

I speak my body

By Laura Hakel

*If you remember me
Don't mention me
Because you're going to feel
A good kind of love.
Chavela Vargas*

I.

When Mercedes Azpilicueta moved to the Netherlands in 2011, something changed in her work. As if the transoceanic distance from Argentina had tuned her ear and given a new urgency to her speech, she abandoned what little materiality remained in it (in Buenos Aires she had already been putting more of an emphasis on the exercise of writing and poetry reading sessions over painting and studio work) and affirmed her interest in language, primarily in orality, spelling mistakes, mistranslations, made-up words and everything that is “dirty” in communication, that soft part—sonic, living, used—of what we say, the bits that dodge the rules of how we “ought” to speak, reflecting personal and local forms of expression.

“You know? It’s all about affection,” she wrote to her sister in the letter *Dear Sister* (2011), one of Azpilicueta’s first works on arriving in Rotterdam, presented now at the Museo de Arte Moderno as part of the works that make up her first panoramic exhibition, as a video installation where the words appear as in a silent karaoke, so that spectators reproduce the voice in their minds. Knowingly, nostalgically, the artist tells her sister banal details of her new day-to-day—the layout of her room, the view from her window, the profound sense of loneliness, but also the sensation of being observed, mixed with reflections and memories of them both in Buenos Aires (“Remember when we went to the delta?”) It is an intimate account that explores the subjectivity of the self as a place of enunciation and the distance inherent in the epistolary genre. In the letter, the intimate voice merges personal and shared memory, constructing a space of connection between the two cities and the two sisters. The text is also a way of inhabiting another language. Paradoxically written in English, in the text Azpilicueta finds value in the spelling mistakes, as if they were the gateway to new meanings for the words, less correct but more subjective and significant.

That affectivity that can transmit the word is also a key part of *Volver a casa expandiendo la voz* [*Heading Home Expanding the Voice*] (2012). This was one of Azpilicueta’s first performative pieces, a recital of a script created from text messages accumulated on her mobile phone over the course of a year, combined with poems: “te quiero Chau/ ¿cómo

estás pum?/ ¿recuperada?/ si están por la zona/ estoy en el cafecito de pasteur y corrientes/ besos cuchufu/ pum me llamó gato/ diluvia y no vuelve” [love you Bye/how are you pum?/ feeling better?/ if you’re in the area/ I’m in the little café on Pasteur and Corrientes/ kisses cuchufu/ pum cat called me/ it’s pouring and he’s not coming back]. The discourse is made up of moments, meet-ups and missed encounters, leading us from a sensation of enormous closeness to the impossibility of communication: that moment when the language takes a false turn, becoming a near automatic, frustrating machine of greetings and monologues.

In her subsequent works, Azpilicueta began to borrow other voices. To construct the scripts of the performances *La calculadora bien templada* [The Well-Tempered Calculator], (2013), *Carne* [Flesh] (2013) and *Pow!* (2014) she appropriated the words of such characters as an obsessive mother, an authoritarian yoga teacher, an art auctioneer, and a teacher in a language exam.

Pascal Quignard says that unlike what happens with our sight and eyelids, in our ears there is nothing to limit the information from the outside.¹ What we hear, voluntarily or involuntarily, joins us to others and the place where we are. In the video installation *Bailarina Geométrica No Cree En El Amor, Encuentra Aspiración y Éxtasis en Espirales* [Geometric Ballerina Doesn’t Believe in Love, Finds Aspiration and Ecstasy in Spirals] (2015), Azpilicueta transformed her voice into a social collective and a territory. She reconstructed the soundscape of Rotterdam with her voice, embodying what she heard in the markets, the port and the street. Sitting cross-legged in the lotus position, like a fortune teller or a medium in a trance, she reproduced the offers of the street traders with the cry of “een eurroooo, een euro”, the chants of sport stadiums and the city’s whole socioeconomic soundscape—working-class, precarious—moving through her in a language she doesn’t necessarily understand. The title of the work evokes the figure of the French poet Valentine de Saint-Point, author of the *Manifesto of Futurist Woman*. Working from this, the artist imagines the decadence and virility of this city, reconstructed after the war, converted into feminine energy, just as poetry turns words and their sonority into a new energy. Entre Ríos poet Juan L Ortiz claimed that the landscape saw “all the dimensions from which it transcends”, the secret life that casts it down.² Mercedes Azpilicueta transmutes the urban routine into something substantial, a transcendence embodied in a chorus uttered by a single voice.

¹ Pascal Quignard, *El odio a la música*, Buenos Aires, El cuenco de plata, 2012, p. 67.

² AA. VV., *Una poesía del futuro: conversaciones con Juan L. Ortiz*, Buenos Aires, Mansalva, 2008, p. 21.

