

Temporal and spatial displacements

Home in Eulàlia Valldosera's 1990s artwork

Eva Bru-Domínguez*

Bangor University
e.bru-dominguez@bangor.ac.uk

Abstract: Dissatisfied with the arts landscape of 1990s Catalonia, Eulàlia Valldosera moved to the Netherlands in pursuit of new forms of expression. Setting up a home in a foreign space made her aware of how dwelling places are saturated with traces of their former inhabitants. During that decade, she produced a series of photographs and installations that engaged with the domestic space. This article explores the artist's use of time, movement, and the everyday object in a selection of her 1990s oeuvre and suggests that place and time in her work hark back to a subject that is either absent or displaced.

Keywords: Eulàlia Valldosera, dislocation, domestic space, object, installation art.

Desplaçaments temporals i espacials. La llar en les obres artístiques d'Eulàlia Valldosera dels anys noranta

Resum: A principis dels anys noranta del segle xx Eulàlia Valldosera es trasllada als Països Baixos per tal d'explorar noves formes d'expressió artística. A l'hora d'establir una llar a l'estranger, l'artista percep traces d'antics habitants en els objectes casolans que es troba. Durant aquesta dècada, Valldosera produeix una sèrie de fotografies i instal·lacions en què explora l'espai domèstic. Aquest article estudia l'ús del temps, el moviment i l'objecte quotidià en una selecció d'obres d'aquesta era i suggereix que tant el lloc com el temps en el seu treball evocuen un subjecte absent o dislocat.

Paraules clau: Eulàlia Valldosera, dislocació, espai domèstic, objecte, instal·lació artística.

Compàs d'amalgama, ISSN 2696-0982 / e-ISSN 2696-1008, primavera 2023, núm. 7, p. 38-42
Data de recepció: 5-9-2022. Data d'acceptació: 16-1-2023.

* Eva Bru-Domínguez is an Honorary Research Fellow at Bangor University. She is interested in the study of materiality in contemporary Catalan artistic and performance practices. Sensitive to the historicity, vibrancy and location of bodies and inanimate objects and their connection with natural, technological and virtual environments, she investigates the significance and interrelatedness of living and inert matter with cultural and geopolitical spaces. She has published on cinema, dance, visual and performance art. ORCID: 0000-0001-7894-1765.

In the course of the 1990s, multidisciplinary artist Eulàlia Valldosera (Vilafranca del Penedès, 1963) produced a range of photographic series, installations, and video series that engaged with the dwelling place. She had moved to the Netherlands in the early part of the decade and experienced first-hand the foreignness and strangeness of home.¹ As the artist explains, “I was given a loft that was full of things, which is common among the Dutch who are so object-conscious. The strange thing was to live in an inhabited space with the signs of an unknown person, someone so culturally distant” (Enguita, 2000: 21). Awareness of the (in-)visible imprints of former residents in her new place of dwelling brought about an interest in exploring the relationship between bodies, objects, space, and time. These photographs and installations share many formal and technical elements insofar as they often combine the use of carefully arranged everyday objects with projected images which are sometimes set into motion. Typically, she makes use of food containers, plastic glasses, medicine blister packs and boxes, bottles of detergent, personal hygiene products, mirrors, lights, and the odd piece of old and often broken furniture. These poor materials are sometimes scattered alongside images of different parts of the female body. In fact, to address the construction of home in Valldosera’s work without accounting for the body is an almost impossible task.

Indeed, Valldosera has been acknowledged as a feminist artist who “represents the female body reinventing itself and reappropriating itself as a subject”, and focuses “on dismantling or deconstructing space” (Villaespesa, 2009: 119). Similarly, her use of common and discardable objects (including waste) has been discussed at length in interviews with the artist herself and has also yielded several compelling studies.² However, despite Valldosera’s ongoing exploration of narratives of displacement through objects, her deployment of everyday and disposable items has seldom been analysed in terms of geocultural and temporal dislocation. In this article, I look at the artist’s use of ordinary, domestic, and quotidian objects as repositories of memory and habit, that is, as remnants of past dwelling practices and places. Drawing on Mieke Bal’s writings on migration, art historian Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro reminds us that “when

you examine the question more closely, moving or shifting places is not just a matter of space, but also and especially a question of time” (Hernández-Navarro, 2011: 191). Following Bal’s and Hernández-Navarro’s work, this article explores temporal fractures and overlaps through the use of objects in the construction of home in Valldosera’s photographic series *Burns* (1990-1991) and *Appearances* (1992-1994), her installations *Shelf for a Hospital Bathroom* (1992), *Provisional Home* (1999) and *Still Life* (2000), and her video series *Interviewing Objects* (1997-2008).

