

Freedom to Imagine



Portrait © Daniel Hofer



La Ribot about the five brains of the performer and about thinking in larger terms.

Text based on an interview between La Ribot and Virve Sutinen, Berlin, May 2017

The Spanish artist La Ribot is talking us through her retrospective “Occuuppatiooon!”, which includes her live works and films from 1993 till the present. Her career has taken her from her native Madrid to London – where her artistic practice fitted in well with the ideas of the live art movement of the ’90s and early 2000s – and to Geneva, where she now lives with her family. At the core of her legacy are her “Distinguished Pieces”, short solo pieces which bear many different names as different series, and brought her not just to the attention of the theatre world, but also of the visual arts scene.

The interview with La Ribot is turning into a performance which is not being recorded by my phone. Her hands are weaving and whipping, she jumps to her feet to demonstrate what she means when words fail. Often she gestures the end of the sentence.

Panoramix

In her landmark piece, “Panoramix”, La Ribot performs 34 different small works from her acclaimed “Distinguished Pieces” series all on her own, over three hours. It is a demanding physical task to perform, but it also requires her to revisit old works, some of which were created as early as 1993.

La Ribot: “Panoramix” was a commission by Lois Keidan and Daniel Brine for the Live Culture exhibition at Tate Modern in 2003. It was put together from three series of the “Distinguished Pieces”. The meaning of those pieces has not changed, but I do have to go in slowly to bring back the emotions. It is a physical thing more than a mental one. Somewhere deep in my mind there is an image of my younger self. It might sound stupid, but it’s a real problem working against your own image when you were younger! It takes effort to accept that you are not the same.

In Paris last autumn, La Ribot performed the best of her “Distinguished Pieces”, “Distinguished Hits”. Once again I was struck by her intense but strangely aloof presence while performing among keen spectators sitting and standing around her. She has a theory.

The most boring thing is to watch someone who is not imagining things.

LR: I think that one needs five different brains when performing to reach total concentration. The first one is deep inside in the muscles, tendons, joints, the stomach, really, in all the organs, in everything that you are as a physical being. I connect to this one by warming up physically. The second brain is the one that keeps the performer aware of everything around. Things like the ambiance, light and

smells, spectators and other performers. That’s why it is good to warm up together as a team, to connect the second brain with everybody in the team. The third brain is there for the real task, to be able to execute the choreography, the text. The fourth brain is connected to desire and imagination. A body needs to be aware of thoughts, dreams and even hallucinations. The most boring thing is to watch someone who is not imagining things. The fifth brain is aware of everything at the same time, from a distant point of view. This one is not constantly outside and travels also in the opposite sense, deeper inside yourself, connecting the whole.

In “Panoramix”, I have to make a big effort to maintain the order of pieces, props and tasks, and at the same time, there is the audience around me, which is always different, so I have to adapt to that all the time as well.

La Ribot was at the forefront when contemporary choreographers began to enter gallery and museum spaces in the ’90s. The world of fine arts seemed to have more freedom and support experimental work more willingly than the dance scene. “Panoramix” has been presented at Tate Modern, Museo Reina Sofía and Centre Pompidou, and has only been shown five times before coming to Berlin. She also tapped into the economy of fine arts by simply selling her pieces to collectors. Early last decade, everything was changing in the performing arts world, and at that time she decided to stop performing alone and took a step back. She started to collaborate with a whole range of artists and to work with large groups of extras or amateurs like in “40 Espontáneos” with 40 non-professionals in 2004.

Laughing Hole

La Ribot’s works are political in an ambiguous way, leaving room for the imagination of the spectator. The meaning of her actions might unravel slowly, but when it hits the spectator, they never forget the experience. The political is transmitted to the audience through the physical proximity in which they experience the event, and through its durational nature, which allows this aspect to



Virve Sutinen and La Ribot © Daniel Hofer

develop. "Laughing Hole" is a bizarre and almost surrealist six-hour performance about politics where the performers laugh continuously to the point of exhaustion.

It turns spectators into friends, which is quite amazing because we're all alone in it: it's the loneliest thing I've ever done in my life.

LR: "Laughing Hole" was done in response to the opening of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, and my plan was to stop performing it once it was closed. Well, I do not think Trump will do that, so we keep on performing it. The performance is six hours long, but it does not mean that one should just pass by. Actually, I would recommend staying for the whole length, or for long moments... to experience the transformation that happens through resistance. As a performer,

you build a strong relationship with those who share this with us. It turns spectators into friends, which is quite amazing because we're all alone in it: it's the loneliest thing I've ever done in my life. One day in Japan, after a performance of "Laughing Hole", I hugged somebody very enthusiastically when I saw him in the street, he spent the whole six hours with us in the piece the day before, and I thought he was my friend!

