

The Poetics of Resistance

Teresa Grandas

The question of space and the spectator

Àngels Ribé's artistic career begins at the end of the seventies, a period in which there was a clear change of aesthetic mode that would prove fundamental for the appearance of new forms of conceiving artistic practices. The associative or symbolic function of art was renegotiated; the work of art ceased to be an autonomous entity, which is how it had been conceived within the modern tradition, and its meaning now depended on its interaction with the spectator; thus there flourished a certain ambiguity and a multiplicity of references and readings that formed an integral part of the whole. In this context, traditional historiography has referred to certain artistic movements of the period, and specifically to Minimalism, from a stylistic and formal perspective: a biased viewpoint that has ignored underlying ideological motivations. Above all, this type of analysis has been based on a non-narrative reading of work, which has excluded any other type of meaning. If it is true the works that have been allowed to fall within the category of Minimalism follow a reductionist tendency as regards form and line, employing industrial materials and found objects, with subjective manipulation being all but non-existent, it should also be borne in mind that many of these artists thought of their works as being *engagé*. We are dealing here with an ongoing exploration of the relationship between artists and institutions, as well as with the hierarchies that govern them, the mechanisms involving one's relationship with the work, and various other aspects of a social and political nature. Artists like Robert Morris and Carl Andre, by reconsidering the traditional bond between the spectator and the object, stressed the open nature of their work and its democratic potential. That is to say, they incorporated a participatory element, through a fresh look at the approaches in which work could be presented. In this way, they aimed at eliminating the barriers separating them from the spectator, whom they addressed directly. In 1967, Michael Fried wrote his well-known essay 'Art and Objecthood',¹ in which he postulates a criticism of Minimalism, regarding it as literalist art in which an inherent feature is to be found that he calls *theatricality*. If it is the spectator's experimentation that restores meaning to the work, we are thus dealing with a changing experience, given that it depends on a space-time framework. The work therefore has need of the spectator's recognition, of their implication; its experimental potential is widened beyond the formal fact of the

1. *Artforum*, no. 6, June 1967.

work, trapping the spectator in a 'theatricalised' relationship, incorporating a phenomenological effect. The mediation or intervention of the spectator is what gives meaning to the work, while Fried defends an artistic concept predicated on the specific nature of the materials. There is nothing less than an antagonistic principle at the very base of modernity that is formulated around the work's self-referentiality. The concept of theatricality, of the textuality of the work, implies a narrative element. In this way, the work is to be understood as a discursive, active space that reaches out to a public space. Anne Rorimer summarises it thus: 'In a re-evaluation of the autonomous object, these otherwise disparate artists bodily and/or thematically incorporate the viewing subject and integrate the subject of viewing into the subject matter of their work. Imbuing their work with psychological and/or social content, they obliterate the literal and conceptual border separating the spectator from the object of spectatorship.'² With this, reality is redefined in various – and, on occasion, even opposed – ways.³ In the same year in which Fried's text was published, 1967, the critic John Perreault wrote several articles about Minimalism and the reconsidering of the art object. In 'Union-Made: Report of a Phenomenon' he refers to the different attitudes that converge in Minimalism, and makes the following comment: 'Minimal art is really not as cold, boring, and inhuman as its opponents claim. Minimal Art is only cold if by "cold" we mean a minimum degree of self-expression. [...] Minimal Art, in spite of the polemics, is emotional, but the emotions and the experiences involved are new and unexpected. It must be remembered that the rational and the conceptual are also capable of evoking emotion. There is also the emotion and the aesthetic pleasure of efficiency and clarity and of surprising proportions.'⁴ Leaving aside considerations regarding the extent and implications of Minimalism, it remains certain that the latter has helped to reconsider the art object from a subjective, symbolic perspective, and Perreault's reading hits the nail on the head as regards this particular aspect. Angels Ribé produced her first work just two years after the publication of these texts, and in them one can see this moment of conflict. The works shown in this exhibition include some of the first pieces produced in Paris, in which a major feature is phenomenologically understood as objectuality (precisely the quality at the heart of Fried's criticism), and also includes those that work with dematerialisation and performance.⁵

The studies of urbanisation by Henri Lefebvre, one of the most influential intellectuals of the seventies, conceive of the city as a social space. Precisely in that decade, in the course of numerous essays, he studied everyday life and hurled

2. Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s. Redefining Reality*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, pp. 195–96.

3. Meyer argues that Minimalism was a space in which occasionally opposing practices converged, contrary to the 'cohesive' movement described in traditional historiography. See: James Meyer, *Minimalism. Art and Polemics in the Sixties*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.

4. See *Arts Magazine*, March 1967, an issue titled 'A Minimal Future?'; which, on its cover, used an image from *Tetra City* by Buckminster Fuller. The other articles appeared in *The Village Voice*, in January 1967, and *Art International*, in March 1967. They were published together in: Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art. A critical Anthology*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995. Ann Goldstein would later use the title of the special issue of *Arts Magazine* in an interesting revision of Minimalism in: *A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958–1968*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004.

5. The exhibition includes works from 1969 to 1984.

critical postulates at the impositions and conventions that restrict it. In his essay 'La production de l'espace', he breaks with the idea of space understood in geometrical and architectural terms, and proposes that space be regarded as a social category and a means of production. Space, then, is conceived as a *field* or *base* for action, and transcends not only that which is urban but also that which is artistic. Presented at the MACBA in 2000, the exhibition *Force Fields* already studied the work of art as a force field, as an expanding space. But throughout Lefevbre's thinking there is a social dimension that turns out to be especially interesting. Much of the work produced by artists during those years involved interventions in space that were not conceived as mere presentations of objects or works, but were located within a space manipulated by the artist, offering themselves to the spectator's experience to be used and penetrated. In other words, we are dealing with a space that acts not only as a physical container of the art object, but which intervenes in the very articulation of the latter, working on an epistemological level. As far as this is concerned, it is pertinent to return to Fried's criticism regarding a key work by Robert Morris, *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, 1965. In his mirror cubes, reflection generates a gap that rejects the hierarchical relationship between the work, the spectator and the space in which they converge; they incorporate their context semantically, they affect participation, and push one along, through them, allowing for a work in constant transformation. The first work by Àngels Ribé was moving in this direction, being work understood as a space of phenomenological experimentation.

