

Settings of inside and out.
On the works of Juan Aizpitarte.

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I'm writing in a hotel room in Amman. Looking out the window, the sun is setting behind a skyline of incomplete buildings. A soft haze filters the late afternoon sun where a nearby minaret is lit up with festive green lights. I'm in town attending the art fair. Having contributed a text to the catalogue on the topic of conversation, I'm engaging in dialogue with lots of people here.

The notion of dialogue constitutes one of the themes at the fair. Dialogue is being explored via a variety of gatherings, talks and lectures, but is also being exemplified by works of art. The idea is to encourage conversations between visitors and artists, organisers, collectors, curators and whoever else is interested in taking part.

Having thought and written on the topic of conversation and having attended the dialogues at the fair, I sit down to write about Juan Aizpitarte's sculptures and installations. In light of the many conversations I've had in the past few days, I begin to see the main body of Aizpitarte's work as invitations. The works manifest themselves by luring audiences in and by inviting them to take part in a conversation, not only with the artwork itself but also between themselves.

What triggers this engagement is a body of work that demand an honest response by you, the audience. Being informed by aesthetic approaches that at times make reference to Minimalism, Aizpitarte's practice also revolves around questions of inside and outside, private and public and about ideas of the "real" versus the artificial. Common to all work is also a strong sense that something is being negotiated. It's being conveyed by the artist's gesture that he is presenting his work as something of a personal offering. As audiences you can sense the invitation as part of the work, as a game that means you enter into bargaining process in order to gain a share of the experience. How this negotiation takes place exactly differs from one work to the other, and from one viewer to the next.

A work titled *Auña /Midi* (2010) constitutes a good example of what I have expressed so far. A metal board has been painted in what reminds of a green chalkboard. Inserted across the board are thin white lines, there as if to assist in the process of writing. The board's shape imitates the silhouette of the mountain *Añamendi* which plays an important role in Basque mythology. The silhouette is resting, at eye level, upon a shiny metal structure making reference to a painter's easel. Only this time, the easel-like structure cannot stand on its own but is propped up against the wall. This topographic outline, this slice of *Añamendi* has been placed like a specimen on display for scrutiny and dissection. Its didactic positioning on the metal easel indicates that it's not only this specific slice of the mountain, this specific image that will be treated this way. Actually, the whole mountain can, theoretically, be sliced up and processed in a similar manner with the support of the easel. The installation raises awareness that iconographic nature has the possibility to transcend, communicate and engage on multiple levels. Matisse's many paintings of *Mont Ventoux* comes to mind, where the painter carried out endless efforts to capture the real, the true, perhaps the essence of the mountain. But also *Fuji* and *Ararat* mountains are subject to similar symbolic treatments.

Bringing an occurrence or activity from outdoor to indoor, or to physically imitate and transfer such occurrences from one place to another, to spaces that were cultured and socialised differently, is an integral aspect of Aizpitarte's work. In an early work titled *Fun Box* (2002) the artist mounted a skateboard rink inside a gallery space and invited skaters to use it. Not only did he hereby question some of the conventions of the art gallery as a pristine white cube (box), he also contacted and brought in totally new audiences. Or perhaps better to call them participants, the group of people who most likely would not have visited the gallery otherwise, namely the skateboarders themselves.

Bridging gaps between audience and participation and between the expectations of what

certain spaces are supposed to deliver are one of the ongoing negotiations taking place throughout Aizpitarte's body of work. The artist works with video, sculpture, installation, performance and sound to create impressions and experiences, but also to explore and challenge spatial restrictions. Again, the idea of dialogue comes to mind. It's as if his work insist on responses, similar to when we speak to each other. The urge to communicate, to pose questions and receive answers, unifies his body of work.

Take for instance Laiff Studio (2008), an installation at Bilbo Arte in Bilbao. The artist converted this industrial space into something like an inventive domestic setting, a pod-like living space. Visitors accessed various cubicles via ladders propped up against the different structures. Reminding of a tree house, or a hut constructed for children's play, only in this case the structure was meant to engage, I presume, with adult visitors mostly. Laiff Studio invited its visitors to a dialogue about what is considered domestic and about what constitutes work and play. It's as if asking, why are these definitions so rigid? The questions were in this case posed physically, since the audience were invited to physically experience the structure. The post-industrial setting of Bilbo Arte does in a contradictory manner also signal freedom. It departs from an environment which initially was purpose-built but that is now the scene for something much more open ended. For Aizpitarte this is one of many arguments feeding his dialogue between space and audience. To what extent can a space that were conceived with a specific purpose in mind change? How can the context be transformed into new environments, into spaces that fill different requests and that perhaps also makes us dream and fantasise about things impossible within previous spatial restrictions? The importance of developing a play area even for grown ups, is something the British psychoanalytic Donal Winnicott wrote about. He named it "an in between space", a space between inner and outer reality, a transitory space. *To what degree is it possible to detach existing and ingrained values from physical spaces? And to re-interpret and make such spaces serve as tools for the conversations we need to have about space, place and audience participation?*

Another piece of work setting the tone for this much anticipated conversation is the sculptural installation titled Belle époque (2009). Here, a fence-like structure has been placed in a closed circle on a piece of minutely maintained parkland in Biarritz, France. Simply by posing, as in an empty gesture, the first impression is that this work is withholding what it's capable of actually doing, namely to mark territory. The decorative shape of the fence is a replica of a similar structure set up along the Concha in San Sebastian where it serves to distancing the flaneur from the ocean. In its capacity as barrier, the fence works as a reminder of certain (bourgeois) societal values and is there to protect us from the forces of nature, in this case the sand and the sea. Also, its presence along the Concha insists on dividing, or at least distinguishing, one activity from another. Belle époque, in spite of its pristine, white, ornamental structure, once taken out of its original context, looks powerless and lonely. But in spite of this improvised and unrehearsed location, in its placement upon the flawless green grass the structure still flirts with power. With its inherent desire to impose order, something which is radically emphasised by its own aesthetic authority. The real question becomes how we can make the transition from one restraining division of space into another, or rather into many others.

Further challenging ideas of spatial mobility and of the implications and restrictions of space is the sculpture Pli-pipe (2002). This work was shown both as a gallery piece in an interior space (Torrance Art Museum, LA 2010) and as a "public artwork" in an exterior space (Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao 2002). Its shape makes reference to a skating ramp, only now the u-shaped structure has been fitted with steps making skating impossible. Instead the audience is invited to climb the stairs, alternatively to use the steps as seats. The structure becomes a small theatre where the play is us, the people looking at each other across the skating bowl.

I've left the hotel room in Amman by now. Some of the dialogues I had at the fair stayed with me. I'm thinking about the actual space where the fair took place, in a shopping mall. I wonder if the dialogues would have evolved in a different manner had the fair taken place

elsewhere? And what if an artist had been asked to design the environment, and what if that artist had been Juan Aizpitarte? Would that have created a different experience all together? His work has an innate drive that stages, instigates and provokes conversations.