Valldosera lived in the Netherlands for about four years. During this period, she produced the photographic series *Burns* (1990-1991) and *Appearances* (1992-1994), cogently described by Bartomeu Marí as pieces evocative of “the phantasmagoria of domesticity and the association between architecture and the body” (Marí, 2009: 109). The *Burns* series is set in a derelict space, stripped of any signs of human activity, where the only reference to dwelling is reduced to a sullied single mattress lying on the floor. The interior wall paint is discoloured and patchy, the plasterwork is crackling, and debris accumulates on the ground. The emptiness of the place adds to a sense of abandonment, dereliction, and disuse. This is a building evocative of past living practices that either abruptly or gradually have come to an end. Valldosera makes use of light projectors to cast fragmented images of her body on various surfaces of its neglected structures, and in so doing she injects light and human warmth into this desolate space. The luminosity emerging from the projections contrasts with the peeling layers of plaster and the matted walls, whereas the nakedness of the artist’s body echoes the vulnerability of displaced subjects and/or groups. Worthy of notice is the artist’s choice to cast her body images on the corners of this built environment. Structurally, corners are the angles or points of contact between two sides or edges and, as such, they can be read symbolically as places of encounter and/or negotiation between different parties. However, there is another interpretation to corners which has to do with inevitability, in other words, with the impact that certain external circumstances or events—like migration movements—have on individuals and collectives forcing them into a place or situation from which they cannot escape.

The photographs in the *Appearances* series are slightly more complex in terms of composition but continue with the topic of the dwelling place by focusing on recreating different rooms of a house. In each of these sparsely furnished quarters, the object becomes the centre of attention. In some images, tooth-

¹ For an account on the cultural and political arena of 1980s and 1990s Catalonia see Eva Bru-Domínguez, “Embodied Memory. Shadow and index in *Family Ties* by Eulàlia Valldosera”.

² See Eulàlia Valldosera *Works 1990-2000* (2000), *Dependences* (2009) and *Blood Ties* (2012).

paste tubes, bottles of shampoo, plastic pill jars and boxes and clothes lie scattered on the floor alongside projections of a woman's body parts. As in many of her pieces, figurations of the female body are treated like any other objects, that is, they are understood as vessels and carriers of embodied memory, culture, and practice. In fact, it is in this series where the artist begins to explore rendering the female body by using everyday items, more precisely, plastic and glass bottles. Illustrative of this is the piece featuring an old Persian rug, where the shadows of a line of plastic bottles of different sizes are cast over the projected figure of her lying body causing its fragmentation. If the representation of space in *Burns* is clearly suggestive of narratives of uprootedness and migration and encapsulates the human need for safety, shelter, and warmth, displacement in *Appearances* operates at a more symbolic level. References to the subject's everyday routines and practices are disembodied, compartmentalised, and dislocated. While this strategy undoubtedly heightens the sense of out-of-places that underlines both photographic series, it is important to draw attention to the temporal overlaps required to produce these effects, as these hark back to the multiplicity of timeframes in the experience of dislocation.

In his analysis of temporality in relation to migration, Hernández-Navarro observes how population movements have traditionally been defined in terms of space. Typically, he notes, "to migrate is, above all, to look for a site, a home, a place to inhabit" (Hernández-Navarro, 2011: 191), and he builds on Bal's definition of migration as "an experience of time – as multiple, heterogeneous" (192) remarking that the temporalities of the migrants "collide with the single time of globalization" (193). The art historian rejects interculturality as a linear or integrative model and defends a "conviviality of times as a collision and irreducible tension", arguing that the immigrant's movement through timeframes "is never clean, never total. There is an excess, something that cannot be moved, something that remains immobile" (194). Understanding of the displacement of human beings in these terms sheds light on Valldosera's photographic series. She works with analogue photography, which allows her to layer different exposures on the same piece of film. As the artist says, "la suma de múltiples tiempos [...] me permiten borrar partes del cuerpo, deslocalizar las sombras de los objetos, o introducirlas en los seres y las paredes que devienen asimismo un cuerpo desnudo ante el reto de verse expuesto" (Valldosera, n.d.). Clearly, this technique enables her to congeal multiple temporalities in a single frame, yet it

