

My Father Avoids the Sirens' Song.

I don't enjoy it here / squatting on this island / looking picturesque and mythical.ⁱ

A man tries to find out what feminine jouissance is: he may even hope to experience it himself, but he always fails in these attempts.ⁱⁱ

Last Fall Josée Bienvenu invited me to organize a film and video program for her gallery. Mulling over for a couple of weeks on how to frame an apparently non-thematic series of screenings featuring performance-based works from four generations of women, I lit on the mythological and classical fable of the sirens and their singing. The early mythological Sirens, those hybrid creatures that perched on rocky islands to seduce sailors with their honey-sweet songs, were the seed of the idea of *My Father Avoids the Sirens' Song*.ⁱⁱⁱ Later, there were deformed and mumbling Sirens who “were neither dead nor alive”^{iv}, living-dead creatures symbolizing the morbid embodiment of the end and inhabiting the level of purgatory –the location where Dante dreamed of Sirens. For Homer, too, Sirens and their song represent doom. Whoever listens to their voices must die. In Dante (19.58-60), the Sirens' plight was purged “at the final three terraces.” It was Dante's gaze that transformed this woman with her deformed body into an image of beauty with a harmonious voice.

The contemporary narrative and reinterpretations of these figures composes a very different melody—one that empowers, and that cannot be interrupted. Sirens, today, chant songs of survival and emancipation.

In 1974, before postmodernism turned out to be the agent provocateur refuting long-established theoretical frameworks of philosophy and cultural analysis, Margaret Atwood wrote a free-verse poem called Siren Song. Not much noticed at the time, Siren Song is now renovated, a cherished mainstay of poetry club websites, literary associations, feminist writings, and educational institutions. The ongoing revisions of women's subjectivity and their place and presence in society gave a shine to Atwood's little-known poem. Today, Siren Song is an ode to female energy and determination. After all, they left the island challenging the male desire to control every situation.^v

Almost two decades after that poem, *The Silence of Feminine Jouissance*^{vi} by Slovenian philosopher and sociologist Renata Salecl blends Lacanian analysis and cultural critique to question the myth of the Sirens. Going back to Homer, Kafka^{vii} and other authors, she dives through fictional and theoretical domains and draws innovative conclusions on the interpretation of female subjectivity. If the tale of Odysseus's escape from the Sirens is commonly interpreted as his triumph, it also “can be understood as his failure to face and pursue his desire”^{viii}. Like Atwood's poem *Siren Song*, Salecl's essay finds women competent to enjoy *jouissance* beyond the boundaries of the phallus. The Sirens' enjoyment calls for transformation of the patriarchal order, which has been only superficially benevolent toward women, nurturing a fresh kind of consciousness. Not without difficulties and uncertainties, present-day Sirens cast off their “bird suits” and their poor image as creatures who paralyze men's life, as well as undermining the family structure and the social order. As Homer says: “Whoever draws too close, off guard, and catches the Sirens' voices – no sailing home for him, no wife rising to meet him, no happy children beaming up at their father's face.” This film and video program was organized with these ideas in mind, after rereading Salecl and other authors, and studying recent interpretations of Atwood's poem.

These performative acts by the artists selected for *My Father Avoids the Sirens' Song*, whether inspired by established Body Art, by political and social activism, or conceived as delegate performance, manifest their artistic imagination, while the sound of their voices no longer destroys but calls for the transformation.

My Father Avoids the Sirens' Song includes 21 works by 12 women artists from Europe and Latin America who are performing –though almost none of them see themselves as a performance artist^{ix}– the ballad of their laugh, the sound of their cry, the joy of their autonomy, the song of their *jouissance*.

