

Günter Mahr

Few artists are as hard to classify as Ulises Pistolo Eliza. Some people know him because of his black and white photographs, others know his short films or video art; some associate him with fetish sculptures, technological macro installations or ritual performances... In the cultural world he is identified with events, festivals and groups that have formed the avant-garde of contemporary art in the last decade. In the world of music, his work with flat frequencies and harmonious chants is now being discovered. All his appearances on television are marked by a series of surprising images: Ulises Pistolo Eliza crucified, naked, in the Fiat factory; or bandaging his face while making strange invocations about the Temple of the Sun in Mexico; or huddled yogi-fashion in a gap in the trunk of a giant sequoia; or on the pulpit of a Baroque cathedral dressed in a jellaba and wearing a wrestling mask...

Günter: Is there any way to classify such an apparently diverse work?

Pistolo: My work is especially difficult to classify because it hovers on the edge of literature, painting, sculpture, music, the visual arts and everyday life. On each occasion, I have used different physical supports, but the instruments used are still simple means of manifesting a way of understanding the contemporary artist. For me, from the moment I consider myself an artist, regardless of the discipline I am practising, I assume a responsibility towards society. My task is that of a social agitator, a polemist and a critic.

Then, in your opinion, the art of the future should be social and committed...

There are a thousand ways of understanding art, but what I practise is anthropological art, which comes from human beings and covers all their manifestations, from society, culture, politics and history to religion and ecology. In this sense, I consider myself a follower of the school of Beuys, who said human existence and the world are a work in which all men participate. I am just another person, so I like to do my bit as best I can.

And objectual art?

I respect and appreciate it but, as I was saying, at the point where I am at at the present time I am incapable of making a work if I can't find some use for it. I think when Duchamp took the step of the ready-made and endowed simple everyday objects with the dignity of art, he was opening wide the doors of creative freedom for the generations that came after him. Duchamp showed that art was a mere state of mind for the spectator and an art gallery was a good enough place to justify the aesthetic quality of an, independently of its use. It was an inflection point where, simply changing the context of an object was giving value to something that had none. From then on, nothing is utilitarian any more; everything is aesthetic. And what determines aesthetic value is no longer a technical procedure, but a mental act, a different attitude towards reality. Now it is the artist's turn to break the social rules. Being an artist no longer means practising a certain profession that requires experience but inventing a different way of achieving freedom.

That is, what you are most interested in is the possibility contemporary art gives you to break all the rules.

The freedom of contemporary art provides us with a very broad field of action. In fact, we may well be the last alternative for generating change. There you have the 8000 nude bodies Spencer Tunick photographed in Barcelona, just after the big polemic among Catalan politicians about nudism... On this occasion, as it was a performance, nobody dared criticise it.

That reminds me a little of that happening in Formentera where you took your clothes off outside the town hall and sat on a lavatory pretending to do your business. The next day you were on the front page of the local newspaper, which called you an exhibitionist.

Yes, that was hilarious... What happened that day was that an association of musicians from Formentera organised a series of activities to defend

freedom of artistic musical expression on the island. I put on a performance entitled *No more shit*. My intention was to denounce everything that was going on with mass tourism and all the rubbish that it generated. So, as you say, I sat on a lavatory I put in the middle of the square and pretended defecate. Then I took a string of *butifarra* (a kind of Catalan black pudding) out of the bowl and fried it in a frying pan on a portable gas stove. Then I put the *butifarras* between slices of bread and handed out sandwiches while the people shouted "Recycle!" and "No more dumps!" at the authorities who were present. The first person offered a sandwich was the mayor, who was watching the spectacle from the town hall balcony. He refused, and the people booed him. The next day, when I saw my picture and the insults against me in the paper, I had to prepare a press release to defend myself and rectify the terms. I told them it was not a "teenage prank" but a performance of contemporary art and that, far from seeking to "provoke and exhibit myself" what I sought was poetic expression. In case there was any doubt, I told them they were all invited to the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Ibiza, where I was holding an exhibition in two weeks' time and I intended to repeat the action.

Your performances have always had elements that the public find shocking. Some people have called you a provoker.

I'm not interested in mere provocation if there's nothing behind it, no message. It is true that my first performances were quite torturous, but now I'm interested in working with absolute positivity and I'm no longer motivated by causing a feeling of horror in spectators. Let's say at first I used the sinister as an argument and now I choose to stimulate harmony and introspection.

