

I AM A PALACE / I AM A STABLE

26.04–01.09.2024



ANA LAURA ALÁEZ

B20

BETWEEN BIRTH AND DEATH

Frederic Montornés

Between birth and death runs the line of a life that, like ours, follows a path that is not flat, linear or lined with roses, and whose internal¹ struggle between opposites² is resolved through the realisation of one's evolution and the absolute certainty that we are going somewhere. This struggle between opposites to which Heraclitus³ refers so clearly, given that it implies movement, is the only real thing in the process of becoming.⁴ And the fact is that the bond that unites opposites is externalised in the visible universe. How? As a sort of permanent activity⁵ that, within the framework of a process of transformation,⁶ allows each thing to become its opposite and the identity of what is different to not be something particular but, precisely, "something different".

If nothing exists without its opposite,⁷ to what do we owe the harmony or unity of things themselves? To what do we owe our

1. Our human essence.

2. "Heraclitus of Ephesus (VI BC – V BC) claims that the very identity of things is their being different and opposed, their diversification and opposition to others, and he calls the opposition in which each of them consists and from which it is generated *war* (pólemos). What is identical in each reality is the very contrast of each thing with the others. Discordance, contrast and opposition are the same principle of concordance, harmony and unity of things themselves." As stated in the following article: <<https://elvuelodelalechuza.com/2015/03/19/heraclito-concordancia-de-los-contrarios/>>.

3. Also known as the pre-Socratic philosopher of change or as the obscure philosopher, due to the cryptic nature of his writings.

4. Becoming: the waters of a river that are constantly being renewed.

5. An "ever-living fire", says the man from Ephesus.

6. In other words, becoming.

7. Remember: no opposite can occur without the other.

Ana Laura Alález, *I Am a Palace / I Am a Stable (First Approach)*, 2024.
Inkjet print on Ilford Galerie Prestige Smooth Cotton Rag paper,
matt, 106 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist

moments of stability? To dialectics?⁸ To the existential debate we have with ourselves under the watchful eye of reason, our particular metronome? I have no idea. I only know that without it—reason, I mean—our feet would not touch the ground and we would float around. In space.

And the truth is, that is not a good plan.

Between a rock and a hard place runs the line of a life that, like ours, is opposed, discordant and permanently contrasted. Always, that is, between birth and death. It is a life that, in order to not die by impalement at the first sign of trouble, uses reason as a shield.

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If I had considered what I have written so far as a good starting point for the text for this exhibition by Ana Laura Aláez at Es Baluard Museu, or if, far from being satisfied with it, I had continued along the same path without being a philosopher or a thinker or someone versed in Heraclitus of Ephesus, I would have sunk into a swamp, having fanned the flames of a disaffected text, disguised as false knowledge and focused on discussing that which is beautiful and sinister in the artist's work, and not on the work she has been developing in search of the essence that condenses her personal and professional life,⁹ guided by her commitment to externalising its results—that is, to exposing herself once again—and closely accompanied¹⁰ by the author of this text.¹¹

If I had to begin again, having clarified my initial slip-up, I would do so in the following way:

“I Am a Palace / I Am a Stable” by Ana Laura Aláez is not (only) an exhibition, but a pause along the path in the process of reflection that the artist carries out based on the doubts and

certainities derived from the structural characteristics of an exhibition space,¹² as well as on the screams and silences with which she confronts them from the moment she chooses to explore its volume and the possible ways of traversing it through the lens of emptiness. Therefore, more than just an exhibition, what Aláez shows in Es Baluard Museu's Exhibition Hall B is an attempt to grasp the space as if she was collecting water with her open hands. In other words, a utopian/poetic experience bound to fail in the eyes of others, but intense and vivid for those who decide to dive in head first. To experience it firsthand.

If embarking on a task of these characteristics¹³ seems foolish to those for whom emptiness is an erratic concept¹⁴ condemned to wander aimlessly, then this is not the case when the person who undertakes it is a sculptor who came up in a precise period¹⁵ and context¹⁶ that, regardless of the memories and feelings they awaken in her,¹⁷ are the anchor that keeps her afloat and prevents her from

12. Exhibition Hall B in Es Baluard Museu, with a surface area of 168 m².

13. Namely: wanting to grasp, trap, capture, understand or penetrate the void.

14. If, from the physical point of view, the void is a space devoid of matter, from the emotional point of view it is the door to depression and the acute feeling of loneliness.

15. End of the 1980s.

16. The Basque Country.

17. “It is as if I never wanted this process to end, so that I can see my career in perspective and realise the turns it has taken and, above all, realise how painful a piece is when it is capable of reminding you of a comedown.” Fragment from the meeting with Ana Laura Aláez at the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao on the occasion of the presentation of her piece *Portadoras queer: el doble y la repetición* [Queer Carriers: The Double and Repetition]. In this fragment the artist refers to the effect that seeing her career has on her through the lens of her exhibition “Every Concert, Every Night, Completely Empty” at Azkuna Zentroa. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8aVoME_8rw>.