-Berta Sichel

ⁱ Margaret Atwood. Siren Song. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine>

ⁱⁱ (Per)Versions of Love and Hate. Renata Salecl. Verso. (London & New York, 1998), 71

ⁱⁱⁱ Works selected by Berta Sichel. My father avoids the Sirens' Song is a Bureau Phi project (bureauphi.com)

^{iv} Salecl. Op. 59

^v Although she wrote the poem in 1974, a decisive year for the women's rights movement – with the approval, for example, of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act prohibiting discrimination in consumer credit on the basis of sex, race, marital status, etc. – Atwood never admits to being a feminist writer, since she believes that any work under this label should be created within the parameters of the movement.

^{vi} There is no consistent English translation for *jouissance*. Enjoyment is a literal equivalent, but it is incomplete. The word has much broader meanings for poststructuralist writers, who developed the sense of *jouissance* in complex ways so as to denote a transgressive, excessive kind of pleasure linked to the division and splitting of the subject involved.

^{vii} Franz Kafka, "The Sirens' Song," in *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. George Steiner and Robert Fagles, (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey), 1963, p. 98. Cited by Salecl pp. 72-75.

^{viii} Salecl. Op.cit., 72-73.

^{ix} Kirsten Heshusius is the only artist who can be categorized as a performance artist.

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ARTISTS BIOS/SYNOPSIS

1. Pilar Albarracín

(b.1968, Spain. Lives and works Seville/Madrid)
www.pilaralbarracin.com

Pilar Albarracín focuses her productions on the analysis of dominant narratives and, specifically, on the clichés which represent Andalusian identity; not from a remote and intellectualized perspective, but through an emotional and subversive immersion in the anthropology of the everyday. Folklore and popular traditions, food rituals, religious myths, and women's role in the distribution of power or collective festivals such as bullfighting, are all critically distorted in the mirror of her reflections. Many of her works have a hypnotic rhythm which grows until it reaches a moment of ecstasy.

Lunares, 2004. Color, sound. Duration: 1'26"

Lunares, reflects on the identity assigned to the Andalusian woman, and the pain that this identity has caused. Albarracín uses stereotypes in order to illustrate that, beyond its harmless appearance, such conventions, while being instruments of national identity, also ultimately serve to eliminate cultural diversity.

Coreografías para la salvación, 2011. Color, sound. Duration: 2'23"

Subversion of the characterizing elements of cultural tradition is a defining aspect of this artist's work. This video explores the strategies which make up daily life, while questioning its visual and conceptual essence.

2. Rosana Antolí

(b.1981, Spain. Lives and works in London)
www.rosanaantoli.com

Rosana Antolí centers her practice on the intersection of art, politics and everyday life. Exploring the relationship between art and social reality, between choreography and politics, she attempts to reveal those hidden choreographic commands structuring the everyday in order to resist the imposition of behaviors, acts and motions. Her works combine performance, drawing, moving image and installation.

Walkative: From Mile End to the City. Graham, 2015. Color, sound. Duration: 6'38" Mile End neighborhood in East London has been described as a failure zone of capitalism. A local from Mile End, Graham is unemployed and he dances through two adjacent boroughs with extremely contrasting political, economic and social identities. The core interest of this walk is in the feelings and movements that give voice to the 'failure'.

Disobedient Silence, Oct-Nov 2015. Video b&w, sound. Duration: 4'18". Herbert Read Gallery – UCA, Canterbury, UK.

"Intentionality is bound up with individualism"—Mieke Bal. One can have a goal but be in no condition to achieve it. This performance explores the relation between actions and purposes in four arenas: the technological, the aesthetic, the political, and the social. *Disobedient Silence* recognizes the risks of aligning actions and purposes by transforming the gallery into a space of protest for bodies and objects.

3. María José Arjona

(b. 1973, Colombia. Lives and works Bogota/New York)
www.prometeogallery.com

María José Arjona's practice is mainly focused on long durational performances. Throughout her career, she has developed several approaches to endure, resist and understand what she considers

the most critical element in performance: time. Her body of work is divided into single pieces and performance cycles which operate in synchronicity within the chronological timeline; simultaneously, the performance cycles create a diverging path where the artist compiles different works to understand the meaning of specific concepts and their effects on the body. Both the concepts and effects unfold into dynamics where the presence of the artist functions outside the boundaries of identity.

