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Interviews with Two Basque Artists Ana Laura Aláez and Azucena Vieites

Zoe Bray

Ana Laura Aláez and Azucena Vieites are artists from the Basque region of Euskadi, in Spain, born within a few years of each other in the mid 1960s. Both are from working class families. Their parents had emigrated from other parts of Spain to find work in the industrial townships that had boomed during the twentieth century in the formerly largely rural territory of Euskadi. Ana Laura grew up in the city of Bilbao, the heartland of the steel industry that was still going strong at the time, while Azucena came from the smaller town of Hernani, where more factories had sprouted, close to the picturesque seaside resort of San Sebastian.

Aláez and Vieites came of age during a turbulent period for Euskadi. During the 1980s, Spain was making its first steps as a democratic state, after more than 30 years of military dictatorship under General Francisco Franco. Euskadi was granted regional autonomy, but political grievances remained: ETA, the violent Left-wing Basque nationalist group, was pursuing its struggle for Basque independence, in a clash with Spanish authorities that brought destruction and bloodshed. At the same time, both Spain and Euskadi were undergoing social and cultural change,

epitomized in what came to be known in Spanish as *la Movida*, an atmosphere of social, sexual and cultural experimentation and liberation. In such a conflictive yet exciting time, the challenge for inquisitive female artists was to find their own space of freedom and self-expression.

Despite their similar backgrounds, Aláez and Vieites have emerged as artists in very different ways. While both developed a feminist consciousness, they have done so following different personal experiences and aspirations that have had their impact on the focus and processes of their art. Aláez transforms her life experience and emotions into a variety of artistic forms, often with herself as protagonist, involving video, sound, photography, installation and multimedia sculpture. Vieites takes an explicitly feminist and conceptual approach to visual culture, predominantly through drawing and screen-printing. She is the co-founder of the Basque feminist artist group Erreakzioa-Reacción, together with Estibaliz Sádaba.

Today, both Aláez and Vieites are established as key figures in the contemporary art scene of the Basque Country and Spain, and increasingly also internationally. Based in

Bilbao, where she was born in 1964, Aláez is currently represented by the galleries Moisés Pérez de Albéniz in Madrid and Leila Heller in New York City. Recent international solo shows include *Goodbye Horses* at the National Museum of Oslo, *Sound Recording Room* at the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum in Berlin, and *Beauty Cabinet Prototype* at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. In 2007, she was featured in the exhibition *Unknowns* at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao as one of the notable artists to define the art scene in the Basque Country. In 2013, she received the prestigious Basque art prize *Gure Artea*. Vieites has had recent solo exhibitions, *Fundido Encadenado*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Castilla y Leon (MUSAC) in 2012, and *Tableau Vivant* at the National Museum Art Center Reina Sofia in Madrid, 2013. Born near San Sebastian, in 1967, she is currently based in Spain's capital city, Madrid, and also teaches in the faculties of Fine Art of the Universities of Cuenca and Salamanca.

Ana Laura Aláez

Zoe Bray: Ana Laura, tell me about your background.

What was your experience growing up?

Ana Laura Aláez: I have never talked much about my background, but I realize now that it is necessary as it explains a lot about my relationship to art. Plus, it's time I came to terms with my past...

My family has humble origins. They came from a remote part of the region of Castille. They were directly affected by the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. My maternal grandfather was a direct victim of Franco's regime. He was a miner. He was hardly educated, he just about knew how to read and write, and still he fought for his ideals. I was told that he also had a gift for public speaking, and that he liked to take part in miners' assemblies. I have always wondered how a human being who struggles to make ends meet can still have the courage to fight for a better world. At one point he was threatened by the fascists and so went into hiding in the mountains. He would come home from time to time. But one day, a neighbour betrayed him. The fascists hunted him down, threw him into a van and carried him off and we never heard from him again.

My grandfather is one of what we call the *desaparecidos* in Spanish, the **"disappeared"** of the Civil War. Like many other innocent people, he is an invisible dot in the history of the victors. We avoided talking about the *desaparecidos*

because, even many years after the Civil War, they represented danger and rejection for the family. It's been us grandchildren who began to openly question these barbarities. The tyrants were those who governed Spain for a long time afterwards. They would say **'you have to forget'**. There are still people who dare to say that people like my grandfather deserved to die.

To talk about my grandfather was taboo. In addition to all the indescribable pain that his disappearance caused, a pall of silence fell onto my family, which stuck to us as if it were part of our genetic makeup. Silence was imposed to cover up the stigma of pain. This silence was accompanied by a distrust of the unknown. Vital courage, like that of my grandfather, was not celebrated by my family. Even our natural habitat and our own home could not be considered safe places. The impact that this fear had on us went beyond the material and the psychological. It's precisely in this silence that originates in my family this feeling of not belonging anywhere. This is what I have inherited.

