

Xabier Arakistain



Xabier Arakistain is not who we think of when we hear the word 'curator'. Think of Pedro Almodovar casting Lola Flores to play Andy Warhol in his boy-drag period –or vice versa– and you won't even get half the picture. But don't be fooled by the flamboyant appearance and the speedy line of repartee: those who makes dismissive assumptions of Xabier Arakistain based on appearance do so at their own risk. With razor-sharp analysis and insight and the whole raft of specialist skills necessary, not only has Xabier survived as an independent curator for the last decade, he has risen to the top of his game.

With a personal body of curatorial work that continues to reflect his interest and specialism in Feminism and gender topics, Xabier has carved out a formidable reputation for himself way beyond the shores of his native Spain. His record of exhibitions, texts and collaborations reads like a who's who of the great and the glorious. To name any would be to commit an act of omission since there are so many canonical names –both artists and curators– with whom he has worked. One of the many reasons that his work continues to be fresh and refreshing whilst dealing so directly with issues that some still consider to be marginal, is his ongoing commitment to rooting out and nurturing younger talent and contextualising them alongside much more established artists.

Although he has had a long-standing working relationship with la Fundación Bilbao Arte Fundazioa, Bilbao, Arakistain has fundamentally stood for the possibility of being an independent curator. Up until now. This year he has accepted the directorship of Centro Cultural Montehermoso, the spanking-new flagship art space in Vitoria-Gasteiz, the political capital of the Basque Region. Technically only fully operational from early 2008, all eyes are now focused on exactly what Xabier Arakistain will do with it.

Ken Pratt interviews Xabier Arakistain....

KP: Arakis, you've taken on the task of heading up Montehermoso which is significantly located in Vitoria, the political capital of the Basque Region and seems to be very much –from the outside at least– a venture for which there is a strong local political will to support it. Obviously, Bilbao has very much put itself on the international cultural map in the last decade. So why this need, or interest, in another significant institution in the region? And what's it like to be heading up an organization where the possibility for political interference must be fairly high?

XA: In the twenty-first century we can no longer separate politics from any issue whatsoever. I understand the term "political" in a very complex, ongoing and global way. In fact, I believe that everything is political, and everything is political in several layers and with different meanings according to different categories and/or perspectives at the same time. Since Louis Althusser redefined ideology, within Marxist theory in the 70's, relating it to the Ideological State Apparatus and at the same time the Feminist revolution opened up a totally new dimension under "the personal is political" maxim, ideology and politics were never the same again. And we are still under that conceptual umbrella.

Anyway, I became director of Montehermoso winning a public contest with a project– and I understand what

you mean about Basque politics, and obviously there should be specific connotations in that sense– but I am more interested in the other layers, the broader social and sexual ones.

KP: We chatted briefly about this before, and you talked about the aim for the programme at Centro Cultural Montehermoso to have a strong Feminist theme running through it. Obviously there's a huge connection with your body of work as a curator in this, but what are your hopes for this programme? What treats does it hold in store?

XA: The project is based on my experience as a feminist curator and activist. I am the same person who, as an independent curator, promoted the ARCO Manifesto 05, demanding basic actions from the public institutions to start taking steps to overcome women's discrimination in the art world. So crossing the line to work in a public institution is the perfect opportunity to start developing those measurements myself. There is no excuse nowadays to keep marginalizing women artists in the programs. There are enough women artists and there are enough good women artists. So we are a centre of production, exhibition and diffusion of contemporary art and cultural practices focusing on the relationship between art, culture, thought and society. And we are open to everything, but we are going to make sure that at least the half of the budget and the program is going to be dedicated to women artists. Also, we are very aware that Feminism is a crucial field of knowledge and we are going to delve into that knowledge with the intention to spread it in many ways.

KP: So would you say this programme builds on 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang' that you curated at the Fine Arts Museum in Bilbao? Taking the Feminist perspective back into the museum..?

XA: 'Feminist art' is at present considered the most influential vanguard of the twentieth century in the Art institution (what we commonly call 'Art' in capital letters). This is because that perspective calls into question the social-sexual hegemonic codes and those of the Art institution, placing the problems of representation in the foreground. This means questioning oneself about who represents whom, from which point of view, and how –without losing sight of the different systems of visual representation (art, film, advertising) that still build and transmit stereotypes of sex, gender, 'race', and sexuality– that contributes to inequality.