8. Discordance, contrast.

9. Since she began her artistic career, towards the end of the 1980s, Ana Laura Aláez has never done anything else.

10. Namely: physically, via phone, email, WhatsApp, photographs, videos or voice messages.

11. Me.

falling off the cliff we are when we are nonconformists¹⁸ and the blood that runs through our veins is anything but lukewarm.

Coming from an “anti-artistic, arid and almost cruel”¹⁹ environment, Ana Laura Aláez studied Fine Arts at the University of the Basque Country and was thrown back into the world, with all her peculiarities, following the time she spent in the workshops at Arteleku,²⁰ having accepted that “circumstances such as insecurity, a lack of means and no future can be as useful for creating as the best theories in the world”. Convinced that you only need yourself to push forward, Aláez became part of a generation of artists whose new way of understanding sculpture²¹ was determined by confronting the direct calls of life, beyond the influence that, from the 1950s until the arrival of the so-called New Basque

18. “I belong to a generation (the post-punk generation, the ‘no future’ generation) that was very much marked by a total rejection of culture. Culture was, in a way, the incarnation of power and oppression,” the artist herself states in her CV, as it appears on her website: <<http://www.analauraalaez.com/about-me/>>.

19. In the words of Txomin Badiola, in his text “Two or Three Things That Would Be Good to Know About Her”, written for the catalogue of “Sculpture Pavilion”, an exhibition by Ana Laura Aláez at the MUSAC in León in 2008. The work *Pabellón de Escultura* [Sculpture Pavilion] is part of the MUSAC Collection.

20. The artist herself confesses in the text referenced in footnote No. 19. Ángel Bados and Txomin Badiola, whom she met at Arteleku, are two very important figures in the artist’s life.

21. “Far from the *genius loci* and with an important change of paradigm in relation to the connection with what came next, which had permeated a large part of the artistic discourse in the decade that was coming to an end,” in the words of Francisco Javier San Martín in his article “Ana Laura Aláez: In Praise of Makeup”, published in issue No. 21 of *Zehar* magazine in 1993.

Sculpture,²² was exerted by two indisputable artists such as Jorge Oteiza and Eduardo Chillida. Two men.

As the artist herself says,²³ “Since the beginnings of my practice there are two parallel vectors that have always been present more or less explicitly: one, the mode of female presence in art, and two, the questioning of the plastic elements that have traditionally defined sculpture as an artform tied to notions basically considered masculine,²⁴ such as strength, hardness, the prevalence of physicality, a self-confident subject, etc., and their different re-evaluations at various points in my career.” On the basis of these two forces and the complicity of other artists of her generation, Ana Laura Aláez dedicates herself to the creation of

22. Two notes on New Basque Sculpture:

– New Basque Sculpture is the name given to the boost that sculpture experienced in the Basque Country in the 1980s at the hands of artists such as Ángel Bados, Txomin Badiola, Pello Irazu, María Luisa Fernández, Juan Luis Moraza, etc., stemming from the study of Oteiza as a sculptor and theorist, the influence of new international aesthetic trends and the willingness to put aside the materials and techniques linked to the local sculptural traditions.

– “The New Basque Sculpture embraced humour and irony, therefore placing itself in a more direct proximity to reality through a fluid conversation with forms and materials related to day-to-day experiences,” as Francisco Javier San Martín claims in the article referenced in footnote No. 21.

23. In her CV, referenced in footnote No. 18.

24. It is worth remembering that the contribution of women to the Spanish art scene in the 1980s—Susana Solano, Cristina Iglesias, Ángeles Marco, Menchu Lamas, among others—was associated with a type of activity based on aspects such as power and strength, usually related to masculinity. At first glance, the work of these artists did not differ from that of their male colleagues. This is something that changed from the 1990s onwards with the arrival of a new batch of artists who, far from producing work with hard and heavy materials—steel or cement in sculpture—or large formats and thick matter—in painting—adopted a more intimate posture by reducing formats, creating object-based work and using lighter, more flexible and unusual materials.

work which, through advocating for dialogue that is unprejudiced towards forms and materials, establishes a more direct relationship with reality, inexorably links itself to personal and everyday experiences, deeply breathes²⁵ the air of a present that is hot on its heels, systematically denies all sorts of conventions and, drawing on what is close at hand, translates into the representation of forms of social conduct. Ana Laura Aláez's work, rather than coming from a random factory of objects, is expelled from a body that feels, suffers and rebels itself.

It is a way—her way—of being in the world.

From the beginning of her artistic career, Ana Laura Aláez's work, instead of clinging to a stone, a steel plate, a trunk or a block of cement, is nourished by her vulnerability, because “only by negotiating from that position can one access those imaginary spaces where art is a fascinating place that brings together the best and worst of our nature”.²⁶ So rather than a material to chisel, weld, carve or forge, it is the listening to and observation of herself—meaning her existence, her body—what makes up the material on which she develops her work.