After the war, Bilbao received a massive wave of immigrants. All these workers were an essential part of the city's industrial character. My parents, like many Spaniards, chose to migrate to Bilbao. They always said to me **'we went where there was work'**. My father learnt carpentry and opened his own workshop next to the steel factory Etxebarria, which employed practically all the neighbourhood. My father was always self-employed; he was his own boss. The idea of a workshop had a deeper meaning for me: it was the place where you could invent your own work.

I was born in a working class neighbourhood of Bilbao. The industrial landscape is carved in my imagination. In the 1960s and early 1970s, with the economic boom, most people's standard of living improved and a middle class emerged. But the first economic crisis, which I witnessed as a teenager was in the 1980s and involved an industrial slump with extremely high levels of unemployment. The words that would best define the youth of my generation were heroin, terrorism, unemployment, machismo, economic crisis, industrial reconversion, and social repression at the hands of a vicious military dictatorship that was gasping its last breath.

Most of us were children of people who had suffered hunger and humiliation. Our parents struggled for a better world, but culture had no place in it. Belonging to the working class forces you to see life from a purely functional perspective. The word **"work"** just meant sustenance. Fantasy was prohibited. Earning money was the engine of

everything, and relationships were merely established in accordance with this. Important decisions were made on the basis of immediate material gratification. Growing up, everything had a unique practical function: bread is to feed you, a wardrobe is for hanging clothes, a bedroom is for sleeping, a cow is for milk... a woman is for having children. Moments of leisure were counted with the fingers of one hand. Culture was for rich people.

What really freed me from all this and gave me a direct source of self-expression was my way of dressing. At that time, my personal aesthetics – a mix impossible to catalogue: punk, Lolita, heavy, dandy, camp, gothic, new romantic, etc. – signified resistance to social convention. My attire, designed using my mother's linen, black lipstick and perfectly delineated punk makeup, was my first manifesto and, without a doubt, my first work of art.

I believe urban tribes are born precisely out of this need for self-expression and that they have a lot to do with the working class's total exclusion of fantasy. For me and others of my generation and background, we created our own aesthetics purely as a way of getting rid of the worker's attire which to us only represented austerity and sacrifice.

The most dismal bars were my best initiation to art. They weren't places which I craved for but at least I knew that there I would be able to get away from daily reality. Most of the other people who hung out in these joints were like me, people who belonged to the working class. We had to find other ways of communicating and interacting, because the political and social situation during those years was a war-like landscape of flames. I would take part in street demonstrations and these were pretty much my first performances.

However, I saw that this whole panorama of street violence and political conflict eclipsed the struggle of women who wished to be more than simply what society imposed on them. I have never believed in this idea that Basque society is a matriarchy, as some famous Basque anthropologists have claimed. It sounds great, but it's far from true. The idea of Basque matriarchy has a lot of myth in it, of bucolic landscape. It reminds me of the society of Ancient Greece and all the hypocritical reading of it regarding gender. When we say that women were active participants in politics, what they were really doing was helping to realize the freedom of their male counterparts, not their own. Whilst they gave birth and their bodies would age, the men would groom their bodies and, at the same time, dally with their lover-friends, exploring their sexuality and identity. It reminds me of the



**Ana Laura Aláez *Bag* (1993) 50 x 50 x 3 cm.
Underwear and handles. Courtesy of Artist.**

sordid stories of a male friend who liked to satisfy the appetite of Bilbao husbands. They would meet in the park after dark where they would take revenge on their apparently heterosexual life. I asked myself: where do the women go to relieve themselves of their cage-like life? Where do they find their moments of secret pleasures? This negated femininity, stripped of hedonism, relegated to the household or to the slavery of a menial job, was not what I wished to identify with.

Zoe Bray: Tell me how you found your way as an artist, and your experience at university.

Ana Laura Aláez: University was for me a very positive experience: it was my one and only possible source of information. It's there that I found like-minded people.

My family never understood my choice to study art. They didn't consider it "*work*" and they saw it as suicide. It meant for them being a failure... a fallen woman. When I decided to do Fine Arts, I did so not because I was looking for a future but because I had nothing to lose. At the time, having a university degree did not necessarily mean that you would find work.

It was my relentless fight with my father that really pushed me to art. The future he wished for me was to be a



housewife and that I give myself to my biological role. My only weapon then was to refuse, to say no to everything. No, no and no. My life would not be reduced to ironing my brothers' underwear.