In 1969 Ribé took part in *La Fête*,⁶ in Verderonne, near Paris, and created a circular labyrinth made from yellow transparent plastic.⁷ On that occasion, there was only one access point that functioned as both entrance and exit, implying a conditioned journey. Single-routed or single-tracked labyrinths oblige one to move along the route to get to the centre, using a single path, with no alternatives or forks, and no chance of getting lost. In the new version shown at MACBA, there are two access points and various possible paths to be taken, as in what are known as 'multi-route labyrinths'. That is to say, labyrinths with alternative routes in which the paths allow one to follow correct or incorrect paths, which may or may not lead to the exit. *Laberint* (1969) acts like an object that occupies space, like a participative sculpture exploring corporality. The spectator's action modifies the space, which is constantly being redistributed. Àngels Ribé would tackle the intervention of the body later, with her installations and performances: on the one hand, basing herself on the use of space and the direct participation

6. *La Fête* was one of the acts organised in the Château of Verderonne during this period, and in which also some Cerimonials of Antoni Miralda, Jaume Xifra, Dorothee Selz and Joan Rabascall were held.

7. The labyrinth is an architectural device that has appeared throughout history in different forms and with different connotations, and which was then used symbolically or formally in different contexts. Of interest is *The Spiral Labyrinth* (1963), by the Scandinavian Situationist group Co-Ritus. For his part, Frank Popper remarks on its presence in what he called 'pluri-artistic environments': pointing, for example to Nusborg's kinetic labyrinth *Hier-Aujourd'hui-Demain* (1967), or a project by the Dvizjenie group, from 1970, a kinetic environment in which, as with labyrinths, the spectator must follow an established route. See: Frank Popper: *Art, action et participation. L'artiste et la créativité aujourd'hui*. Paris: Kinksich, 1985.

of the spectator; on the other, using cardinal points as abstract coordinates of position and orientation that situate us in a specific place. Both the labyrinth as well as the space into which it has been incorporated (in this case, an exhibition room) is transformed by the material used. Thus, the plastic of which it is made contrasts with the usual labyrinthine opacity that makes it impossible to guess or imagine what is going on the other side (and which makes it difficult to find the exit). At the same time, the use of the plastic reinforces her criticisms of traditional materials, whether those used for sculpture or for art in general. If, symbolically, the labyrinth implies a revelation and is linked to initiation rites, to the vital passage that forms us as individuals, this journey may also be understood as one of loss. This said, here we are closer to Borges's vision of the labyrinth as a symbol of perplexity. The itinerary that Àngels Ribé suggests to us by using soft, transparent walls, breaks with the uncertainty of labyrinthine twisting and turning and also with the solitude that usually accompanies it. This labyrinth makes us take part in the choices of other people: activity is not confined to that of a single individual, but emerges in the relationship with the people inside or who are observing the labyrinth from outside. Thus the collective, participatory nature of the piece is essential. Loss or disorientation gives way to a sense of play, to an invitation to experiment, and to a sensorial and rational passage. To a certain extent, the sculpture *Acció al parc* (1969), created that same year with an air duct tube for aeroplanes, follows similar lines. She sited a section of this tube in the children's play area of the Montrouge Park in Paris, then photographed the way in which children handled and incorporated it playfully into their games. In contrast to the static notion of traditional fixed, unmoving sculpture, she proposes not only the possibility, but the need to handle the object in order for it to have meaning; the implicit need to interact with it using a principle of controlled mobility. On the other hand, there is no single result, given that the handling of the piece in itself gives rise to a variety of shapes. Both pieces are examples of work that refutes the modern tradition. They consist of socialising experiences involving the integration of the spectators, through which they question their role and are invited to intervene. The art object is transformed into an integrationist space that goes beyond traditional limits. The participation of the spectators is what activates the meaning of the object, poetically.

The de-emphasising of the object

As Morris's cubes reveal, with the use of alternative supports and procedures, changes in the practice and perception of artistic work led to a loss of the concept of authority, as it had been understood up until then, applied to matters such as authorship, the work, its authenticity, its institutionalisation, and even exhibitions and the way to exhibit work. Traditional materials were substituted

by a great variety of methods and media in which the idea or message was foremost, as was the dematerialisation of the object. Anne Rorimer⁸ has listed them thus: photography, as a system for restructuring the pictorial, and video, with the appearance of portable systems; the use of metalinguistic codes, that is to say, of language as a medium or representation – or what Rorimer calls ‘the medium as message/the message as medium’; communication, systems or forms of organisation; sequencibility and seriality; the subject as object, based on the integration of the spectator in the very production of the meaning of the work; the pieces of *environmental art* in which the specific context is conceived as the space and time in which the work is set. In all these cases, the conventional criteria of perception, reception and meaning of the work of art are altered. The restructuring of perception and the relationship between the process of production and the work itself, put off formal questions regarding physical presence and the object, composition or technique, to give way to information or communications systems. In the case of Àngels Ribé, language and geometry, the relationship between abstract thought and nature, are recurring elements.

