

Art as Creative Resistance. A Bird's Eye Tour



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**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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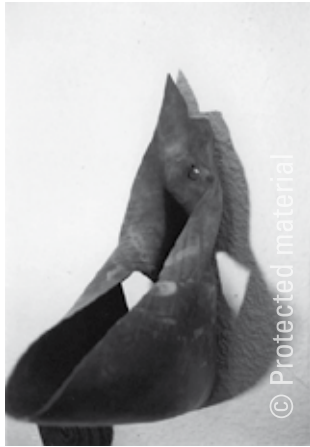
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Original text published in the catalogue *Susana Talayero. Restless Chronicle (1987-2016)* held at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum (4 March to 6 June 2016).

Susana Talayero arrived in Rome in 1986 and continued to live there until 1995. That journey and her long stay in the city proved crucial to her experience and her work. In the eighties, many artists, critics and galleries enlivened Rome's cultural scene with all manner of movements, explorations and debates such as the one between realism and abstraction. After the war, in response to the long period of cultural isolation, Italian art had embarked on innovative investigations and had gone back to exploring some of the groundbreaking intuitions of the historical avant-gardes, such as Futurism. Along with the influence of American art (Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art) and New Realism, some artists soon became interested in recovering specifically Mediterranean memories, and even—as in the case of Giuseppe Capogrossi and the group Origine (Origins)—“primordial” glyphs and archetypal symbols. A lot of work was done in the fields of conceptual art and installations, and also in so-called “Arte Povera” as theorised by Germano Celant in the sixties. In the wake of these trends, the Nuova Scuola Romana and the movement known as the Transavant-garde sprung up in Rome in the eighties. In this scene in which “official” scenes and “ex-centric” situations existed side by side, different generations and trends often clashed in heated debates. Rome's open, cosmopolitan art world was not yet conditioned by the subordination and commercialism of postmodernity.

In Rome, Susana watched, listened, and became familiar with this multiform reality that flourished at the crossroads of the North and the South of the world. She initially set up a small studio in Vicolo Santa Margherita—in the working class area of Trastevere, which was popular with artists at the time—and filled it with paintings, drawings, objects and works of different types and formats. Later she moved to a larger studio on Piazza Cairoli, and for a long time she alternated between it and a workspace fitted out in her house. Motivated by an overwhelming desire to experiment and express herself, she produced large paintings—with acrylic paint and mixed media—and also worked with paper, cardboard, and “poor” or recycled materials including linoleum, iron, plaster and plastic. Each format, large or small, allowed her to assemble, paste, draw symbols, mix techniques and materials, and to quickly outline colours, figures, shapes, and scenes, captured with minimal gestures. And also to make albums, books, “tiles”, “tablets” and miscellaneous ob-





Rubber pieces, assemblages in the Bilbao studio, 1994

jects. The things that built up between the walls, furniture and floor of each of the places where she worked ended up becoming a kind of installation, in a perpetual state of emerging and striving. Even the actual space—the imaginary stage—of each “installation” became an element that Susana explored and worked on, not as a finished “composition” but as an event open to multiple suggestions.

From her peripheral, transversal position, Susana immersed herself in Rome’s art world, frequenting different scenes and artists and striking up friendships. Very soon, in 1987, she was invited to show her work at Galleria L’Ariete: her first solo show. On that occasion I wrote a brief introductory text for her. Her work already transmitted a strong vital energy, and some of its essential characteristics could already be glimpsed in the works from that first Roman period. These distinctive features include the importance of a spirit of “imaginative DIY”, the sense of the unfinished transience of each work, and the desire to mould inorganic chaos, suggesting particular narratives through informal brushstrokes and the outlines of shapes and images. They also include the presence of symbolic, often surreal figures that swing between the spheres of the plant and animal worlds and the human world, which overlap with poetic irony and cartoonish overtones. In Susana’s work, humans sometimes adopt animal elements, and animals become an allegory of the human. When Susana and I, along with pianist Esther Flückiger, started collaborating on a music, drawing and poetry event based on *L’oiseau prophète (Bird as Prophet)* in Rome’s Sala 1 in 1996, the figure of the bird emerged as one of the most interesting protagonists of those “narratives”. Susana used this ancient archetype as a metaphor of freedom and the breath of life, but in works such as *uccellaccio* (big ugly bird)—the title of one of her paintings—or in the form of a flightless, many-faced bird, it was also a totally earthly metaphor. In his introductory text for the series of compositions in the exhibition of 1997 *Aviarios e Insectarios (Aviaries and Insectariums)*, in which numerous strange little figures swarmed over the walls and other surfaces, Milton Gendel mentioned the importance of zoomorphic symbolism in Susana’s work. But it was more than that. When she turned to the human sphere, Susana drew and painted some highly grotesque figures as in the series *Curiosidad (Curiosity, 1990)*, *Dibujos rotos (Broken Drawings, 1991)* and *Retratos (Portraits, 1991-1994)*, as well as others that were more light-hearted and ironic. And then there are the inorganic things—another important factor in her work—, like the fragments of polymorphous objects that combined with other elements in her collages, paintings, and drawings, creating unusual and imaginative combinations, as in *Autoritratto visionario (Visionary Self-Portrait, 1991)*, *Visi vasi (Jar Faces, 1990)* and *Escuadra y cartabón (Square and Set-Square, 1990)*.

