

Esther Ferrer was among the first guest artists to appear in "Spirit Nomad" a remarkable weekly series of performances organized by Denise Luccioni at the recently opened Fondation Cartier building in Paris. A Spaniard and one of the few female heirs of Duchamp and Cage, Ferrer has worked in Paris for 20 years. Although her reputation as a performer is well-established here and abroad, her objects, drawings and photographs are less well known? Along with her live actions, they map the practice of an artist driven by an uncompromising intelligence.

Under the title *Zaj, Theory and Practice*, Ferrer's performance played of the conventions of academic lectures. She sat behind a table on which stood a lamp (incongruously lit, given the ambient natural light), an old fashioned clock, which started ticking loudly as soon as she entered the room, and a stack of loose sheets of paper from which she read throughout the performance. We learned that ZAJ is a Cage-influenced group founded during the early

'80s in Franco's Spain by two composers Juan Hidalgo and Walter Marchetti, whom Ferrer joined in 1967. As Ferrer was telling us about Zaj, she was also engaging in its practices, and the event, spectators included, was being annexed to its history.

In the manner of nested Russian dolls, the performance held other performances, among them a piece by Marchetti, in which Ferrer emptied a full bottle of gin into a shot glass, letting the odorous fluid run over the edges of the table and dribble down onto the floor. Later, she reprised a previous work of hers that had her balancing one of her shoes atop her head with deadpan composure. She assiduously countered theatricality and the austerity of her person and props set off the baroque proliferation of her words. Although Ferrer at various times identified herself as a feminist, a foreigner and an anarchist, she spoke from constantly shifting narrative loci, and so never came across as the subject of the performance.

Ferrer deployed multiple strategies to keep us thinking and laughing. She treated words as individual wholes, as distinct as the tools in a mechanic's case. The word "silence" opened a long passage during which she kept on mouthing her text in all seriousness but without sound. She repeatedly blurred the boundaries between written and spoken language by voicing such devices of punctuations caps, commas and underlining. She used counting, permutations, phonetic and etymological connections and common sense to create excruciatingly long lists, enumerations so abundant in their flow of images and references that they overran the conceptual hierarchies by which we make sense of things.

Employing time as exactly as language, with the clock doubling as a metronome, Ferrer systematically interrupted the performance's flow. For instance, she walked out in the middle of a sentence, to return 79 seconds later and speak the next word without a hint of hiatus. She broke into singing an eight-tone scale or into shouting a political slogan in the midst of otherwise even-toned recitation. Her mien remained steady throughout. This evenness partly accounts for her undeniable presence, which kept her audience riveted, even when she froze for a good minute, becoming a perfect still of herself. Poignant in her peculiar mix of seriousness and absurdity, intensely curious, Ferrer offered us a rare moment of refreshing laughter.