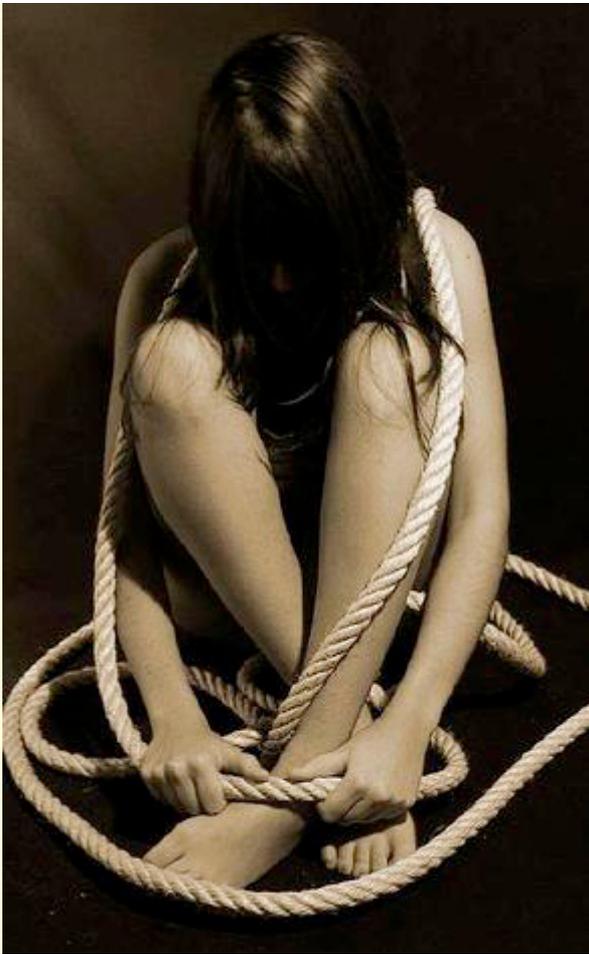




Basque Writing 6

Poesia and performance



"The lone woman... and other things". Kafe Antzokia

And even when the poetry called for its autonomy, more than 25 years ago in the 80s, it has succeeded to reach new ways and areas. Since then, Basque poets have organized dozens of poetic performances, readings, musical events and other initiatives. Together with the intrinsic value of the literary work, most successful poem-collections have been accompanied by public readings. From the paper to the orality to the public, **Ixiar Rozas** and **Oier Guillan** have researched thoroughly about the development of this performance. And they present here one of the most interesting phenomena of the Basque literature.

Literature in public, performance

These last decades have brought the preeminence of the novel to the Basque literature. It is apparently an indication that we are closer to the world literature, if we look to the genres that rule among the big languages. The poetry, however, has managed to take a step forward before books, sales and readers. Next to the **far-reaching works**, the poetry has held the advantage in its distinction. Immediacy is its ally, not to be confused with the Basque sung improvisation called *bertsolaritza*. It has similarities, since it is a public oral bare initiative, but immediacy is related to comprehension.

Oral culture has been the master of our culture for a long time. But 'literature' comes from 'letter', there is even who does not accept the term oral literature. Orality has gained a renewed strength in the 21st century, by the hand of the audiovisual. And poetry fits it wonderfully. Bare poetry, poetry in its loneliness, and poetry mixed to other artistic fields. Song, verse, theatre, dance... they all intermingle easily and perfectly.