The critic John Perreault was the driving force behind a special issue of *TriQuarterly* magazine, dedicated to ‘Anti-Object Art’, in which Ribé took part.⁹ It aimed to show that a significant part of recent artistic production was based on the premise that an idea is more important than its realisation. Several years had gone by since Perreault’s reflections in *Arts Magazine*, and, going beyond any attempt at classification, he remarked that the physical or visible expression of the idea lacked importance compared to the idea itself. Having gone beyond notions inherent in art’s modern condition, many artists of the time not only questioned these notions, but also any other that lent support to said visibility, intrinsic to the artistic condition. ‘The content of *TriQuarterly* is not “about” art, but is art in itself... By using the name anti-object art or non-object art I am trying to define a trend rather than baptising or rebaptising a movement.’ Perreault’s proposal remains significant and brought together a highly interesting group of artists who, in his opinion, produced anti-object or non-object works, opting for the dematerialisation of art or its de-objectification, ‘the de-emphasis of materiality’. Going beyond the facts concerning what type of pieces they were or which materials they used, he stressed that this type of work dealt in *anti-commodity objects*, creating attitudes rather than a given style. In Perreault’s analysis, despite being based on materiality, he transcends the merely formal and correctly diagnoses a series of attitudes that depart from the modern artistic tradition. Although it is true that he acts more as a barometer than as an analyst of the system, it is interesting that he produced an issue of the magazine that was designed as a portable exhibition, never presented within a conventional context, which spectators could carry in their pocket and which ended, as an

8. Op. cit.

9. *TriQuarterly*, no. 32, winter 1975. With contributions by artists like Lawrence Weiner, Agnes Denes, Douglas Huebler, John Baldessari, Vito Acconci, Hans Haacke, Eleanor Antin, Adrian Piper, Sol LeWitt, Robert Smithson, Joseph Kosuth and Daniel Buren, making a total of 35 artists in all.

experience, once the page was turned. Of Àngels Ribé's work, it included *Light Interaction* and *Wind Interaction* (1973), pieces that had earlier been shown at the exhibition *Outdoors-Indoors* at the Evanston Arts Center in Chicago (July 1973). In this action a lamp and a fan are placed in an open space on a grass surface for 24 hours. In this way it is possible to perceive how artificial and natural light interact, and how natural air and artificially generated air cohabit the same space. Certain artificial phenomena, in this case the emission of light from a bulb and air from a fan, confront their natural counterparts: solar light and wind. Defined by the artist as the objectification of an artificial phenomenon (blown air) and of its interaction with a natural phenomenon (the wind), these works question concepts such as its monumentality or durability. They were not produced in a conventional space, such as a gallery or an institution, and have to do with the paradox involved in the relationship between the same effect (light or air) and their transcendence or interaction depending on whether they have a natural or artificial source. Years later, she transformed this proposal into a real experience in the installation *The Best Way of Expressing It*.¹⁰ In this case, the event wishes to provoke not only a sensorial experience, but also an emotion. The piece consists of a fan on the floor aimed at a plumb line that remains still, given that it has been placed at a distance at which it is not affected by the air from the fan. The plumb line, made taut by the force of gravity, marks a vertical line. The breeze creates an invisible but perceptible angle in that space in such a way that geometry converts it into a sensorial phenomenon. The words that describe it (*The Best Way of Expressing It*) are an indication of Ribé's conviction that certain things can only be expressed through the medium of art. Language, be it verbal, sensorial, gestural, based on a suggestion or on an impossibility, makes for possible communication and the frustrations this can generate. On another level of decontextualisation are the works made with foam in 1969, in which this ephemeral material is placed in unusual contexts. Either in seawater or on a partition wall, its change of place has semantic connotations that upset its conventional meaning. In 1973 Ribé photographed various elements that, in isolation or by association, and precisely because they are decontextualised, can relate to each other. These are images of footsteps, irruptions, traces or proof of absence itself. There are no human figures nor elements to provide us with a scale reference, which makes it possible to establish conceptual associations of different kinds. These works map out a cartography of possibilities for decontextualisation, transfer or association, extended through other works produced in this period. If in *Light Interaction* and *Wind Interaction* she showed us the interference of two sources of energy outside their usual context, in the three photographs of *Intersecció de llum*, *Intersecció de pluja*¹¹ and *Intersecció d'onada* (1969) she uses a different method. The images show the interaction

10. The installation was shown in the space run by Alanna Heiss in the Clocktower Gallery, as part of the *Ideas at the Idea Warehouse* exhibition, organised by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources in New York in 1975.

11. This work was shown in *Prospectiva'74*, curated by Walter Zanini in the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo, 16 August – 16 September 1974. The show brought together about 150 artists from different countries.

of these elements in a natural space, and their dependence on random and transitory factors. These images provide evidence of that which is hidden, the energy and day-to-day events not normally taken into consideration. They establish a connotative element, they reveal situations that would otherwise be inoperative. This static iconography is shown in sequence form in *Accumulation – Integration* (1973/2001), by means of six photographs that recount a process of transfer: that of transporting water artificially by means of a hose to its logical natural space, the sea, and in which two different natural elements are merged: fresh and salt water. This duality also expresses ambiguity. It consists, too, of a changing experience in space, which denies the idea of representation as a stable and unique fact, and which corroborates the process of dematerialisation. These images do not work in a dramatic fashion, but rather stress their experimental, phenomenological aspects. The narrative of a path taken continues in *Transport d'un raig de llum* (1972),¹² an action designed to be filmed, and which consisted of transporting light reflected in a mirror by means of the movement of her body, diagonally crossing the space. In the case of *Two Main Subjective Points on an Objective Trajectory* (1975), a series of photographs shows the return journey along the Williamsburg Bridge, in New York, starting from two subjective points and involving an objective displacement decided upon by the artist.

