

**ROSA MARTÍNEZ**

**Para volar\*. PILAR ALBARRACÍN**

**Jorge Luis Borges said that a poet, like a prince, receives a destiny. And it is true that there are creators who cannot escape the telluric responsibility that drives them to translate their visions into the form of a 'work of art'. Their existential metabolism urges them to transform their experiences through the linguistic resources of their age. For them, attempting to go beyond the established is a way of approaching that sphere of living poetry, at one and the same time ethereal and profoundly material. A poetry as Artaud understood it when he said: 'I do not like luxurious feelings, I do not like poems about food, but rather poems about hunger.'<sup>1</sup> A 'necessary' poetry such as the one which Gabriel Celaya called for: 'necesaria como el pan de cada día, como el aire que exigimos trece veces por minuto para ser y, en tanto somos, dar un 'sí' que glorifica' ['as necessary as our daily bread, as the air we need thirteen times a minute in order to be, and such as we are, to utter a "yes" which glorifies'\*\*.]<sup>2</sup> Pilar Albarracín's art is an act of pure affirmation, a direct and steely exercise of commitment. It springs from a well which is deep and dark, at times torrential and gushing, crystalline and bright, at others, hurt and hurtful, but always vital and hopeful. Albarracín has focused on the analysis of dominant narratives and, specifically, on the clichés which represent Andalusian identity; not from a remote and intellectualised perspective, but through an emotional and subversive immersion in the anthropology of the everyday. Folklore and popular traditions, food rituals, religious myths, and women's role in the distribution of power or collective festivals such as bullfighting, are critically distorted in the mirror of her reflections. Aware of the way in which inherited models shape imaginaries that regulate people's identity and morals, she uses satire and irony as forces to steer them towards a liberating catharsis.**

**For Albarracín art is mysticism, revelation, enlightenment. It is the result of a process of instantaneous combustion which takes place, nonetheless, 'after a great deal of insistence'. The artist says that it is like the stamping of feet in flamenco: 'You keep on and on, and suddenly there is a moment of unique intensity.' Many of her works have a hypnotic rhythm which grows until it reaches a moment of ecstasy. Then the spectator suddenly awakens 'with a revelation or a thud' snapping them out of their intellectual and sensorial slumber**

and forcing them to call into question their preconceptions. In all her performances, it is Albarracín herself who personifies the female characters that transform her into a peasant, an immigrant, a battered woman, housewife, flamenco dancer or singer. By putting her personal energy on the line she becomes fully involved in her multiple personalities: 'It's like being a medium through whom each character enters and later leaves to make room for the next one.'

From her early interventions such as *Sin título. Sangre en la calle* [Untitled. Blood in the Street] (1992), which featured women thrown out onto the streets of Seville after having suffered some bloody incident, to more recent works such as *viva España* [Long Live Spain] (2004), which takes place in the streets and squares of Madrid, an unquestionable desire to integrate conscious and unconscious, feeling and reason, body and soul, private and public, runs through Pilar Albarracín's creations. This is why she plays with the surprise factor and gives improvised performances that are put forward as shock therapy in order to bring out collective demons. Consolidated as an artistic discipline after the Second World War, performance continues to be the most effective means of bombarding western dualist metaphysics, based on separations and oppositions which entail hierarchical appraisals between terms. Performance offers a new synthesis in which empathy is the vehicle to integrate art and life, the inside and outside, the self and the other. The artist says: 'Where there is empathy, there is interest. But where there is interest there isn't always empathy.' While religious ceremonies pursue the perpetuation of the systems of beliefs, contemporary performance has a critical potential which deconstructs the inherited models.

Through her stagings, Albarracín focuses on the woman as the repository for commands of submission and explores the different facets of a specific situation of economic and social development in Andalusia, in Spain and, by extension, in the manifold contemporary combats between tradition and modernity. Modernisation, the synonym for progress, and its final derivative, globalisation, involves a process of homogenisation that erases cultural differences, except those which may be reduced to clichés and integrated into the market once they have been deactivated and exoticised, as Isidoro Moreno affirms.<sup>3</sup> But there is a reverse movement of identity reaffirmation which questions the gaze of the 'Master' fascinated by 'Otherness' and it fosters a process of production of the subject recognised in signs and stylemes in which ancestral knowledge is condensed. Flamenco dance and song are a paradigmatic example of that popular wisdom which preserves the truest connection to life 'en obras que se

hacen solas a través de los siglos y los poetas' ['in works which come about of their own accord through the centuries and poets'\*\*), as Juan de Mairena said.