“More than being talented, I felt I could be seductive with very few resources,” “I have always expressed myself well through my attire.” These two statements by the artist²⁷ should not go unnoticed in order to understand that the reason the body is one of the main references in her work is because it has always been very clear to her that the body—her own body, the body

25. “I think that an artist has to express what is happening to them, because if your life changes, the concept you have of art changes as well. My need to return to sculpture is because I feel so lost that I need the imposition of things, of mass, of volume. The silence involved in working on a piece is comforting,” explains Ana Laura Aláez in the text referenced in footnote No. 19.

26. Bea Espejo maintains in her text “It OK If Nothing Explains Anything”, published in the catalogue of the exhibition “Every Concert, Every Night, Completely Empty”, presented at CA2M in Móstoles between 2019 and 2020 and at Azkuna Zentroa in Bilbao in 2021.

27. Published in the text referenced in footnote No. 19.



Ana Laura Aláez, *Mary Sex*, 1991. Wool and metal, 70 x 50 cm.
Courtesy of Juana de Aizpuru

of her sculpture work—is precisely the most suitable base²⁸ on which to display the material that shapes her thoughts, articulates her discourse or drives her to explore other ways of representing the person that lives inside her. But Ana Laura’s relationship with her own body is not only a question of her attitude towards life, it is the food that nourishes her artistic practice.²⁹

I do not think anyone can doubt that if there is one piece in Ana Laura Aláez’s artistic career that has been a turning point and has led her to lay the foundations of the lexicon that, since then, has articulated her language, it is none other than *Mujeres sobre zapatos de plataforma* [Women on Platform Shoes] (1992). Shown for the

28. Francisco Javier San Martín, in his text referenced in footnote No. 21, states the following: “The next thing for young people was not stone or wood, but what they were wearing: their clothes, jewellery, makeup.”

29. In relation to the topic of the body and clothing, I would like to add these two statements by Ana Laura Aláez. They seem worthy of consideration to me because they are accurate, sincere, tender and raw:

– “I think that the most accepted women in art—I am referring to those who use their own body as an instrument of expression—are women who have lived tragic lives or have represented the female condition through pain. Magnificent women such as Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke, Francesca Woodman, etc., whose work was based on self-portraits focused on suffering, deformation, death. The rest are conceited bitches with hollow brains... I belong to this category.” This comment appears published in the text referenced in footnote No. 19.

– “Without knowing it at the time—because now I am very aware of it—the aesthetics of my outfits were a form of catharsis in the face of this turbulent society. Any piece of generic clothing, once taken into personal territory, can become another form of creative expression. The criticism I received was very scathing from the beginning. There I realised that being different, as a rule, is a threat that tends to get exterminated quickly. It’s as respectable to get up and worry about ‘what should I wear?’ as it is to reflect on whether a sculpture is the appropriate shape, material and scale.” This comment appears published in the text referenced in footnote No. 26.



Ana Laura Aláez, *Mujeres sobre zapatos de plataforma* [Women on Platform Shoes], 1992. Six wigs designed by the artist and six pairs of shoes of the 1970s, 185 x 332 x 29 cm. “la Caixa” Foundation Contemporary Art Collection

first time in public as part of the exhibition “Surface”³⁰ and made up of six heads—a series of wigs made from materials as varied and impossible as they are suggestive—and six pairs of platform shoes, this piece, according to Txomin Badiola, represents the death blow to the New Basque Sculpture insofar as “although it was not her intention . . . [Aláez] uses one of the fundamental motifs of sculpture following Oteiza: space as a presence of the same importance as matter”.³¹

If the most striking aspect of this work is undoubtedly the fantasy that is emitted by the forms, materials and colours of the elements the artist uses to personify her six women, I believe that what is truly important—or truly shocking, I would dare say—is the silenced emptiness of the imprisoned bodies that live between two prostheses, that is, between the only things we can see: wigs and shoes. This is something obvious that, far from going unnoticed, acquires a special relevance when one finds out that the actual dimensions of each of these six invisible bodies coincide fully with those of the artist herself. Therefore, they are six absent presences of Ana Laura’s body. The body of a woman, in the first person, multiplied by six and repeatedly silenced in a premeditated way.

To represent herself by giving rise to an inner emptiness without giving up on her relationship with the other—us, the public—and through the lens of images, superficiality, accessories, liminality, make-up, disguises, etc., demonstrates the artist’s sensitivity to the transformations of the body in our contemporary culture—continuously bridging the gap between what is natural and artificial, organ and prosthesis, skin and make-up—as well as the importance she gives accessories for allowing us to recreate and reinvent ourselves at will, the realisation of the point we have reached in our race towards the artificialisation of our human body and the desire to make visible, without a hint of resentment,

30. The exhibition by Ana Laura Aláez and Alberto Peral in Espai 13 at Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona in 1992. It was curated by the author of this text.