This evolution in your actions is gradual, but as time goes by it will take you from one extreme to the other. If you go back over your works in video in chronological order it is surprising to see how you have gone from handling blood, skeletons and stuffed animals to harmonious chants and meditation. Tell us something about this transformation.

The change in my work is, on the one hand, a reflection of the change in my life and conscience; and, on the other, the mirror where the influence of all the people and artists I've met is reflected. In *Máscaras* (Masks, an action where I bandage several women's faces and paint a face on the bandage with a hypodermic syringe with which I have extracted my blood) you can see the influence of Ana Mendieta and the Viennese school. At that time I shared Ana's fascination for blood and its power as a symbol in Catholicism and pre-Hispanic civilisations. However, *Máquina* (Machine, where I hang naked from a huge steel structure in the Fiat factory in Turin like Christ crucified) is a tribute to Marina Abramovic. I've always admired this artist's capacity to investigate and explore the limits of the psychic and the mental. All the more so, because this research is not based on sensationalism but on the symbiosis between work and life. Like the Bosnian artist, in my performances the main territory of creation and experimentation has often been my own body, and I have tried to make the public join in as a fundamental part of the work. In *Máquina 2* (an action I performed in Sarajevo, where I hung from a spinning machine), I would have dislocated my arms if my companion hadn't stopped the artefact.

In your last actions, however, we no longer see you hanging from machines or handling bloody bodies.

I'm not interested in experimenting with the thresholds of pain in the physical body now, but in the way to inner peace through the spirit. In *Meditación*, which is the action I have performed most often recently, I explore the field of meditation through music and light. With harmonious chants (a technique that allows us to sing two or more notes at the same time with out voice), I explore healing and transformation.

Are you saying you attribute healing properties to your performances? Up to a point. Now I am researching the idea of contemporary art as a medical prescription and the artist's work as a diagnosis for his public. At the moment I'm fascinated by sound therapy and cimatic science. I think any sound near the human body brings about a physical change inside the organism and its electromagnetic fields. Most

diseases start in one of the subtle bodies. Our negative thoughts, emotions and programmes adopt a dense form, like patterns of energy crystallised in our etheric fields. These crystallised patterns gradually seep in until they eventually manifest themselves as a physical disorder in the body -our densest electromagnetic field. Sound is capable of dissolving these crystallisations or potentially harmful energies long before they reach the physical body; which happens to be preventive medicine in its purest form... Until now, the category of sound therapies included shamans, Sangams, monks and everyone who uses sound to feel better or to help others feel better. I don't see anything wrong with including in the group contemporary artists who explore sound for the same purpose.

This mixture of music, medicine and contemporary art reminds me a bit of John Cage. I don't know whether you know the anecdote about when John Cage visited the acoustic chamber at Harvard University in 1951. His intention was to obtain a perspective of "total silence", but when he went into the chamber he realised he could hear two sounds, one loud and one soft; the first was his nervous system and the second his heartbeats and the blood flowing through his veins. From then on his concept of silence changed completely, because there is really no way of experiencing "silence" while one is alive.

I agree. All matter is sound and emits sound, although these sounds are mostly outside our limited physical sense of hearing. Our physical bodies, therefore, are also resonant electromagnetic fields, like our auras, both generated by the atoms that we are made up of. . John Cage is a visionary and in my work I try to follow his musical postulates. This artist -I don't consider him only a musician- explores the sense of music that I am most interested in, the sense whose roots come from an immemorial sacrality whose effects are both therapeutic and spiritual. In Meditación, my intention is to soothe my mind and the spectators' to make them sensitive to spiritual resonance.

The idea that all matter is in a vibratory-musical state is not new. Pythagoreans affirmed the planets emitted sounds, which depended on the arithmetical proportions of their orbits around the Earth, just as the length of the cords on a lyre determines its tones. Combining all these sounds produced a special synchrony: the "music of the spheres". Later Kepler affirmed that the sounds emitted by the stars are more or less high-pitched according to the speed of their movement... Do you consider yourself a follower of this tradition of thinkers?

If there's one philosophical school of Ancient times that fascinates me, it is no doubt the Pythagoreans. I share their view that the universe has "exact" proportions, established by rhythms and numbers. In fact that is what gave rise to a cosmic harmonious chant. And this idea is not a mere intuition, but it has been demonstrated scientifically in recent months...

Scientifically?