There are several works by Pilar Albarracín that focus on folklore and, specifically, on flamenco, which has been, and remains, an artistic way of expressing the social pain of a people. Most important among them are *Prohibido el cante* (Singing Prohibited), that was performed in the year 2000, and *Muro de jilgueros* (Goldfinch Wall), a wall installation created specifically for her exhibition at the Reales Atarazanas in Seville in 2004. *Prohibido el cante* presents a singer and guitarist sitting in a tavern and ready to perform. On the wall is written the sentence from which the work takes its title from and it refers to the way in which censorship during Franco's time tried to restrict the exaltation and critical outpourings of the exploited classes. A glass of manzanilla stands on the table. The singer, wearing a ruffled dress with a camouflage print, wails her laments, building to a crescendo and finally, tearing her dress with a knife, rips out her heart and throws it into the audience in an unequivocal gesture of complete devotion. Her song is not made from words and the absence of linguistic articulation means that the cries which pleasure and suffering wrest from the body, faithfully translate the agitated movement of passions. This is why her voice fluctuates between pagan happiness and the profound magma of the 'black sounds' of the soul.

The installation *Muro de jilgueros* is composed of tiny songbirds locked inside individual cages hanging on a wall. The cages appear as an ironically anti-minimalist sequence due to their artisanal character the relative disdain for linearity in hanging them, and, above all, because of the presence of the lively little birds inside them. The sculptural seriality of the piece is suddenly broken by the peculiarity of a cage inside which a stuffed canary, wearing a flamenco dress, sings a *carcelera*. The *carceleras* [the word originates from the Spanish word for jail *cárcel*\*\*] are usually sung by male prisoners who recall their freedom and express their pain at its loss. In the case of *Muro de jilgueros* it is a woman's voice which sings from her ancestral prison. Félix Grande recounts that one day the singer Manolito María was asked why he sang and he replied concisely and bluntly: 'I sing because I remember what I have experienced.' And as the memory of what has been experienced is essential, the place from which it is sung – be it the tavern, as a place of recreation; the prison, as a place for punishment; or the cage, as a metaphor for the cultural constraints behind which women are locked away – is configured as the suitable context in order to express the feelings of the oppressed. García Lorca said that

**'se canta en los momentos más dramáticos y nunca jamás para divertirse, sino, como en las grandes faenas de toros, para volar, para evadirse, para sufrir, para traer a lo cotidiano una atmósfera estética suprema' ['people sing at the most dramatic moments, never in order to enjoy themselves, but, as in the great bullfights, to fly, to escape, to suffer, to bring a supreme aesthetic atmosphere to the everyday'\*\*.4**

**If singing gives voice to sorrows, dance connects the body to the rhythms which interweave eroticism and death. Dancing is a way 'to step outside oneself' which can be beautifully codified in choreographies and geometries or brings out the shapeless movements that liberate what is repressed. There are two works by Albarracín which directly confront this tension: La cabra [The Goat](2001) and Bailaré sobre tu tumba [I Will Dance on your Grave] (2004). In La cabra the artist appears dressed in a Marisol-style [Marisol was a Spanish child star of the sixties\*\*] white outfit with pink polka dots and frills above the knee. She cradles a wineskin with which she performs a wild and violent dance that is both fascinating and obscene. The wine spills over her with each movement, stains her dress, makes her slip and lose the verticality of order and reason. Sexual passion, instinct and madness overflow against the background noise of the short tunes played by gypsies during the street entertainments in which a goat is forced to balance on the top rung of a stepladder. The art of these nomadic, street-wise musicians, contrasts with the art of the remote and cryptic elite performer. Aware that hermetism, as Foucault said, is an exercise in power which excludes the other, Albarracín includes in her discourse those who are subordinate to the dominant system, be they gypsies or women, who have traditionally been marginalised from power and language, and, by putting them on stage, she makes a clear existential and ideological commitment.**