Susana's work can be highly painterly, with strong colours, although she often turns her hand to drawing and graphics—in pencil, ink, and mixed media on paper—exuberantly and to great effect, capturing shapes with quick gestures. The influence of Expressionism, particularly German Neo-Expressionism, can be sensed below the surface of many of the works from her Roman period. There is also a restless “child-like” naivety in her drawings from that time, as well as in some *art brut* works, and in her “discovery” of Osvaldo Licini, an imaginary twentieth-century Italian artist who Susana mentions in her autobiographical notes. She also mentions other artists, including Cy Twombly and Edith Schloss, two excellent Rome-based North American painters whose works expressed unusual styles and methods with great pathos. In Rome, Susana also made friends with Silvano Agosti, a somewhat peculiar figure from the Italian film world who helped her to discover the “virtual eye” of this art form. None of this should surprise us. Susana explored the historical avant-garde, the Transavantgarde, and the work of particular artists in a search for the free, poetic irony of signs, tonality, and images that were in line with her own sensibility. It was an ongoing quest in which she avoided labels, groups, and movements, remaining open to stimuli and input and, at the same time, true to her essential feelings. Susana had taken her own “pathos” to Rome. She had her own artistic background, her personal influences, including, she wrote, “some that are close to Spanish Informalism, such as my encounter with José Guerrero’s paintings while I was a student.” She knew that “the sleep of reason produces monsters”, and she exorcised the monsters and sought answers. She also sought some illuminations, but without heroic or transcendental ambitions. Rather, with the creative patience and the radiant curiosity of those who seek illumination in the fleeting mythography of life and hidden beneath the surface of everyday life.



L'oiseau prophète, installation view,
Centro per L'Arte Contemporanea
Sala 1, Rome, 1996

In Rome, Susana found a Mediterranean dimension that subdued the lights and shadows in her works, as can be seen in the great paintings from her Piazza Cairoli period—*Incrocio (Crossroads)*, *Uccello bianco (White Bird)*, *Piazza Cairoli I* and *Piazza Cairoli II*—, in which the scene opens up, and she composes and colours expansively. Nonetheless, other paintings from this period—such as *Cani per strada (Stray Dogs)*, *4 cani per strada (4 Stray Dogs)* and *Mecanismo delirante (Delirious Mechanism)*—are based on harsher and more absurd metaphors, in denser, narrower colour spaces. Ever since then, the gentle and the grotesque,



Broken Drawings series (1991),
installation view, Studio Morbiducci, Rome, 1993

poetry and irony, alternate and combine in her work, which constantly swings between conflicting perceptions.

As a whole, “narrative” has been an important organising factor in the dynamic of her works, either in the sense of sequence in a thematic series or within a particular work. In other words, both in the installations made up of drawings, tablets, objects, and pages of “booklets”, and in works that consist of a single space. But we should point out that the term “narrative” may not be quite accurate... Because Susana’s discourse is rarely linear as stories or figurative paintings are. Rather, it is “narrative” in the sense of attempting to decipher a puzzle made up of symbols and figures, like a hieroglyph. Susana expresses and suggests through a process that is enigmatic and surreal, rather than discursive, and through a hieroglyphic structure based on symbolic references and heterogeneous combinations. Her discourse is pieced together from fragments, and its “fragmentary” nature is a rhythmic, aesthetic component of her work, encouraging the creation of new nodes and interaction between imaginary centres. Perhaps it is this, and the passion with which she acts on her need to express herself, that leads Susana to sometimes include in her work a sentence, a word, or a written element affirming something, or to present her works accompanied by quotations, comments, and even titles.

