

IF I CAN'T DANCE,
I DON'T WANT TO BE PART OF
YOUR REVOLUTION

AND

BULEGOA Z/B

IN CONVERSATION

As part of the programme Performance in Residence, If I Can't Dance has invited the newly founded office for art and knowledge Bulegoa z/b to investigate a case study performance from the oeuvre of Spanish artist ISIDORO VALCÁRCCEL MEDINA. *Study of a Mobile Object in Space and Time: a visit by Isidoro Valcárcel Medina*, takes place at between theater in Amsterdam on Friday 18 February 2011 at 18:00 hrs. During the evening, Bulegoa z/b will talk with Valcárcel Medina and together they will present his work.

Isidoro Valcárcel Medina (Murcia, 1937) is an important representative of conceptual art in Spain, whose body of work includes performances, sound pieces, architectural projects, installations and books. From his early practice up to the present day he has asserted a critical attitude towards both art institutions and the art market.

Bulegoa z/b is a collaborative initiative based in Bilbao, Spain. Its members, Beatriz Cavia, Miren Jaio, Isabel de Navarán and Leire Vergara come from backgrounds in visual arts, choreography and social theory. Their initiative, an 'office for art and knowledge' is created around a common interest in processes of historicization, cultural translation, performativity, the body, postcolonialism, social theory, archival strategies and education. Their varied professional backgrounds allow for a myriad of methodologies within their many projects. This interview with Bulegoa z/b and If I Can't Dance presents their research interests and is an introduction to the practice of Isidoro Valcárcel Medina.

If I Can't Dance first heard about Isidoro Valcárcel Medina through our collaborations with artists from the Basque region, such as Jon Mikel Euba, and through our previous collaborations with Miren Jaio and Leire Vergara in the context of our Masquerade edition in 2008-2009. Their accounts of his work fed our curiosity and we have now developed this interest into a research project. Valcárcel Medina's artistic output is extremely diverse, not least because his practice spans four decades. Can you explain what your relationship is to him and how would you typify his practice?

We only recently met Isidoro Valcárcel Medina. We came into contact with him at *Sí vas, escríbeme a la legada (If you leave, write me when you get there)*, a group show that was part of Periferiak07, in sala rekalde contemporary art space in Bilbao in 2007. After that, we invited him to devise a project for sala rekalde, but that didn't make it to production. If I Can't Dance has offered us a second opportunity to work with him.

His work is extensive, rich and resistant to classification. It is a particularly idiosyncratic practice, which has remained ideologically consistent even as it has journeyed through minimalism, conceptualism, concrete poetry and participatory art. This resistance to categorization lies in his reluctance to 'play the game of consolidated language' and to escape all rules or 'creative morale's'. Each project is a specific proposal and is also a critical reflection on artistic behaviour in connection with the moment. As he likes to say, art is just an 'example', a 'verbigracia', an 'attitude.' (Before we go on, we would like to say that, with his approval, we will now quote Valcárcel Medina abundantly. It is impossible not to do so, since language is his medium, and he expresses himself so precisely.)

PRESENTATION

Study of a Mobile Object in Space and Time: a visit by Isidoro Valcárcel Medina to Bulegoa z/b
Thursday, 3 February, 2011 - 19:00 hrs
Bulegoa z/b
Solokoetxe 8 bajo,
48006 - Bilbao
Free entrance
www.bulegoa.org

Much of Valcárcel Medina's work engages with the public sphere and has a socio-political component. He often enters into a directly affective relation with his audience – for instance with the *I.V.M. Oficina de Gestión*, a 'management office' that he opened for a month in 1994 in Madrid, devoted to managing the public's ideas or with actions such as the one where he called up strangers to give them his telephone number, in case they might need it.

What would you say are the most, and least, successful works in this regard? And what kind of tools or strategies does he employ to address his public?

