

Walking with Company

Spanish society is an easy target for artist Pilar Albarracín's irony. In the last two decades she has analysed each of the stereotypes and clichés that make up the Spanish identity. She has penetrated the collective psyche of what defines a Spaniard and has put Spanish society under the microscope, drawing attention to all of its representations. It is a portrait we might prefer not to see, which clashes with the image that modern Spain has tried to project of itself since 1992 – the very year in which Albarracín began her artistic journey with the performance “Sin título (Sangre en la calle)” (“Untitled [Blood on the Street]”). With that piece she brought attention to the question of gender-based violence, a serious problem in Spain, which is considered to be a consequence of the country's culture of machismo. Albarracín's icons and symbols are rooted in Andalucía, her home soil, which for decades has contributed to the global conscience the most identifiable emblems of Spain: flamenco and bullfighting. *Musical Dancing Spanish Doll* again examined the idea of invisibility in 2001, becoming an icon of the representation of women in visual culture and probably one of the most popular works of art of the decade.

In 2004, Albarracín presented the video performance *viva España* (“Long Live Spain”), in which she returned to some of her themes from 1992, although analysing them from a somewhat more distant angle, using the skills she had developed in the intervening years, where she had frequently displayed a kind of “anthropological dark humour”. In this video, the artist walks through Madrid's main streets followed by a popular music band consisting entirely of men. Albarracín walks while the musicians persist in following her. The music is the popular Spanish pasodoble, “Viva España”, which is an indelible element of any summer fiesta in Spain's towns and villages. It is known mainly as festive dancing music, so its function here is associated with the interplay of the sexes. The artist walks at an accelerated pace for the three minutes of the video performance, faster and faster as the video goes on. Towards the end, the pace becomes frenzied and finally the artist breaks into a run to escape the band that has followed her throughout. During the video, the music acts as a phrase that reiterates the same question. This idea of repetition and rhythm appears in other performances by Albarracín, including “Lunares” (“Dots”) and “La Cabra” (“The Goat”), although here a paradox arises between the music and the actions that take place.

Albarracín has also drawn imagery and behaviours from the culture of today's mass media – TV trash and the disintegration of privacy. With this strategy, the artist invites diverse readings of her work. The recreation of a scene of persecution inserted in the everyday public domain transforms what might seem an innocent episode into a robust interpretation of the sexist culture that still prevails in the country and affects women in their work, social and domestic environments. The artist herself also suggests the potent image of paparazzi pursuing celebrities, transforming herself for the purpose into a jet setter of impossibly attractive elegance.

One aspect of Albarracín's work that has not been investigated enough and that is particularly fascinating is the use of theatrical architectures as a backdrop for her performances and videos. The choice of streets along which she walks is not random; they display the architecture that arose from Spain's urban and modernist development of the early twentieth century. The buildings and structures that appear in the

background contain a voice from the past that is thus connected with the present. The buildings date back to the same period as the music we hear.

In this performance, Albarracín creates a trajectory. The idea of itineraries and the use of public spaces as a scene for art have persisted since the origins of conceptual art; examples can be found in the carnivalesque cavalcades or anonymous persecutions presented by artists such as Jean Tinguely, Vito Acconci or, more recently, Sophie Calle. The notion of trajectories and routes is also present in the psychogeographical awareness of Guy Debord's Theory of the Dérive. All of these artists choose the street and public spaces as the scene for their performances. With this video performance, Albarracín completes a cycle she initiated in 1992 in the public domain, analysing the consequences of male violence. After seeing the video we can't help but ask: Viva España?

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