Near the end of her stay in Rome, Susana’s life was enriched by forming a family. Her first daughter, Leire, was born in 1993 in the house on Via Oreste Tommasini, where she lived with her partner and compatriot, the psychologist Iñaki Aramberri. The second, Juana, was born in Bilbao in 1998. These events were also important from the point of view of spatial topology: the house became a studio and an alternative workplace. If in a sense Susana felt more isolated then, it was also because Rome’s art scene had changed in

the meantime. It had changed *a lot*. And not just in Rome. The effects of the amply studied phenomenon of the emergence of “globalisation”, of virtual reality, of postmodernity and of post-postmodernity... were compounded by the well-known effects that led to the creation of what critic and historian Fredric Jameson called a “dominant art system” in which the boundaries between art, commercial power, and media politics are often unclear.



4 cani per strada, 1991
Acrylic, postcards, and metal
on canvas. 200 x 200 cm

The decision to leave Rome was inevitable, and it was also positive for Susana’s personal and artistic life. Nonetheless, she wrote: “I have left Rome, but I carry Rome inside me.” Although she embarked on a new and important stage of her life and work in Bilbao, Rome has never disappeared from her sights. All artists have their own inner map, their places of initiation and memory of the soul. In Bilbao, Susana developed the techniques, themes, and ideas she had forged in Rome. From Bilbao, she continues her dialogue with Rome, visiting regularly and sending her friends catalogues and information about her work and activities. She has even found opportunities to collaborate in projects in different places and countries with some of her artist friends, such as Karin Eggers and Primarosa Cesarini Sforza. As for my own friendship with Susana, it began in her early years in the city when she had her studio in Vicolo Santa Margherita, and over the years I’ve followed her career and I’ve often had the opportunity to talk to her about art. A new edition of my book *La murata (Sealed in Stone)* was published during the time we used to see each other in Rome, and Susana has been kind enough to quote passages from it in several of her catalogues, and even in relation to her recent video *La murata* (2015), in which she links the practice of art in a studio to the spatial phenomenology of “confinement”. The development of this link between “inside” and “outside” led to the project *Las muradas*, which Susana conceived with the singer Isabel Álvarez for the monastery of Santa Maria de la Piedad in Casalarreina, La Rioja. Why the reference to *La murata*? The book was based on the true story of a young woman living in the early fifteenth century, who locked herself in a stone cell built onto the outside of the



Envelopes series, assemblages in the Rome studio, 1998



Plant Drawings, installation view, Galerie Kunstfalle, Bern, 1991

wall of the Cemetery and Church of the Holy Innocents in the heart of Paris, in a holy and profane space that attracted a mixed bag of exiles, fugitives, beggars, prostitutes, street artists, preachers, and believers, as records show. Susana read it as a metaphor of the soul of the artist, which observes the surrounding world from a central point. This helps to sum up her imaginary “position”: emotionally committed to things but at the same time always able to look from the outside. Determined for years to recover her own “Mediterraneaness”, Susana later quoted some paragraphs from another of my books, *Ultimo tè a Marrakesh (Last Tea in Marrakech)*, reflecting her increasing interest in the memories and cultures of the South, an experience that has broadened and enriched her outlook.

Moving forward on a spiral path, in Bilbao Susana has matured and re-worked her language, exploring and experimenting with new techniques. For instance, her series of encaustic paintings—a technique that uses wax as a pigment binder—, which includes a large-scale painting with a beautiful title, *La rosa de nada (The Nothing-Rose)*, inspired by the Paul Celan poem. As Susana continued to mature, she produced works of great beauty, large compositions such as the transgressive installations she set up in her studio under the title *Jardín (Garden)*, for example. For this exhibition, Susana decided to arrange them on the walls along



