

## SPECIAL FOCUS: VENICE BIENNALE

# PAVILION PROFILE: SPAIN DORA GARCIA



*All the Stories*, 2001– (Installation view, Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 2011).  
Photo: Stuart Whipps. Courtesy Eastside Projects, Birmingham

WORDS: OLIVER BASCIANO

**THERE ARE AROUND 40 OF US** sitting in a gallery at Eastside Projects, located on a Birmingham backstreet, staring at a live feed of a dozen or so kids on skateboards. They're in Barcelona zipping around a plaza, using the architecture of the museum that flanks it to practice ollies. And yet none of us is here because we're particular fans of nosegrabs and K-grinds; rather, we're here to listen to a talk by Spanish artist Dora García.

The artist, who was born in Valladolid during the last decade of Franco's reign and will be representing her country at this year's Venice Biennale, typically stages performative works in which she can be seen to test the parameters of a work of art. The works are often focused on articulating notions of control in the artist-viewer relationship, a power struggle that she relates to psychiatric theory and to the ways in which society attempts to deal with madness. García appears to work at the extreme ends of engagement with her audiences: while many of her performances encourage audience participation, in others she appears to be suggesting that the audience is completely irrelevant. These skateboarding kids, for example, are blissfully unaware that their performance is being appropriated as an artwork: the artist is streaming the footage from the webcam that she installed at MACBA in Barcelona for a solo show there in 2003.

Specifically, the skaters' appearance in Birmingham extends the life of *The Kingdom* (2003–), García's ambitious project in which the entire Spanish institution was coopted into an all-encompassing, continual artwork. The kids on boards conform to the fulfilment of a series of 'prophecies' (written into a novel authored by the artist prior to the exhibition), each of which described a future event situated in the venue, of varying significance – anything from 'Alain drinks a beer while sitting on the stairs of the museum', to the prediction that the institution's library printer will be turned on. Some of these would be fulfilled by the artist's own programming – 'Alain' was an accomplice of García's, paid to drink the beer – while others were left to chance. The possibility that skaters would use the museum walls for tricks was a fairly safe bet, since they congregate there in big groups whenever the sun is shining; and, eight years later, the webcam – still installed at the museum, but now part of its collection, its footage running on MACBA's website – continues to attest to this. This live-streamed remnant of García's apparently temporary marriage of chance and the preconceived sparks the fanciful idea that the artist's programming of the space might still be in operation. If the predicted encounters are still being fulfilled, then might García still be catalysing them? This ambiguity, the artist

tells me later, was purposeful, aiming to induce a "suspicion of reality... where no action can be taken for granted". The intent to create paranoia is one example of the marriage of the artist's long-running interest in madness and psychiatry, and her complicated relationship with her public.

*Steal This Book*, from 2009, was a work requiring a participatory, attentive audience. Premiered at that year's Lyon Biennale and borrowing its title from Abbie Hoffman's 1971 counterculture manual, it featured sculptural piles of the publication massed in a gallery alongside institutional plaques warning visitors that, the book's title notwithstanding, they were not permitted to take any copies away. A comic game of cat and mouse was thereby instigated between visitors and attendants, the former keen for a souvenir of this slice of institutional critique, and the latter eager to uphold the work's rules. Likewise *Instant Narrative*, a work produced for the ICA's *Double Agent* exhibition (2008). There, a woman sat at a desk in the corner of the gallery with a computer, producing a slightly delayed but pithy narrative describing the appearance and actions of the exhibition's visitors, which was then projected onto the gallery wall. When the gallery emptied, García's typist-commentator fell silent.

At Eastside, another work featuring a woman and a desk was on show. On this occasion, however, my entering the space provoked no reaction. Instead, she appeared to be midway through reading aloud a short statement concerning a nun being impregnated by a priest. The gallery was empty of people other than her and me; before I arrived, I assumed, she must have been talking to herself alone. *All the Stories* (2001–), as this work is titled, is a long-running project (documented via a blog) in which the artist formulates a few sentences, in the style of a movie pitch, to describe stories found through newspapers, literature, personal anecdotes, histories, movies themselves and, for a short time, a research collaboration with the German Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Archives, which contained the notebooks of GDR secret police. Whatever the source, however, the key to the performative incarnation of these stories is the viewer's irrelevance to its staging.