That's right, a NASA satellite (Trace) has confirmed that the heavenly bodies emit harmonious sounds on measuring the ultrasonic sounds emitted by the sun. According to the scientists, the sun plays a score made up of waves that are about 300 times higher than the tones the human ear can hear... On the other hand, and going back to the Pythagoreans, I can tell you I have always shared their admiration for the sphere as the symbol of a pure and perfect form. I collect spheres made of different minerals and the crystal ball is a basic element in my photographic composition.

Let's forget the harmonious chants and good vibrations for the moment and go back to performances. Looking back over your work, between your most provocative early actions where you used blood and stuffed animals and the recent ones where you dedicate yourself to meditation by means of music and light, I find very different performances. Some are futuristic, others rather shamanic and, finally, there is a group I'd call iconoclastic. They are actions where you have taken your criticism of sacred symbolism to such extremes that some of your videos have been considered absolute anathema by the most orthodox bigots...

What you say is true. For a while in my life I made very iconoclastic art, above all as far as the Catholic Church is concerned. It was a way of criticising the cynicism of the priests and the hierarchic abuse by means of the deconstruction of symbols. In Pulpito (Pulpit) I went up on the pulpit of a cathedral dressed in a black jellaba with a hood and wearing a catch-as-catch can mask and performed a ritual with the altarpiece illuminated behind. I was harshly criticised by conservative sectors when the video was projected at several video art festivals... It was fun; but now raising this sort of polemic no longer interests me. Just as I'm not interested in using religion to provoke. I am at a stage in my life where rather than showing up the frivolity of religious leaders I prefer to seek the common element shared by the different creeds that cohabit on the planet. In this sense, I consider myself a follower of Paramahansa Yogananda, a holy man who paved the way for the study of the common roots that all religions share. I think at this moment there's no point in creating discord in the world. It is a time to speak out for tolerance.

Tell us a little about the performances where you introduce magic and religious elements. In your actions we have seen you handling crucifixes, amulets and oracles. You have written out texts by Lao-Tse, you have read from I Ching to those visiting your exhibitions, you've recited texts from the Bible, the Koran...

That is because I believe that the sacred books of the East and the West offer basically the same doctrines. All religions have their positive side and I think it is a very enriching task to explore these elements. And I'm not only talking about performances, but about life. Wherever I travel I try to pick up the life cycles of each community. If I go to an Arab country I observe Ramadan and read the Koran; if I'm in a Buddhist country, I meditate and read Siddharta, Suzuki or Goenka; and here at home I've even been on pilgrimages with a book by St John of the Cross or St Teresa of Ávila in my backpack. Maybe some people find this chameleonic part of my personality rather surprising, but the truth is that if you look for true religion with absolute respect, the followers of any creed are much more tolerant than people imagine...

Speaking of art and life, I think the work that best defines your work is Box, the cube that can be taken apart with which, if I'm not mistaken, you've travelled around the worlds for years, inviting all sorts of artists to participate spontaneously... What does this project consist of exactly? What does it represent?

At the heart of Box lies the essence of the purest of happenings. It's not a representation but an "experience" that shows the constant relationship between art and life. The secret resides in the fact that I never have a structured beginning or end. Its form is open and fluid. In fact, I'm not pursuing anything specific. The idea is that the situation generated with each Box unrepeatable; it happens once and is gone forever... I'd call this project the purest expression of ephemeral art, for its only goal is to interest the largest possible number of people and, if possible, for them to experience it interactively. All kinds of artists have participated in Box: dancers, musicians, graffiti artists, painters, DJs, sculptors, kickers... I just bring them together and tell them to flow...

The idea of flowing reminds me of the group Fluxus, and not only because of the name ("fluxus" comes from the verb to flow), but because it seems that in Box we find the elements that characterise this famous sixties group: a mixture of different artistic disciplines, a fight against the traditional art object as merchandise, the proclamation of anti-art, the importance of improvisation in actions.

You're right in what you say, because I'm a great admirer of Fluxus; but to tell you the truth, the Box project is the fruit of my reading Hackim Bey. For me, Box is based on the pure. Direct action Bey defined as "immediatism", a kind of proposal where the artist communicates his energy person to person, "chest-to-chest" as the Sufis say, without going through the distortion mechanism typical of show business. To do so it is necessary to eliminate the possibility of recuperating or reproducing each happening. Each Box is considered a finished and unique event, only experienced by those who took part in it without mediation.