So I did my university studies without any support from my family. **'Why are you studying?'** was the question my father would always ask me. If I had allowed myself to listen to the people around me, I would have been imprisoned by their reality. I think my intuition told me that art could fight back against the authoritarian and institutional language. But above all, I would allow myself, as a woman, a very different role to the one that society sought to impose on me.

To study Fine Arts at the University in Bilbao was, without a doubt, a good decision. There, I realized how important it is to discover that there are others like you. That you are not a monster. Despite the mediocrity of some professors, I discovered many great mediators in the academic world. With my radar of freshly released personal values, I was quick to pick out those who stood out with their vitality from the masses of students. My heroes are those who work without fear of dismantling the mythical status of art and who question the opinion of others.

As I lacked financial resources, I found unconventional ways of expressing myself. I made sculptures from objects found in garbage bins or in flea markets. My versatility has been my wealth.

Most of my time studying at the university was interrupted by numerous strikes. Although much of the fighting was in the name of autonomy and workers' rights, there were many interconnected conflicts: terrorism, fighting against the Spanish state, the anti-nuclear movement etc. A big cocktail in which, however, like I said, there was no place for those women who did not see themselves

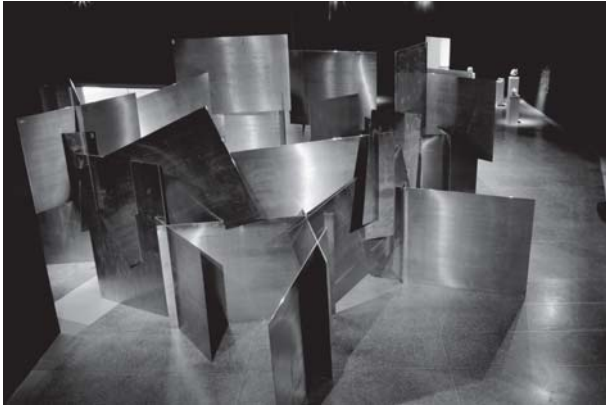
represented in these struggles. Plus everything was so dramatic. You were told to be careful with what you did because it had consequences. It sounded like threats, the kind that I had been bombarded with about sin as a child.

It was the same thing in the art world: as an artist, you were expected to position yourself politically. Artists had the duty to represent the social struggle and to give meaning to their work. There was a lot of talk about the functionality of art.

We all know that culture can be transformed by artistic vanguards. But in 1980s Spain, vanguards were being imported. I remember that when I started Fine Arts, nearly everyone was talking about Expressionism. It was presumed that what came from outside Spain was contemporary. These Expressionists talked about the workers' plight. It was about justifying art. The idea seemed to be that work, effort, and dedication to work with factory hours, necessarily meant good results. Big canvases, big brush-strokes, lots of turpentine, lots of texture, lots of paint on your overalls, lots of **'this is good, this is bad'**. These are some of my memories of my time in the Faculty of Fine Arts.

Result was considered more important than process. Experiences of fear, humiliation, chaos, rejection, doubt, betrayal, homelessness, negation of origins, desire, sex, failure, temptation etc. were seen as irrelevant to art. Despite all this, all the questions I asked myself emanated from the feminine presence-absence: where is the woman in all this? Where is her heart? Where is feeling? Where is direct personal experience?

As a woman, I began to understand that my path would follow the route of official non-recognition, but, all the same, I did not want to succumb to the easy resort of just damning masculinity. Even though I was tempted to destroy all these



Left: Ana Laura Aláez *Head-Hole-Spiral-Fist-Sperm-Nude* (2008) Various sizes. Bronze and leather jackets.

Above: *Sculpture Pavilion* (2008) 300 x 200 x 1 cm, 32 aluminium sheets. Collection, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, (MUSAC, Leon). Both images, Courtesy of Artist.

values and demolish the establishment, I realized it was not a good option in the long run to choose this as my only destiny. I was tempted by the irresistible voices of the “*cursed poets*”, Artaud, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Keats, Poe, etc., and at the same time I was attracted by the idea of simply using the excuse of social misunderstanding as proof of my own value. I did not want to end bitter and cynical. Rather, I just wanted to flee reality. Start from zero. My only instrument was to canalize facts through art. I think, at this point, the sensation that you have nothing to lose can be the best creative impulse. The challenge is not to succeed in society, to get yourself recognized, but rather to not wait for other people to accept you, to confront yourself in the mirror, with your own combat.

I found self-expression in everything that was within my reach. My ability to draw from my surroundings has had a direct impact on how my life developed. Society treated me as an imposter because my aesthetics did not correspond to my surroundings. Even those who claimed to be liberal sought to ridicule me.

