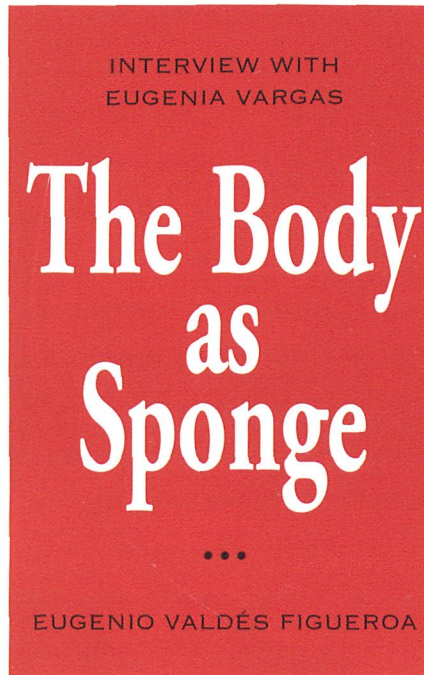


TERRITORIES

For Eugenia Vargas (born in Chile, 1949), the body is a common material, a receiver which marks the passing of time, a memory bank. Her work is situated on the borderline between photographic installations and the photography of installations. She exploits the testimonial and documentary possibilities of photography. But contrary to the tendency of traditional photography to freeze the image in its space-time dimension, Eugenia constructs a kind of theatre set-design, documenting it in order to touch on such ancient themes as the passing of time and the imprints of memory.

According to the artist, the act of creation, just like human existence, is made up of a set of rituals, an internal order, a logic which is invariably expressed by recording the passing of events. For this reason, time and space as basic components of identity are not only key themes in her work but also vital instruments for the construction of the photographic image. That is why it is not a matter of chance that she uses her body as both pretext and protagonist. "For me," the artist states, "the body is like a sponge. I use personal objects: shoes, watches, books, etc. In this way I try to enable everyone who



sees my work to identify with these symbolic references I use. It's a way of setting something up and documenting it." The way in which Eugenia Vargas perceives photography has a lot to do with her personality. She doesn't like image-hunting. "...because that robs me of energy. I like being in control of everything, setting up my own images, using my own objects and creating my own symbols. I prefer working in the studio and selecting the materials I use one by one: each has a point, it's not just accidental."

E.V.F: What kind of meaning can be drawn from the relationship between your own naked body, undisguised, and all the symbolic objects you include?

E.V: I draw several connections between my body and these objects; evidently, one is the creation of a

relationship of belonging. The final aim is that the viewers establish a link of identification with the image I provide and the objects I incorporate. This is the basis of the kind of active photography which I make: I don't want the public to simply contemplate my work. I was educated in the 70's in the United States, and I am part of that generation which has been influenced by the feminist movement. It was as if this movement gave me the possibility to do as I wished with my body, even to assault it. It seemed so new and daring for women to take off their clothes and photograph each other. I felt that this was good for me and it was what I had needed all my life. I was attracted by what they call 'directorial photography' in the States, that is, photography which maintains the ability to direct you, just as a theater director does. Then I started to make small installations and sets to put my body into a context.

E.V.F: Some American photographers of your generation work with simulacra and with disguises, rather than with nudity, when they incorporate the body in a leading role. By undressing, they conceal the artistic idea within a game of political messages. Is disguise also one of your aims?

E.V: I am transparent, I'm not interested in disguising anything. In the objects I include, you can see regret, nostalgia, aside from the ideology they bear. Within my methodology, is the recycling of my own images, and this strengthens one of my cardinal aims: working with memory.

E.V.F: Do you mean that there is an archaeological aim within your creative method?

E.V: Yes. I could have used video, or computers, or digital photography, but none of that interests me. I reject high technology, because for me the most important thing is to make photography like a craft, a primary thing. Within this almost archaeological interest that I have for re-evaluating the traditional technical processes of photography, I also make use of the conceptual possibilities of the photographic process itself. In this sense, I want to be more or less coherent with situations like the environment. In photography, you use chemicals which can be highly toxic, things that are really corrosive. That's why, in some of my work, I establish analogies between the deterioration of the environment and photographic processes. Photographers who are always after the latest equipment really get to me; that kind of thing doesn't attract me at all. I fight against that sort of technological refinery. I'm interested in representing part of my personal world and other things which don't affect me directly, but might

reach other people; personal histories I get hold of....