The participation of the audience, and their experience, have become two of the main concerns in Valcárcel Medina's work since he gave up painting in the '60s. That's when he started working on the *Ambientes* and the *Lugares* (the *Environments* and the *Places*), devices that replace the object with a place that must be occupied and vacated by the spectator. *A Continuación (Un relato en doce jornadas: lugares, sonidos, palabras) (To follow, a story in twelve journeys: places, sounds, words)* from 1970 shows this development. The exhibition went beyond the spatial limitations of the *place* (the gallery) and the temporal limitations of the exhibition: the continuously increasing sound meant one could only experience the complete exhibition by visiting the gallery every day. The *lugares* and *ambientes* bear witness to his conception of the spectator as an active agent who has to free himself from a conventional understanding of terms like participation or experimentation:

"I've always liked to demand an effort from spectators to take them out of the passivity that the art world determinedly provides."

An incident during the 1972 *Encuentros de Pamplona (Encounters in Pamplona)* made him aware of this interest. *Los Encuentros* was an exceptional art event from the last years of Franco's regime, and included work by John Cage, Steve Reich, Art & Language, Otílica, Kosuth, Weiner, André and many others. Valcárcel Medina installed *Estructuras tubulares (Tubular structures)*, in which pieces of industrial scaffolding were arranged in a way that hampered the pedestrian

As one of the representatives of conceptual art in Spain, Valcárcel Medina is surprisingly unknown outside the borders of his home country. It seems he is averse to promoting or commercializing his practice, and, much of his oeuvre is not object based. What would you say is Valcárcel Medina's position in the contemporary Spanish cultural context and why do you think he has always stayed 'below the radar' internationally?

trajectory of the Paseo Sarasate, the town's principal promenade. The piece was vandalized during the festival; it was not understood and provoked anger, which was not the interaction between the work and the audience he had been looking for. This piece, which failed in terms of 'democratic participation', marks a watershed in the artist's practice, and had an influence on later works, where the spectator is invited to participate in an unexpected way.

It is true that, unlike other Spanish conceptual artists, his work has gone almost unnoticed in the international field. One of the reasons for this may be his attitude of placing himself on the outside, not of art, but of its market. In the words of Díaz Cuyás, Valcárcel Medina is "a master of the very noble and difficult art of escape" and his art is "the art of small things".⁴ It's not that he hasn't done much. Quite the opposite, and as he told us on the phone, when he surprised us with a project he had already drafted for Performance in Residence:

"I'm incapable of not thinking. For me not to think, I need something else to occupy myself with. Involuntarily, I think... it is a personal vice".

Just as importantly, he hasn't kept much (he explains the destruction of most pre-1972 works by saying "they took up too much space") and he is not very interested in documenting ("keeping documentation is an activity that many, many times exceeds my capacity and my spirits"). His practice is governed by strict economic principles, according to which there is no place for the superfluous, only for the necessary. Since being invited to his home (he welcomes everyone with open arms), we have seen for ourselves that a lot is superfluous to him and just a few things are necessary.

We would like to quote an extract from the definition of 'production', part of a glossary he produced for us:

"Straightaway, the shadow of banknotes is presented to the person writing this. If it's necessary to produce, then produce and that's it. But, what if there is no need to produce? Well, it seems that then too production is imperative. The reign of the product (I think that's what production longs for) cannot hide, as happens, the predominance of its motivation. What I want to say is that in many cases we can do without production; but never without ideation."

He is very critical of the way the economy of the art world determines artistic production. 'The shadow of banknotes' refers to the production budget of a museum as some sort of menace to an artists' freedom. He often tells a story about how some years ago he was approached by the director of an important Spanish museum who offered him a salary, and asked him to budget the production costs. He answered €60 and the director responded that he had €60,000 to produce a show but not €60. The show didn't happen.

PRESENTATION

Study of a Mobile Object in Space and Time: a visit by Isidoro Valcárcel Medina
Friday 18 February 2011, 18:00 hrs
between theater
Van Diemenstraat 410
1013 CR Amsterdam
3rd floor
Bookings: +31 (0)20 62 69 291
Tickets: EUR 10 (EUR 5 students)
www.ificantdance.org

A(nother) difficulty in making Valcárcel Medina's work accessible to a public outside of Spain is the Spanish language barrier. His performances, sound pieces and writing are all in Spanish and there isn't much published on his work in English. Do issues of translatability and communication resonate in his practice?