Some women emerged in the music scene during the 1980s. I especially remember Las Vulpes, which was considered the first female punk rock group in Euskadi. Their one and only song was ‘Me gusta ser una zorra’ (‘I like to be a whore’). For me, this was a manifesto screaming against the silence of feminine sexuality. But its resonance was misunderstood. Men – who formed the majority of the audience – understood the title as an explicit way of giving consent to their sexual advances. They just saw the band and their female fans as whores. There they were in the crowd telling you: ‘**I’m going to give you what you need**’.

Zoe Bray: You have created with various unconventional media and forms of expression, including sex, bondage... Can you say more about what has brought you to work this way?

Ana Laura Aláez: Growing up, I was taught that the body – especially the female body – was the site of pain. Intuitively, I have always sought an antidote to this. This is where my experience with art begins.

It took me a long time to accept my own body. In my family, the body was considered simply a sack of potatoes, something you were expected to just endure. Adulthood came prematurely. Growing up, I felt the urgency to find an alternative path. Coupled with this was the constant fear of getting pregnant. Women were seen as simply being at the mercy of the predatory male. In my family, a pregnant unmarried woman was trash. Sexuality had one single objective, to procreate, according to strict moral norms. Desire was synonymous with sin. Not in a religious sense but in the sense of a stain which prevents the people around you from accepting you. I heard so many awful and absurd things that it still pains me to say them. Even joking about them doesn’t help. This total fear of the prohibited created in me an insatiable curiosity for pleasure and fun.

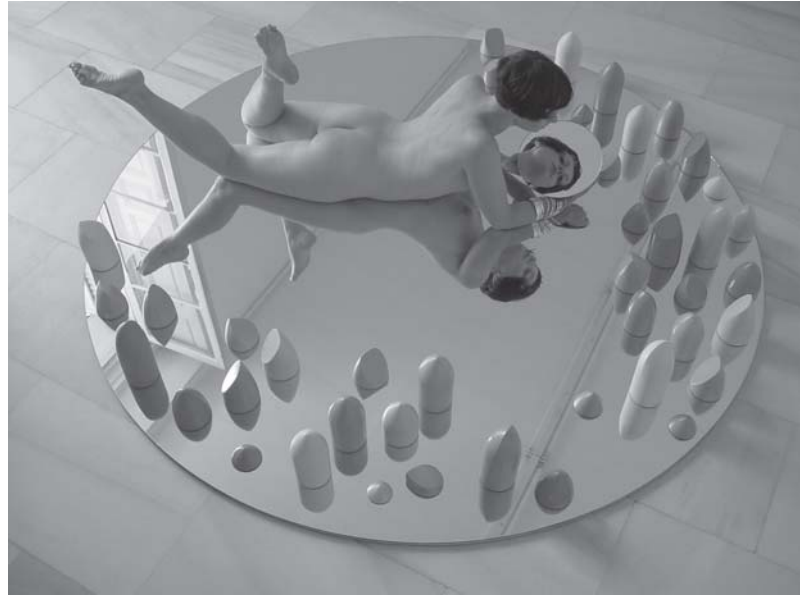
I decided that my body would be my sanctuary, something completely different to the inhospitable dungeon I had been inculcated with. After all, my body was my only possession. I wished to legitimate the place from which I saw and felt the world. I had to ignore the opinions of the people around me.

I talk about sexuality because, for me, art and sexuality – in the broad sense of the word – are united. Body as sensual entity, in opposition to the “*sack of potatoes*”. Body as sculpture, as a bank of ideas and a mediator of feelings. Body as infinite projection of yourself, as a collector of personalities. Body as language. This process of eliminating the judgment of others and replacing it with your own system requires a lot of time, dedication and persistence. To fight for your autonomy, both mental and practical, is the first step towards freedom. The ability to find a place where you can simply be is a great good fortune. I found art.

I appealed to everything around me that related to my basic need to communicate, from a world where women were merely considered dumb figures, passive and impotent. My creativity has been my wings in a land full of mines. A creativity at a level far from reality understood as a non-negotiable monolith that was very far from my possibility.



Above: Ana Laura Aláez *Two heads* (1995-1999) 150 x 121cm photograph. Collection Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Sevilla.
 Right: *Shiva* (2001) 100 x 133cm photograph. Collection, Hotel Miró, Bilbao.
 Both images, Courtesy of Artist.



My first weapon was the construction of my identity via my way of dressing. I am an aesthete. It's a magic and sacred ritual. For me, to be naked in front of society is to be me, to be dressed.