Playing with the Spirit, 2015. Color, sound. Duration: 5'21"

Centered on the action on the body, unfolding it (the action) into a series of games with its own shadow. Understanding the shadow and the smoke as planes where matter dissolves, the body is transformed into a structure allowing the animal to materialize and release its spirit within the creation of the image. There is no use of special effects while editing, just a conscious selection of the object (the pipe), the posture of the body, and the use of light.

SV MUTED, 2012. Duration: 9'50

This video refers to childhood memories where one wondered what kissing might feel like. The embracing aspect of it is associated with the bounding function of the straps; the sound carried by the cables interconnecting the speakers; the kisses sent and the edited sound produced by a couple kissing (from where the actual sound emerges)...all of them fluid extensions of the kiss into the space.

4. Leonora de Barros

(b.1953, São Paulo. Lives and works in São Paulo)
www.broadway1602.com/artist/lenora-de-barros/

Her early work was powerfully influenced by concrete poetry- words are precisely arranged in typographic design that turn into images. A linguistics graduate from the University of São Paulo, Lenora de Barros started her artistic career in the 1970s, in the midst of the emerging experimental art scene in Brazil. Daughter of Geraldo de Barros, a pioneer of Concrete Art, her work has always been featured her fascination with language. Today her conceptual-based work expands the idea language from diverse, unexpected angles—video, performance, photography, objects, installation, and sound art. Since 1983, de Barros's work also incorporated sound, either by the resonance of words or through voice performances. In collaboration with Teresa Serrano ***E a voz tem sombra?***, was commissioned by Daros Latin America.

E a voz tem sombra?, 2011. Color, sound. Duration: 5'26"

The video-performance reflects on communication. Both artists are located in a library, a clear symbol for the communication of knowledge. Each is on one side of a table with the top separator lifted, creating a boundary between the two and an individual space or territory on either side of the table.

5. Irina Botea

(b.1970, Romania. Lives and works in Chicago and Bucharest)
www.irinabotea.com

Over the past ten years, Irina Botea has engaged in an art practice that uses multiple media— digital video, film, video installation, performance, photography— to inspect the present socio-political dynamics and the possibility of their transformation. Her work combines reenactment strategies with auditions and elements of direct cinema and cinema vérité to look into the roles that trauma, history, language, and music play in the formation of the individual and the community.

Auditions for a Revolution, 2006. Color, sound. Duration: 24'

Chicago, 2006, young people audition for roles in a reenactment of the first televised revolution, the 1989 Romanian revolution. In the piece, the Romanian artist who witnessed the events, juxtaposes

actual footage of the revolution with reenactments of those same televised events by non-Romanian speaking performers. In the reenactment, the young people try on 'the identity' of the revolutionary and learn the 'language' of revolution.

6. Sofia Goscinski

(b. 1979, Austria. Lives and works in Vienna)
www.sofiagoscinski.org

The concept of testing the limits of her viewers, as well as that of her own awareness and the art she makes, is a common thread in Sofia Goscinski's oeuvre. Her work, which embraces and frequently overlaps a wide range of media including sculpture, photography, performance, video and ready-mades, questions basic values that form the cornerstones of modern society, like happiness, freedom and sanity, and presents them in a way which throws them into the fray with their evil counterparts (sadness, captivity, and madness) while balancing along the fine lines that demarcate them from one another.

Without Head, 2013. Color, sound. Duration 08':01"

A wooden box resembling a sculpture accommodate the head of the user. The act of burying her own head is a powerful allegory for how Goscinski sees the brain – an entity that transcends the physical space it occupies. For her, the brain is regarded as a burden, a negative force to rail against, an obstacle toward achieving a sense of inner peace. It is precisely its power to engender negative considerations that provides the foundation for any critical discourse.

