

# Continuities of Being: Animals, Bodies, Things, and New Aliens in Fina Miralles' Conceptual Work\*

Continuidades del ser: animales, cuerpos, objetos y nuevos  
aliens en el trabajo conceptual de Fina Miralles

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**ABSTRACT:** In 1974, the Catalan artist Fina Miralles (Sabadell, 1950) presented in Barcelona *Imatges del zoo*, an installation evoking provocative tension between freedom and captivity, nature and culture, civilization and cruelty. In order to criticize living conditions in zoos, the exhibit combined photographic documents on zoological parks with live caged animals –including Miralles herself, who was locked in a cage, thus becoming both agent and part of the artistic artifact. One year earlier, Miralles had explored this very kind of critical blurring of borders (human and animal, life and death, natural and artificial, etc.) in the exhibit *Naturaleses naturals*, in which she mixed pebbles, grass, a tree, sand, two live hens, and hundreds of live snails with stuffed birds and pigeons. In *Matances* (1976-1977) the artist presented a series of photomontages that included works depicting dead animals. Following the path of the field of Animal Studies, which problematizes dichotomies as subject/object or animate/inanimate, my contribution aims to explore the *continuities of being* in Miralles' work. The uninterrupted connection between animals, bodies, natural elements, objects, and other *aliens* (such as the tree-woman and the dressed tree, two of her most significant performances) reveals an idea of subjectivity that goes beyond the humanist paradigm. It also promotes a rethinking of the notion of alterity, which means no longer what is alien to the self: it conveys, on the contrary, the idea that otherness is a necessary condition of one's identity.

*Keywords:* Fina Miralles, Animal Studies, subjectivity, alterity.

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RESUMEN: En 1974 la artista catalana Fina Miralles (Sabadell, 1950) presentó en Barcelona *Imatges del zoo*, una instalación que establecía una tensión provocativa entre libertad y cautividad, naturaleza y cultura, civilización y crueldad. Con el fin de criticar las condiciones de la vida animal en los zoológicos, la muestra combinaba fotografías tomadas en parques zoológicos con la presencia de animales vivos enjaaulados –incluyendo a la propia Miralles, que, encerrada en una jaula, se convertía a la vez en agente y objeto del artefacto artístico–. Un año antes, Miralles había explorado una idéntica fusión crítica de fronteras (lo humano y lo animal, la vida y la muerte, lo natural y lo artificial...) en la exposición *Naturaleses naturals*, en la cual entremezclaba piedras, hierba, un árbol, dos gallinas vivas y cientos de caracoles vivos con pájaros y palomas disecadas. En *Matances* (1976-1977) la artista presentó un conjunto de fotomontajes que incluían representaciones de animales muertos. Siguiendo el camino abierto por el campo disciplinario de los Estudios Animales, que problematiza dicotomías como sujeto/objeto o animado/inanimado, mi contribución pretende explorar las *continuidades del ser* en la obra de Miralles. La conexión ininterrumpida entre animales, cuerpos, elementos naturales, objetos y otros *aliens* (como la mujer-árbol y el árbol vestido, dos de sus acciones más significativas) revela una idea de subjetividad que traspasa los límites del paradigma humanista. Además, dicha continuidad favorece la revisión de la noción de alteridad, que deja de designar lo alieno al yo para indicar, al contrario, que la otredad es una condición necesaria de la identidad.

*Palabras clave:* Fina Miralles, Estudios Animales, subjetividad, alteridad.

## 1. NEW SUBJECTS, NEW ALIENS, AND THE IDEA OF CONTINUITY

This paper presents some of the results of a research project on new subjects in contemporary Catalan literature and art. I understand *new subjects* to be those who inhabit the limits of normative subjectivity –that is, the subjectivity that constructs itself as rational, self-conscious, and non-hybrid, and which is commonly acknowledged to be incorporated in living intelligent beings. New subjects are therefore those that exist outside of the borders of what has been historically perceived as hegemonic in society, such as the ill, the abnormal, the *trans*, and the queer. However, the notion of new subjects also relates to the limits of humanness, and consequently, it is suitable to include other kinds of incarnations as well, such as the animal, the cyborg, and even the inanimate object.