KP: Things are about to kick off in Montehermoso with the first full-scale exhibition. It's often held that curators opt for a 'manifesto' or 'signature' show with their first major show in a new space that they've taken on running. What should we know about 'The Furious Gaze'?

XA: We are opening the new era at Montehermoso with an international group show entitled 'The Furious Gaze' that I am co-curating with Maura Reilly from the Feminist Center at the Brooklyn Museum. We both think that it is very important that the institutions that are informed by Feminism should start working on networks

Also, this project is specially dedicated to the new generation. The twenty-first century has started

trying to ignore the Feminist agenda, and especially in the art world, by labeling it as passé. And it is very important to make clear that Women's Rights is not a trendy thing! What kind of a cheap joke is that? We should be not playing with human rights.

The exhibition takes the title from the metaphor that the philosopher Amelia Valcárcel, uses to describe the reaction of women, who grew up with the Mirage of Equality when they become 30-year-olds, and discover that the so-called 'gender equality' is a cultural delusion that fades away as soon as they reach adulthood and tears itself to pieces as soon as they hit the 'the glass ceiling'. On the other hand, the concept of 'the glass ceiling' refers to the sexist obstacles women have to overcome in order to climb up the social and professional ladder. 'The Furious Gaze' is an international collective exhibition that gathers works by 20 artists talking about the discovery of the cultural fallacy of gender equality and about the rage that cannot be expressed.

KP: And do you perceive it being well-received by local people or are we all philistines in assuming that there might be some reactionary resistance to the kinds of work and artists you might show?

XA: I do not believe in a monolithic idea of the audience. I believe there are different audiences and people. And I also believe that you are never going to satisfy everybody's expectations. But we are talking about an artistic and cultural project for an important public institution in the city, and I believe that a public cultural policy should look after social justice and plurality. As far as I know there is a big section of the population that sees me as fresh air coming into the city, but I still have to keep arguing that social justice is not a fashionable thing but a necessity. And it is also tiring having to bring out the statistics to demonstrate that women and other marginalized groups don't have the same opportunities as white Basque or Spanish men.

KP: I noticed that we've both worked with certain artists who straddle the visual arts and pop music world; people like Caron Geary, Janine Rostron etc. I understand what my area of interest is in this. But, darling, this interview is about YOU! What's the interest in these 'double talents' for you?

XA: Hahaha! Double, triple... I am interested in talent! I was an adolescent in the late seventies and grew up in a particular cultural context where music, art, fashion, cinema, etc... was being mixed in a new way. Today this is the new reality opposed to the nineteenth century clichés of divided artistic disciplines. And that is especially very clear in the new generations of artistic and cultural practitioners, a twenty-first century renaissance. They use and mix anything they need or want to express themselves. But there are two names that are not exactly eighteen-year-olds whom I admire especially for the complexity of their huuuuge talents. I really admire the courage, wisdom, originality and independence of Caron Geary and Pam Hogg.

KP: It once came up in conversation that your father was a very well known footballer in Spain. Is there any connection between this and the path you've mapped out?

XA: Obviously not. I remember the first time I got a

full-page interview in a major newspaper and thinking that it was about my work and discovering at the first minute that the journalist was very interested in the “contrast” of my father being a legendary goalie of the Real Madrid in the 60’s and me being the first transvestite/drag queen/cross dresser whatever.. curator in the country that was getting some attention for my political shows and I wanted to kill him. Now, I automatically answer the question when it comes with, “My father is very well, thank you! Any further questions related to him, please ask him directly”.

KP: Touché! What’s the most amusing experience you’ve ever had as a curator working on a project or negotiating the muddy waters of the art world?

XA: The “proper” art world can be fun and funny, but also quite predictable. Anyway, doing ‘Trans Sexual Express’ with Rosa Martinez was a huge laugh. Rosa is a force of the nature and that was a great adventure. For instance, I remember being in Budapest and discovering at midnight before the opening that a couple of big pieces were missing from the transport. Also, I have special best memories of meeting and working with some of the artists in ‘Switch On The Power’, a couple of ladies from that show are my really good friends ever since.

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