E.V.F: You are a Chilean artist who lives in Mexico. How does your work relate to current artistic production in Chile, and how is it integrated into contemporary Mexican art?

E.V: I abandoned Chile at the beginning of the 70's. I no longer have any connection with Chile. When I left I wasn't an artist, but a music student. A lot of my work has to do with identity. I am Chilean regardless of where I may go. I'm very critical of the political system in Chile and the conservative mentality of people there shocks me; to me it seems such a small-town mentality. I love Chile, but I don't feel comfortable there; it's suffocating. In Mexico, there's a lot more social tolerance than in Chile. And when I talk about nostalgia, it's not for having left my native land. It's a nostalgia for the things I can touch and understand. It was in the United States, after leaving Chile, that I started to get interested in photography. By pure chance, I came across a Canadian theater company and a camera landed in my lap. They needed to make a presentational catalogue for the company and I offered to do it, even though I'd never taken a photo in my life. It was a theatrical experience. Perhaps that's why there's a whole theatrical liturgy later in my work. I'm very influenced by Mexican culture; a lot of things that appear in my work come from popular culture in Mexico. In that sense I guess I am close to Mexican

artists, but visually, intellectually, I don't think I have much in common with them.... Maybe with some Mexicans who have worked outside Mexico, such as Silvia Gruner, with whom I do in fact identify.

E.V.F: Even so, Mexico has a long photographic tradition....

E.V: Yes, but that tradition doesn't influence me, although I value it a great deal. One of the photographers who did influence me when I studied photography in the States was Álvarez Bravo; for me, he is the best. But I've never been like documentary photographers, not even like American ones.

E.V.F: How does the Mexican public relate to your work?

E.V: Ten years ago, I suffered quite a lot. I don't know if you've heard of an institution called the Consejo Mexicano de Fotografía (CMF). I arrived just when that institution was in decline, and my work was quite shocking to its members, particularly the men. Mexican women, however, did like it. Many young women involved in photography also started showing themselves nude. And now even the men are taking their clothes off! At first, a lot of people branded me a feminist, and they even said I was a lesbian, but all that didn't bother me too much. In many Latin American countries feminism and lesbianism go hand in hand. On top of this, the CMF decided that I wasn't a photographer because I do performances and installations, and they don't consider

that to be the work of a photographer; they think that kind of work is for sculptors or actors. But the artists did consider me one of their own. I really found my feet among artists because photographers rejected me outright. That's why I have hardly any contact with other photographers in Mexico and we really have very little to say to each other. I am a transgressive woman. That's part of the freedom of art. People have often said that my images and performances are sensational. Sometimes it gets to me that people don't accept that a photographer who does performances can be a bit theatrical. For me, it is always valid to break barriers.

E.V.F: Eugenia, looking at your photos, one gets the impression that one photo doesn't tell the whole story, and you have to look at a whole series where there is a sequence and the ideas are continued. Is that your intention, or does it just happen like that?

E.V: I like working with movement, with reading, and I don't really like using only one photo because it's like giving you only one word. I'm interested in narrating images, so that my photos can be read backwards or forwards. Perhaps it would still work if I took a few of them away; I like the idea of polysemic readings and the fact that anyone can identify themselves with my discourse. But then, I also want the freedom to do as I please, even if people get upset; they have every right to do so. We have to find more flexible attitudes without segregation. A lot of machismo