Questions may be raised, of course, about the adjective *new*: if what defines these anormative subjectivities is sociological, sexual, or philosophical subalternity, why should we not talk about *other* subjects instead of *new* subjects? Nevertheless, I made my lexical choice intentionally. The notion of a strong and unified subjectivity brought about by the Enlightenment (the apogee of rationality) and Romanticism (the apogee of sentimentality) has become weaker and weaker, mainly because it rests upon the idea of a social, political, and ethical homogeneity that is no longer sustainable. In fact, a multitude of theoretical approaches (from psychoanalysis to disability studies) have long questioned the unicity of the self. In this sense the very fact of using the paradigm of alterity –the fact of speaking of *other* subjects– implies an act of power and an affirmation of the supremacy of some identities (the ones that identify themselves as *one* and not as *other*) that we cannot endorse. If we rethink the limits of the human, otherness must necessarily be redefined, too. Hence the title *new aliens* instead of the somehow redundant *other aliens*.<sup>1</sup>

In a 1982 essay titled *The Subject and Power*, Foucault declared that the goal of his work during the last twenty years had been to create «a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects,» and he defined «three modes of objectification» that transform humans into subjects (1982: 777). The first one is scientific objectivation, meaning for instance the objectivation of the speaking subject in grammar –let us remember that Émile Benveniste defined subjectivity as «the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as “subject”» (1971: 224)–, the producing subject in economy, the living subject in biology, etc. The second one is the objectivation of the subject through what Foucault calls «dividing practices» or normative divisions that constrict individuals, such as mad/sane, sick/healthy, or evil/good. The third one relates to auto-recognition, to «the way a human being turns him or herself into a subject» (1982: 778): this, for example, is how humans have learned to recognize themselves as subjects of sexuality. Broadly speaking, my aim here is to explore the second kind of objectivation of the subject described by Foucault.

I would like to reflect on these questions by taking some of the Catalan artist and writer Fina Miralles’ works as case studies.<sup>2</sup> In 1973, Miralles pre-

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1. The notion of new subjects outlined in these paragraphs is further developed in my article «Animàlia o les extensions de la subjectivitat: possibilitats d’una mirada no antropocèntrica en la interpretació del subjecte de la cultura» (forthcoming).
  2. Artist *and* writer: for an analysis of the importance of language in Miralles’ creative process, see Maia Creus (2015 b).

sented the exhibit *Naturaleses naturals*, for which she had gathered pebbles, grass, a tree, sand, two live hens, and hundreds of live snails, but also stuffed animals. One year later, in 1974, Miralles displayed *Imatges del zoo*, in which she combined photographic documents on zoological parks with five live caged animals: a dog, a cat, a sheep, a frog, and the artist herself locked in a cage during the business hours of the three days that the exhibition was open to the public (Hurtado, 2001: 56). In the *Matances* project (a long-term work displayed in 1978) Miralles used different techniques to show the connections between power and death and also, as she declared in an interview, «la unió de la persona com a ésser i les matèries naturals en un espai no natural» (Parcerisas, 2001: 43). The results of *Matances* were presented in a series of photomontages, some of which showed run over or skinned animals.

*Naturaleses naturals*, *Imatges del zoo*, and *Matances* have in common the presence of animals, and in all three of them, a subtle and yet provocative continuity is established between human and non-human creatures. I will be dealing mainly with the first two projects, with a brief final remark about the third one. In recent years, representations of animality in literary, artistic, and cultural productions have been addressed by the field of animal studies, an interdisciplinary area that «engages the many ways that human individuals and cultures are now interacting with and exploring other-than-human animals» (Waldau, 2013: 3).<sup>3</sup> Margo DeMello, who prefers the term *human-animal studies*, defines this area as «an interdisciplinary field that explores the spaces that animals occupy in human social and cultural worlds and the interactions humans have with them» (2012: 4). Regarding the goals of this not-so-new approach, Kary Weil suggests that theory's turn to animals «grows out of, on the one hand, a weariness with post-structuralism's linguistic turn and a resulting search for a postlinguistic and perhaps posthuman sublime and, on the other hand, an often conflicting turn to ethics that raises the question of our human responsibility to the animal\_other» (2012: xx). Among the theorists who have worked in this field one could highlight, in addition to the above-mentioned authors, Rosi Braidotti, Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Donna Haraway, Matthew Calarco, Harriet Ritvo, and Cary Wolfe, as well as Bataille's theory on religion and Kristeva's essays on abjection. Within the wider frame of what has been

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3. Some suggest that a distinction should be made between *animal studies* and *animality studies*: «If animal studies can be seen as work that explores representations of animality and related discourses with an emphasis on advocacy for nonhuman animals, animality studies becomes work that emphasizes the history of animality in relation to cultural studies, without an explicit call for nonhuman advocacy» (Lundblad, 2009: 500).