The fact that his work is based on working with/on language and that he is persistently monolingual does explain much of the difficulty in transmitting his work. With monolingualism we do not only refer to the fact that Spanish is the only language that, to our knowledge, he uses, but that his use of language is of such a specific and precise nature that translation becomes very difficult if the artist himself is not the acting subject.

Valcárcel Medina has dealt with different forms of organizing and disorganizing signs and linguistic systems such as the dictionary, glossary, catalogue, survey, calendar, list or taxonomy. There is the action that took place in the streets of São Paulo in 1976 during his South American tour: during this action, the artist approached people holding a piece of paper with a question written in Portuguese asking them to write down a word in their own language. Using those terms and their translation as a starting point, he drew up the *El diccionario de la gente (The people's dictionary)*. Another example is *Viva Madrid que es la Corte (Long live Madrid where the Court is)*, his idiomatic manual for foreigners with cliché phrases in English and Spanish, written in 1992, when Madrid was European Capital of Culture.

In *Conversaciones telefónicas (Phone conversations)*, of 1973, the artist recorded eighty phone calls to strangers, during which he explained that he was calling to offer his phone number. "But, why?" the person being called asks: "There is nothing to understand", answers Valcárcel Medina. These arbitrary and confused situations recall the 'broken phone' game, or Chinese Whispers, and show how acts of communication, even poor ones, can be productive. This piece is also an anachronism of course. It recalls a time when it was possible to receive messages sent by communication devices with more innocence than today.

His investigation of the lecture genre has also proved to be revealing. He approached it in the same way that he has other formats and systems, exhausting all its possibilities, penetrating its internal logic and exploding formal conventions. In *Indicios racionales de irracionalidad (Rational signs of irrationality)* held during the workshop *El fantasma y el esqueleto (The ghost and the skeleton)* in 2000 in Arteleku, the audience were left asking each other: "Did you understand anything? I didn't!". Valcárcel Medina answered that they did not understand anything because there was nothing to understand. He had tried to illustrate that "art cannot be taught" and that even in the most positive scenario there exists only "the possibility to learn".

The art world is nowadays much attuned to identifying 'blind spots' in art history. It has become popular practice to discover and claim formerly unrecognized artists, who are then granted cult status. What does Bulegoa z/b think of this development and what might Valcárcel Medina have to say about it?

As Valcárcel Medina states in the glossary he wrote for us, we are living in "the reign of the product". Art history is subjected

to this same reign, falling under a general dynamics of demand for the production and consumption of innovations. Within art, there is a special interest in 'discovery'. We all participate in this. When it is focused on peripheral regions, it recalls the exploratory spirit of the *Conquistadores*. It is aimed at generating new models of reading history that make the old ones outdated and, sometimes, it goes hand in hand with the conversion of some examples of conceptual practice into museum pieces with market value, something that these practices originally resisted.

But it would be too simplistic to read these processes in only negative terms. The re-reading to which art history is subjected contributes to the questioning of a discipline that is conventionally interpreted from a Eurocentric perspective. The art institution plays a fundamental role in these re-readings as a place that reinterprets the artistic past.

This obsession with finding blind spots in the past turns out to be even more problematic, precisely because the study object is the past and the past is, strictly speaking, a limited resource: if it didn't happen, it didn't happen. The searching is a sort of proof of the problematic relationship that we maintain with temporality in modern times. The perspective changes however, if, as an historian, you apply the logic of the magician's hat, from which an inexhaustible supply of historical rabbits can appear. Then the past becomes a stage for fantasy and invention. The result will not be part of history though, but of fiction, like those bestselling 'historic' novels.