In 1967, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler¹³ spoke of an 'ultra conceptual' art that stressed mental processes and which was orientated in two different directions: art as idea and art as action. 'In the first case, material is denied, given that sensation has been converted into an idea; in the second case, material has been converted into energy and movement through time.'¹⁴ Lippard and Chandler's statement is opportune not only as regards those works of Àngels Ribé produced since the end of the sixties, but also as regards that of many other earlier artists, from America as well as Latin America and Europe, including artists from Eastern Europe. In Ribé's work, one can appreciate her interest in the poetical logic of perception, be it verbal or mathematical. In this sense, the appearance and use of geometry is frequent in her work, in the study of figures on a plane or in space. Be it by means of an installation, of film or through her performances, her relationship with space is established primarily through her own body. In the three different pieces titled *3 punts*, produced between 1970 and 1973, or in the film *Triangle* (1978), geometrical forms are created using body or movement, much as her body was able to transport light in the action *Transport d'un raig*

12. Action performed in August 1972, as part of the second show of *1.219 m³*, in the courtyard of the Muntadas family home in Vilanova de la Roca. In the first edition, during the month of June, those taking part were Francesc Abad, Jordi Benito, Alberto Corazón, Miquel Cunyat, Ferran García Sevilla, Robert Llimós, Muntadas, Carlos Pazos and Ponsati. In the following show, which took place in August, together with Àngels Ribé those taking part were Alicia Fingerhut, Olga Pijuan, Manel Rovira, Jaume Sans and Carles Santos.

13. See: 'The Dematerialization of Art', *Art International*, February 1968.

14. Lucy Lippard, *Seis años: La desmaterialización del objeto artístico de 1966 a 1972* (1973). Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 2004, p. 81. English edition: *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Object from 1966 to 1972*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977.

de llum. In the case of the installation *E la forma* (1979) light initially penetrated into a darkened room through a transparent photographic image of the artist that covered a window (later converted into a light box). The gesturing of the artist herself, the movement of her body, is what occupies the space. The same applies with the images in *Invisible Geometry* (1973): if in the one case it is the symmetry created by the movement of the eye from left to right that forms a kind of geometrical sculpture, in the other it is the movement of the camera in front of a single image that creates a greater tension of geometrical perception.

Shared space

The new ways of understanding artistic activity are closely linked to alternative spaces. During these years, systems for divulging and disseminating such work internationally appear on the scene, through media such as mail art or exhibitions of reproducible works of art. This is the case with *Arte de sistemas*, or the various editions of Encuentros Internacionales de Video, in various cities around the world, organised by the Argentinean Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) on the initiative of Jorge Glusberg who invited artists from different European and American countries; Àngels Ribé took part in five of these shows between 1975 and 1976.¹⁵ Beginning in the mid-seventies there appeared various associations, forms of organisation and alternative spaces, with the common aim of handling proposals put forward by such artists. Especially interesting – as an attempt at economic and social contextualisation of the new artistic practices and their structures – is the study headed by Julie Ault, *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985*,¹⁶ within the framework of which she presents a cartography of the groups and alternative spaces, artists' cooperatives or autonomous spaces that started to appear in New York City from the second half of the sixties, and which burgeoned in the seventies and dynamited the city's artistic and cultural scene until the mid-eighties. This type of venue appeared all over the country, as was the case with the Chicago-based N.A.M.E. Gallery, which became a hub for the city's first Conceptual exhibitions, and for which Àngels Ribé created an installation in 1973 and a performance the following year. If the artistic context was a response to the commercialisation of art based on new forms of creation, production and distribution, it was also a response to the wish of artists to control the means of circulation and use of their work. In Ault's study we can find some of the spaces in which Àngels Ribé presented her work during her long stay in

15. There were various editions of the Encuentros Internacionales de Video, which were presented in different cities, such as Paris, Ferrara and Buenos Aires. In February 1977 they were held at the Joan Miró Foundation, Barcelona. Antoni Muntadas, Joan Rabascall, Jaume Xifra, Eugeni Bonet, Eulàlia Grau, Francesc Torres, Juan Navarro Baldeweg, Carles Pujol and Manel Valls are some of the artists from Spain who presented work there. Àngels Ribé took part with the video of the performance *Stimulus – Reaction*.

16. The project started with the exhibition organised by Julie Ault, *Cultural Economics. Histories from the Alternative Arts Movement*, shown at The Drawing Center, 1996, by way of an approximation to the artistic scene in New York from the mid-seventies through to the mid-eighties. In 2002 Ault published *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985*, in which she quoted the above-mentioned essay 'A Chronology of Selected Structures, Spaces, Artists' Groups, and Organizations in New York, 1965–1985'. This essay was also printed in a special issue (no. 15-16, 2010) of the magazine *Brumaria*, dedicated to the AWC-Art Workers Coalition.

the United States, between 1972 and 1980.¹⁷ To give just a few examples, one of those venues in which she was involved was the gallery at 3 Mercer Street, Store, opened in 1973 by Stefan Eins, and which remained active until 1977; and there, in 1975 she presented her work *Two Main Subjective Points on an Objective Trajectory*. Also, in 1979 she displayed the installation *E la forma*, this time in the Franklin Furnace, founded in 1976 by the artist Martha Wilson. Another emblematic space was 112 Greene Street,¹⁸ run by Jeffrey Lew and operative between 1970 and 1978. Here she presented the installation *Work is the Effort Against Resistance* (1976), one of her most politically referenced works, and, as such, somewhat unusual within her work as a whole.¹⁹ Struggle, elements of power and the fragile line which separates them, live side by side with an insistence on making an effort on all fronts to achieve something, whether within the field of politics, psychology or of any other kind. In this and other works of the same name, although they are independent of each other, she uses a physical definition of work as an effort against resistance, as a base. For the exhibition *Style and Process*²⁰ organised by Marina Urbach in May 1976 at the Fine Arts Building in New York, Ribé presented two works, also titled *Work is the Effort Against Resistance*. Part of the installation consists of a film loop of the artist running, together with a recording that repeats a text about utopia, in front of a mirror that has been stained red. The impossibility of achievement, intrinsic to the very concept of utopia, is made clear in the image of an endless race, leading nowhere. The second version was developed in a different environment: a white circle on the floor defined a space, in the middle of which were a pair of headphones. Through these an extract was read from a text about Greek history stating that the culture and character of a country is a direct consequence of its geography. It reflects an irrational determinism, the idealisation of the

17. From 1966 until 1969 Àngels Ribé lived in Paris. In 1972 she moved to Chicago, where she stayed for some time, and at the end of 1973 she moved to New York, a city in which she lived until 1980, when she returned to Barcelona.