I had to hear the word *puta* (whore) many times. To be a *puta*, was not something necessarily just sexual: I was a *puta* to the people around me because I dressed differently, because I refused to act coy, because I flaunted my physical attributes, because I would paint my eyes, because I dared to shave some of my golden curls, because my black clothes had holes in them that looked as if they'd been ripped apart with knives, because I liked to deliberately ladder my tights.... And because I was a solitary figure. I was often very scared of being attacked by the boys in my neighbourhood, whose only weapon against me would have been to force themselves onto me sexually, a way of subjugating me and showing me who is right. I duped myself saying that nothing and no one could hurt me, that I had an invisible protective shield. I was a “weirdo”. A live representation of ire and –at the same time – of enthusiasm for life. Sometimes, when I would enter a shop, there would be this awful silence. I still feel it sometimes.

It's important for me also to talk about the relation of art to gender and age. I aspire to making art for the rest of my life. I have great admiration for Louise Bourgeois. She has had a huge influence on my work. Bourgeois is for me an example of how a woman can age well. There is a taboo in our society about women's age. In art you can express the passing of time. It is a privilege to work on something that you like with such intensity all your life.

Zoe Bray: You share ideas and artistic projects with other artists. Can you tell me more about how collaboration has been important to you?

Ana Laura Aláez: My main asset is the ability to find like-minded people or individuals with whom I can exchange ideas, thoughts and desires. To find collaborators is the part of art that is the most genuine and direct. Mutual recognition and appreciation between artists is absolutely necessary. It's important to feel recognized by other artists. And that you in turn validate their work. It's not about doing “similar work”. What's interesting is to have an intense dialogue. Differences are a perfect recipe to generate intense communication. Between artists, the categories of art — “social”, “conceptual”, “biographical” — don't exist; there is just “art”. In that respect, there is a camaraderie between artists in the Basque Country that is quite remarkable. If I think what are the “works of art” that have most influenced me, I can only say frankly that they have been my friends.

Zoe Bray: You have exhibited with numerous prestigious institutions, and recently you received the prize Gure Artea. Tell me about your experiences working in these spaces and receiving this public recognition.

Ana Laura Aláez: When you feel that you have done your homework with yourself, that's when you feel the reward. When your work does not satisfy you, that is when you have not been honest with yourself. In this sense, it is

important to say that artists have the right to fail. I don't think there is a single creative life that exists without doubt. The toughest person with the artist is the artist herself. You are forced to look at yourself in the mirror. The fundamental thing is not where you exhibit: it's the special moment that you are living.

To persevere and continue working whatever your situation is the only way. You can't depend on what society considers success or failure. But it's true that receiving the Gure Artea prize was very special. I did not expect it. It has given me a lot of strength. In the prize-giving ceremony, I felt there were indeed people who really valued my work. We were three women who were awarded. It was an honor to be one of them.

All my travels have been thanks to my work. I think this is the best way to acquire knowledge and generate new ideas. I love to discover cultural differences from up close. Right now, I am in Mallorca, working on a project in Zona Base at the Cultural Center Solleric. I am also preparing my next solo show at the Gallery Moisés Pérez de Albeniz, in Madrid, which will be in September 2014.

Zoe Bray: How has feminism been relevant to you?

Ana Laura Aláez: It's only recently that feminism has borne fruit in Spain: in 1981, the law for the right to divorce was passed; in 1983, Emakunde, the Women's Institute, was created; in 1985, they de-penalized abortion, and much later, reform of the penal code, labour law etc.

But the extreme Right is spreading its ideology again across the world: homophobia, misogyny, religion, xenophobia and class struggles. They try to erase all the progress made. In Spain, we are facing the consequences again of a Right-wing government with a corrupt political class that acts with impunity. There are many things today that I find deeply worrying. Two, in Spain, are education and the new law against abortion. The only people who will be able to get a good education are those who have the means. The new law on abortion is horrifying. It advocates treating the body of a woman as if it belonged to the State or to the Church.

As a child, I studied in a public school where education was very close to the dictatorship and to the Church. I found life more interesting in books. But I was lucky to have teachers who encouraged me, especially in art. They taught me about more abstract things, in literature, art history and philosophy. I recall reading Greek mythology and imagining feminine deities that were strong and powerful.

But I didn't consider feminism. When I first began university, I realized I needed to arm myself with courage to abandon my family. And this act could not be compatible with belonging to a group. I was a solitary force with only one clear objective: my independence... my very own *"room"*. I allowed myself to follow my intuition. I would have caused myself harm if I had thought too much about why I had left home. I know it would have taken away the strength I needed to flee. I was looking for a tool to construct my new identity. I sensed that being an artist and being an aesthete were compatible. Art was this abstract space completely detached from crushing reality. I didn't call myself a feminist then because I thought my struggle was individual. In the 1980s, there was still no consciousness of differences, everyone just talked about *"men"* and *"women"*.