We found the following words of Valcárcel Medina truly inspiring:

"Imagination hides a wealth which drives the world. It is not so much an artistic matter as it is evolutionary. Fantasy, on the other hand, tends to be infertile or folklorically productive, that's to say, it is useless for evolution."

If time and language underpin this artist's practice, it is because –despite his professed aversion to history– he understands that the "only thing that generates ideas, the material of the artist" is "the historic moment".

Regarding the opinion that Valcárcel Medina might have about all this, we think he witnesses it with the humour, sarcasm and the sceptical resignation that characterizes him. After having been around for years, it must be strange to now be 'discovered'. We would like to recall the text on the card that he sent us for New Year:

"2011. IVM APPRECIATES THE PASSAGE OF TIME".

We share the idea of archival research being able to reactivate documents of the past and present. A document cannot materially change, but the eyes that look at it do change; time always changes our perspective, and the document itself will also affect whoever looks at it. Therefore the image of the researcher of archival material as someone who deals with inert study objects is a bit of a cliché. We all have to negotiate images and documents every day, constantly managing the distance at which we keep them. This becomes evident in our perception of distancing, estrangement and dissociation regarding what surrounds us. Besides generating anxiety, understanding this way of seeing things can turn out to be very useful in a research context understood as an imaginative practice. It can be an instrument that, paradoxically, allows us to negotiate the temporal, recover a historical and critical sense and, with a bit of luck, soothe some of that anxiety.

The work of Valcárcel Medina is evidence of this transforming and reactivating capacity of research as imaginative practice. *2.000 d. de JC* (2001), for example, is a book that covers two thousand years of history through two thousand historically insignificant events, one per year and page, illustrating a coherent and rigorous methodology guided by the principle of "exploiting and exhausting the possibilities of the subject up to their logical conclusion". The book offers the reader the possibility of experiencing time in different ways. It is a receptacle of temporary spaces: two thousand years contained in the volume occupied in space; the five years that the artist dedicated to research, financed by subscribers; the number of hours needed to read the book in various ways (the whole two thousand years read in one sleepless night, a couple of years read in chronological order, single years randomly selected...).

WORKSHOP

Bulegoa and Isidoro Valcárcel Medina
Dutch Art Institute / MFA ArLEZ
Saturday 19 February 2011, 14:00 hrs
If I Can't Dance Office
Westerdok 606-608
1013 BV Amsterdam
This workshop is for students that are participating in the research project *Affect / Production* that If I Can't Dance coordinates at the Dutch Art Institute in 2010-2011 with tutor Phil Collins

Valcárcel Medina has quite a critical attitude towards documentation and has previously said that "memory itself is the best source of documentation, because if it fails, it is because there was no need to keep it". A recent exhibition of his work, *Come and Go* (Barcelona, Murcia, Granada, 2002-2003) was originally conceived as a retrospective, but the artist resisted this idea. Instead he made a new piece that consisted of three enormous filing cabinets containing records with keywords relating to his work and to other keywords and so on. The visitor could move physically as well as conceptually through the artists' oeuvre and perhaps also his mind. How do you think his motives for this show connect to his critical perspective on historical documentation and art institutions?

This exhibition emerged from Valcárcel Medina's reluctance to organize a conventional retrospective. This reluctance originates in the certainty that an artist has to respond to the 'historical moment' in which he has to live, and therefore the project should be presented, not as an act of resurrection, but as an act of creation, departing from the following question:

"How is it possible for the artist to organize a critical retrospective of himself? How is it possible, in having to handle old pieces, not to touch them up, and therefore, create a new piece of work?"⁵

The travelling exhibition was presented at three institutions, which allowed the artist to develop a piece 'in transit', an exhibition that mutated at each institutional stop. The huge filing cabinets hung from the ceiling, and contained information on

his work, and his personal thoughts and reflections. The project depicted many aspects of his practice, such as things that cannot be tackled: communication; escape; the frustration of the audience's expectations; archiving and un-archiving. Each institution received a specific permutation for exhibiting the cabinets.