At Venice this year, visitors to the Spanish Pavilion will find that – despite being presented with a six-month-long, rotating programme of live performance works by García and invited 'accomplices', staged in the central space of the pavilion building – the artist has little interest either in shouting for their attention or in coaxing interaction from them. She relates this ambivalence specifically to the exhibition's setting. "The visitor to Venice is someone who does not walk, they run", García says, referring to the amount of art an average viewer tries to cram into a single visit. "So I'm trying to start from a position of indifference about whether anyone attends or not, and this gives one a feeling of liberation." It's a feeling that has allowed García to free herself from all the trappings that might ordinarily surround such an ambitious project: she will eschew a publicised schedule of events, or any interpretation, translation or formal recording. Visitors must take their chances, turn up and hope they like what they see at any given time.

"The work is not made for the public", García affirms. "But they are welcome to see it... I'm not forcing them to be as passionate as I am about what will be happening. It's an attempt to rebalance the power between myself and the viewer, whom I don't feel superior to." The remaining rooms of the national



*The Inadequate*, 2011, HD video, 45 min. Courtesy the artist

*Staging a six-month performance marathon without a public schedule is unconventional to say the least*

pavilion, meanwhile, will also disregard the typical niceties of exhibiting by being given over to the storage of props used in the performances, alongside three small monitors showing continuously looped preexisting videoworks by the artist.

That García allows herself to take such liberties with the public who view or participate in her work provides a contrast to the kind of dominant institutional phraseology that presents art's primary function as serving the public and being for the social good, which is now so inherent in the middlebrow presentation of 'culture'. This purposeful break from the status quo stems from García's long-running interest in dissidence and in challenging the institutional codes of the artworld, which she sees too heavily tied to capitalist dogma.

This interest also surfaces in García's sustained referencing of madness and psychiatry: both in the formal subjects she investigates, as in *The Deviant Majority* (2010), one of the films García will exhibit in Venice; and in her use of speech in the performance practice exemplified by *All the Stories*, along with the connection speech has to Freud's 'talking cure', in which an analyst describes problems for the analyst to interpret. Asked about this aspect of her practice, García mentions her interest in the belief that mental illness is not a medical condition but a social one. Here, she's reiterating a particular mode of 1970s theory that she acquainted herself with while on a residency in Trieste, the Italian town that famously stopped incarcerating those with psychiatric problems during the mid-1970s, and this forms the central subject of *The Deviant Majority*.

The film involves an extended monologue by Carmen Roll, a German nurse who was associated with the Red Army Faction in the late 1960s, before her itinerant activism led her to become one of the leading figures in Trieste's deinstitutionalisation movement. Roll argues that the social circumstances created by capitalism were responsible for the symptoms of madness (a hypothesis shared by Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, 1972, in their linking of capitalism and schizophrenia). It's a further example of García's interest in the crossover of alternative mental states and rebellion against social rules and conventions, which finds its way into other works. *Steal This Book*, for example, when



*Steal This Book*, 2009, book, Collection Centre National des Arts Plastiques (CNAP), Paris. Photo: ProjecteSD, Barcelona

you set Abbie Hoffman's counterculture status against the activist's later suffering from bipolar disorder; or the accusation, levelled by Jacques Lacan at James Joyce – another former resident of Trieste and subject of the second video to be shown in Venice, *The Inadequate* (2011) – that the writer would be regarded insane were it not for his artistic status.

The idea of staging a six-month performance marathon without a public schedule in Venice is unconventional to say the least; but García would argue that art practice and madness are similar (and logical) reactions to the orthodoxies of the free market that the Biennale operates within, and that the artist, for her part, seeks to rupture. It's evident that García is uncomfortable with being complicit in this idea of nationalistic representation and the inherent industry that surrounds Venice; but she seems to see her role as the enemy within – the lone lunatic among the sane – and that her interventions, live commentary and production for the sake of production (regardless of end consumption) might just offer an escape route from the overbearing systems of normalcy, nationhood and industry. •