called posthumanism, animal studies combine elements of philosophy, cultural studies, and natural sciences in order to question dichotomies such as subject/object, rational/irrational, or animated/inanimate. As Erica Fudge notes (*apud* Wolfe, 2009: 655), if earlier forms of history focused on human ideas about animals in which animals were mere blank pages onto which humans wrote meaning, this new approach «traces the many ways in which humans construct and *are constructed* by animals.» Following this disciplinary path, my contribution aims to explore the *continuities of being* as they appear in some of Miralles' creations. I believe that these continuities are bold and irreverent, not only because they put into question the centrality of humans, but also because they invalidate the idea of alterity that has structured contemporary Western thought on difference. This anthropocentric and authoritarian idea of alterity can be summarized in one sentence that combines the notions of alterity and possession: *I am the one, and the animal is the other: my other*. This is precisely the sentence that I intend to contradict.

The notion of continuity deserves some further reflection. In his discussion on animal-human relationships, Derrida makes very clear that his purpose is not to *erase* limits between human and non-human creatures, but to *multiply* and *complicate* these limits.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, he explicitly writes: «I have thus never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal» (2002: 397). He adds:

So [my purpose] will in no way mean questioning [...] the limit between Man with a capital M and Animal with a capital A. It will not be a matter of attacking frontally or antithetically the thesis of philosophical or common sense on the basis of which has been built the relation to the self [...]. I have thus never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls *itself* man and what *he* calls the animal. (2002: 398)

Many other theorists (Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Matthew Calarco, etc.) have also referred –using different terms– to this idea of continuity. In particular, Calarco proposes the notion of *indistinction*, which he defines in opposition to *identity*. According to Calarco, identity theorists start with human-centered ethical frameworks and then try to show that these frameworks extend to include animals, «thereby founding continuity on the basis of animals exhibiting certain human traits or capacities» (2015: 49). For their

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4. «Whatever I will say is designed, certainly not to efface the limit, but to multiply its figures, to complicate, thicken, delinearize, fold, and divide the line precisely by making it increase and multiply» (Derrida, 2002: 398).

part, indistinction theorists do not deny such continuities, but raise questions «about the ways in which such continuities tend to be portrayed as running unidirectionally from human to animal» (2015: 50). So, the difference is the direction in which continuity is perceived: «indistinction theorists attempt to develop ways of thinking about human beings, animals, and ethics in a manner that radically displaces human beings from the center of ethical reflection and that avoids many of the exclusions associated with lingering forms of anthropocentrism» (2015: 50).

Following this path, when I speak about continuities of being I am not denying the rupture between humans and animals (of course there is one), nor do I mean that humans, animals, and objects share the same level of essential properties (autonomy, consciousness, intelligence, etc.). I am just trying to call attention to the implicit hierarchization between these categories and the subsequent universalization of the human point of view whenever we talk about other (nonhuman) ways of existence/experience. In the conceptual works of Fina Miralles, this authoritarian hierarchy seems to fade: in her creations, the human body is covered with straw stalks, talks to trees, or is caged like an animal; live snail shells are painted as if they were stones or canvas; big squares made of grass float on the surface of the sea. Everything refers to fusion.

Fina Miralles' work has been studied by a remarkable number of critics and scholars,<sup>5</sup> and in 2000 an anthological exhibit entitled *De les idees a la vida* [From ideas to life] –with its corresponding catalog– was devoted to her in the Museu d'Art de Sabadell, following the artist's cession of her documentary collection to the museum. It can be said, therefore, that she is a fairly well-known creator, at least to the extent that conceptual artists are *well-known* by general audiences. My aim here is just to focus on a small area of her creative career: the de-centering of human subjectivity. The rereading of animality and the shattering of boundaries between humans, beasts, and objects –together with the investigation of the body and the idea of spatial translation, which I will not be addressing here– are nuclear issues in Miralles' conceptual work. I believe that these central concepts manage to expand the notion of subjec-

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5. See, for instance, the works by Assumpta Bassas, Alexandre Cirici, Maia Creus, Agustí Hurtado, and Pilar Parcerisas included in the references list. Miralles has also been the subject of doctoral dissertations by Marta Pol (2012) –who focuses on the image of the tree as a key element in the artist's cosmology– and Laura de la Mora (2005) –who reads Miralles in the context of Land Art. In addition to these sources, the artist's webpage ([www.finamiralles.com](http://www.finamiralles.com)) provides very useful first-hand information on her actions, videos, and writings.

