

Interview with Ana Laura Aláez

February 15, 2022

Interviewer: Nakagawa Chieko (Towada Art Center)

1. First, tell us about the background to your becoming an artist.

I should underline that I come from a very humble Spanish family, a family directly affected by the Spanish Civil War. My maternal grandfather was a miner, and barely educated. He only just about knew how to read and write, yet still fought for his ideals. I was told that he also had a gift for public speaking, and took part in miners' assemblies. One day, the fascists hunted him down, threw him into a van and carried him off, and we never heard from him again. Like many other innocent people, he is an invisible dot in the history of the victors. The fascists stigmatized their victims forever. Nobody wanted to speak about such atrocities because it meant danger and rejection. Only the next generation could speak about it, much later. When I was a child, I felt it was something floating in the air, like a strange law designed to keep you quiet. I inherited silence. It helps me to think of silence as a kind of void, and in turn a void must relate to art, like a blank space you have to fill. I have no doubt that this emptiness of a sort is the principal motor of my work.

Later on this silence came to be accompanied by my own gender battle. Let's say our parents struggled for a better world, but culture had no place in it. Belonging to the working class forces you to see life from a purely functional perspective, and that includes the female body. Changing the perception of your own body can change your perspective about life. Growing up in a male dominated society I needed to fight for my own autonomy, both mental and practical. The absence of a feminine presence made me ask a lot of questions, to which I found some of the answers in art: a place where I could simply be myself. I decided to study fine arts at university not because I pretend to be an artist, but because I felt like I had nothing to lose. In the working class context I was considered a nonnormative girl, some

kind of impostor, as I didn't follow "the gender rules." So it was essential for me to meet people through their artwork, and feel that I was not alone. My friends, especially women, turned out to be the guides I was looking for.

2. What are your principal interests when it comes to making art?

Growing up, I was taught that the body – especially the female body – is the site of pain. Intuitively, I have always sought an antidote to this. This is where my experience with art begins. I decided that my body would be my sanctuary, something completely different to the idea of the inhospitable dungeon I had been indoctrinated with. After all, my body was my only possession. I wished to elevate the place from which I saw and felt the world. I had to ignore the opinions of the people around me.

It's essential to confront reality on your own terms. I was born in a working-class neighborhood of Bilbao. A dark industrial landscape is carved in my imagination. I had this urge to free myself from life's harshness and confront the societal message floating around that there was no future for a woman like me. My way of dressing gave me a direct source of self-expression. Perhaps my first artwork was my own attire, how I expressed myself in developing a personal aesthetic. I felt that it was better not to wait until I had the right moment, or the right materials, or the right situation. Young means being in a hurry – don't think too much, just do it. So, I was constructing a different look almost every day without any support, every day a new piece. I picked up things from the trash, or flea markets. It's a pity I destroyed all these materials from that period, but it never occurred to me that I was doing art. At that moment, I felt my life was like a rehearsal to get "a room of my own."

3. How did you develop your clothing creations into installations?

I began by doing small sculptures using all kinds of materials, including my own clothes. I find the first works of artists very interesting, when there is still no clear underlying concept, when the person first succeeds in showing their freedom. After I began to work with some galleries I realized that the work was lacking something: the “soul,” the energy I felt pulsing in the studio like a heart beating. In 1997, I got my first invitation to do a site-specific project for Sala Montcada, a prestigious experimental art space in Barcelona. My idea was to do a work about the space itself. *She Astronauts* was a clothes shop inside a gallery space. A rectangular box with an open door at one end to see out was a fake construction. I mixed some art pieces with the architectural elements, and I invited other artists to participate, to blur somehow the “signature of the author.”



She Astronauts, Sala Montcada, Barcelona, 1997

Three years later, I did another important project that changed my trajectory: *Dance & Disco* (2000) at the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. It was a real electro techno music club inside the museum. I divided the space into a dance floor and a dark room, and selected DJs to do live sessions. This project also marked the beginning of my work with the electronic music duo Silvania. Released under the moniker Girls on Film, our eponymous album includes some of the specific music we did together for my videos. *Dance & Disco* attracted both very bad and very good reviews. But now, 22 years later, young people

tell me how important that project was for them. So, we could say that in art the consequences are not always immediate.



Dance & Disco, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2000

4. How did you choose the artwork *Bridge of Light* for Towada?

I was invited to present a project for the Towada Art Center in 2007. The selection committee members apparently liked my installations in the Spanish Pavilion at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001. I was immediately interested as I liked the concept of developing an art center at the same time as selecting the works of the artists. I was familiar with the architecture of SANAA and like the expression of emptiness and transparency that they use in their work, so I took the opportunity to study the work of Ryue Nishizawa a little more. I was very inspired so presented not just one, but three projects, of which ultimately *Bridge of Light* was selected. The room originally designated for my work was also changed to one with a frontal window, as this was considered essential to the piece.

5. How did you compose the sound for the work?

Since 2004 I have been collaborating with the German electronic musician Ascii.disko. He composed a specific music piece for *Bridge*

of Light. We were investigating some abstract aspects of music also found in sculpture, such as the abstraction of the tridimensional, ie what might be the sounds of light, geometry, transparency, frame, pillar, ice, etc.

In the beginning *Bridge of Light* was a vertical pedestal that later became horizontal as if it had tipped over to fit the space. Even the slightest change can challenge all your immediate ideas.

6. Both the light and music one experiences in the piece are very gentle and soothing. Do you see this as an expression of femininity, or is it a response to the male-centric, masculine nature of the world of sculpture?

Bridge of Light doesn't have any specific gender such as masculine, feminine, or trans. Gender is – to borrow the words of the feminist Judith Butler – a social construction. But it is true that all my works reflect my experiences, and as you said, *Bridge of Light* includes a response to the male mainstream. In it I am questioning the formal elements that define sculpture as a discipline, with qualities that are traditionally considered male such as strength, hardness, a glorification of the physical, a self-assured subject. I've reassessed, pondered, realigned these qualities many times throughout my trajectory as an artist. When I was young it was so difficult to find female references in art. Now it is different – even though there is still a lot that needs to change.

Still, I don't know what art is ... and to be honest I don't want to know. I don't think there is any need to understand it, either. There is a constant pulse between art and life and vice versa. I am very sure that art helps to build an inner shelter step by step, and I believe in perseverance. Women are very good at that.

7. When you are inside *Bridge of Light*, you feel a multitude of things, and one of those feelings is like being inside a human body. Is this about drawing the spectator into a realm that is quite

private, and perhaps private to you? Or about drawing them into this inner space physically/anatomically and mentally/spiritually?

Walking through this kind of horizontal “human spine” allows us to think about our life’s trajectory from a new perspective. The strong exterior appearance contrasts with our own apprehensions. I could say: “Vulnerability is allowed here.” This is a “perfect” structure, in contrast with our own feelings. Although the light inside doesn’t change, the light from outside does, through winter, spring, summer, autumn, day and night. The sculpture and the space belong together, as we can see the main street from inside through the window, or the sculpture from the outside. Many different spectators can find refuge in *Bridge of Light*.

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Published on 28 March, 2022