31. In the text “Two or Three Things That Would Be Good to Know About Her”, published in the catalogue of Ana Laura Aláez’s exhibition “Sculpture Pavilion”, held at the MUSAC in León in 2008.

the progressive invisibilisation of our essence as people. By exaggerating what we see—“In order to be able to interact or talk, I need the materials, the ‘forms’,” says the artist—³²deliberately leaving in the background valuable information about the origin of the materials she works with, assembles and/or moulds, or the value she gives them as the means of “translation of certain movements of the spirit”,³³ I would say that each and every one of Ana Laura Aláez’s works is a sort of catharsis—or liberation or restitution—of everything that happens to her, worries her, makes her happy, sad, enrages her, or of everything she would like to crush. She tells us what she thinks and feels through her forms. We have seen this before in *Mary Sex*³⁴ (1991), in *Bolso [Bag]*³⁵ (1993), in *Autorretrato rosa [Self-portrait in Pink]*³⁶ (1994),

32. Published in the catalogue referenced in the previous footnote.

33. Expression extracted from the text by Txomin Badiola, published in the catalogue referenced in footnote No. 31, when he mentions French philosopher Henri Focillon (Dijon, France, 1881 – New Haven, Connecticut, USA, 1943): “Focillon said that life is form and that form is the way in which life happens. The sculptor, but mainly the person, Ana Laura Aláez, has permanently expressed this vital need for form. As in Focillon’s case, for Aláez, forms are not purely abstract entities, but rather ‘the mechanism for the translation of certain movements of the spirit’.”

34. This is the first knitted sculpture made by Ana Laura Aláez. The piece was knitted by the woman who made her “thick winter sweaters to wear to school”. The artist states—in the text referenced in footnote No. 19—: “I always keep in mind that ‘work’, physical effort, is not a guarantee for producing a good work of art. My knitted garments are radical in this sense.”

35. A piece made up of a plastic bag handle and a pair of her father’s underpants. “This clean and dirty work, loving and at the same time full of resentment, the expression of a burden and at the same time of liberation, constitutes a true ‘deconstruction of the father’, an operation equivalent to that carried out by Louise Bourgeois in the mid-1970s.” A very accurate interpretation by Txomin Badiola, as he states in his text referenced in footnote No. 19.

36. A self-portrait in which she appears wearing a wig made from slices of boiled ham, in a clear reference to the inevitable expiry of life.



Ana Laura Aláez, *Bolso* [Bag], 1993. Father figure's underpants and handles, 30 x 30 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Ana Laura Aláez, *Culito* [Little Ass], 1996. Bronze and cork, 23 x 26 x 23 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía Collection



Ana Laura Aláez, *Corona* [Crown], 1995. Cast bronze, 40 x 40 x 25 cm.
CAzM Museo Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo Collection



Ana Laura Aláez, *Pantalón preservativo* [Contraceptive Trousers], 1992. Latex, 110 x 50 x 10 cm. Courtesy of the artist

in *Pantalón preservativo* [Contraceptive Trousers] (1992), *Corona* [Crown] (1995) and *Culito* [Little Ass] (1996),³⁷ in the installation *She Astronauts*³⁸ (1997), in *Cabeza-Espiral-Agujero-Puño-Esperma-Nudo* [Head-Spiral-Hole-Fist-Sperm-Knot]³⁹ (2008), and in *Cortina* [Curtain] (1994) and *El conflicto es otro* [The Conflict is Another One] (2018), two formally identical works, materially opposed—the former is made of latex and the latter of esparto—and separated in time by 24 years, made under the influence of a soul that cannot and does not want to stop being itself and for whom art is an exercise in survival.

It is never a leisurely stroll along a path lined with roses.

The reason we have gone back to the beginning of Ana Laura Aláez's artistic career to approach "I Am a Palace / I Am a Stable"—the exhibition that you are now seeing (or will see) and that the artist has worked on as if it were her last—is because what determines the framework she establishes, both for the conception of the works that comprise it⁴⁰ and for their realisation

37. Three referential works on the impact of the AIDS epidemic on our society and culture. *Corona* is part of the CA2M Museo Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo Collection and *Culito* is part of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía Collection.

38. Presented in Sala Montcada at the "la Caixa" Foundation in Barcelona (active between 1981–2006), this installation consists of the creation of a relational space that addresses the limits between art and life, fiction and reality, and questions authorship by featuring the collaboration/intervention of other artists with whom Aláez feels close. The artist says that, when approaching this installation, she had the feeling that it was going to be the last exhibition she would ever work on. A feeling she still experiences today in the face of each new project she embarks on, such as, for example, "I Am a Palace / I Am a Stable", the one that concerns us now.

39. Made with used leather garments through which the artist evokes her search for beauty between "the execrable and the sublime; the transcendental and the eccentric". This piece is part of the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao Collection.