tivity by reinforcing the idea that the subject is not only the being capable of thinking rationally, but also the one capable of having experience –and even of *conducting* experience– and feeling and suffering in ways we humans cannot conceive.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL, FEMININE... AND ANIMAL

Contextualizing Miralles' figure means locating her in the complex map of conceptual art. According to Pilar Parcerisas (2007: 76), in the conceptual period (around 1970-75) Miralles devoted herself to the vindication of nature, borrowing some elements and procedures from *arte povera*, as shown, for example, in *Relacions*, where she explores the connections of the human being with elements such as straw, grass, stone, soil, and sand. Whereas in the post-conceptual period (around 1976-1980) Miralles engages in a more idealistic and critical reflection on ownership, power, and death, as is visible in the performance titled *Petjades* [Footprints] –in which she leaves footprints spelling her first and last name in the streets of Sabadell, while wearing shoes with soles stamped with the image of a man– and, especially, in *Matances*.

Defining conceptual art as the one in which the most relevant feature is the *idea* (or the *concept*) seems by no means sufficient. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens recognize that conceptual art «does not employ one specific technique or art medium, nor can it be categorized according to one distinctive genre» (2007: xi), yet still they take the risk of outlining many of its distinctive features. In their view, conceptual art «aims to remove the traditional emphasis on sensory pleasure and beauty, replacing it with an emphasis on ideas and the view that the art object is to be “dematerialized,» that it «sets out to challenge the limits of the identity and definition of artworks and questions the role of agency in art-making,» «seeks [...] to revise the role of art and its critics, so that art-making becomes a kind of art criticism,» «rejects traditional artistic media,» and «replaces illustrative representation by what some call “semantic representation”» (2007: xii-xiii). For his part, Alexander Alberro (1999: xvi-xvii) proposes that some of the most recurring characteristics in conceptual art are the consideration of every one of the constituting elements of the artwork as equal components, the tendency towards dematerialization, the negation of aesthetic content, the abandonment of the valuation of technical manual skill, and the rejection of the idea of an «original, cohesive work» –for this last item, it is worth remembering that Marjorie Perloff (2010) defines the contemporary era as one of «unoriginal genius,» meaning that originality has ceased to be a

key value.<sup>6</sup> In conclusion, «the conceptual in art means an expanded critique of the cohesiveness and the materiality of the art object, a growing wariness toward definitions of artistic practice as purely visual, a fusion of the work with its site and context of display, and an increased emphasis on the possibilities of publicness and distribution» (Alberro, 1999: xvii).

What interests me is that the features mentioned above cast a shadow upon the Realm of the Artist –with capitals– hence putting into question the very notion of the hierarchy between the creator and the object of his creation. Much conceptual artwork shows that not only the figure of the artist/writer seems to vanish, but also that his or her power –the ability to control discourse– is eclipsed. Who is the subject of creation in, say, Joseph Kosuth’s *Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)* (1968), which uses as an inspiration a dictionary definition of the word *art*? Is it the artist or is it language itself?<sup>7</sup> Who is the subject of creation in the hand-painted snails that Miralles releases in a park? Is it the artist or is it the probably astonished snail crawling on the grass? The question of agency, a crucial one in animal studies, emerges here. As Susan McHugh states, one imperative for animal studies is «to conceptualize agency as more than simply a property of the human subject form» (2009: 489), so animals can be considered agents «of an order different from that of human subjectivity,» or, in other words, as «actors operating in accordance with a logic different from that of intentionality or psychological interiority» (2009: 491).

Miralles said in an interview that in the works she created by the end of the seventies «no hi ha la meva mà, no hi ha el sentiment, a mi el que em feia por era transmetre el meu sentiment» (Ubach, 2017: no page number). In many conceptual practices, the human creator camouflages him or herself among other beings and objects in the world without showing any superiority –we might recall, as a contemporary example, the chameleonic performances by Chinese artist Liu Bolin, who melts into his surroundings. What we find here is the artist taking a step back from the front line of traditional creativity– that is, creativity understood as either inspiration or craftsmanship, or a combination of both. Hence conceptual art is apparently quite a non-subjective practice in

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6. «Originality is often defined by what it is *not* –not derivative, not arising from or dependent on any other thing of the kind, underived. And further: originality, whether in the arts or the sciences, is synonymous with novelty, invention, creativity, and independence of mind. [...] The “death of the author” in the years of poststructuralism meant, of course, the death of genius theory as well, with social theorists as Pierre Bourdieu turning their attention to the way culture creates the illusion of “genius” for the evidently gullible masses» (Perloff, 2010: 22).

