Interview with Esther Ferrer, November 2012 with questions from Emma Hedditch, Mattin and Irene Revell. Translation from Spanish by Ifígo Eguillor.

What do you think about the historicisation of radical figures such as John Cage, and the great appetite for this past?

The appetite for ‘icons’ is insatiable and the tendency to mystify an artist, a politician, etc. I don’t share it at all. It’s ok to take advantage of all this mess about his centenary to make his work known. What happens is there’s a lot of talking but little interpretation of his music, that’s the problem, it would be better if it were more balanced. Anyway, I think Cage’s work is an anthem for creative freedom: and even if it was just that, I think that is very much already. I believe that’s why many artists take Cage as a reference in many different ways.

How do you relate with his 100th anniversary?

If I’m asked to participate, and those who ask seem serious to me, I participate and if not, I won’t.

How do you relate to the kind of practices and contemporary work that takes an interest in history, texts and so on?

History has always been revisited, and happily so! And as always, there are intelligent reconsiderations and others that are less so. History can be reviewed in many ways; and when biased, we must talk about revisionism, and that, as we all know, is very dangerous. But we must be alert and react so that “the old world running after us doesn’t catch us,” as it was said in May ’68.

John Cage’s anarchism seemed perhaps different to yours, more rooted in an American individualist tradition, while yours seems more connected to a revolutionary moment, the more associative anarchism experienced during the Spanish Civil War.

To be honest, I’ve never reflected on that. My idea of anarchism is very particular, very Spanish or Iberian if you want, but I’d never talked with Cage about ‘his’ anarchism or ‘mine’. When I responded to his request to write on the question of whether ‘anarchism has a future’, I did it according to my own ideas, and he clearly endorsed them, so I guess he agreed with me.

Does anarchism lose its potential when it is presented or talked about in an art context?

Why should it? Anarchism, the way I conceive it starts with the awareness of your own responsibility. This is one and the same in the ‘artistic’ arena as in any other area. The question is more whether the engagée: work gains or loses its recalcitrant potential, and capacity to engender reflection, in such an artistic context (e.g. museum or gallery). Primarily yes, there is often a loss of potential in such a context. But it depends on the circumstances: it could also perhaps drive consciousness about social struggles beyond the artistic context.

What do you think of authorship as it is understood in the artistic context?

I understand authorship simply as that which I do, within my own limits; that which I am responsible for, for better or worse. Lately there has been a lot of discussion for and against authorship, from my point of view this is a question of personal choice and one should act according to one’s own needs.

In collaborations how do we employ personal decision to employ liberty?

Collaboration for me is not following a set of rules, but rather to agree on the exercise of personal liberty, although that may seem contradictory. I am an individualist, I’m not interested at all in trendy notions of ‘participation’, which actually I find tricky and naïve. I think this kind of ‘participation’ is precisely what is being mistaken with genuine collaboration. I can only collaborate when I feel free: free to decide if I participate or not, and if I do decide to collaborate, free as to how I do it. For me, collaboration does not mean submitting to rules agreed by others.

How does a person know how to be responsible to oneself, and with regard to society? And conversely how would you relate the notion of solidarity to your ideal of ‘dispersion’?

The thing is that I don’t think one can be responsible vis-à-vis society, if one is not responsible vis-à-vis oneself. In my opinion the awareness of individual liberty is essential to living in a society harmoniously (as far as that is possible). When in the text sent to Cage I talk about ‘dispersion’ I am referring to the dispersion of power, against the concentration of power that the State implies. To my mind, anarchism doesn’t fight to conquer power, but rather seeks to disperse it, both at collective and individual levels. Starting with the most immediate social relation, the couple.

Doesn’t anarchism suggest a sense of agency and freedom that under these prevailing material conditions is impossible to achieve?

Of course Anarchist thinking can facilitate the exercising of individual and collective freedom more than capitalist thinking. But taking into account all historical moments, now is perhaps the most difficult of all because the enemy is like a ‘hydra’ with many heads.
But I also think that before, like now, it is very difficult to achieve a free society, whether anarchist or not. The reason for this being that it needs to be based on individual responsibility, and this is very difficult to bring into practice. This could only be achieved if we could have collective consciousness and a common desire to change the model of society in which we live.

What has been your involvement in political activism, and how do you see this in relation to your artistic practice?

I’ve never been a political activist, I’ve limited myself to simply defend what I think, wherever I go, with my artistic work and my political consciousness. I don’t like to label myself, my artistic practice has never interfered with my political engagement and vice versa. As a matter of fact they always match.

How has feminism disappeared from discourse in the political left, when it has done so much work on dissolving patriarchal power?

Precisely because this is what feminism is about, among many other things: the dispersion of patriarchal power, and we can’t forget that political parties are ‘patriarchally’ structured, both right and left wing ones, and mostly run by men. And then, unfortunately, when a woman rises to power in these systems, she’s had to internalise the party’s ideological patriarchal discourse. Feminism, at least as I see it, has always had problems with political parties: in the 70s they used to say “let’s liberate the proletariat (meaning the workers, masculine and plural) and then, once we’ve achieved that, we’ll focus on women’s liberation...” Thank God women haven’t waited!

How different do you feel the current time is compared with 1991, especially in terms of a political horizon?

The differences are many, firstly:
• the lack of credibility of politicians and trade union leaders
• the non-existence of real social mobilisation
• the lack of faith in whatever, starting from the revolution
• the omnipresence of religious problems
• the impossibility of seeing things clearly thanks to media manipulation
• the fact that there are possible and accepted racist positions and ‘official’ behaviors bordering on fascism
• the attempt to reverse many of the achievements that took the workers’ movement, the feminist movement and the lesbian and gay movement so much effort to achieve.

In the letter to Cage you delight in saying ‘there is no road’ whilst the letter is joyfully optimistic: what are your thoughts on nihilism?

I’m not saying there’s no road, what I’m saying is that “the road is made by walking,” as Antonio Machado wrote. Everyone must make their own effort to move forward: the road doesn’t exist by itself. The interesting thing is by creating your road, you meet others that march like you, and many parts of the road can be made together. The human being is a social being, although very often behaves as an antisocial being.

And finally, one question that has come out but maybe is not well formulated: what is the sovereign subject if you don’t acknowledge the self, or the idea of a whole self?

Although I don’t entirely understand the question, what I do think is that the subject is sovereign itself, but part of a social weave, that it’s carried within whether desired or not.

1. Engagée - (of a writer or artist) morally or politically committed to some ideology.

2. Antonio Machado’s famous poem Walker, there is no road. Machado, a Spanish poet, exiled by the forces of General Franco, and who died in exile, has written: “caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar” (“Walker, there is no road, the road is made by walking”).