Art was for me an escape. I aspired to a sexuality that was hedonistic, aesthetic and experimental. This was not an issue that was socially acceptable. My pulse has been desire. It took me some time to accept that the body is political. It's my trajectory, which gives me a feminist perspective even though I initially rejected the term. My conclusion is that there are many classes of feminism, and all struggles, be they individual or collective, converge to freedom.

It's incredible to me now to think about the innocence with which I originally approached art: without any aims, without thinking that I had to live from it. It is society that would later call me *"artist"*.

Azucena Vieites

Zoe Bray: Azucena, tell me about your early years, growing up in Euskadi.

Azucena Vieites: I grew up in the small town of Hernani, not far from San Sebastian. Hernani was already then a mixed place with several very different neighbourhoods. It had a rural and Basque-speaking population, and also a more industrialized part, with inhabitants from other regions of Spain. My neighbourhood is El Puerto, which was particularly working-class. My parents came from the region of Galicia, and they went there because that's where a lot of other Galicians had settled. My family was very Left-wing and Republican. They were also very proud Galician-speakers. Unfortunately, however, I am of what we call the *"lost generation"*, in that under the dictatorship of Franco I never got to learn Galician or Basque as a child. We were expected to only speak Spanish. In Euskadi, there were no

Basque schools as there are now. I can understand Basque, and I tried to learn it later in life, but I am not a Basque speaker. My main language is Spanish. I am first-generation Basque. This is the case for many people around my age in Hernani.

From where we lived, I could see the river Urumea (which runs through San Sebastian and into the sea) and the mountains, where there used to be barracks of the Spanish *Guardia Civil*, and I could see all the demonstrations and riots that took place there during the 1970s and 1980s. There were intense clashes with the Spanish authorities. People would run through the streets, lock themselves up in their houses, in the bars, keep their windows shut.

It's also true that during this time, the Left-wing movement, while being against the established authority, was also authoritarian in its own way, and quite macho. Luckily I had a good group of friends who, like me, wished to go beyond established norms and restrictive identities. We also had many male friends who were "*insumisos*" (who rejected Spanish military conscription and so lived a precarious life, constantly risking arrest). We organized a lot of initiatives to support them. But I always felt the need to express myself in other ways, playing with different codes of behavior and self-presentation. One day, for instance, I would wear bright red lipstick, another day do something else. I wasn't doing this out of provocation or to challenge anyone, it was fun and to celebrate diversity.

Zoe Bray: This was also a time of great cultural change in Spain and in the Basque Country. How did you get involved in these various trends?

Azucena Vieites: I grew up liking technopop, and feeling at home in protoqueer culture. This was not considered cool then; it was seen as frivolous, just like the bright red lipstick. You couldn't hear this type of music in the local town festivities, where live bands would always play folk or traditional music. To listen to technopop, I would hang around the fairgrounds. The first time I saw the Basque feminist punk rock band *Las Vulpes* was on television; it was then censored for their song 'Me gusta ser una zorra'. As a young artist, music is a great channel through which to explore other ways of doing things. There was punk, with its "*do it yourself*" approach. It was not about doing things well but about simply doing things, being a subject of your own action.

I am a feminist. For me to be a feminist is obvious. Of course, there are different ways of being feminist. There are

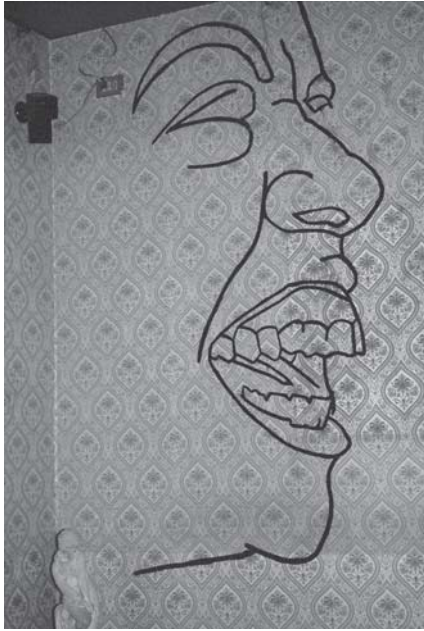
those who, so to say, follow the book, and who consider those who don't as not feminists. And then there are those who are feminists in their own way. I don't conform to any categorization. In my art, I want to escape convention and open up to discovery. An exercise for me as a feminist is precisely this exploration. I question established modes of thought and I seek to discover different forms of understanding. I need to explore all the nuances. In colour, for instance, there is so much more than just black and white. There are the fluorescents, the greys, the different shades. I may as well call myself a feminist queer in that I refuse to be attached to any identity. I think in terms of diversity. Of course, identities are necessary fictions, but at the same time they exist in diversity. As an artist and as a woman – basically, as an individual with preoccupations and concerns, not satisfied with established ideas and norms – it is only natural that I am drawn to feminism and alternative modes of thought.