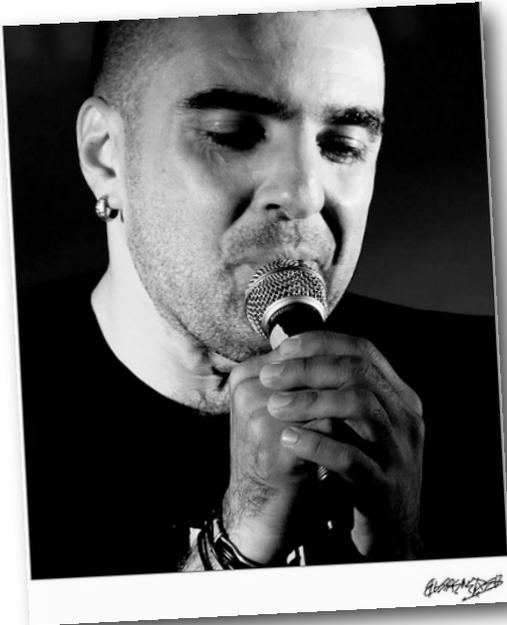
As we look back, we realise that mixing genres comes from long ago, and it is even longer for public initiatives. The word, the creator and the listener face to face. It has managed to find a place in the renaissance of our literature, in the flourishing of our language.



Urtzi Urrutikoetxea
President of the Basque PEN Centre



Poetry Theatre



Oier Guillan, poet

Photo: Joseba Barrenetxea

'Beauty begets hope; that is why it is opposed'. This is an example of the kinds of sentences I have read in Eusebio Calonge's book *Orientaciones en el desierto* (Artezblai). In my view, the quest for beauty in a broad, political sense forms the basis of art. All kinds of means may present themselves down that road, and each creator has to find the means of expression that suits him or her best. In this article, I have analysed the strong points that poetry enjoys on stage.

Poetry has deeply established its roots on stage: when we are referring to theatre, the word 'poetics' becomes crucially important, and when we put the words 'performance' and 'poetry' together, we are led to certain ways of working that are largely unspecified and difficult to label as well, and which, as a public, we have increasingly internalised.

I can see a close connection between the different forms that poetry adopts on stage and the characteristics of performativity.

A whole host of authors in the contemporary history of theatre have been poets as well as playwrights (Heiner Müller, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter... and closer to home, Gabriel Aresti, Jon Gerediaga, Alfonso Sastre, and others), and this is no coincidence. Poetry is a literary genre that has ended up connected with paper, but its starting point is in song writing, in orality, and in live communication. What is more, I believe that the theatrical style of writing over the last sixty years has adopted the form, structure and features of poetry: I would add Rodrigo García, Angelica Liddell and Thomas Bernhard to the ones already mentioned above.

The inherent characteristics of poetry open up interesting lines of work in drama: in the texts written when the poetical structure is taken as the starting point, the actor is not that closely connected with the logical thread of the narration, he or she is freer to make his or her own interpretation of the text with a certain regard for the stage directions; likewise, the repetition, the rhythm, the shortness of the sentences, and the building of images offer other opportunities when working from the starting point of the physical, by providing from the text itself a tendency to eschew naturalism and logic almost naturally. Poetry-based texts can be built differently, by means of a collage, by turning what were also thought to be worthless texts into

'poetic' ones with the help of the body. Incidentally, insofar as poetry is 'ego literature' it can be combined with works based on self-fiction, action theatre, etc.

Perhaps that is why poetry is constantly toing and froing between the paper and the stage and adopting different forms. Some possible ways could be as follows:

- *Dramaturgy of the voice*: Simple performances based on voice work, where there is one reciter on the bare stage with no more than a sheet of paper and a lectern as he or she faces the public. The art of the voice is taken into consideration at all times.

- *Poetry recitals*: a format that has had insufficient attention devoted to it perhaps because of its hybrid nature; it is a hypothetical sub-genre of the performing arts. When one looks at forthcoming cultural events there are countless poetry recitals, but what does the poetry recital format have to offer literature? What can it offer poetry? What can it offer the stage? For some time at least, since the era of the early 20th century avant-gardes, it has been possible to see that it provides a medium for experimentation purposes and for seeking a connection between the different forms of art. In poetry recitals of this kind, however, it is more common to find poetry accompanied (by music, images, etc.) rather than connected with other arts in a single code.