18. In 1980 this space became White Columns. In the second issue of the magazine *Avalanche* (winter 1971, pp. 12–13) an interview by Alan Saret and Jeffrey Lew was published in which they explain the process of creation of this space, as one adaptable to different types of works. *Avalanche* was one of the most influential magazines of the period and aired the artistic processes then underway: the transition from Minimalist art to performance, together with the incorporation of new media such as video. It appeared in autumn 1970 and was published in magazine format until 1973, and in bulletin format from May/June 1974 until summer 1976. Run by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Bear, it dealt with American artistic activity, and above all, the New York scene. No. 11, summer 1975, announced the forthcoming issue of the magazine *TriQuarterly* dedicated to 'Anti-object art', a monograph put together by John Perreault and to which Àngels Ribé contributed.

19. Made up of a large variety of elements, newspaper images appeared of the May'68 demonstrations and the death of Franco, the biblical image of David and Goliath, the text by Albert Memmi called 'The Colonizer and the Colonized', black and white photographs of feet on the shoreline or the remains of a bunker on the beach, images of pots of food, colour photographs of landscapes, together with a hammer and a heated stove as indicators of an urge to make an effort, and a circle of white letters on the floor that make up the sentence, 'The Point of Reference'.

20. Among those taking part were Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci, Jacki Apple, Cecile Abish, Barbara Bloom, Jonathan Borofsky, Mary Beth Edelson, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris, Àngels Ribé, Dennis Oppenheim, Hannah Wilke and Martha Wilson. Marina Urbach describes all the participants as having the following common trait: '[...] in one way or another they deal with simultaneity, multiplicity and the subversion of frontalness.' For her part, Lucy Lippard, in her contribution to the catalogue, sees fragmentation as the common trait of these artists, understood not in a negative sense, but rather as '[...] a way of pointing to the existence of a network, a web of barely visible connections and meanings and associations both visual and verbal'.

past in contrast to the absurdity of the present situation (in this case, the Greek dictatorship), in which the headphones become a monument to modernity. One final work that shares this same title was the homage to the artist Charlotte Moorman, who organised the Annual Avant-garde Festival of New York, in which Ribé participated on two successive occasions.

At the beginning of this text, it seemed opportune to refer to the basis of Michael Fried's criticism of Minimalism, precisely because it diminishes the narrative potential of the artistic object. It is its *theatricality* – the highlighting of space-time as a determining factor within which it is developed and the importance of the reading or intervention provided by the spectator – that allows one to understand the wealth of proposals of such works and their evolution towards performance. In the works of Àngels Ribé the artist's body intervenes in the definition of the action. In the case of the performance, the work no longer seeks to make an artistic entity of the object, but is rather the presence of both the artist and the spectator, who incorporate a subjective factor into the development of an action taking place within the marked limits of space and time. We are dealing here, then, with a displacement of the meaning of the art object onto experience itself, a process of de-objectification of art, of de-emphasis. It is, in fact, an attempt to understand the work as something not necessarily durable, to transfer the quality of the art object to the non-material or ephemeral and to deny its objectuality, its monumentality. If Ribé first investigated the idea of the object using transgression, together with certain materials and dislocating their relationship with a natural space, she soon transfers the object into gallery interiors in the form of 'installations' in which the presence of the artist is suggested using elements such as photographs, sound, video, texts, objects, etc. The need to establish direct communication urges her to investigate and experiment with human behaviour and her own function as an artist in particular. Hence works such as *E la forma*, or performances, in which Ribé admits: 'I used my knowledge of psychology as much as I did intuitions, dreams, memories and personal experiences.'

Before dealing with the performances, let us briefly consider the installation *North – South – East – West* (1973), presented at the *Chicago* exhibition in the N.A.M.E. Gallery. The gallery's L-shaped space was perfectly aligned along the axes of the four cardinal points, on which the urban layout of the city is based. Ribé marked the points indicating north, south, east and west in the gallery, and, in the central space, laid out a map of the city, upon which was indicated the exact spot where the gallery stood. Finally, she placed a compass on top, so as to corroborate the spot with relation to the cardinal points. In this case, the work differentiates itself from traditional concepts of sculpture and uses geometry to create a sculptural installation, in which representation and reality are combined.

This piece is linked to the performance *Perception of the Cardinality of Chicago*, presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago that same year. Although no documentation has been preserved, this performance had an objective component: the cardinal layout of the city, naturally, that is to say the parameters for ordering space. It also had a subjective component: a journey by car through Chicago, in which a personal orientation within the artist's perception of the city intervened. A year later she presented a series of four performances at the Vehicule Gallery in Montreal. Whereas in the first *Nord – Sud – Est – Ouest* there remained an interest in referentiality, positioning and a given demarcation, the subsequent ones relate to earlier works. In *Constatacion de la présence d'un volume immatériel* (1974), the same variables intervene as were used in *Light Interaction* and *Wind Interaction* (1973), although in this case the spectators' reactions are incorporated, as they redraw and pace around the fanned air. *Réel – Faux* (1974) is a performance defined by the artist as a statement of two different materialisations of reality: one in which a phone conversation was broadcast in real time, and the other, which immediately followed, in which a recording of the same conversation was played back. In *Stimulus – Reaction* (1974) she equated the reaction of a turtledove to the sound of its own recorded cooing, and the reaction of the public to the recorded sound of the hubbub made by a large crowd.