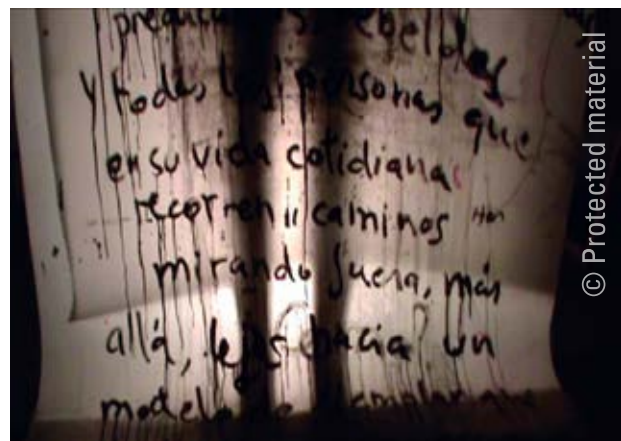
Garden, assemblage in the Bilbao studio, 2015

with a series of previously unexhibited encaustic works on paper created between 2000 and 2009, thus creating a single assemblage consisting—like life itself—of “a multiplicity of individual pieces”. At the same time, given that the “non-objectual” arts—*les immatériaux*, as the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard called them—make it possible to capture the fleeting nature of images, and even their power, Susana naturally explored the potential of new audiovisual technologies, producing experimental films and videos. In any case, as we saw earlier, she had already shown an interest in film and photography and in the potential of the virtual eye during her Rome period. One of her notable films is the 2010 project *Domestic Flights*, in which she uses video and photographs to explore a space that she vividly describes as “domestic, but not domesticated”. And here we could add that the spaces that Susana creates have always been essentially “not domesticated”.

So between new “narratives”, installations, objects, “books” and events of different kinds, Susana’s career has evolved through intense and exuberant activity. A glance at her curriculum over the last decade confirms the wide range of different types of works and projects in which she participates. But in everything she does, she has always remained true to the constant elements of her imaginary universe, without blatant ruptures, which is to say without losing that “imaginative DIY” spirit, her particular way of capturing fragments, of creating elements that swing between the finished and the open-ended, between symbolic evocations and concrete forms. In other words, without ceasing to occupy what Leire Vergara has called “residual spaces”, “in-between territories”, zones that are both inside and outside, or on the margins of the public and private realms, at the heart of the ambiguity between the social and the existential. It is no coincidence that

Susana's many activities include organising drawing workshops for children, and that she has participated in what she describes as "integration programmes, running sessions at day centres and at the psychiatric hospital in Álava."

At this point, we should take moment to reflect on the term "DIY" (the Italian "*bricolage*"), which was particularly used in the context of Arte Povera by those who chose to resist the consumer society and the socio-cultural, media, and industrial standardisation that went with it, opting instead for craftsmanship and for the search for new kinds of representations. New representations that, as Celant wrote, did not lose sight of the archetypal visions and symbols that act upon man's innermost being, and continued to use irreverent irony, and, very importantly, creativity as a form of "resistance". More recently, now that globalisation and the alliance between science, the market, and technology have "usurped all discourses", the philosopher and scientist Isabelle Stengers also recommends "creative resistance". "We need to learn that which we have been taught to unlearn," she writes, "(...) we need to learn to imagine and create connections between things that we have been taught to consider separate (...) to cultivate a new art of storytelling (...) to oppose the expropriation of thought..." But how? "An answer cannot be reduced to the simple expression of a conviction," Stengers says, "it is manufactured." And, she argues, this is where the concept of DIY or *bricoler* comes in, as a process that is necessary in the effort to find answers, "*fabriquer de l'espoir au bord du gouffre*" (manufacturing hope on the edge of the abyss"), and to contribute through the active cooperation of individuals—"some with others, some for others"—wherever the system of neoliberal capitalism, "radically irresponsible, seduces and cheats to reduce people to zombies..." Strong words? Too strong for a text about art? But we know that art is in the midst of a historical process that, more than ever, requires consciousness and autonomous thought.



Sealed in Stone, 2015, video screenshots

What does all this have to do with Susana Talayero and her exhibition at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum? Well, in some of her notes, Susana talks about her approach to art-making as a constant search for "practices of resistance". If "the mechanism is delirious", we must devise strategies to resist. Art can do this. In fact, come to think of it, we could say that this is precisely what Susana has always done in her artistic practice: resist the expropriation of the individual imagination, occupy her own points of perception, and move freely in order to capture signs and images in the bittersweet installation of life.

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