Several of Valcárcel Medina's pieces reflect on institutions, like the art world, as systems and structures that determine contemporary ways of life. There is for example the series *Arquitectura premature (Prematura architecture)*, which takes shape out of architectural projects that have not been realized - *Edificio para parados (Building for the unemployed)*, *Torre para suicidas (The Tower for suicidal people)*, *Museo de la Ruina (The Museum of Ruins)* and so on. There is also the survey, undertaken during the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid in 1974, which asked 'Until when do you think museums of contemporary art will continue to be inaugurated?'

PARTNERS

Study of a Mobile Object in Space and Time
is a production of If I Can't Dance
in collaboration with hetevem theater
If I Can't Dance is financially supported by the
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We have extended the Performance in Residence invitation to Valcárcel Medina as well as to Bulegoa z/b, which means you will be working closely together with him on a case study. This research has thus become a collaboration between the three parties If I Can't Dance, Bulegoa z/b and Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, rather than making him the passive object of research.

Valcárcel Medina has indicated himself to be very critical towards certain concepts we aim to articulate in the Performance in Residence programme, such as 'archive', 'historization' and 'performance'. Could you tell something about the initial discussions you have had with him?

When we met in September, Bulegoa z/b was just starting up. We had just found a space and we were still discussing basic terms and concepts. Valcárcel Medina told us that the following month he was going to premiere an adaptation of *Seis personajes en busca de autor (Six Characters in Search of an Author)* by Pirandello. We started laughing.⁶ We felt a bit the same way: there were four of us, we had found an author, but we were still searching for a lot of other things. We read your proposal together with Valcárcel Medina and then went back to Bilbao with more doubts than when we left. Later on, we sent him this letter (he used to work for IBM, but we know that he does not use computers):

"(...) is it possible to think about a way of working which disturbs the assumption that a research starts from a static, predetermined and immovable relationship between subject and study object? (...) the subject-investigator is necessarily determined and affected by the study object and the process of investigation. The fact that in this case the study object is so clearly 'here and now' (...) requires rethinking the terms about what research is."

how can this Performance in Residence project with Isidoro Valcárcel Medina and If I Can't Dance help us to define Bulegoa z/b?"

"(...) we would like to invite you so you can give us your definition of the following terms (...):"

"FORM, KNOWLEDGE, EDUCATION, PRODUCTION, WRITING, INFORME, RESISTANCE, PERFORMANCE, ARCHIVE, DECLASSIFICATION, PRESENTATION, OFFICE FOR ART AND KNOWLEDGE."

Soon after, we received his answer by letter.

Endnotes

1. 'Valcárcel Medina al habla. Valcárcel Medina en conversación con José Díaz Cuyás y Nuria Enguita Mayo', in *Ir y venir de Valcárcel Medina*, Barcelona / Murcia / Granada: Fundació Antoni Tàpies / Comunidad Autónoma de la Región de Murcia / Centro José Guerrero, 2002.
2. All unsourced quotes by Valcárcel Medina come from conversations between the artist and Bulegoa z/b.
3. 'Entrevista con Isidoro Valcárcel Medina: La memoria es la mayor fuente de documentación', *Revista Sin título*, no1, Centro de Creación Experimental, Universidad Castilla La Mancha, 1994.
4. José Díaz Cuyás, 'Ir y venir', in *Ir y venir de Valcárcel Medina*, Barcelona / Murcia / Granada: Fundació Antoni Tàpies / Comunidad Autónoma de la Región de Murcia / Centro José Guerrero, 2002.
5. 'Valcárcel Medina al habla. Valcárcel Medina en conversación con José Díaz Cuyás y Nuria Enguita Mayo', op. cit.
6. 'Entrevista con Isidoro Valcárcel Medina: La memoria es la mayor fuente de documentación', op. cit.
7. 'Valcárcel Medina al habla. Valcárcel Medina en conversación con José Díaz Cuyás y Nuria Enguita Mayo', op. cit.
8. *Ibid.*
9. In Pirandello's play from 1921, six figures are introduced that claim they are unfinished characters in need of an author who can complete their story.