**In Bailaré sobre tu tumba (2004) she once again shows the need to decodify enforced roles. A professional dancer, wearing black boots, and a woman – Albarracín once again, with red flamenco dancer's shoes – stamp their feet on a dais. He possesses the artistic tools, but the dance takes place on her territory. Their dialogue goes through different stages of intensity, and it expresses the lack of understanding in the relationship as well as the cultural baggage of the man-woman roles. She is still, he attacks softly. He waits, he gives the woman time and then, with artfulness and courage, he builds a geometry for her. She breaks his discourse by stamping her feet wildly. He traps one of her feet between his legs, but she rebels and turns the foot which remains free. He dances, she stamps on the ground and makes a noise. He**

constructs, she deconstructs. In the end, the dais on which they are dancing caves in due to the impulse of the woman, who falls into a hole as dark as a grave. 'This work talks about how it is preferable to sink rather than be subjugated; it speaks of resistance, of the desire to keep on dancing until you collapse, of the desire that men will surrender.' Sarah Kofman says that the new self-sufficient woman does not submit her pleasure to the omnipotence of a man.<sup>5</sup> Despite the pain it causes her to have to break with so many codes, she isn't waiting around, and is capable of self-immolating drastically in order to put an end to a situation.

Lunares [Dots] (2004) shows the courage of this determined, hurt and aware woman. The artist, in her 'folkloric' incarnation, dressed in an all-white, long-tailed flamenco dress, follows the rhythm of the *paso doble En er mundo* [In the World\*\*]. Holding a needle, she pricks herself with small and insistent thrusting movements, which cause blood to well up and create dots which adorn the dress. Lunares is a mystical and political performance. 'It speaks about the insults received from the outside; about the responsibilities which consume women; about the need to externalise this burden. As others do not share in your pain, you have to show it yourself... Although the pain of needles might always be less than internal pain.' This work has an undeniable feminist dimension, as it dares to reproduce the insult of belittlement, to fight it by showing it publicly. In performance and other contemporary rituals associated with urban tribes and pathologies, the practice of self-harm is an attempt to recover the body, to free it from social impositions. In the historic and paradigmatic creations of Gina Pane, Rudolf Schwarzkogler and Ana Mendieta, blood appears to reconnect us with the extreme reality that civilisation represses and conceals. Pilar Albarracín belongs to this rich tradition, but like Louise Bourgeois or Jana Sterbak, she uses clothing as a metaphor for the cultural skin which must be pierced in order to give back to the unconscious its role in the discourse.

While in Lunares the needle acts as a phallic element that performs the penetrations, and the cloth as a membrane over which the marks of unease are unfurled in abstract, overflowing splodges, in the work *Te quiero, Jose* [I Love you, Jose] (2004) we find the same symbolic outline, but here the emotions are transposed onto the formalised territory of language. The letters of the sentence are written in blood-red on a huge white banner, acting as a social manifesto and love offering at one and the same time. In fact it harks back to the gypsy rituals carried out by the matriarchs of the clan, wherein a white handkerchief is inserted into the vagina wick, when removed, and stained with blood, shows the community

that she is a virgin. This display is a kind of symbolic offering of virginity. In the case of Pilar Albarracín's work, the banner acts as a vast handkerchief. The chosen name, Jose, besides being one of the most common in Spain, refers to the figure of Saint Joseph and the virginity of Mary. After the artist had made the banner, she hung it from the balcony of her home, subverting its traditional function as a means of protest to turn it into a celebration, into a public show of the power of love and commitment. 'You can't remove a tattoo. A banner is something ephemeral which can be destroyed or replaced. This work is a reference to the temporary character of love.' The invasion of public space with a private story updates the idea that the personal is political and confirms that an experience becomes more real when others share it. What makes any offering into a love offering is the truthfulness of the person giving it.<sup>6</sup> The banner thus becomes an extracorporeal way of offering oneself, an incentive for the nature of the lover to be favourably transformed and an example of the way in which, through a gift, lovers express the psychoanalytical 'desire to be the cause of desire'.