Gustavia

In 2006, La Ribot joined forces with French choreographer Mathilde Monnier to create "Gustavia". It is about traditional theatre and about all that goes along with it. The collaboration came to life after many years of talking and meeting while travelling and presenting their own work. "Gustavia" is simply a masterpiece, a feminist classic in which two brilliant choreographers come together. La Ribot describes the studio work as a real dialogue and free flow of ideas.

LR: I really wanted to work in theatre and dance again, and Mathilde wanted to work with burlesque and clowning. So the first things we agreed on was to be face to face all the time in the studio. I love working with Mathilde and I have really good memories of the process, but Mathilde (*laughs*) thought the process was horrible!

I love performing with Mathilde because we never try to agree on how to do things.

Again she jumps up and tells how much fun they had together in the studio. It is not hard to imagine. There is something special in the air when these two 'divas' meet on stage.

LR: I think it's important to have "Gustavia" in my retrospective as we touch on timeless themes such as femininity, self-presentation, theatre and our role in society. I

love performing with Mathilde because we never try to agree on how to do things, how to behave on stage, and what "Gustavia" is.

Another Distinguée

One recurring theme in La Ribot's work is labour and its relation to sexuality. In her works, this is often demonstrated through endless repetitions of tasks or movements, or through the isolation of performers. In some of her works, the performers are repeating the same movement patterns for a very long time, just like one would on an industrial production line. Moreover, she sees sexuality and labour as strongly related within patriarchal structures.

In La Ribot's latest work, "Another Distinguée", she reverses the power structures and looks for a way out of the repetition of gender roles. This time there is a real contact, a kind of seduction game going on, between La Ribot, actor Juan Loriente and dancer Thami Manekehla, who are performing heroes, warriors, mermaids. It brings together many themes from her previous works, but there is also something new.

LR: "Another Distinguée" is about the freedom to imagine what I want and desire. It is also operating on the level of instincts: I don't care about conceptual art or political correctness. I am taking the freedom as an artist to imagine a woman in total power.

This is different to my other works, since here, the spectator has to imagine, imagine what there is not. One critic saw things that are not there, like that I rub myself against the genitals of the male performers. Their genitals! That's not what I'm doing. We're just twisting!

"Another Distinguée" is performed on stage with the audience moving freely around the performers. It is typical for La Ribot to be moving between black box and white cube, to choose the most appropriate space for presenting her live work. But that choice also has a more profound meaning for her identity as an artist.

LR: For me, going from theatre to gallery allowed me to go from working with my body and dance, to thinking about performance in a larger way, like I would watch dance. As dancers and choreographers we are contemporary artists, we can think on a much bigger scale.

Beware of Limitations

LR: I think of myself as Loïe Fuller, because she was not only concerned with the language of the body and movement, but with space and lighting. She was a theatre director, metteuse en scène. She was thinking in larger terms about how the theatrical and the visual operate. For me this is in the heart of things in my work. It really doesn't matter what kind of space you work in. It depends on how you see that space. I see performance as an act of opening and expanding, first into the body, then into the space, into the building, into the people around you, into the city and into the world. It becomes a language that contains all other disciplines needed to thinking bigger or larger than what the body language can express.

Dance is intrinsically interdisciplinary and so are artists.

Imagine if you didn't have to be a dancer, you could be an artist! That's the whole aim of "Distinguished Pieces", to bring dance to another kind of space. For me, it is important to understand that dance is intrinsically interdisciplinary and so are artists.

La Ribot is one of the first conceptual artists of her generation, and she has seen the expansion of the dance scene in the last twenty years. She is also teaching at HEAD - Geneva, which has made her think a lot about the future of dance.

LR: On the plane coming to Berlin, I was thinking how valuable it is to have more artists in the world. Why? Because artists are good at watching, seeing, feeling and thinking about the world. Our position is both critical and sensitive, which allows us to bring a different kind of intelligence

into the world. The more artists, the better the world will be. Actually, this thought lead to another: Maybe I am reaching the point of maturity. It is that moment when one suddenly understands things. 🖤

RETROSPEKTIVE LA RIBOT Occuppation!

Eine Retrospektive von La Ribots Arbeiten
(1993–2017)

A retrospective of La Ribot's works
(1993–2017)

Film | Mariachi 17

Mi–So, 16:00–21:00 | HAU3 Houseclub
Eröffnung: 11.8., 17:00

Filme & Installationen 2003–2014

Mi–So, 15:00–19:00 | Galerie Barbara Weiss
Eröffnung: 13.8., 15:00

La Ribot Laughing Hole

12.8., 14:00 | Sophiensæle | 360 min

La Ribot
Panoramix (1993–2003)
17., 20., 23.8., 19:00 | Sophiensæle | 180 min

La Ribot & Mathilde Monnier
Gustavia
26.+27.8., 20:00 | HAU1 | 60 min

La Ribot
Another Distinguée
1.+2.9., 19:00 | HAU1 | 80 min