- *Poetry shows*: inspired by the circus or silent cabaret on occasions, when a dialogue takes place among different arts on stage, even though written poetry is the starting point. In other words, it is an endeavour to find a unique code for each show through the artistic dialogue that takes place within a common creative process. To see poetry, music, painting, body movement, anything you like, not one beside the other but TOGETHER on stage. When I say 'dialogue' (negotiation), I mean



internalising something new from the characteristics of other arts and renouncing something from one's own characteristics, while at the same time being true to one's own form of expression. Only from a creative process undertaken together by artists from different art disciplines in which an artistic dialogue takes place will the show that is more than the (accompanied) poetry recital be created.

- *Body literature through performativity*: to say that a work is 'poetic': an image, a film, action without words. Underpinning the sense of poeticness there is something that goes beyond the use of the word itself: the ability to stir an emotion which manifests itself without words, the image that the receiver forms using his or her

Poetry should not be merely something that is interpreted but something that 'happens'

own poetics. In that respect, there are many works comprising poetic images, which in most cases escape from the narration structures. In the case of contemporary dance this is evident in many performances, and increasingly in works of drama that tell stories.

Staging written poetry can provide the scene with interesting variants. But at

the same time poetry has to overcome the shadow of the paper to seek the 'truth' on stage, to coincide with the very search undertaken by the actor, to overcome the contrived interpretation even though the actor is not a 'character'. Consequently, staging poetry should not, if at all possible, be merely something that is interpreted but something that 'happens'. Nevertheless, in my view, deep down there always has to be the capacity to communicate, a way of moving, a way of making something 'real' happen beyond any labels, concepts and reflections allegedly having substance.

Touch by moving

To find a scene that will speak to the heart, one that will speak to the senses and the emotions. Having the capacity to touch by moving. The way of understanding poetry has much to do with the plastic arts, music, and light. The reason is that it forces the receiver to be active, because it invites him or her to add his or her own imagination to what is received, so that communication can come full circle. That has little to do with the explanatory, naturalist, televisual trend that all too frequently predominates in the theatre.

With happenings, performances and other kinds of artistic trends the interaction among different arts is revived on stage; basically, it should be about returning to the bases of art. The origin, basic fascination, deep memory of communication of what we call the scene would lie in the orality, song, ritual, free

dance, the shadows created by the fire, etc. But I am not going to proclaim a way of life that is no longer mine; the most important thing is to re-encounter the basic communication beyond any aesthetic, fashionable or ephemeral trend in the relationship among different forms of art, a quest for beauty that touches the foundation, where we divest ourselves of artificial fictions to encounter the fiction we are (the mask that we create every day) in all its expressiveness. To share. With the aesthetic demanded by each time, moment, group or individual evolution, it makes no difference: what matters is that the quest for beauty should form the basis of all aesthetics. Touch by moving, once again.

Poetry seeks beauty, and insofar as beauty (even the crudest and darkest beauty) begets hope, it awakens the receiver so that when a creative work is being contemplated, it compels him or her to take an active stance because he or she is not presented with a *fait accompli*. That is precisely why it is dangerous, why it is opposed, why poetry itself and everything that is poetic is of interest on stage.





Voic(e)SCAPES, two faces of the same fracture



Ixiar Rozas, poet

Photo: Zaldi Ero

1
Who speaks when
voice speaks? I would
like to expand some-
where this question,
here, within these lines,

now. In the vibration of this question, I'll introduce another one that takes as starting point the question posed by Gilles Deleuze –following Spinoza—, the well known *What can a body do?* Now I would like to reformulate it into: What can the interweaving of voice, body, word and language do within current dance scene? This question leads me to explore the field of experience, as well as the new meanings that arise from a dance that allows its voice to emerge and bursts into speaking. Within this experiential field the experiences of voice, language and tactility emerge in a specific way.

2
(...) In my exploration I propose a genealogical –non historical— approach to performances that burst into speaking from the perspective of voice. To do so I trace a line between the field of experience and some concepts opened up by artists such as Vera Mantero, Mónica Valenciano, Idoia Zabaleta, Filipa Francisco, Irena Tomazin, Leja Jurisic, Mal Pelo, Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion. These dance makers dialogue with questions that I consider essential for the current critical thought – and not only for it—: The concept of experience, the concept of life and that of animality. We could call this dialogue extra-disciplinary, as it establishes bridges between a micro-political practice, such as dance, and issues belonging to a macro-political frame.