40. All of them are new productions, except one: *El conflicto es otro* (2018).



Ana Laura Aláez, *El conflicto es otro* [The Conflict Is Another One], 2018. Esparto, variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist



Ana Laura Aláez, *Cabeza-Espiral-Agujero-Puño-Esperma-Nudo* [Head-Spiral-Hole-Fist-Sperm-Knot], 2008. Bronze and leather jackets, variable dimensions. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao Collection



Ana Laura Aláez, *Pabellón de escultura* [Sculpture Pavilion], 2008.
42 aluminum plates installation (300 x 200 x 1 cm each), variable dimensions. MUSAC Collection

and installation in the exhibition space, is the void.⁴¹ This is the best framework in which to place the entirety of a production⁴² that, although it does not yet have a definitive form at the time of writing, is likely to reflect various aspects of the artist's artistic and personal life, in a very precise moment and place. Namely: the clamour of the battle between opposites⁴³ that she continues to wage within herself since the first time she faced adversity⁴⁴ in order to dedicate herself to art; the desire to keep alive the procedural level of her sculptural practice by contemplating the movement of the spectator as a considerable factor in the understanding of her work;⁴⁵ the need to make real contact with the body visible by affixing a 1:1 scale photograph of one its fragments;⁴⁶ to lay out her work again in an exhibition space like

41. That emptiness she made use of in 1992 to materialise feminine invisibility, the artificiality of life and the multiplicity of people who inhabit the inside of our own bodies.

42. Five in total:
Soy Palacio / Soy Establo (primer planteamiento) [I Am a Palace / I Am a Stable (First Approach)], 2024. Photography
Soy Palacio / Soy Establo, 2024. Esparto and chains
El conflicto es otro, 2018. Esparto
Infinitas veces el mismo lugar [Infinite Times the Same Place], 2024. Esparto
Hilera de traiciones [A Row of Betrayals], 2024. Esparto ropes

43. Do you remember the tension between opposites that we referred to at the beginning of this text, invoking Heraclitus of Ephesus? Our failed beginning?

44. We are referring to the artist's social and family environment, something to which she later refers—perhaps to restore things, who knows!—when stating the following: “I think that I have inherited from my family a kind of ‘silence’, ‘of emptiness... Of being’. I think this has to do with art.” This statement appears published in the catalogue referenced in footnote No. 19.

45. Despite the fact that she has said on more than one occasion that “in general, other people's opinions have never been of any use to me.”

46. Specifically an arm. It appears in the work that gives the exhibition its title.

someone who attaches beads to their body and presents themselves to others by showing only one side of their coin; to jump off a cliff again with no net in order to experience, with intensity, the vibration of the internal negotiations—doubts and certainties—inherent in every exhibition process... to express a way of seeing and understanding the world from somewhere between the exhausting obligation of having to be herself at all times and the fact that she has lived in Mallorca for 13 years, a circumstance that is by no means trivial.

The list of 10 works mentioned above ended with *El conflicto es otro*,⁴⁷ produced in 2018. This is not by chance. It is because the path the artist has followed throughout her work on this exhibition began with the search for which thread to follow in order to fulfil a double mission: to summon up the courage to act accordingly within the conceptual framework she imposed on herself—one should never reject one's intuition!—and to think, from that position, what steps to take, following the rhythm that suits her best, like when someone starts to knit a jumper. This is the way—that is, assuming she was going to continue knitting until a form took shape—in which she understood that *El conflicto es otro* had to be the thread to follow. It is a piece that, in the form of a tangle of holes and esparto ribbons hanging from the ceiling and resting on the floor, grants her the key to understanding the exhibition as an attempt to embrace the impossible, to embrace a space, giving volume to its emptiness.⁴⁸

Devoted to the task of weaving an ephemeral structure with braided esparto ribbons and ropes, rusted and new steel chains and interspersed cavities of natural fibre that, just like chrysalises, she conceives as receptacles susceptible to being interpreted as each of us sees fit—let everyone think what they want!—Ana Laura Aláez knows that her exhibition will not be brought to completion until the very last minute.

47. This piece derives from *Cortina* (1994), an identical piece made in latex, the thread of which the artist follows to remake it in esparto and title it *El conflicto es otro* (2018).

48. We had seen this before in her piece *Mujeres sobre zapatos de plataforma* (1992), part of the “la Caixa” Foundation Collection.

If you want, once she finishes and you have seen the results, we can meet up someday to talk about it all. If it fascinates you as much as it has fascinated me since I first embarked on this adventure with her,⁴⁹ I doubt you will regret it.

Author's note: you will have noticed that, for this text, I obtained information from very few sources: two texts published in catalogues of solo exhibitions by Ana Laura Aláez, an article that appeared in a magazine, a lecture by the artist, many hours on the phone, photos and videos sent via WhatsApp and, above all, 32 years of friendship with her, whom I feel very close to. For various reasons. I could have consulted more sources and even written a totally different text, but that was not the case. What I have learned through these sources alone is extraordinary, and I cannot be more grateful! Especially to Ana Laura.