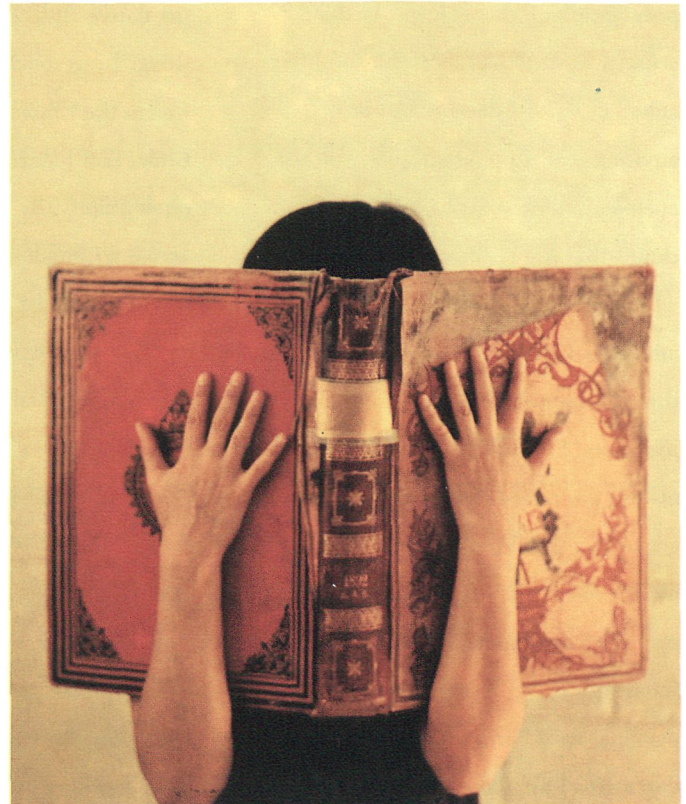
comes from women. We should find a way to communicate so that we don't all wear ourselves out in that sterile struggle. I don't think that now, at the end of the millennium, feminism is out of date or dead; it should still be considered and accepted. Women's struggles have not ended in the developed world or in the Third World: their problems remain the same. Those battles have not yet been won. I don't think that feminism has been left behind. I think it was one of the most important political movements that took place after the 60's; perhaps post-modernism and multi-culturalism wouldn't have existed if it weren't for the women's movement.

E.V.F: Nevertheless, the feminist movement (which was accompanied by the black movement, and then followed

by the gay movement, and the fight for civil rights) marked out social limits as fragmentary and stagnant spaces, creating a complex and heterogeneous social diagram, polarizing the different sides even more. I think the feminist movement, to a certain extent, actually contributed to the radical building of barriers and differences.

E.V: I don't see it that way. The feminist movement didn't tackle the differences between men and women, but rather the disadvantages in access to jobs, positions of responsibility, social roles, etc. (because there are, of course, biological differences.)

E.V.F: Do you think a lot of people see your work as 'feminist' simply because the photographic subject is you, a woman, and because of the unique way you work with the image?



Eugenia Vargas.
*Poder de Actos de
Dominio Irrevocable,*
1995.

How does that conspire against the communicative aims of your artistic production?

E.V: I don't really mind if that's how they read my work, but I don't think that's all my work comes down to either. For about five years now, people haven't been interpreting my work like that in Mexico. I'm afraid that going against the current is now in fashion: men photographing women and vice versa. After my participation in the Fifth Havana Biennial, I was invited to exhibit in a show called 'Cuerpos Alterados' in the Wilfredo Lam Center in Cuba. Later, in the Bronx Museum in New York, I exhibited a large installation which was linked thematically to the work I exhibited in Havana. I tried to create a dialogue between eighty water bottles with shoes inside them and great

ecto-color impressions which emphasize my reflections on identity, nostalgia, memory and the need for understanding between people. I tried to create a cyclic atmosphere using tautological resources to make a metaphor about alternative history. Now, I'm going to photograph men and it will never be in the same way that they photograph women, or that women photograph each other. I recently curated an exhibition in Mexico called 'Hombres mirando hombres,' which included performances, documentary photography and conceptual photography. The critics really attacked me. They even said that I curated my exhibitions in the same way that I carried out my photographic work. That, of course, I interpreted as praise! At the inauguration, I remember that 80% of the public was gay. In

Mexico, from the 80's onwards, women's art opened up the possibility for men to let themselves photograph each other. That's why I invited four photographers to this exhibition, which was very controversial. At the moment, I am busy with a project in which I'll be working in collaboration with another photographer; I'll use his photos in order to see the masculine body from his viewpoint. The man we're going to use as a model has nothing to do with the canon of masculine beauty; he's an imperfect, pretty average man, fragile inside. This is the same way that I work with a woman. Although I still haven't resolved all my doubts, I do feel I can say something new about the male body. In spite of the biological differences between us, we're really not all that different.