7. Kirsten Heshusius

(b. 1979, Netherlands. Lives and works in Amsterdam)
<http://kirstenheshusius.nl/>

The work of Kirsten Heshusius relies heavily on the ritualistic aspect of performance. In her present work, Heshusius investigates the impact her family history has had on her life and her own struggle to connect with her ancestors. Her use of materials and her subject matter relating to life and death conjure images of Japanese Butoh performers. They indicate the present, self-reflection, inner contemplation and confrontation. During her performances the audience tends to become more engaged and empathetic with her struggle. Spectators can place themselves in her physical dimension: her struggle with the material and the corresponding situation with one's own body. The body understands her statement sooner, and then the head/ mind interprets the words.

Bij Haar [Together]

A Memorial for my Grandmother, 2013. Performance during Twente Biennale Enschede NL.

Color, sound. Duration: 10'

Commissioned by Performance Art Event [PAE] Rotterdam, the artist created a site-specific work in the city of Enschede (NL). In the former farmers' cemetery, now a public park, the performance was a tribute to the forgotten lives of the people buried there. On a personal level it is an attempt to get close to her grandmother whom she never met because she died when she was just the artist's current age. Her life, her body is forgotten, and the artist is the only evidence she was once alive.

8. Narcisa Hirsch

(b. 1928, Germany. Lives and works in Buenos Aires)
www.hugoares.com/artists/narcisa-hirsch.html

Narcisa Hirsch is a pioneer of experimental cinema in Argentina and has produced continuously in various media since the 60s. In the beginning, as a painter and illustrator, her works were exhibited at the gallery Lirolay, which, like the Instituto Di Tella, was the most important art gallery in Buenos Aires in the 60s. She conducted performances and happenings, and was part of the group of filmmakers formed by Marie Louise Alemann, Claudio Caldini, Horacio Vallereggio, Juan Villola and Juan José Mugni,

exhibiting their films outside the circuit of theaters and institutions, with the exception of the Goethe Institute, an organization that during the last military dictatorship in Argentina accompanied this movement and gave a formal context to it. Hirsch has published several books and nowadays performs live film projections and installations.

Canciones Napolitanas, 1971. Color, sound. Duration: 10'21"

While romantic Neapolitan songs are heard, a mix of abstract images is shown including a big mouth in the foreground that eats a raw liver and then a postcard.

Retrato de una artista como ser humano, 1969. Color. Duration: 20'

Experimental documentary showing several happenings with the artist, in collaboration with Alemann and Mejia. As in a ritual farewell ceremony, they throw the different elements that have intervened in those happenings into the river. The film, shaped like a personal diary, documents the artistic events held at the time.

La Marabunta, 1967. 16mm transferred to video b&w. Duration: 12'40" (in collaboration with Alemann and Mejia)

In October 1967 moviegoers who attended to the premiere of *Antonioni's Blow Up*, at the Teatro Coliseo, in Buenos Aires, were confronted with a large plaster skeleton of a woman stuffed with live birds, finger food, fruits and vegetables. Hirsch resisted labeling a happening and the work. *La Marabunta* attempts at converting a random assortment of strangers into a group of participants and spectators, at once observing and being observed, affecting the work and being affected by its arena of activity.

9. Beth Moysés

(b. 1960, Brazil. Lives and works in São Paulo)
www.bethmoyses.com.br

Through different media (photography, video, drawings, installation), Beth Moysés creates her works around themes of violence against women in both the historical and contemporary worlds. Moysés approaches this idea through the ideals of romantic love imposed on our collective unconscious for centuries, and are a major cause of physical and psychological aggression against women. In her works, she uses recurring images, such as battered women, dresses, women's work or manifestations of the mother-daughter bond. Moysés treats these recurring images and female symbols as a means of exorcism, as ritual catharsis and purification of women.

Despontando –Nós (Performance), 2003. Color, sound. Duration: 8'50"

The thorns being plucked one by one from long rose stems produce a subtle and intimate sound. Is "being a woman" so painful and sorrowful?