Contingency, the possibility that something might be happening or not, or the ephemeral element, are characteristic of these performances. Indeed, her first performance is related to her geometrical works, but includes a different parameter, that of gravity: in *Relation Between the Position of a Particular Body and Gravity* (1973) she shows the image of a raised and lowered hand, perceiving within it the dilation of the veins through sanguinary stasis. The photographs of this performance were presented in the magazine *Qüestions d'Art* (no. 28, 1974), as part of the 'Informació d'Art Concepte 1973 a Banyoles' by the Grup de Treball, of which Àngels Ribé was a member.²¹ On the 29 May 1977, a gathering called *Works to be Destroyed*²² was organised on the West Side Highway, in which various artists were invited to give a performance. Ribé presented the performance *Counting my Fingers*, in which, seated on the ground and concentrating, she counted the fingers of both hands aloud. When anybody approached her, she said 'When I've finished, I'll go' and started again. This was a loop-action, given that each interruption required her to begin again, thus preventing her from leaving. The phenomenological component seeks to make the ephemeral infinite, to combine two opposing natural elements. On the other hand, the impossibility of finishing, the realisation that one cannot leave, opens a sort of psychological breach that would remain a feature of her more introspective later works.

21. For more information on Àngels Ribé's work with this group see the *Grup de Treball* catalogue, Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (February-April 1999).

22. *Works to be Destroyed* took place on the West Side Highway, New York, 29 May 1977. Among the participants were Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Jacki Apple, Arman, Bill Beirne, Peter Berg, Terry Berkowitz, Jean Dupuy, Gordon Matta-Clark, Rita Myers, Dennis Oppenheim, Saul Ostrow, Lucio Pozzi, Àngels Ribé, Francesc Torres and Krzysztof Wodiczko.

Symbolic space. Ornamentation and painting

In 1979, while still living in New York, Ribé was commissioned to design a project for a teacher-training college in Sant Cugat del Vallès. She was interested by the idea of educating the way of seeing of those whose task was to educate. As a form of sculptural reflection, she created *Ornamentació*, a series of slides of ornamental forms, which make up the imaginary world of the urban surroundings. Casual discoveries are combined with an inventory or repertory of forms. Not long afterwards, she would repeat this process in New York, this time with photographs in black and white. In her work there are references to elements of a symbolic nature that can be ornamental, corporeal or immaterial. If she initially began to deal with the study and understanding of symbols, later what interested her were their forms, as she herself admitted, 'dispossessed of their content and function, as permanent vehicles of communication, able to go beyond their historical moment'. After a few years in which she investigated geometrical forms, she concentrated 'on the appearance of objects, on everything which is alien to their structure, which does not intervene in their function, that which is superimposed with the aim of embellishment and granting significance'. In the process of photographing and showing them as isolated elements, she provides them with their own structure, divorced from the entity to which they originally belonged, now converted into independent sculptural objects. In this work process, there intervenes not only an alteration of the way in which we perceive objects by means of their decontextualisation, but also the fact that our perception is also marked by repetition, combinations of elements and rhythm. To this extent, a clear connection can be established with certain works of embroidery in which the thread delineates symbolic writing. This particular use of needlework represents a shock to the cultural imaginary, which traditionally regards this as being a women-only task. Instead of presenting it, what's more, as something functional, she shows it to be an artistic event. In the sculptures of the eighties, she goes even further towards a symbiosis of media: sculpture as a support for painting (e.g. *Paisatge*, consisting of iron structures and neon lights); or the sculptural painting of wire mesh, in which painting has been extended beyond its own support and directly covers the wall. A year later, the drawings on highly fragile paper override conventional line drawing and become large strokes. The result is an outsize series of brushstrokes, which on occasion imply a loss of consistency when the strokes are repeated.

The public's space. Broken identity

If ornamentations reveal to us the presence of geometrical forms in our urban environment – they can do no less, given that geometry is present in the very

essence of nature – we discover another interesting geometrical proposal in the series of six photographs titled *Six Possibilities of Occupying a Given Space* (1973). In this work she uses the simple movements of fingers, which unite and separate from each other, and the combinatory possibilities that allow us to occupy the space, playing with the spaces in between the fingers. In this case, a simple, modest gesture has multiple perceptual and semantic possibilities. In relation to this piece, it is interesting to recall a work by the Italian artist Ketty La Rocca, *Le mie parole, e tu?* (1971–72). There are various versions, one of which – formally speaking the closest to that of Àngels Ribé – shows an open hand with the English pronoun *you* written several times; in each successive image, a further finger is hidden, so that by the end none is visible. Another version, however, turns out to be especially interesting: instead of the fingers moving, she keeps her hand (again with the word *you* written on it several times) palm up and with the fingers stretched open. As the sequence proceeds, a male hand covers a further finger each time, so that in the last of the six photographs it completely covers the fingers of the original female hand. The woman's hand disappears and the male hand alone remains, also with the word *you* written on the back. In this case, the interpellation of the woman is silenced, and it is the man who dominates the situation by means of his gesture. While this is formally close in approach to *Six Possibilities of Occupying a Given Space*, it is nonetheless true that conceptually it is closer to certain other works discussed later on. These are proposals that transcend the individual and involve the universal, given that they deal with timeless questions, referring as they do to the condition of women and revealing a moment of fragility and doubt.

Gender-identity politics, the mechanisms of the social consideration of the role attributed to women and the cultural prejudices that affect behavioural patterns were especially determining in that period with regard to the formation of movements and groups that demanded a repositioning of women's roles and the reformulation of social and political structures on the part of the powers that be. In France, in the years that Àngels Ribé lived in Paris, the Women's Liberation Movement was formed in the wake of the May '68 demonstrations, and did not think of itself as an organisation but rather as a non-hierarchical 'movement', in which there was not, and should not be, a group of leaders. In Paris, Ribé made contact with the *Le torchon brûle* group, but never became a militant as such, and nor did she when she reached the United States. Her feminism is an existential element that stimulates and transgresses, and blossoms in her work as a personal compromise, but without being militant. In the American context of the seventies a remarkable number of newly-formed groups were demanding civil rights, and feminist movements – using activism and social action, or working in their corresponding professions – insisted on changes in society's cultural

and political behaviour. Many artists took part in this identity-based need to take a stand as activists, but also as personal individuals who wished to reconsider their position intellectually, as both women and artists. The instrumentalised position of women and their social role, the mechanisms of power and submission, and their transcendence in the symbolic order of language and daily life was, and still is, marked by masculine clichés. The nature of representation and identity conditions a narrative structure that, in the case of the work of Àngels Ribé, is highly significant.