is the type of objects she uses to figure the subject, particularly the detergent bottles and hygiene products, that is suggestive of a desire to "clean" any cultural, political, and historical "excesses", as Hernández-Navarro would put it.³ This cleansing action extends to her own practice as an artist, which led her to move to the Netherlands to free herself from her own "cultural baggage" (Enguita, 2000: 23) and "learn to work all over again" (24).

References to cleansing are also present in her installation *Shelf for a Hospital Bathroom* (1992), where the human body is abstracted and takes a more ephemeral form. The orderly display of medicines, hygiene and beauty products, and the immaculately clean and shiny surfaces in this piece has a rather soothing effect on the spectator. Here, the body has disintegrated and is figured as light, an identity in flux, becoming object when it reaches the surface of each of the neatly arranged everyday hygiene and beauty products; memory as it casts their distorted shadows on the white towel; body when it moulds into the sleeve of a hospital gown or a trouser leg; and residue when it is eventually deposited in the child's potty. In this installation, transition through spaces, or the body in movement, is conveyed through light, whereas the everyday hygiene products function as obstacles that interfere with the direction of the beam and cause it to change direction, creating distortions, intermittencies, and discontinuities. Further, the public is invited to interfere with the path of the light by placing their hands or fingers between the objects, playfully casting shadows and new forms, interrupting its linearity, displacing it, and redirecting its trajectory.

Displacement in Valldosera's artwork is conveyed in myriad ways, and objects are key to her exploration of migratory movements; as the artist states, "aquellos que han experimentado un cambio de residencia conocen mejor que nadie el poder de los objetos" (Valldosera in *Interartive*). Her video series *Interviewing Objects* (1997-2008) consists of 10-minute recordings where she invites fellow artists, curators, installers, and collectors to speak about an object. The recordings take place abroad and at the home of the interviewee where the artist chooses to lodge in order to get a better insight into the "interior landscapes of the locals' homes" and avoid the "antiseptic rooms of the cities

3 Cleansing products and the action of cleansing are recurrent in Valldosera's work. See, for example, the installation and performance *The Navel of the World* (1991), the installations *The Kitchen* (1992), and *Vessels: the Cult of the Mother* (1996), the video-performance *Devotion Portrayed* (1997), and the interactive installation *Interactive Bottles* (2009).

[she] passes through” (Valldosera, 2000: 164). *Migrant Objects* is part of the *Interviewing Objects* series and consists of monologues by three immigrants or foreigners living in Barcelona, who explain why these random objects are important to them. The medium she uses for these video series is worthy of attention insofar as the moving image, as Bal reminds us, performs “migration and the social movement of people” (Bal 2008, 150). In her article, “Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement”, the cultural theorist explores how “video can help articulate migratory culture” (150) by making it visible in new forms and heightening the temporal asynchronies intrinsic to displacement. She notes, “memory in video often concerns someone else’s past or memories, which as a viewer, you cannot recall at all. These memories happen for the first time. Yet, they are inalienably anchored in the alter-memory or hetero-memory that the exposure to the work stages for us” (152). Interestingly, in these video series, the voices of the interviewees are heard but their faces are hardly ever seen, in fact, the primary subject of the lens is the object itself (a doll, a teddy bear, a watch or an old table, among others) and the recounted story. Here, the artist invites the viewer to experience the strangeness and foreignness of home through the memories elicited by these items. The past feelings or events associated to them are shared, that is, mobilised through the medium of video. The audience’s gaze is turned into the object itself rather than the subject, and the moving image operates at an affective level, for to move not only means to change place but also to stir feelings or emotions.