Zoe Bray: You chose then to study art at university, and went to Bilbao. How has this been significant for you?

Azucena Vieites: I went to Bilbao for the first time in order to apply to the University's Faculty of Fine Arts. Initially, my family was not too keen on this subject; they saw it as risky, not providing any clear professional outcome. This was 1984. It was a particularly "*hot*" time. Factories were closing down and there were protests and demonstrations going on around. I remember few people turned up for the entrance exam because of the riots. It was also a very exciting time. The university attracted people from everywhere. I made many good friends there, who today are also part of the art scene in the Basque Country.

As artists, we have always operated as individuals, but one thing that remains important to us all is the awareness that good things always happen thanks to mutual support. Being a community is about working together and generating a connection. What we each do individually is collaborative in that it generates possibilities for others. We are also aware that what previous artists have done is important for future generations. There is this awareness in Euskadi of the importance of transmission, of passing on knowledge, ideas and connections from one generation to the other.

I think this making connections is also relevant to feminism in Euskadi; together we generate a feminist context, we support each other. I hear this does not happen so much



Azucena Vieites *Juguemos a prisioneras (Let's Play Prisoners - from Julie Zando) (1995) Mural drawing, Club Convento, Bilbao.*
Both images, Courtesy of Artist.

elsewhere; I have heard women in other places say they miss such a strong network. In Euskadi, we help and encourage each other. When one succeeds, we all succeed. In the spirit of what Marcia Tucker said, **‘the value of getting power is to give power.’**

I went to live in Madrid in 1999. But the principal reference for my art remains Euskadi. I have strong personal and professional relationships there and I often take part in activities, for instance at Arteleku (a contemporary art center funded by the provincial government of Gipuzkoa near San Sebastian), where workshops, debates and other art events regularly take place.

Zoe Bray: In 1994, whilst still living in Bilbao, you created the collective Erreakzioa-Reacción with Estibaliz Sádaba, also from Euskadi. Tell me about these years. What brought you to create this collective?

Azucena Vieites: We were concerned with the need to create projects that explored ideas about feminism and art in Euskadi. At the time, there was an important and dynamic context of feminist activism in Bilbao, but when it came to relating feminist theory to art, there were huge gaps. Not just in Euskadi but in the rest of Spain. We had little access to key feminist texts, given so few were translated in Spanish, let alone Basque.



Erreakzioa-Reacción *Collage of images (2012)*

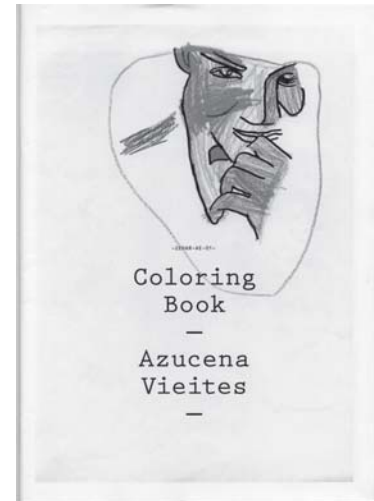
So our first project was to produce femzines. We got small subsidies from Basque institutions, including from Emakunde, the Women's Institute, which had recently been created in Euskadi. These helped us to make our first print-run, which we did in monochrome to contain costs. We also made a point of paying our collaborators for their work, even if we could only pay little. It has always been important to us to be able to remunerate artists. Ana Laura Aláez took part in our first femzine in 1994. Another Basque artist who took part early on was Itziar Okariz.

We also sought contact with feminist artists in other parts of Spain and abroad. We discovered the comics of Patricia Alvarez, an artist from the Rioja region. Her work is strong; she deals with queer politics and many other issues that were just not being considered then in the Basque Country. She had been living in the USA, in San Francisco, which explains a lot about her extraordinary forward thinking. We were amazed that her work was so little known.

In the 1990s, the work of the Guerrilla Girls was emerging. We met Bildwechsel, a group that works with videos, in Hamburg, Germany. We also followed the work of WAC (Women Action Coalition) in the USA. Seeing how feminist art projects were being done elsewhere, we decided to do our own here in the Basque Country. That's how Erreakzioa came about, as an experiment in different ways of **“doing”** and **“being”** here in the Basque Country.