Techo de ofrendas [Ceiling of Offerings] (2004) is a floating sculpture composed of over 300 flamenco dresses. The spectator walks under a vast colourful, baroque and informal swirl. The work expresses the desire to abolish hierarchies and establish direct contact with the deity, as it harks back to a custom rooted in popular religion: the offerings of outfits made by women to hang in Marian churches and shrines such as El Rocío or La Reina de los Ángeles in La Peña de Arias Montano, Alájar (Huelva), in exchange for a prayer being received. These are acts of bartering during which a link is created from woman to woman as they ask the Virgin to intercede before God. As a form of connecting the human and the divine, the offering seeks to make equal bodies which belong to different existential and power categories. Slavoj Žižek affirms that the offering proposes a shock in the economy of exchanges according to which one of one's own possessions is sacrificed in order to obtain another unattainable possession. The commitment isn't neutral, it obliges the other, and, on the stage of unconscious transference, proposes a symbolic exchange in which the gesture of the purest 'yes' does indeed precede the postponed hope for compensation for that gesture. The offering calls for justice in the exchange and complicity between an ideal form of equality and the reality of material inequality, as Marx said. It thus connects a promise and a 'spectral' wait, as Žižek declares.<sup>7</sup>

In the collective ceremony of bullfighting, the sacrifice of the bull and the exhilaration of the festival are associated with offerings to the sun, with unproductive rituals and with the

astonishment and the hecatomb of daring to look death in the face. Bullfighting is a mirror and a ceremony, a power game which shows that the sacrifice is, par excellence, an attitude in the face of death since, as Bataille says: 'the movement it consists of is a violence which demands proof that death exists.'<sup>8</sup> Tartero (2004) is a separate sculpture of a stuffed wild bull which presents the animal, the symbol of power and energy, defeated, kneeling and humiliated, but lifting its horns and its gaze in a final, proud and tragic attitude of defiance before death. With this intense and fleeting gesture, the bull proves its nobility in the face of the great defeat: the defeat wherein it doesn't matter how death comes, it always comes. In the bullring this ceremony unfolds as a confrontation between two protagonists. However, collective festivals have endured, such as the one in Ohanes, in the Alpujarra region of Almeria, in which the challenge to the village boys consists of making the bulls, which have been let loose in the streets, kneel down.<sup>9</sup> The game of humiliation and sacrifice acquires a less tragic, but equally effective, dimension from a symbolic point of view.

In a more jocular way, the challenge is present in Caseta de tiro [Shooting Gallery] (2004), an installation in which the artist proposes a game in which the spectators are invited to shoot at popular personalities and important figures from history and the arts. The Catholic Kings, Picasso, the poet Bécquer, the players from the Betis and Seville football clubs, African immigrants, gypsies and civil guards are displayed in small portraits mounted on fragile sticks. As the artist says: 'The question is what is the prize. Whether you hit the stick and take away the photo, or hit the personality and free yourself of the anger you feel towards them.' This shooting gallery is based on the idea of building dynamic objects requiring public participation. It seeks to provide fleeting therapy, a low-level democratic exercise in imagining another history of Andalusia without harmful people, although these may differ for each spectator depending on their political position and personal fantasies, just as the figures who appear in the firing line come from contrasting positions. Art and visual representations are always a form of fictionalisation, and dramatisation is, specifically, a form of cathartic fictionalisation. Fiction serves to bring us closer to other modes of consciousness and Albarracín produces her fictions in the street or in impromptu settings, conceived as contexts in which the private and public interact. Just like the puppeteers, processions and other representations of playacting and street entertainments, *viva España* (2004) is a walk through social space. A woman goes around the streets of Madrid pursued by a band playing the *paso doble* *Que viva*