One notable aspect in this group of works is Azpilicueta's interest in the affectivity that is channeled through language, but also in the control and violence exerted through it. Using her ears as a great radar, the artist investigated what is transmitted in what we say and hear, which transport our identity, like an invisible DNA chain. In her performances she exorcized all that she heard, availing herself of the elasticity of the word, using in her scripts poetic resources by Marguerite Duras, Clarice Lispector, Susana Thénon and Alejandra Pizarnik—from whom the name of this exhibition, *Yo hablo mi cuerpo* [I speak my body], is taken—and the capacity of the tone and timbre of the voice to go beyond the meaning of language.

II.

The voice as a channel where inside and outside meet was followed by the question of the place of the body in this overheating circuit of communication. In 2015, if anyone entered her workshop in the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam they would find her imitating, to the point of facial deformation, the expressions and emotions of Charles Le Brun with the book open,³ uttering words like mantras and guttural sounds. *Un mundo raro* [A Rare World] is the result of that experimentation, connecting the Spinozan holistic gaze of body and soul, a point of reference for historical performances by such artists as Bruce Nauman, Lygia Pape and Lygia Clark, and the emotional spite of a bolero by the Mexican Chavela Vargas. Swathed in Adidas armour, Azpilicueta writhes, gesticulates, speaks to herself, sings and explores all the physical sound forms her voice can produce. She investigates the sounding board of the body and seeks to expand it with demanding yoga breathing and physical exercises, so that it might accommodate more, like a tent inflated at a festival to house a multitude. In Ancient Greece, athleticism was body worship and, through it, the worship of beauty and truth. In *Un mundo raro* [A Rare World], Azpilicueta is an athlete who in the act of expanding her body imagines that we could be more flexible, to listen to who we are and how we are with others.

In *Gender Trouble*,⁴ Judith Butler proposes thinking of speech as a performative act, where body and language come together, and where conventions and norms operate that determine how we are and the way we behave. From this perspective, performance in

³ Jennifer Montagu, *The Expression of the Passions: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's "Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière"*, Yale University Press; First edition, 1994.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge, 1990.

Azpilicueta's work is a live driving force for investigation: a tool of deconstruction of significant structures and bodily behaviours inherited through language.

In this respect, *Molecular Love* (2016) is a project guided by an interest in including in the artistic practice another kind of knowledge through performance, something that Marie Bardet calls *thinking with moving*,⁵ a knowledge that isn't necessarily rational, but rather closer to instinct. *Molecular Love* is the result of an experimental work in which Azpilicueta brought together choreographers and dancers from different disciplines of dance and theatre to perform a script of actions, ideas, phrases and movements proposed by the artist, but which mutated when absorbing the group's work. Set up as a living organism, the work consists of a performance—lasting eight hours in the first presentation—a series of drawings, the video *Untitled (Molecular Love)* (2016) and visual mnemonics, notes written in a personal code combining words and drawings used to memorize and rehearse the performances. The focus of the work is placed on thinking of female desire as the center of the creative and artistic act. It proposes a decelerated, non-conclusive work rate, with results that are not necessarily visual or objectual. It is an essay on the information that can be found in the body, and on the possibility of discussing the authority of materiality and the gaze over the rest of the senses, both in art and in life (in her *Manifesto of Futurist Woman*, Valentine de Saint-Point said: "Women, for too long perverted by morals and prejudices, return to your sublime instinct.")⁶ In the performance, two female bodies communicate in a non-verbal dialogue. It is a relation in which there is something of sisterhood and learning through the reversal of movements and, above all, the recognition of one's own body through the other. The word appears as a singing game, at times rather innocent or naïf ("Beeso, beso besito, besooo, besito..." or "Renata trabaja todala, todala semana Renata")⁷, forming choral moments throughout the work.

But unlike a formal chorus, where the composition and the rules to be followed are necessary to form that single "voice" that must not be strayed from, in Mercedes Azpilicueta's works the polyphonic and the corporal respond more to the idea of *intoxication*. This is expressed in her Paris travel diary: "i feel intoxicated. we feel intoxicated. our bodies feel intoxicated,"⁸ to describe the chain reaction of shivers she feels on hearing a busker on the Paris Metro; and also "i also feel touched. suddenly we all feel touched. we understand we might have very little in common. still, at least we are feeling

⁵ Marie Bardet, *Pensar con mover. Un encuentro entre danza y filosofía*, Buenos Aires, Cactus, 2012.

⁶ Valentine de Saint-Point, *Manifesto of Futurist Woman*, 1912.

⁷ "Kiiss, kiss kissy, kiiss, kissy..." or "Renata works allthe, allthe week Renata."