7. It is worth remembering here that one of Kosuth’s emblematic creations is a composition made of neon tubing and wire entitled *Language must speak for itself* (1991).



which the artist manifests him or herself only as a gazer, a collector, or a selector, keeping control over the idea, but moving away from direct performance. This is why it offers a superb platform from which to problematize subjectivity.

Along with many conceptual artists who fought the formalist understanding of art, we find in Miralles a sort of personal war against forms and in favor of materials. About *Naturaleses naturales*, she writes:

El tractament dels materials naturals va orientat vers els criteris següents:

- a) Mostrar únicament la seva matèria.
- b) Patentitzar que no han sofert transformació.
- c) Posar en evidència que són naturals.
- d) Desposseir els objectes de llur caràcter d'objectes i accentuar-ne la pura existència física.
- e) Mostrar que el valor material pot substituir el formal.

Per tant, al col·locar una sèrie de materials en una galeria, al canviar el seu context, no s'intenta oferir la morfologia tectònica de l'espai on estaven inclosos en un principi (com reproduir un riu, un camp, una platja, etc.) sinó mostrar els diferents materials que els composaven (Miralles, 1975: no page number).

Why this resistance to form? One could argue that the idea of form implies an intervention on the matter –modeling, shaping, cutting, or just staring at it– and, therefore, an act of control by the artist/shaper/viewer, in other words, the imposition of one's subjectivity on matter. I will not go as far as saying that privileging materials over forms means setting these materials free from human control or giving them full autonomy from the artist, but I believe that it leaves the idea of authorship in a second plane (along with the corresponding notions of *genius*, *originality*, and *intention*). The result of this surrender of form is an extremely personal art, but, at the same time, a *personless* art: an art that does not impose itself as a human dominance on non-humans and things but as a companion to non-humans and things. As a consequence, the anthropocentric realm is severely compromised. Some of Miralles' experiments with fusing different elements show this anti-anthropocentric bias: in *Dona-arbre* she plants a third of her body in soil, in *Cobriment del cos amb palla* she dresses herself in straw, and in *Paraules a l'arbre* she seems to hold an intimate conversation with a tree.

Miralles' political views are strongly present in her works. This political bias is closely related to the importance of gender parameters, although the union between gender awareness and conceptualism is not free of problems. In the monograph *Genealogías feministas en el arte español*, Patricia Mayayo

(2013: 26-30) deploras that art critics remain silent about conceptual women.<sup>8</sup> According to others, however, the affiliation of conceptual Catalan women artists with feminism is less important than their social commitment,<sup>9</sup> and Miralles herself has shown some uneasiness with being labeled as feminist. In fact, when a journalist reminded her that she had been tagged as one, Miralles replied: «No m’hi sento. Després de la mort de Franco vaig fer peces que es podien dir feministes, però si hagués estat home hauria fet el mateix amb altres denúncies. Són les historiadores les que ho diuen, però jo sóc una dona lliure, un ésser humà» (Serra 2014).<sup>10</sup> Despite these nuances, Miralles can be understood to exist in a tradition of complicities with other Catalan women artists such *Sílvia Gubern*, *Eugènia Balcells*, *Àngels Ribé*, or *Tere Recarens*, but also with creators like *Judy Chicago*, *Suzanne Lacy*, *Sandra Orgel*, and *Aviva Romani* (Bassas, 2001: 92-101; 2013) –the Cuban American artist and performer *Ana Mendieta* could be added to this list.<sup>11</sup> The relevance of the