Erreakzioa-Reacción Covers of Femzines (1994-2000). Both images, Courtesy of Artist.



Azucena Vieites Coloring Book (2010) Cover of the publication

Erreakzioa-Reacción means Reaction in Basque and Spanish. This was the principal motivation behind Erreakzioa: to put women artists on the map.

For our first femzine, we produced a list of names of Basque women artists. This was prompted by our frustration with how art exhibitions and collections rarely included women artists – especially when we knew how many women artists actually exist. When we asked curators why they didn't exhibit more women artists, they would simply respond that it's not a question of quota but of quality. And we responded of course it has to do with quality, that's what we're talking about! So then they would answer, **'well, there aren't many women artists'**. So we took them to their word: if that is what they need, a list of women artists, we'll give it to them. We carried out extensive research, in art schools, in art competitions, prizes and grants, and picked out over a hundred names of women artists. We also updated Emakunde's list and included ourselves. This was our declaration of intention, so to speak. You want names? You got names. It's like this feminist slogan that says **'and now you'll say again we were just five or six'**, when there were actually thousands of women in a street demonstration. There could be no excuse for institutions to continue saying there are few women artists.

We have been pioneers in the Basque Country in putting feminist thinking and art practices on the table. We were the first to tackle such issues from the art world. The most iconic years of Erreakzioa were 1994 to 2000, when we focused on producing these femzines. These had an

important impact, tackling and disseminating ideas about gender and art in an artistic way that was unique in the Basque Country. Erreakzioa has been a clear reference in this respect.

Whilst Erreakzioa consists of just Sádaba and me, the aim is always collaboration with other artists. There hasn't been a need to bring more people into Erreakzioa because the collective is about working with others anyway. Our concern is always to make things happen, generate projects in which people can participate, and create networks. Right now, we continue to be present, especially by taking part in discussions and debates. For instance, the summer feminist workshops in Arteleku.

Zoe Bray: How do you distinguish your own artwork from what you do with Erreakzioa? How is your work developing at the moment?

Azucena Vieites: My art feeds off the work done with Erreakzioa, but it focuses more on the actual articulation of artistic practice. My work is a kind of DIY remix that attempts to represent a memory in relation to the present and an experience of the passage of time, a memory whose intensity will gradually fade away. Since the early 1990s, I have made drawing the main medium of my artistic practice. I explore drawing in both its technical and politico-ideological fields. Drawing is an agile, direct, accessible, and cheap medium: there is no need for big infrastructures to do it, to transport it or to store it.



Azucena Vieites *Fundido encadenado-Break You Nice (Cross Dissolve-Break You Nice)* (2012) MUSAC, León (Spain)
Screen-printing on paper. Image courtesy of MUSAC and Azucena Vieites. Courtesy of Artist.

In my last solo exhibition, *Tableau Vivant* at the Reina Sofia Museum (2013), I laid out a series of silkscreen prints based on a collage of pre-existing images, together with a series of drawings coloured in by the participants of *Coloring Book*, a workshop for children which was held prior to the opening of the exhibition. The idea of *Coloring Book* developed from my interest in looking at how children work: their lack of convention, and their ability to build language and to surprise. The show also included a video piece and a series of screenings, my first incursion into this field. My aim was that the multiplicity, fragmentation, and repetition of all these images function as a way of breaking away from the absolute image and from the linear narrative form. The ephemeral and processual nature of the work is also central. The title, *Tableau Vivant*, alludes to painting and movement, and to an idea of “*still*” representation in a setting where individual people pose, recreate, and simulate an event or a scene. Other aspects of this work include questioning the idea of entertainment and the construction of a visual iconography where pleasure, excess and fantasy are implicit.

Currently, I am working on a project to take place as part of the events in San Sebastian as European Cultural Capital in 2016. I have also been asked to design the cover of the Spanish translation by María José Belbel of the book *Mother Camp. Female Impersonators in America*, by Esther Newton. I am also participating in a collective exhibition *Múltiplo de Cien* in Seville in May 2014, organized by the International University of Andalucía, as part of an archive of work on feminism and gender.

Zoe Bray conducted these interviews in early 2014 by email and phone. She is Professor at the Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada, Reno. She published her first book *Living Boundaries: Frontiers and Identities in the Basque Country* (2004). She is currently working on a new manuscript, looking at the relationship between Art and Politics. Bray is also an artist, often painting the portraits of individuals she interviews as part of her research.