Desatar tiempos (Performance), 2014. Color, sound. Duration: 5'15". Commissioned for #1

International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. Twenty local battered women wore a white a white dress and the sleeves were longer than their arms' length. The action has a double meaning: on the one hand the women are united, fighting for a social cause and, on the other, they remain tied, because they were subjected to the same behavior and the same story.

Diluidas en agua. 2008. Color, sound. 5.'36" Zaragoza, Spain.

Another delegate performance by Moyses, with the participation of 40 women: 20 live in a government shelter and the others were activists against gender and domestic violence. The white dresses were made by the women in the shelter. In reverse, they wrote with a red marker, their histories. In the square the women washed the dresses – a metaphor for the deed of removing scars, pain, and memories.

10. Elena del Rivero

(b. 1949, Spain. Lives and works in New York)
www.the-paraclete.com

Elena del Rivero is a painter with a large body of works on paper. She has, however, experimented with other mediums like photography and video. Del Rivero draws inspiration from experience and the everyday life; what is at hand. Sewing, gilding and the written word are frequently used as alternative tools for drawing. Her work develops slowly, building visual narratives that are completed with carefully chosen titles that favor double entendres. She has always been interested in transforming decay and in reusing her discarded works, putting them back together as a metaphor for the ritualistic power of mending life.

Nu descendant un escalier, 2002-2013. Color, sound. Duration: 20'20"

The work was recorded during her exodus from her studio-home, which was severely damaged by the 9/11 attacks. This is part of a series of performances around the theme of a nude descending stairs. Here the nude hides her face behind a mask, representing a global nude, homeless and alone.

11. Teresa Serrano

(b. 1936, Mexico. Lives and works Mexico D.F./New York)
www.teresaserrano.com

Teresa Serrano's long career is multidisciplinary and separate from dominant trends. Her main interests lie in deconstructing gender, class, race, and stereotypes, and in how power is exerted to control individuals—particularly women—in ways that are sometimes obvious and violent and at other times subtle and psychological. Through painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and especially video, she has produced a unique and powerful body of works with which she has built a creative discourse where form and content come together in a sincere, personal, and artistic involvement.

Restraint, 2006. Color, sound. Duration: 3'06"

Restraint is an elegy on mental fixation, isolation, restriction and repression, rooted in obsessions and the inability to discard them. It shows us a mature woman, the artist herself, sitting at a desk, trying in vain to write in a notebook at an inexplicably frantic pace, while the other hand is inexorably trapped in a bell ringing above the desk, like those used in the reception of certain hotels.

Glass Ceiling, 2008, b/w, sound, 2'17"

A delegate performance, Glass Ceiling refers to the struggle for women's equal access to employment specially highlighting the troubles to win a high power rank in the business world. Without a dialogue, the video uncovers the tension between a perfectly suited woman—whose expression is covered by a mask making her into an anonymous symbol of all women—and a male figure who wields a rodeo lasso with which repeatedly impedes her to escalate the corporate ladder.

12. Mariana Vassileva

(b. 1964, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Berlin)
www.dna-galerie.de

Mariana Vassileva transforms still life and movement through visual representation into new energetic harmony. She is not interested in the physical act of movement, but in the mental process behind it. In a minimal way, she transforms objects, situations and manners, and presents them on a lyrical level. The spectator begins to appreciate the work through the emotional movement of a strangely represented world. In this process, one is animated toward a heightened sensibility of daily variations.

Traffic Police, 2008. Color, sound. Duration: 1'47"

In Vassileva's videos, rhythm and harmony create a particular tension and a moment of uncertainty, left to the chance. *Traffic Police* shows two policemen repeating a number of movements, trying in vain to organize the chaotic traffic in a big street in Mexico. Between whistles, gestures and rhythm form an urban choreography, turning for a moment the order into a dance.

Pedrito, 2010. Color, sound. Duration: 3'

In the streets of Mexico. There were many shoeshine boys, but *Pedrito* was the only one who had so many men waiting for his shoeshine services. With curiosity she asked him: How many women's shoes he had polished in his 50 years? He answered in a very low voice: None. Vassileva was the first.