⁸ Mercedes Azpilicueta, *about hell, smells & shame*, Paris, 2017-18. (in English in the original)

something together. for sure this music is making sensible something that is real in all our bodies".⁹ The text is part of the work *Bestiario de Lengüitas* [Bestiary of Tonguelets], a project started in 2017 at the Villa Vassilieff residence in Paris, reflecting on intoxication as something as positive as it is inevitable. The work, of a procedural character and conceived as a long-term investigation, is composed of different parts, including a manual of survival exercises with *Armaduras suaves* [Soft Armour], made from organic, porous, recycled materials that take care of the multitude of soft, migrating bodies that we are.

The polyphony of voices has also started to turn into a polyphony of references. Over the years an underground stream has formed of works, artists and writers, contemporary and historical, running through Azpilicueta's projects and flowing together in her way of making transversal artistic investigations, against the grain of convention. "Dishonest investigations", as she calls them. In *Bestiario de lengüitas* (2017-18), more than conceptual affiliations or historical ties, Azpilicueta imagines affective affinities between Lea Lublin, the Argentine feminist artist who settled in Paris in the 1960s, the "*neobarrosa porteña*" poetry of Néstor Perlongher,¹⁰ the Chilean reggaeton of Tomasa del Real, and the medieval tapestry *The Lady and the Unicorn*—an enigmatic group of six pieces dedicated to the senses in which, in the last one, the lady holds a chest under the legend *a mon seül d'ésir*, which for Azpilicueta suggests female desire, something absent and historically denied, like a treasure. Azpilicueta's "dishonest investigation" is a way of doing that turns the canonical and patriarchal history of art on its head, suggesting unorthodox, transhistorical connections that rewrite the past and our present.

Azpilicueta's latest project, *Cuerpos pájaros* [Bird Bodies] (2018), produced especially for this exhibition, asks where the body begins and ends, this intoxicated body she imagines as collective. A body made up of many parts, diverse and demystified; filthy and affected rather than ideally and conventionally attractive or domesticated, subject to traditional, repressive beauty rules. The work is a video installation with a script made up of three voices or discourses (one personal, one historical, one theoretical) that interweave reflections on writing and description as an emancipating act, on the deformations of the human figure in mannerist art, and narrate the impressions of the spectator faced with the body language of the baroque work *Judith Beheading Holofernes* by Artemisa Gentileschi. These narratives, combined with a low bass sound that goes through the spectator, are superimposed on a collection of close-ups of images compiled by the artist on long walks

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ *Neobarrosa* is a pun of Perlongher's on "neobaroque" and *barro*, referring to the mud of the River Plate. (TN.)

around Buenos Aires in the summer of 2018, showing details of knees, necks, torsos, hairs, lips and arms. They are fragments that instead of reducing to abstractions or showing the body as an object, present features, gestures and personal poses impossible to adapt to the prescriptive straitjacket of a physical “ideal.”

The writing of scripts and the production of visual mnemonics are important activities in Azpilicueta’s work. In her first projects, the mnemonics were small papers that fit in her hand and which she could move from one place to another. In time, she started to make embroidered fabrics and handmade patchworks from them, recovering the manual work and artistic practices traditionally classed as female. Mnemonics are part of her work process and of her thinking about performance. They are objects that carry with them the action in condensed form, giving materiality to the memory of the work, articulating and dividing the space of the room, guiding the visitor’s movements.

Furthermore, there is a radical interest in the performative, connected to the possibility of thinking of the work as an open, evolving system, with extensive investigations that are enhanced in the long term. Some of her works have the logic of an open encyclopaedia, such is the case of *yegua yeta yuta* [mare jinx pig] (started in 2015), in which a list of over four hundred insults for women in *lunfardo* (Buenos Aires slang) continues to grow with the passing of time. Others form constellations that join together a textual script, and mnemonic, performative work and, sometimes, a video based on the live work, such as the case of *Geometric Dancer* and *Molecular Love*. It is hard to work out where Azpilicueta’s works begin and end and which parts make them up. This open-endedness is down to her interest in not directing artistic production towards a search for a closed result, but rather reappraising the value of the research process, decelerating it, deriving pieces from each moment, rethinking the materiality of the work and its components.

III.

Mercedes Azpilicueta’s works have the potency of a love letter found in a wardrobe, a text wished for in the middle of the night, the yearning memory of a relative’s words. They deal with personal emotions familiar to us all. A long-distance call, an email that arrives just in time, a heart that beats like when we run for a bus that waits for us to catch up. The fade-out of the *reggaeton* of the van pulling away from the traffic light, the street trader’s words and catchphrases and singsong calls. Her work investigates—through language, the body

and what we hear—all that we take from the outside and all that settles in us, becoming something personal, but also something that connects us. Her voice is the one that listens attentively to what has passed through us in everyday life and reassures us: “trust me sister, those words have to do something, even now.”¹¹

¹¹ Extract from *Dear Sister* (2011)