**España. This work alludes to the controversy surrounding this phrase which, on the one hand, encapsulates the popular sentiment of the love of one's country and, on the other, the exacerbation of extreme nationalism. The yellow of the dress refers to the colour associated with envy, and the band, to the persistence of clichés. The camera reproduces continuous movements of harassment and disquiet and makes the central character feel out of place; an annoying element. Just like the celebrity gossip programmes, the desire for notoriety, the public display which fosters envy, and the loss of dignity, converge. The final frames propose an ambiguous conclusion, as we do not know if the pursuit slowly breaks up or is maintained indefinitely.**

**Artistically, Albarracín's productions question the absolutist pretensions of minimalism as a hegemonic language and do not subject themselves to the anglosaxon mainstream. They connect with the poetics of excess which the baroque, kitsch or pop represent and link up with a Spanish tradition of criticism which contains Goya's enlightened positions and Valle Inclán's theatre of the grotesque,<sup>10</sup> as well as Velázquez's gaze 'when he paints the common people and jesters, who make people laugh due to the pain they are suffering,' as the artist says. Like those deformed beings in Velázquez's painting and the magical quality, or duende, in flamenco, Albarracín seeks to 'hallar en el fondo de lo cotidiano la inocencia de lo sagrado' ['find the innocence of the sacred in the depths of the everyday'\*\*.]<sup>11</sup> Her work reflects the flash of madness, understood as a form of lucidity, and destabilises false identities. It is imbued with a generosity which conceives the work, not as a documentary transcription of what exists, but as a form of production of thought and life, as a gift which needs a reply from the other, to whom direct or indirect requests are being made for new forms of action, love and conscience, or, in other words, involvement.**

**From a social perspective, Albarracín looks at the differences between the ius sanguine [blood rights], and the ius soli [land rights, the rights to one's birthplace]. Not from the intransigence of fundamentalist, exclusivist nationalism, but from the awareness that blood is the heritage of all universal strangers – as indeed we humans are as we pass through the world – and from the conviction that the land we believe to be solid can sink under the weight of new or old imperial impositions. The culture of roots feeds Albarracín's creations and provides her with an anthropological context, but the need to break with stereotypes leads the artist to reject 'toda la dulce geometría aprendida' ['all the sweet geometry that has been learned'\*\*),<sup>12</sup> to pursue Dionysian liberation, to insist on the reinvention of the significant woman and set off**



**in search of new poetic worlds, in order to become emancipated, through all these things, from the weight of history and to initiate other forms of flight.**

#### **Notes**

**\* 'Para volar' means literally 'for to fly', suggesting preparedness for flight, or in this case, for new forms of flight.**

**\*\* Translator's explanatory notes and versions of quotes.**

**1. Antonin Artaud: Oeuvres complètes, vol. 9, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, pp. 226-27. Quoted in Gérard Durozoi, Artaud: la enajenación y la locura, Madrid, Guadarrama, 1975.**

**2. Gabriel Celaya: 'La poesía es un arma cargada de futuro', Cantos íberos, Alicante, Verbo, 1955.**

**3. Isidoro Moreno: Sobre la llamada segunda modernización de Andalucía y la reforma del estatuto, lecture given at Mairena del Aljefe Town Hall on 14th February 2004 during the 3rd Mairena Solidarity Conference.**

**4. Federico García Lorca quoted by Félix Grande in 'Teoría del "duende"', Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos, no. 9-10, Madrid, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana, (May 1992), p. 85.**

**5. Sarah Kofman: El enigma de la mujer. ¿Con Freud o contra Freud?, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1982, p. 50 and following pages.**

**6. Juan Luis Moraza: De amor, saber, Madrid, Galería Elba Benítez, 2004.**

**7. Slavoj Žižek: Las metástasis del goce. Seis ensayos sobre la mujer y la causalidad, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2003, p. 291 and following pages.**

**8. Georges Bataille: Théorie de la Religion, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, p. 66.**

**9. Francisco J. Flores Arroyuelo: Fiestas de ayer y de hoy en España, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2001, pp. 72-80.**

**10. Rosa Martínez: 'Pilar Albarracín: una y mil mujeres', Pilar Albarracín, Paris, Actes Sud/Altadis, 2003, p. 19.**

**11. Félix Grande: op. cit. p. 90.**

**12. Federico García Lorca quoted by Félix Grande: op. cit. p. 90.**