Lippard believes that the characteristics of what has come to be known as Conceptual art facilitated access to artistic production for many women: 'The inexpensive, ephemeral and unthreatening nature of conceptual media in themselves (video, performance, photography, narration, texts, happenings) encouraged women to take part, to enter through this crack made in the walls of the art world. With the public appearance of younger women artists in conceptual art, new themes and points of view emerged: narration, the allocation of roles, appearance, disguise, questions involving beauty and the body; attention was centred on fragmentation, relationships, autobiography, performance, daily life and, of course, feminist politics.²³ The marginalisation of women from the artistic process and its productive structures was, according to Lippard, what allowed this invisible barrier – which had always kept women away from autonomous activity, separated from masculine authority – to be broken down. As happened with the creation of artists' co-ops and alternative venues, these processes took place in the context of the deinstitutionalisation of the institutional and commercial systems of the art world, and allowed other proposals to be channelled through, which, in their turn, acted as intellectual and ideological alternatives to established art. 'Feminism', 'femininity' and 'the feminine' are cultural constructions that involve a political and social vision of identity or gender. Ribé, in some of her first exhibitions, was aware that being a woman artist was a disadvantage: which is why she signed her work 'A. Ribé', thus obscuring the forename and her female condition. On the one hand, it was a matter of avoiding possible conditioned readings and of ridding herself of any given connotations; on the other, it was about understanding that the fact of being a woman would bring more difficulties than advantages in the art world. Let us recall the 1988 manifesto of the Guerrilla Girls, 'The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist',²⁴ which a decade later pointed an ironic finger at the discrimination against women both inside and outside the world of art, and the difficulties they had in achieving professional recognition. In the case of Àngels Ribé, her works are more introspective, referring as they do to her own female condition and to all the social and ideological connotations that go with it, as well as the expectations it intrinsically arouses. These are the works produced in the seventies, when Ribé lived in the

23. Op. cit., p. 13.

24. The opening assertion is 'Working without the pressure of success'; it continues later 'Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood'.

United States, in a context in which the struggle for equality between the sexes was at its height. But in Spain, before Franco's death, any possibility of emancipation was monitored, due to strong pressure from both family and society. Women could not travel abroad, nor open bank accounts or a business without permission from their spouse or a parent. Women were brought up to do housework, were prepared for marriage and motherhood. In this oppressive atmosphere, women were given a secondary role, centred on domestic duties, never professional ones. Women only had a certain presence in the public sphere and the media, when questions to do with fashion and beauty were involved. That dark, suffocating atmosphere, lacking any intellectual potential, condemned many women to social ostracism. Years earlier, Carmen Laforet had conjured up this atmosphere in her book *Nada*. Set in a district of Barcelona in which families try to pretend that they are well off when they are anything but, they struggle to perpetuate a series of clichés that one young woman refuses to accept.

It is an equivalent to this powerful image that Àngels Ribé provided for the feminist magazine on art and politics, *Heresies*, which she titled *Stork-Woman. The Dryness and the Fullness of One's Existence* (1976). In the photograph, the artist is seen on the floor, her body curled into itself as she cradles an imaginary baby. In this case, motherhood has been imposed by the collective imagination. It contradicts reality, in the sense that at that moment – and even though her gesture contains a certain frustrated expectation – she didn't have any child. Ribé always uses her own body as a means of presenting such questions; she has recourse to self-representation and not to anonymous figurines. At the same time, however, her personal narrative is transferred to a symbolic level through the spectator's own experience, who, although on occasion is impelled to go through certain spaces, with these works needs to follow the narrative provided by the images in order to confer meaning.

Can't Go Home (1977) is an installation that takes a fresh look at the role of women as regards power structures, and further questions inherited conditioning. It reflects a moment of doubt, of the need to make both personal and professional decisions. Once again, it suggests the disadvantages of being both female and artist. *Can't Go Home* is a reflection on im/possibility, a reflection based on duality: memory, childhood, shock, fear, loss, dreaming, desire in opposition to repression, determinant social circumstances, oppression in the home and the making of identity. It contrasts past and future, reality and dream. In a dark room, a double slide projection shows two types of images that correspond to opposing worlds. Someone combs the artist's hair or gives her something to eat; an unseen, maternal figure, who acts as a conditioning presence and determines how and what the artist does. Elsewhere, she faces the wall as

if shamefully punished. She is unable to face us until she has atoned for what she has done (that Catholic exculpation of guilt, so typical of our own cultural imaginary), or until the 'punisher' decides the punishment has been sufficient. Ribé covers her face with plastic, thus suffocating the possibility of speech, of talking, of breathing, of seeing. These images refer to the three engravings, *El no dit, El no fet, El no vist* (1977), an approximation of the words of the three wise monkeys: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. We are dealing with an interpretation of wellbeing disconnected from the knowledge and questioning of reality. Hence too, the images of blindfolded eyes. It is not uncertainty but the conviction that it is better not to know, to keep certain things hidden, that produces happiness. Plastic covers her body and impedes visibility, mobility, in the same way that the cords restrain her or the mask painted on her face dilutes her identity and figuratively annuls any possibility of seeing or being seen. In other images in this work, she adopts the foetal position or makes the regressive gesture of sucking her thumb and so evokes a return to an impossible and immobilising infancy. Dependency on the maternal figure is not only present during the process of growing up, but is needed in order to subsist, together with the figure of masculine authority: the faceless man, in a suit, to whom she gives her hand not so much to be guided as in a form of submission to his dictates. From time to time an image is inserted of the artist trying to climb a slope that appears to have neither beginning nor end, with little more ambition than that of obtaining access to the unknown. This infinite climb refers back to the impossible action of counting the fingers of one hand, again and again. The gestures of each image, measured, contained and with no margin for possible action, make up the substratum of this return to the distant past of the first years of life, to the determinism imposed by society and family. In another image, she covers her ears with two books. On one side is *L'Anarchisme. De la doctrine à l'action* by Daniel Guérin, a libertarian utopia written in 1965: on the other, the essay *Psychology For The Fighting Man. What You Should Know About Yourself And Others*,²⁵ an analysis of psychological forms of control, of the application of force, and of panic, defeat, morale and leadership. On the one hand, we are dealing here with imagery that displays a suffocating and castrating environment: the ties of the past, the need to escape. This is, in fact, a statement regarding the need to leap, but with the conviction that this leap is one made into a vacuum, into uncertainty. On the other hand, it shows an attempt to understand, the possibility of fleeing and moving forward, of making a break with that which oppresses us, of flying: it is a representation of a dream and of a liberating world. To walk naked, without inhibition, through the snow, or to throw a stone, reinforcing the sensation of power and self-control. On the black walls of the room, written with white chalk that any spectator could wipe away, words and sentences insist on this double perspective: 'try to go back, memory', and at the same time, 'the

