

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

ESTHER FERRER. INTERTWINED SPACES

## THE THINGS

March 16, 2018 – June 10, 2018



### Esther Ferrer

*The Things (Las Cosas)*

Performance

Le Lieu Festival, Quebec (Canada), 1990

© Esther Ferrer, VEGAP, Bilbao, 2018

Photo: F. Bergeron

“Performance is the open work par excellence [...] Performance is transformation, movement, precariousness [...] Performance, as I understand it, is happily full of dissidents.” [1]

Esther Ferrer (Donostia/San Sebastián, 1937) pioneered the use of **performance art** as a tool for transforming reality. Her sphere of action operates in two levels: a private one, which questions such intimate issues as sexuality or personal relations; and a social one, which denounces the objectification of the female body and demands equality for men and women.

At the beginning of the performance titled *The Things (Las Cosas, 1990)*, Ferrer sits on a chair, her back to the audience, and puts all sorts of objects on her head while she removes her clothes. Naked, she then moves to another chair and sits facing the audience, where she dresses while continuing to place things on her head. As the objects are removed, she sets them down on a table in the same order in which she picked them up, one after the other. Ferrer has staged this performance many times over the years, but not always in the same way, for she usually alters the format to suit the occasion: occasionally she includes other people, and sometimes she doesn't undress or decides to use different objects. Yet in every case Ferrer plays at discomfiting spectators and uses the absurdity of the situation as catalyst for action. [2]

The “things” used in the artistic performance and named in its title acquire new symbolic value through their involvement in the action and their physical interaction with the artist, whose handling of them does not diminish their own objective, instrumental nature. [3] In her countless performances of *The Things*, Ferrer employs ordinary, everyday objects—a table, a chair, a glass, a hammer, a loaf of bread, or a funnel—and divests them of their customary functions. They are objects the artist has come across during her life, but she did not choose them for aesthetic reasons. In her performance, she has no interest in passing them off as anything other than what they are: perfectly mundane things. [4] In doing so, she creates absurd situations that, without intending to communicate anything, urge spectators to find something, to invent their own stories and connections.

According to Ferrer, performance is the art of here and now. Three elements intervene in her actions: presence, space, and time. The artist is interested in the effects and interpretations that the interaction of these three elements elicits in the viewer: the presence of the person performing the action (the artist), the presence of those who receive and/or actively or passively participate in the action (the audience), and the space-time in which the action unfolds. For Ferrer, the performance consists of her body, her energy, her objects, her self-portraits, her voice, her ideas, her words, and her reasoning.

The artist prefers to describe her creative work as “making things” rather than “making art”, an expression indicative of her discomfort with the term or status of “artist”, which she nevertheless uses solely to help others understand what she does. Her personal and artistic attitude is governed by a desire to be free and not betray her own principles. In fact, throughout her career she has consistently operated on the fringe of social and cultural conventions, allowing her to break down barriers and open up an infinite field of creative possibilities. She defines herself as feminist by conviction. Her own body becomes the most effective means of energetically promoting the visibility of women on the still predominantly male national and international art scene.

### • QUESTIONS

Esther Ferrer used everyday objects to stage her performance *The Things (Las Cosas)*. Observe the [images](#) of this performance and note the objects that appear. Why do you think she chose those items? Do they have anything in common? Are they related somehow? In what way?

In addition to the objects, the artist states that she herself is the work. Why do you think Ferrer says that? How does she insert herself in the performance?

This piece, and all performances in general, are based on ephemeral actions; in other words, they only last as long as the action is being performed. Why do you think an artist would want to create a temporary work? Do you think the piece is exactly the same every time it's performed? Why would Ferrer create a changing piece? How does it feel to know that the action—or, better said, the work—only exists while it is taking place?

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How can a performance be preserved or stored? How might the work or the visitors' interaction with it be recorded and remembered in the future?

Ferrer believes that a fundamental part of her performances is the interaction of three elements: the presence of the artist and her audience, the passage of time, and the space where the action takes place. How do these three requirements meet in *The Things*? Why do you think these three elements are so important to her? In what way does the audience participate? How do they interact with her?

The first performance of *The Things* was given in 1988 and the last in 2011. Describe what you imagine witnessing those performances was like. How do you think the participants felt while watching it? How would you feel? What impressions does it give you? What is your opinion about audiences participating in or interacting with works of art? Each person who sees this work feels different things. What makes each person experience different feelings even though they are seeing the same thing? Do you think giving a performance several times is the same as showing a picture at several different exhibitions? Why?

[1] <http://dspace.umh.es/bitstream/11000/1867/1/TD%20Garc%C3%ADa%20Muriana%2c%20Carmen.pdf> (p. 381)

[2] <http://todoesperformance.blogspot.co.uk/2015/12/esther-ferrer-las-cosas-1997-2011.html>

[3] <http://www.reactfeminism.de/entry.php?l=lb&id=51&e=>

[4] [https://creators.vice.com/es\\_mx/article/wjeywy/esther-ferrer-pionera-del-performance-en-espana-entrevista](https://creators.vice.com/es_mx/article/wjeywy/esther-ferrer-pionera-del-performance-en-espana-entrevista)

## • ACTIVITIES

### Stage a performance with everyday objects

First, watch the [video](#) in which Esther Ferrer talks about her working process. Pay attention to her description of how she plans a performance, particularly regarding what she calls the “score”.

Next, gather up some familiar objects and bring them to school. Also look for mundane items like the ones Ferrer used in *The Things*. Don't forget that some of them were things she came across by chance in the course of her life. In the classroom, spread out your objects and those of your classmates on a table. Imitating Ferrer, choose some of the things to use in your piece and write a score describing an action you could perform with the selected object. When you're finished, share and discuss it with the class.

### Write a short essay

Given the ephemeral, temporary nature of the medium, documents such as photographs or videos are needed to store or record a performance like *The Things*. These documents, once acquired by museums or collectors, are generally cataloged as works of art. However, not all artists agree with this practice: Ferrer, for instance, does not share this “encapsulation” of her works.<sup>[1]</sup> However, she does view the objects created in preparation for the performance—drawings, models, or performance instructions—as works of art.

Write an essay giving your opinion on the following questions: Should documents that record the work of artists be considered artworks? Why? Why do you think Ferrer considers the documents or objects produced by artists prior to the performance to be works of art? Do you agree with her? Why? Would you rather acquire the documents produced before or after the performance? Why?

## VOCABULARY

**Performance:** an artistic practice consisting in the public appearance of an artist who performs a series of actions or events, sometimes in an improvised manner, and in which aesthetics may also be an important factor.

### LINKS

<http://www.reactfeminism.de/entry.php?l=lb&id=51&e=>

<http://angelsbarcelona.com/en/artists/esther-ferrer/projects/las-cosas-performance/59>

<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/esther-ferrer>

<http://angelsbarcelona.com/en/artists/esther-ferrer/projects/las-cosas-performance/59>

<http://www.artium.org/images/historico/Exposiciones/Documentos/ESTHER%20FERRER%20folio1.pdf>