Valldosera’s exploration of movement between places through everyday objects lasted for a good ten years and culminated in the installation series *Provisional Living* (1999), where temporality and motion are even more prominent. The series consists of three pieces that explore how individuals’ identities are affected by migration or changes of residence, and includes the installations *Provisional Home*, *Provisional Bedroom* and *Still Life*.⁴ The pieces are very similar in terms of format and encapsulate many of the themes and techniques discussed so far. In *Provisional Home*, a range of old-fashioned, worn-out and in some cases broken pieces of domestic furniture lie scattered on the floor, alongside a few piled-up chairs, light projectors, mirrors, and small electric motors. These material and rather heavy objects share a space with a range of projected images of armchairs, books, tele-

phones, and suitcases, which are set into motion and routinely circulate around the walls of the dimly lit room. The images of the objects are animated and travel at different speeds tracing a variety of networks of light and colour on the room’s walls and ceiling only to occupy their “rightful” location for a very brief instant. Their shapes are subject to numerous and temporary distortions, they momentarily meet and merge, shrink and increase in size, and mould into the structure of the building, its corners and columns, lightly brushing against every inch of this space. In this piece, the artist incorporates variables of time and vectors of direction and speed in order to turn a house in disarray into a world of wonders, of magic and light, of controlled chaos. Valldosera describes it as a piece that engages with the transitory nature of concepts and how these are associated with particular cultural and geopolitical spaces (Enguita, 2000: 31). She uses movement and light to draw a fragile and ephemeral web of relations, stressing temporal and spatial dissonances and asserting these as constitutive parts of homemaking processes.

In 2000, Valldosera exhibited her photographic series and installation *Still Life* at the Galeria Joan Prats in Barcelona, one of the most important spaces in the city dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art. As suggested by the title of the exhibition, on this occasion, the artist transformed the gallery space into a home, that is, she recreated a three-dimensional still life. Large photographs of her fragmented body hung on the corridor walls, above the sofa, and above a double bed. The last room in the house featured a child’s highchair and a broken baby’s cot. As in the other *Provisional Living* installations, ordinary objects—in this case, baby clothes and products—were projected on the walls and circulated at various speeds around the room, becoming its only source of light. *Still Life* brought together the themes, aesthetics, media, formats, and techniques that the artist had been exploring in the course of a decade: her interest in exploring motion and transition between dwelling places; the importance she grants to memory-laden objects; and her desire to shed light into the traces of past practices and habits. However, I would venture to say that the topic of the installation in the final room of the gallery—a baby’s room—signalled a change in her practice, for it included a new vector in her already complex understanding of temporality: the future.

⁴ *Still Life* consists of an installation representing a child’s room and a series of photographs which explore the female body.

References

- Bal, Mieke (2008). "Migratory aesthetics: Double movement". *Exit*, vol. 32: 150-161.
- Bru-Domínguez, Eva (2019). "Embodied memory: Shadow and index in *Family Ties* by Eulàlia Valldosera. Contaminated and dislocated bodies in Catalan visual and performance cultures". *Journal of Romance Studies* (special issue), 19:2: 263-281.
- Enguita Mayo, Nuria, Bartomeu Marí, and Eulàlia Valldosera (2000). "Conversation". In *Eulàlia Valldosera. Works 1990-2000*, eds. Monique Verhurst and Witte de With, 19-44. Rotterdam: Witte de With.
- Hernández-Navarro, Miguel Á. (2011). "Out of synch: Visualizing migratory times through video art". In *Art and visibility in migratory culture: Conflict, resistance, and agency*, eds. Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, 191-208. Amsterdam / New York: Rodopi.
- Interartive. A platform for contemporary art and thought. "El poder de los objetos. Eulàlia Valldosera". In <https://interartive.org/2010/09/objetos-eulalia-valldosera> [accessed 2 August 2022].
- Marí, Bartomeu (2009). "Actions, objects and devices in the oeuvre of Eulalia Valldosera". In *Dependences*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía: 105-115.
- Rodríguez Muñoz, Bárbara (2012). *Blood Ties*. London: Carroll/Fletcher.
- Valldosera, Eulàlia (2000). "Quemaduras, apariencias, still life 1991-1999". In <https://eulaliavalldosera.com/agua-luz-y-sombras-proyectos-realizados-desde-1990/cuerpos-fotos-y-acciones/quemaduras-apariencias-still-life-1991-99/> [accessed 2 August 2022].
- Villaespesa, Mar (2009). "Interrupt our calculations and begin again at zero". In *Dependences*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2009: 116-137.