25. Carried out by the Committee of the National Research Council with the Collaboration of Science Service, USA, as a contribution to the war effort in 1943.

point of departure, flight'. Loudspeakers on either side talk to each other about difficulty and fear, and about when (something) might be. Finally, in the centre of the room a pedestal supports a glass beside which fall drops of water, which, therefore, never will fill it, like a sculpture of impossibility. Indeed, this work is a political statement as regards the possibility of action, of control of one's individual and social capabilities. Light does not imply only the possibility of flight, but also represents the creation of a personal and collective project separated from the ties of the past. Only two years had passed since Franco's death and Spain had just started its process of political transition, which would lead the country to build up a legitimating democratic project capable of leaving behind the legacy of forty years of dictatorship. The figures of authority and domestication, which had been regarded as parental ones, had become figures of dictatorial control in a suppressed and repressed country. A dream is not only an individual act, but is extendable to an entire country in need of developing and transforming itself.

Also in 1977, Ribé created the installation *Amagueu les nines que passen els lladres*, exhibited at Barcelona's Galeria G. It is made up of a dark space with two red spotlights in the centre, pointed at the floor, and two loudspeakers with two audio recordings. One stresses obedience, docility, dependence and discipline: the other, resistance conflict, passion and dreaming. The theme, once more, is the need to break away, to break through into other realities, hope in the face of what cannot or should not be done. 'Don't paint / Don't drink / Don't jump / Don't move / Don't look / Don't listen / Don't speak, don't speak, don't speak / Don't go up / Don't come down / Don't turn around / Don't sing / Don't tell / Don't speak / Don't think, don't think, don't think. / Don't suck / Don't whistle / Don't run / Don't run / Don't turn around / Don't blow / Don't laugh, don't laugh, don't laugh, don't laugh,' insists the voice. The orders and prohibitions are evocative of the images in *Can't Go Home* or the three previously mentioned engravings, which incite one to inaction. They are evocative of the paralysing blockage that conditions our behaviour, the social conventions that determine what is proper and correct; and what is expected of us, especially of women. They make up a possible ethics and morality, both of them arguable. All of this is confronted with desire and a need for change. 'I want, I want, I want, I want, I want, I want / I want, I want, I want, I want,' she blurts. Finally, a slide projection alternates images of her open, relaxed hands with those of the same hands tense, clenched or twisted. They reveal the two opposing realities, perhaps in a less explicit but possibly more poignant fashion than the previous work. If the wound in *Association. Cut: Interruption of the Skin's Continuity* was understood in terms of its medical significance as an interruption in the continuity of the skin, in these works it is expressed as more of a rupture, which afflicts and torments the soul. Earlier we saw how the work was an effort against resistance;

now we see two forces such that each makes the other impossible. Duality, a frequent theme in her work, is expressed here as an internal splitting, as a conflict of opposites: the tension of her hands expressing anguish in contrast to relaxation and hope. In the work of Ketty La Rocca, the masculine hand ended up dominating the situation and hiding the interpellation of the woman. This same duality between what we see and what we cannot see had already appeared in earlier works by Àngels Ribé, in which the journey, the process or the perspective allowed us to perceive that which had not initially been shown. Once again, duality appeared in geometrical works in which symmetry acts as the physical and conceptual axis (*Invisible Geometry 3*, 1973). Duality can be understood physically: as empty and filled space, or as light or as open air contrasted with corresponding artificial phenomena. But duality can also be psychological, as can be seen in these works, which confront dream and memory.

It is interesting to observe how the more introspective works, which indicate the devalued position of women, are perhaps those that best exemplify the social and political situation of our country throughout those years. It is true that the social construction of concepts such as 'gender' is a product of ideology, of fundamental ideas that are the backbone of a person's or a collective's thinking, but also of their day-to-day practice. To this extent, the political is not only that which concerns government, but is rather that which controls our behaviour in a collective context. The dual reality that has been pinpointed clearly by Àngels Ribé in these installations from 1977 is revealing not only of a fragmented and stigmatised feminine imaginary but also of a process of state building that, in fragile fashion, was trying to mediate between the burden of recent history and a different political imaginary. Social and cultural change should be made not only within the orbit of the individual, but that of the collective. In this sense, even though these works require the spectator to adopt a contemplative attitude – that of seeing and listening – they are also an invitation to action: even though it is not immediate, it is certainly crucial. They act on the emotions as powerful narratives, inseparable from a rational process. They act on a personal level and at the same time in a public space. They do not allow us to be passive, but rather force us to position ourselves before a given situation. In this sense, they are highly engaged political works, not only because they reveal, but also because they denounce unbearable situations. It is precisely this manifestation of a rupture in the social construction of women and of the individual that makes the need for the spectator to act – we are clearly called upon to do so – absolutely unequivocal.