You seem to be one of those contemporary artists who share mistrust of the world of show business and the omnipotent rise of the media.

I have less and less faith in the communicative power of the media. There was a time when I did performances directly in TV studios. An example of this is Mandala telemática (Telematic Mandala) and other video art pieces. At the moment I prefer to work in direct actions, looking the audience in the eye. The TV medium is too unreal for fruitful work. Like Baudrillard, I think we should mistrust hyperreality. For me, satisfaction and happiness do not arise from pretending and imitating reality, but from actual reality. Capitalism has taken the consumer too far. What any teenager aspires to is impossible to attain. By means of the virtual work of artists and set designers TV sells us a vital intensity that simply does not exist. There are a thousand examples of hyperreality: pornography is sexier than actual sex, because the actors are perfect and touched up by Photoshop... Cyber dating, Christmas trees, sports drinks that sell tastes that don't exist... I'm not interested in all this world. It's not my intention to cause anxiety with my work but help control desire.

Obsession with controlling the mind was precisely the theme of one of your first installations. In 1966 you made Control, where you appeared inside a dark box with a stethoscope, a microphone to amplify your breathing and a gas mask. The box was surrounded by computers inviting people to play like video games with the words INSERT COIN. By inserting the coin the installation was set in motion: the box lit up, your vital signs appeared on the screens and your breathing could be heard for a few seconds. Then suddenly it is all turned off, your heart stops beating, the electrocardiogram goes flat and the words GAME OVER appear on the computer screens.

I was fascinated by the new technologies at that time. I was addicted to the cyberpunk literature of Bruce Sterling, Ballard and William Gibson. For me they were real visionaries who saw a direct connection of the human brain and computer systems... It was in the fifties that a series of American writers were capable of evoking a world of artificial intelligence, a new order where thinking computer networks would work for multinational corporations that would have taken the place of governments as centres of power. I always felt like an heir to that science fiction. I think those cyberpunk stories were genuine predictions of what the Internet was to become. From the nineties onwards, these literary genres lost their drive because instead of speculating about the future they showed everyday events. Their disappearance was the result of the triumph of their postulates. Control was a tribute to my teenage readings.

Parallel to the cyberpunk trend there was psychedelia, the idea of the psychonaut, the traveller around his own mind. You always admitted you were an admirer of the fathers of psychedelia. In your installations you used to project fractals and you did research into the colour of the aura.

I spent my youth with Huxley and Hoffman. I firmly believed in experimenting with psychotropic drugs to open up the doors of perception. I considered some substances to be real medicines for the soul, that brought me in direct contact with nature. I devoured Castaneda's books, because I was fascinated by the character of Don Juan, an informed person who goes his own way and discovers a new relationship with the universe by using plants and other substances. Now the truth is I'm a long way away from all that, and although I'm still attracted by the idea of the shaman as a person who dedicates himself to hold sessions for the good of the community, I don't think you need the help of any foreign substance to do so. At the present moment, to reach transcendence I prefer to work simply from my own mind... In spite of everything, it is true that there my installations still have a certain psychedelic air.

Part of your work we have not mentioned is what you describe as "social work". These are festivals or gatherings you have organised where you managed to congregate hundreds of artists for a short period of time. Some took place once and disappeared (Pronóstica [Forecast]); others are better known because they are musical, although part of their essential content is considered contemporary art (Observatori [Observatory]).

n both cases, the original idea was not so much to organise a festival as a meeting of people who would inhabit and transform contemporary culture. My idea was to turn a space into a temporarily autonomous zone in the purest Hackim Bey style. A place for expressiveness at all levels where the creators would meet and generate ideas freely. I only wanted to be a nexus, to become diluted in the crowd and help them mix. *Pronóstica* was held in 2003 at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Ibiza, and it was carried out thanks to the effort and enthusiasm of more than a hundred artists who took part altruistically and the patience and understanding of Elena Ruiz, the director of the museum. It was very tough. I had a hard time gathering all those people together, but in spite of my exhaustion after the meeting I had the satisfaction of creating a spectacular platform that gave rise to a large number of contacts. So the baggage was very positive, so much so that I don't dismiss the idea of doing another *Pronóstica*.

And Observatori?