49. It began with a phone call in February 2023.



Ana Laura Aláez, *Autorretrato rosa* [Pink Self-portrait], 1994.
Photograph on Hahnemühle cotton paper, 50 x 50 cm.
Courtesy of the artist

BITING SPACE; CHROMING SYMBOLS; SURRENDERING TO THE ANIMAL

THOUGHTS ON AN EXHIBITION BY ANA LAURA ALÁEZ

Iris Dressler

I have seen the works by Ana Laura Aláez for the first time in November 2022 in the exhibition “Nature Is Not on Our Side” at Galería Pelaires in Palma, Mallorca.¹ A visit of this exhibition was part of the framing programme of the CIMAM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art) conference² that I visited for the first time, just like Mallorca, having been invited by the then acting director of Es Baluard Museu d’Art Contemporani in Palma, Imma Prieto,³ who had brought the conference to Mallorca.

Indirectly I had to do with the CIMAM conference as early as 2015, when an installation by artist Ines Doujak provoked one of the biggest crises of the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).⁴ The exhibition *The Beast and the Sovereign* had been curated by myself, Hans D. Christ, Paul B. Preciado and Valentín Roma and concerned the CIMAM conference in the same year. This important committee concerned with ethical foundations, challenges and agendas for museums for modern and contemporary art at the time did little to nothing in order to

1. See <<https://pelaires.com/en/exhibition/ana-laura-alaez-nature>>. The exhibition was extended for the duration of the CIMAM conference 2022 in Palma de Mallorca.

2. See <<https://cimam.org/cimam-annual-conference/annual-conference-2022-palma-de-mallorca>>.

3. She is the director of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona since 2023.

4. See Hans D. Christ, Iris Dressler, Paul B. Preciado and Valentín Roma (ed.). *La bestia y el soberano / The Beast and the Sovereign* [exhibition cat.]. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2018, p. 72–107.

address this crisis—a crisis that had to do with one of the most effective and simultaneously most strongly negated mechanisms of the cultural sector: censorship.⁵

I mention these contexts because they reverberate in my thinking about the work of Ana Laura Aláez: Ines Doujak's artistic research on the capitalist, colonial and neoliberal implications of the textile industry as well as the eloquence of fabric and clothing; Paul B. Preciado's statements on dissident bodies and desires; *The Beast and the Sovereign* as separate, yet at the same time intertwined figures that stand for the binary relationships and balance of power between animal, nature, femininity, disease, unproductivity, monster, servant etc. on the one hand and human, culture, masculinity, normativity, productivity, state, master etc. on the other side; for the coexistence between wolf and Bambi, to speak with Aláez.⁶ Not to forget the censorship inscribed into the violent history of the (female and proletarian) body, which counts part of the central references in Aláez's works—besides her certainly palpable scepticism regarding institutions such as the museum.

The conference in Palma was held under mottos such as resilience, nature, climate and care, yet nobody had spoken even once about the activists who in those days glued themselves to paintings in order to address the pressing need for action in the face of climate change. Instead, the CIMAM president at the time had let the media know that she didn't think much of these protests and asked that no media attention was spent on them⁷—in other words, to silence them. *Nature Is Not on Our Side*.

The first thing I noticed when I entered and explored the exhibition was the spatially very precise staging of the works, both on

their own and in relation to one another. I also felt an extremely present, virtually palpable absence of the human body, while at the same time this very human body seemed to give shape to the things in the space: be it in the manner in which the body impregnates used clothes that the artist uses as material in several of her works, be it in the arrangements of the objects and sculptures, for instance in her installation *Boceto de mujeres sobre zapatos de plataforma* [Sketch of Women on Platform Shoes].

This work consists of fifteen, partly hat-, cap- or helmet-like head covers individually crafted from diverse material that hang from the ceiling in rows at similar heights. Held by hardly visible nylon strings, they seem to hover in the space or, depending on the perspective, to be worn by invisible imaginary persons. Their size is relatively small, as if they are made for children's or dolls' heads. They hang or hover slightly above the average height of an adult person, you could say, eye level with "women in platform shoes". In the first edition of this installation, in the early 1990s, six hovering objects oscillating between cap and wig are each allocated one pair of platform shoes, whose garish colours refer to the disco culture of the 1970s. In the enlarged and greatly revised edition of the artwork, these shoes have been relegated to the title alone, which simultaneously points to a mere sketch of *Mujeres sobre zapatos de plataforma*, in other words something provisional.

Strictly following the understanding that all works by Aláez are sculptures, the platform shoe also refers to the pedestal that traditionally exposed sculptures—until they were toppled off, just to scare us to death over and over again in Duane Hanson's human figures: real or not real?

What Aláez exposes is the absent, and particularly the absence of the female body. *La femme n'existe pas*: this outrageous sentence by Jacques Lacan⁸ could still be read as emancipation from gendered identities in the 1990s; a denial that echoes in the slogan "No Future", which ultimately implicates the refusal of reproduction.

While the first edition of *Mujeres sobre zapatos de plataforma* decidedly draws on the aesthetics of disco-pop, the current

8. Lacan, Jacques. *Seminar XVIII*, 1970–1971.

5. See <<https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/the-socialist-and-the-sovereign-censored-show-opens-at-wuerttembergischer-kunstverein/2696/7>>.