3
Dance burst into speaking in the sixties –mainly through the Judson Church company—. Nevertheless, it is only from the nineties onwards that voice and language experimentation become more specific in choreographic works. Which are the aesthetic and ethical consequences of the irruption of this voice in dance? And, why did I choose to analyze this scene from the perspective of voice? Dance that experiments with its voice from the nineties onwards unfolds a diverse experiential field; experiences that take place at a processual stage of creation but also in its reception. It is due to these, that analyzing critically this experiential field seems relevant to me. These choreographic works render visible other ways of communication –forms of communication related to

performativity—. And simultaneously, (...) they reflect other ways of understanding the body, ways linked to processes of subjectivation.

4

(...) Why did dance emancipate and subvert its voice since the nineties? Which are the motivations and the experiences of the artists I have researched on? (...) In a conversation I had with Vera after the Spanish premiere of her piece *We are going to miss everything we don't need*, in Gijón she explained to me that voice is for her something quite liberating. For her this experimentation has a political sense: "I think that not talking can be also very political", said Vera. "But what it had always seemed quite strange to me was the fact that dancers were something without orality. It seemed historically regressive. When you do not talk you are something different, another animal. So it was quite weird to face an activity upon which it had been decided not to have words, language. It has never seemed normal to me. In this sense it can be a political decision". I should recall now the litany Mantero chants in *Uma misteriosa coisa, disse e.e. cummings*: "A sorrow, an impossibility, atrocious, atrocious, an impossibility, a sorrow, atrocious, atrocious...".

5

(...) When crossing the landscape of these choreographies I have placed myself in a narrative territory where, in general, the important thing is not what is being told. Here, the carnality of words comes to first plane, as well as the need to introduce narration in territories that are remote from any search of sense and expressiveness. In these performances, which I have also called *choreopoetic polyphonies*, we do not look for a totalizing sense.

(...) Nowadays, we don't find any more those huge meta-narratives about the world nor about history. Narratives have dissolved in an atomization of narrations which, in most cases, instead of placing us in the ambiguous, in the questioning and problematization, frame us in a self-referential world. A world that individualizes and isolates us in the poverty of experience that inhabits our daily life.

(...) In these *choreopoetic polyphonies* voice detaches from body and composed language. Voice is the condition of tactility. Voice is a corporal missile that escapes and inhabits the space between the "I" and the "you", between the "I" and the "other", to return to the body. Voice inhabits between body and language, mediates between body and language, but it does not belong to any of them. As if when talking our voice did not belong to us. As if we would speak with voices that emerge simultaneously from several bodies or places. Also the "I" decomposes: into that voice which is ours and at the same time does not totally belong to us, into that language and those bodies full of fissures; the "I" moves into a de-subjectivated place.

i) Burt, Ramsay (2004) "Genealogy and dance history", in Lepecki, A. *Of the presence of the body*, London & New York, Routledge.

ii) Rolnik, Suely (2007) "La memoria del cuerpo contamina el museo" <http://eicpcp.net/transversal/0507/rolnik/es/> Suely Rolnik, "The Body's Contagious Memory; Lygia Clark's Return to the Museum," translated by Rodrigo Nunes, *Transversal* (January 2007): <http://eicpcp.net/transversal/0507/rolnik/en>

iii) Fragment from the conversation with Vera Mantero held in Gijón (9/5/2010) and part of the materials of my PhD "Voic(e)scapes. Experiences and potentials of voice, language and tactility in current dance scene" (Faculty of Visual Arts, University of Basque Country, in process of publication).

iv) If we follow Agamben's reasoning when talking about the poverty of experience, already forecasted by Benjamin when he spoke about soldiers returning dumb from the battlefield. In Agamben, Giorgio (1978) *Infancia e istoria*, Torino, Einaudi. In English can be found under the title *Infancy and history. Essays on the destruction of the experience*, London- New York, Verso, 1993.