Observatori is another story. It was a project created with the support of Consuelo Císcar, at that time Director General of Museums and Fine Arts of the Generalitat Valenciana, and the collaboration of private enterprises. I created it with Blanco Año, a close friend with whom I proposed to put before the general public two realities with a minority following: research music and contemporary art. I participated in the first five editions (2000-2004), where I was in charge of the art direction and Blanco the music. It was a magnificent experience for me, especially because of the mass attendance and the expectation it aroused. The most gratifying thing was to have an uninitiated public enjoying art live. I remember there were round tables and great brain storming sessions, interactive works that captivated the visitors and magnificent performances with excellent artists: Marcel·li Antúnez, Pi Piquer, Esperanza Tirado, Cuco Suárez, Aliwalu... It was sensational. The first year we had hardly any funds, but the artists put their heart and soul into it. As our leitmotiv said, it was "an art festival for artists". Everybody gave it all they had and something extraordinary was achieved.

Precisely one of the facets you are known for in Valencia city is for bringing contemporary art within reach of the uninitiated public. The galleries *Purgatori I* and *Purgatori II* were active for seven years and the inaugurations were multitudinous. They were always teeming with young people. And there were even teenagers at the exhibitions. Then you organised *Performatori*, the first performance festival in Valencia...

We managed to create a very solid group; it included Xavier Monsalvatge, Oscar Mora, Carlos Mallol, Miguel Ángel Jiménez, Isabel Meseguer, Alex Mortimer, Juan Domingo, Alberto Ruiz, Chema López and many other artists, theoreticians like Nilo Casares and collectors like Manuel Monleón. We were very different creators, but we got on very well together. Those years were very fruitful. As for bringing contemporary art within reach of the public, we were extraordinarily successful. In fact, not only did we give them a chance to enjoy art, but we turned them into artists. In the action *Expón en un Museo* (Exhibit at a Museum), we encouraged citizens to improvise artworks on any available support; then we showed them the pieces in the Museo de la Ciudad. The action ended up with the graduation ceremony, in which we gave the new artists an official diploma. On a single day we conferred over 200 contemporary artists.

You have always had a very special relationship with ARCO. In February 1997 you organised the first edition of the electronic music and interdisciplinary art rave for ARCO, which you repeated every year until 2002. In 2003 you set up a box and last year you performed an action in 12 galleries at the same time.

I get on very well with Rosina Gómez Baeza, the ex director of ARCO. I respect her work and I've participated in several editions as an artist with Galería Punto, a Valencian gallery directed by Amparo and Miguel Agrait with their two sons, Miguel and Nacho. All the same, at the end of these editions I always had the feeling I would have liked to make the fair a bit more fun. In a way, I thought it would be nice to contribute to ARCO having a closer relationship with the art object than merely as a consumer good. I was aware that this was very difficult; because ARCO was after all

a trade fair and, therefore, the way it defined itself should have to do with commercial exchange. On the other hand, it is also true that it is a contemporary art fair and, therefore, it should have a greater margin of freedom to transform or redefine itself than any other sort of fair. After all, we're talking about contemporary art, with all that implies: inherited values that do not admit censorship and have an infinite creative potential. Well, the fact is I suggested to Rosina that we should set up an electronic music festival with performances and actions. She loved the idea. And that's how electronic music sessions helped turn the fair into a more entertaining event every night for a few years. Then I thought it would be a good idea to shift this ludic spirit to the fairground during the daytime as well. There had never been performances in the pavilion before, but there's a first time for everything. I set up the Box and invited many artists; the collaboration of Ximo Lizana, a technological artist and the then director of ARCO, was essential. The following year I performed the action *La vibración de las galerías* (*The Vibration of the Galleries*).

To finish, I'd like to ask you if you are planning any short-term project and, if so, if it's an individual or collective project.

At the moment my project is *La iglesia del arte contemporáneo* (*The Church of Contemporary Art*), a space I am building in Formentera that will house all sorts of artistic proposals with a social basis. At the present time I'm not interested in art that is not useful; I only believe in activities that have a positive outcome. An example to follow could be Beuys' work *7000 Oaks*, an action he performed in 1982 during *Documenta* at Kassel, which turned out to be a very successful project because a crowd of followers reforested mountains in Germany... That's more or less the idea: to generate change by arousing awareness... For the moment I think it's the best thing I can do. Besides, the project is attuned to the reality of contemporary art today, because if we already have critics, curators, fairs, galleries and museums, what could be better than building a temple? *The Church of Contemporary Art*.