6. See footnote 1.

7. See <<https://www.europapress.es/illes-balears/noticia-presidenta-cimam-sugiere-medios-no-den-visibilidad-protestas-contras-obras-arte-utilizan-2022111130532.html>> and <<https://www.diariodemallorca.es/mallorca/2022/11/14/activistas-clima-palma-hay-arte-78525047.html>>.

version refers to (post-)punk and gothic, apart from the small globes that look like mini disco balls that hang from one of the more elaborately donned helmet-like shapes. Delicate lace or fluffy faux fur is combined with metal braces, rods and chains, with a somewhat martial appearance. They equally call into mind bonnets for weddings and baptisms, safety helmets and torture instruments, cuddly toys and steel skeletons, bandages and medicinal apparatuses: devices for the correction of bodies, just like Moritz Schreber's⁹ Orthopedic Chin Strap to Prevent Malocclusion from 1858 or the so-called Steadier that he developed around the same time; or those head meshes through which wires and electrodes can be connected at specific points. These fantasies reach from *Frankenstein* to *Matrix*, from modern psychiatry's electric shocks to the fiction of the lie detector. "Why does our body look like a cage?", Aláez asks.¹⁰

A hundred years after Schreber's invention of the Orthopedic Chin Strap and the Steadier Harry F. Harlow undertook an experiment under the name The Nature of Love that shook the way mother-child (and human-animal?) relationships were conceived until then. Macaque babies who were given the choice between mother imitations made of fur or pure wire frames that gave milk, chose the former, that is the contact with skin and fur, rather than their drive satisfaction.

It is well known that the subjugation of women and the female body begins during childhood. Witch, whore and hysteric are supposed to be exorcised from this body, while at the same time—one could say on the back of the medal of motherhood—the female body is being defined according to them. Aláez appropriates these projections onto womanhood and shifts them in a gesture that isn't heroic but celebrates fragility and vulnerability, the ambiguous, uncertain, contrary and deviant as strengths. "And there, in these interstices", she writes, "between

experience itself and the projection, the inner exercises overlap." She thus describes her own artistic practice most accurately: "biting space; scraping out memories; chroming symbols; categorizing thoughts; reinterpreting fears; transforming memories; refining ideas; crowning convictions; tearing open wounds; negotiating disagreements; shaking experiences, responding with silence; scrounging what we perceive as unsuitable; insisting on the improbable; expanding the useless; driving desire; embodying affection."¹¹

Two further helmet-like objects, entirely made of metal and reminiscent both of booby traps and the kinetic sculptures by Lázló Moholy-Nagy, were positioned on veritable pedestals rather than on imaginary women with platform shoes. They were titled *Tú no eres él ni ella* [You are neither he nor she] and *Ellos no son ellos* [They are not themselves]. A third bonnet made of studs hanging on the wall was called *Yo no soy yo* [I am not myself]. These latently dangerous objects in their complete inaccessibility and beauty could also be read as indication that political subjectification is primarily to do with emancipation from identity politics that coat bodies and desire with unambiguousness and standardization: beginning with clothing that forms and genders a body all the way to prostheses that aim to optimize it in the name of medicine or factory.¹²

In her works, Aláez's own exposed and naked body surfaces often, for example in scenes in front of or on a mirror or in bed. These are by no means references to naturalness, but rather to constructedness, disciplining and censorship of the female body and desire: including its deviation from the norm in the sense that it is a dissident body that lets its fluids flow freely (*Blade Runner*, 2003). There was not a single work in the exhibition "Nature Is Not on Our Side" that showed Aláez's body directly. Yet it is

11. Idem.

12. See, for instance, Christ, Hans D., "Symptom Bauhaus" and Barker, John, "Bauhaus und der menschliche Motor". In: *50 Jahre nach 50 Jahre Bauhaus* [exhibition cat.]. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2022, p. 470 and p. 451. As well as Preciado, Paul B. "La zona erógena. Una prótesis para Ana Laura Aláez". In: *Todos los conciertos, todas las noches, todo vacío* [exhibition cat.]. Madrid: CA2M, 2020, p. 53.

9. Moritz Schreber (1808–1861) not only invented the Schreber-Garden, but also instruments for the correction of bodies that he apparently also used on his son Daniel Paul Schreber. In 1903 Daniel Paul Schreber published the book *Musings of a Neuropath* that became famous through Sigmund Freud.

