

Action

A Provisional History of the 90s

Exhibition on until 7 February 2021



Accidents Polipoètics reciting the poem *Nenecaca* at the European Surprise Poetry Festival (SAT, Barcelona, 1993). Photo: Consuelo Bautista.

ACTION: A PROVISIONAL HISTORY OF THE 90s focuses its attention on the performance scene in Spain throughout that decade. A period of profound changes in the social and political spheres during which, after the dissolution of the Communist Bloc in Europe, the logic of a new globalised world that still prevails began to take over. The field of culture was characterised by increased institutionalisation, as evidenced by the opening of a considerable number of museums and art centres, along with the consolidation of the market and internationalisation, made visible through the large-scale artistic events that sprung up all over the country. Parallel to this dominant structure, another scene emerged, one that was much more precarious and fragile, and which emphasised interpersonal relationships and emotional ties. It began to forge itself in certain fine arts faculties in cities such as Barcelona, Valencia, Cuenca and Madrid, and in self-managed spaces of all kinds, picking up momentum in festivals and gatherings of different durations and formats. It insisted on writing its own history in real time, both in publications and in exhibitions. If there was a common denominator in all the works that were created, it was simplicity: in fact, almost all that has endured are documentary traces that allow us to fragmentally reconstruct actions of an ephemeral nature. Some of them can be recreated by anyone, as if following an instruction manual. Beyond simply defining a space of its own, action permeated a whole way of doing, in which the work not only *expresses* but also *does*.

The years of the Spanish Transition had led to the establishment of a democracy that prioritised necessity over reason, and that favoured the future over the analysis of the recent past. This systemic erasing of memory also involved the marginalising of some of the conceptual practices already experimented in the sixties and seventies, in order to make way for more formally conventional ones that, in their celebration of appearances, gazed less critically at the complex realities of the time. However, during the mid-1980, a generation emerged throughout the country that found inspiration in the conceptual practices and Fluxus spirit of artists such as Àngels Ribé, Benet Rossell, Carles Hac Mor, Jordi Benito, Carles Santos, Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, Juan Hidalgo, Esther Ferrer and Nacho Criado, prioritising processes over results and expanding artistic practice to territories that had not been previously explored.

The very definition of *action* and the limits of art were their main subjects of reflection. Many of their pieces raised questions to the performance practice as a way to tackle more complex issues, among them the resistance to the logics of productivity and usefulness so characteristic of a period in which capitalism advanced triumphantly. At a time when the art system was becoming consolidated, institutional critique brought into question the validation mechanisms and many of the norms that had become accepted in the professional art practice. Their resorting to notions of chance and playfulness served to counteract everything that appeared planned and premeditated, in order to give rise to experience and subjectivity. The hierarchies and roles of each of the actors involved in this scene were resolutely dissolved. Depending on the occasion, most were either artists, photographers, producers, technicians or simply spectators. Thus, a privileged place was reserved for the spectator as a symbolic and effective activator of the work. Other issues that society was facing in the nineties also emerged in various actions, such as the spread of HIV—which by then had already reached pandemic proportions—, gender issues, and the refusal of military service.

The action scene engaged in turn with other scenes with which it shared various interests, concerns, ideas and spaces. Paratheatrical experiences, made visible through the pioneering work of Albert Vidal or collectives such as La Fura dels Baus, were a transgressive model that reevaluated the public's place. Poetry, as evidenced through the work of the Accidents Polipoètics duo, expanded the territory of the written and spoken word towards the fields of action, sound experimentation and public participation. In a similar way, experimental and action music accompanied this entire generation, who often summoned the spirit of John Cage, both in his challenges to the notion of virtuosity and in his search for silence.

The exhibition begins by showing the link between the practices of the seventies and the symptoms of change that were experienced during the second half of the eighties. Thus, after reexamining the notion of randomness or the ability to subtly alter reality, Pere Lluís Pla Buxó's *Epitomes*—diagrams that reread the history of art—are introduced, followed by Antonio Ortega's ironic pieces that play with the notion of the use of time. Then, Rafael Lamata and Jaime Vallaure's 35-minute-long video piece – which, incidentally, has the same duration as many of their own performances – outlines the basics of performance art while also reflecting on its codes, languages and strategies, including the criticism towards those who tried to turn the practice into as watertight and impermeable a space as the conventional practices it was attempting to overcome.

The next room allows us to experience how the scene was being perceived in real time by faithfully reconstructing the exhibition *Acción directa* (Direct Action), organised by Joan Casellas and based on his immense archive, Arxiu Aire, which he began compiling in 1992. The exhibition, which took place at the former headquarters of the Institut del Teatre as part of the Primavera Fotogràfica festival in 1996, displayed photographs of various artists in action, and showed how the scene was experienced from within.

A large mural created by Antonio Gagliano articulates the following room, as it reflects on the developments of that decade, condensing the experiences of dozens of festivals, in addition to the programmes of multiple self-managed initiatives throughout the country. It displays a large part of the experiences of the time, from Oscar Abril Ascaso's *Low-Tech Music* to Nieves Correa's tours of Barcelona; from Borja Zabala's sober and powerful work to Cabello/Carceller's critical vision of those who ignore political minorities. This itinerary culminates in two pieces that lead us towards silence: the sophisticated work of Tres, on route to the absolute void, and the large-format installation by José Antonio Sarmiento, made up of 180 radios tuned in to all the stations in the city, until they become completely silenced.

The exhibition ends with a room shared by three different experiences. The first is by Tere Recarens, an artist who throughout her career welcomed the fusion between art and life, and shows documentation of various projects alongside her participatory piece *La gallinita ciega* (Blind Man's Buff). The others are by two separate collectives. Los Rinos, formed in Barcelona by Marcel·lí Antúnez, Sergio Caballero and Pau Nubiola, were active between 1985 and 1992. Originating from the graffiti scene, and after having covered the city's walls with their trademark bullseyes, they also dedicated themselves to action, music and the publication of a magazine, becoming an unclassifiable, punk-inspired counterpoint. Circo Interior Bruto, formed in Madrid in 1999 by a dozen members, expanded its activity to all types of experimental formats. In the exhibition they present a live experience of their creative process through the continuous activation of an open creative laboratory.

Finally, under the title *An Implicit Commitment*, the exhibition *Action: A Provisional History of the 90s* brings together a set of interviews with artists and participants from that period, which allow us to reexamine some of the practices and attitudes of the 90s' art context, as well as to situate these experiences in relation to the present. The interviews emphasise orality as one of the most appropriate preservation methods for performance, and facilitate a direct dialogue with its creators to review what should be the expanded ways of approaching, case by case, the preservation and presentation of these practices.

Exhibition organised and produced by the MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and co-organised by l'Internationale.

Curated by

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l'internationale OUR MANY EUROPE

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Performances and Activations

Activations of some of the exhibited pieces, as well as actions related to the exhibition, will be carried out periodically. Check the schedules on macba.cat.

Continuous Actions

- *Demostración práctica del funcionamiento del programa LTM* (Practical Demonstration of the Functioning of the LTM Programme, 2020), by **Oscar Abril Ascaso**
- Creative workshop by **Circo Interior Bruto**

More information regarding the schedule of the activations by the artists on macba.cat.

Opening times

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 11 am to 7:30 pm
(from 25 June to 24 September, from 10 am to 8 pm)
Tuesday closed
(except for public holidays)
Saturday, 10 am to 8 pm
Sunday and public holidays, 10 am to 3 pm

Every Saturday, from 4 to 8 pm, entrance to the Museum is free.

The Museum entry ticket is valid for a month.
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