performance took the form of a peaceful demonstration and attracted about 2,000 participants. Visual artist Montserrat López Páez reminds us of Framis's use of the word "beauty" in the banners worn by the performance artists and describes the event as "una cadena humana de belleza, tranquilidad y respeto contra la violencia: *Belleza contra puños, Moda Anti-Bala, Beauty Beats Violence*" and notes the relevance of the location, "[que] nos propone, casi irremediamente, un slogan más: cultura contra violencia"

(2017, p. 73, italics in the original).⁷ *Lifedress*, the collection of dresses she presents at Art Basel in 2019 goes even further. Designed to protect women from sexual harassment, the nine dresses are manufactured with car airbag material which changes in shape when there is an instance of intimidation (Figure 11). Each outfit is designed to shield women from a particular sexual attack. The provision of safe spaces for women in public spaces runs through Framis's artistic output, a rather playful example of this is what she calls her "reversible architecture": *One Night Tent / Mueble: refugio para sexo inmediato* (2002). Needless to say, in practical terms, the tent is an impossible "place of passion" (Plate and Rommes, 2007, p. 32), yet the title of the work in both languages harks back, precisely, to passionate encounters. The reference to the "one-night stand" phrase is obvious in the English version, whereas the use of "mueble" in the Spanish title quite possibly is a wry wink at the discrete and private love hotels, formerly known in Spain as *meublés*. Framis's problematisation of the boundaries between the public and private space brings us back to the fashion show, in particular, her catwalk *Is my body public?* (2019), where fifteen models of various ethnic backgrounds wear skin-colored bodysuits and envelop their bodies with a transparent black tulle fabric which features the "Is my body public" sentence in several languages. Here, the bodies of the models do not fall into the fashion industry's prescriptive categories of shape or size; instead, Framis showcases body and ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the complex circuit of gazes that are habitually mobilised by the catwalk are challenged by the question that each woman exhibits on the black veil wrapped around her body.



Figure 11. *Lifedress*, Basel, 2019.

I began this section speaking about the political charge and affective potential of "social sculpture" and I have briefly touched on some of the key issues raised by feminist geographers and urban studies theorists to show how the artwork

⁷ Ten years after, in 2012, the designs were exhibited outside the El Corte Inglés in Palma, an event co-organised by the Spanish flagship store and Es Baluard Museum.

of Framis gently slots into spaces laden with histories of social conflict, gender inequality and racial violence. As a way of conclusion, I should like to draw attention to the affective potential of her non-aggressive spatial interventions, the playful elements she introduces in her work and how she is able to enthuse and empower individuals and communities precisely because, as Wilson would put it, she treats the urban environment as an enabling space.

5. Conclusion: Carving out Feminist Spaces

The artists discussed here all engage with the many ways of looking that govern spatial interactions. Valldosera's photography disables the objectifying male gaze and liberates the female body from the scopic economies that enframe it. Diego's soft shields provide an enveloping membrane which offer spaces for human relations and draw attention to the (hetero)normative regimes of body control and regulation through observation. Framis's clothing collections for women are designed to enable them to access urban spaces safely, whereas her public interventions provide a peaceful response to gender and visual violence. The work of these artists is illustrative of the shift in the perception of feminism(s) that took place in Spain at the turn of the twenty-first century and led to its incorporation in critical analysis. Nowadays, it is commonplace for art historians, art critics, curators, and cultural institutions to address openly the question of feminism(s) and showcase feminist artwork. Without a doubt, Valldosera, Diego and Framis have contributed to the carving out of a safe space for feminism(s).

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