10. See footnote 1.

imprinted into those works in which she uses pieces of clothing that she had worn, such as the installation *Cabeza-Espiral-Agujero-Puño-Esperma-Nudo* [Head-Spiral-Hole-Fist-Sperm-Knot]. This installation consists of six leather jackets from whose breasts and backs strange organic-seeming forms and proliferations protrude. These are phallic in their basic structure: albeit like transforming, deforming and inverting phalli that mutate into heads, holes, knots, spirals, fists and other states and in-between-states. I read somewhere that they hang from the wall like pig halves at the butcher. It's an association I share and one that makes me think of the development of the assembly line around 1870 in the slaughterhouses in Cincinnati.¹³ Similarly I remember Barbara Kruger's unforgettable photograph *You Are Seduced by the Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*. Almost literally in *Cabeza-Espiral-Agujero-Puño-Esperma-Nudo* Aláez seems to deconstruct the "carnophallogocentrism"¹⁴ that Derrida described, by "the adult, white, male, meat eating European, willing to sacrifice",¹⁵ whose sacrifice is directed at "the most brutal industrial technology", such as mass animal breeding and slaughtering.¹⁶ In a sense, Aláez ridicules this figure, transforms, perverts and disarms it without ever losing sight of the technologies and mechanics that constitute this figure all the way to the assembly line (be it as meat eater or factory worker).

The cut-open pair of pants of *El sonido del sexo en el vinilo* [The sound of sex in vinyl] (2022) could be read as a reference to anatomy that first engendered the normed body and the fictions of gender, race and norm at the turn of the 16th and 17th century: the disciplined body, the body as machine that is made to fit the capitalist relations of production. The first phase of capitalist

development, Silvia Federici writes, comes with "the war against the body". It "forfeited its naturalness and was determined the 'Other'. As the external frontier of social discipline" (*Nature Is Not on Our Side*). "The concept of the body no longer referred to a specific organic reality, but became a political signifier that referred to class relations and to the unsteady, constantly redrawn borderlines that these relations produced in the cartography of human exploitation." Federici describes the subjugation of the proletarian body as it revolted against its capitalist appropriation.¹⁷ In this context, she understands the witch hunt or genocide against women lasting over two centuries not only as an "attack against the resistance of women against the proliferation of capitalist relations", but also "against the power that women had acquired through their sexuality, their control over reproduction and their healing faculties".¹⁸ This is radical censorship of another knowledge that is deemed dangerous.

With her constant allusions to punk—or the assembly line as in *Cabeza-Espiral-Agujero-Puño-Esperma-Nudo*—Aláez clearly states she is not only interested in questioning the constructions of the female, but also in the proletarian body and their mutual intertwining—whereby she occasionally plays off one against the other, such as in the gesture of "peeing while standing up" in *Blade Runner*.

By using industrially manufactured textiles in many of her sculptures and installations, she refers to more than spinning, weaving, knitting and sowing, reaching all the way to fashion and the terrain that is supposedly connoted as female. She also points to one of the first globally operating capitalist industries that concurred with the mechanization of bodies and processes of production, colonialism and its "inheritance",¹⁹ Taylorist division of labour, in short the establishment of deeply necropolitical exploitation. Until today these exploitative relations particularly

13. Giedion, Sigfried. *Die Herrschaft der Mechanisierung*. Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1982, p. 115.

14. Derrida, Jacques. "Force of Law. The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'". In: Cornell, Drucilla, Rosenfeld, Michel and Gray Carlson, David (ed.). *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

15. Ibidem.

16. Ibidem.

17. Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

18. Ibidem.

19. Doujak, Ines and Barker, John. "Preface". In: *Loomsbattles, Warpaths. An Eccentric Archive 2010–2018*. Leipzig: Spector Books, 2019, p. 10.

affect women in the so-called low-wage countries in former colonies who in their twelve-hour shifts sow together the ever same parts. “The modern textile industry is an industry of ‘bloody Taylorism’”, Ines Doujak and John Barker write in their introduction to *Loomshuttles, Warpatbs*.²⁰

At the same time, something magical and animistic inhabits Aláez’s objects. In their explanations of Andean textiles, Doujak and Barker point out that these fabrics are perceived as living beings with whom one can actively communicate.²¹ From these textiles speaks the “passion for the exact and ecstatic, for mathematics and dance”²²—a passion that diametrically opposes the rationalist and necropolitical logics of the capitalist textile industry.

Already by using found garments, partly worn by herself, and by separating and newly sowing the seams, Aláez gives them voice and communicates with them in her works. Inscribed into all her works is the exact and ecstatic, mathematics and dance.

I Am a Palace / I Am a Stable
Ana Laura Aláez

From 26th April
to 1st September 2024

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Texts
Frederic Montornés
Iris Dressler, Co-Director of
Württembergischer Kunstverein
Stuttgart

Translations
la correccional

Print
Esment Impremta

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Fundació Es Baluard Museu d’Art
Contemporani de Palma, 2024
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Acknowledgments
Daniel Gerhard Holc, Txomin Badiola,
Maira Miramar, Albert Jordana, Imma Prieto
Mallorca artisans: Magdalena Vidal,
Pep Toni Ferrer
Ibiza artisans: Pepita Cardona,
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Blacksmith: Gus Vilches
Fundació Ses Dotze Naus, Galeria Pelaires

ISBN 978-84-18803-95-6
DL PM 00281-2024
Free booklet. Not for sale

20. Idem, p. 9.

21. Idem, p. 7.

22. Idem, p. 8.

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