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8. Mayayo is very critical of *Pilar Parcerisas* and of the politics of exhibitions of the *Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA)*: «Tampoco le concedía gran atención a este aspecto [*feminism*] Parcerisas en un libro más reciente, *Conceptualismo(s) poéticos/políticos/periféricos* [...]. Parcerisas sólo le dedica unas pocas páginas al asunto. A pesar de que consagra toda la segunda parte del libro [...] a analizar las relaciones que se establecen entre arte y política dentro de las prácticas conceptuales españolas, sólo trata de pasada el impacto de las políticas feministas en el arte del período al glosar el trabajo de *Eulalia*. Las relaciones del arte con el movimiento de mujeres se despachan en un breve párrafo [...]. No nos sorprenderá comprobar que el *Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)*, una de las instituciones que más ha contribuido en las últimas décadas a esta relectura del conceptualismo catalán, tampoco haya otorgado un papel relevante a los discursos feministas» (2013: 28-29).
  9. *Maia Creus* acknowledges that the 1960s were «la dècada de l’expansió definitiva de la teoria feminista de l’art, la cultura i la vida,» but she also states: «Aquesta realitat [...] no fou tan evident ni explícita al nostre país. Tal com elles mateixes subratllen, no es pot posar l’etiqueta feminista a les quatre artistes que exposaren a la Sala Tres: *Fina Miralles*, *Àngels Ribé*, *Eulàlia Grau* i *Concha Jerez*. Per sobre de la consideració feminista se sentien participants d’un estat de consciència ciutadana que a finals dels setanta intuïa que el carrer tornaria a ser seu» (Creus, 2012: 24-25). This opinion is to some extent revised in Creus, 2015 a.
  10. However, in a more recent interview she states: «Les vegades que he parlat amb les dones, els dic: però si tu tens tot el dret de ser qui ets! Tens tot el dret de fer la teva vida! No has de fer la vida dels altres, no t’has de donar al marit, als fills i als altres! El masculisme ve també de l’educació que moltes mares donen als seus fills mascles. Si tu tens una mare que t’ha respectat com a persona tens molta feina feta. Jo he sigut la *Fina*, no la filla femella, i els meus germans: el *Toni*, la *Maite* i la *Celi* ens van respectar com a persones des de petits. La meua mare em parlava com una persona amb coneixement» (Ubach, 2017).
  11. Compare, for example *Mendieta’s Rape Scene* with *Miralles’ Standard*, *Mendieta’s Blood and Feathers* and *Tree of Life* with *Miralles’ Dona-arbre* or *Recobriment del cos amb palla*, or *Mendieta’s Silhouettes* with *Miralles’ Petjades*.

links between body, territory, and gender become obvious if we pay attention to Miralles' exploration of corporality in pieces like *Dona-arbre* and *Standard*. Àngels Viladomiu identifies the performance *Dona-arbre* as the proposal of «una dona emancipada de la ciutat» (2006: 184) and connects it with works by Frida Khalo, Louise Bourgeois, and Ana Mendieta. Marta Pol considers that this performance shows «els primers indicis d'expressar, a través de la relació del cos humà amb l'entorn natural, el principi femení des d'una dimensió denetrítica [*sic*]» (2012: 41). For her part, Parcerisas describes *Standard* –a piece where the artist appears muzzled and sitting in a wheelchair– as an allegory of feminine paralysis in an objectifying world:

L'artista apareix emmordassada i asseguda en una cadira de rodes com a metàfora de la paràlisi de la dona que es veu obligada a mirar i a no dir res. Davant seu, una pantalla de diapositives projecta imatges d'una mare vestint la seva filla (les calces, les mitges, la samarreta, etc.) per tal de donar a entendre que a mesura que et vesteixen el cos, també et vesteixen la ment. També, al seu davant, un televisor emet un programa habitual amb imatges que reflecteixen com la dona és tractada a la TV i, finalment, sona una gravació amb un seguit de consignes i anuncis conformistes sobre una visió consumista de la dona com a objecte. (2001: 40-42)<sup>12</sup>

The two axes mentioned so far (the conceptual approach that erases the anthropocentric privilege of the author and the gender-based practice that both suggests the fusion between the female body and the environment and criticizes the objectifying discourses on women) create a pattern that becomes more complex, and extremely enriched, if intersected with the attention that is given to the role of non-human animals, as they bring out all sorts of unforeseen discomfort about our own human position. In this sense, Pramod K. Nayar points out that, according to philosophers critiquing humanism, «we do not at any point want to deal with a situation in which *the animal might know us in ways we do not understand*» (2014: 88). This very anxiety is also expressed by Derrida, who, using as a pretext the shame he feels when being naked and watched by his cat, reflects on the perversity of the human/non-human distinction and proposes substituting multiplicity for binarism: «beyond the edge of the *so-called* human, beyond it but by no means on a single opposing side, rather than “the Animal” or “Animal Life” there is already a heterogeneous

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12. In her text *Testament vital* Miralles defines *Standard* as «una acció que evidència els valors tradicionals donats a la dona “standard”, inculcats des de la infantesa pels pares, els mestres, els marits, les lleis, l'església» (2008: 17).

multiplicity of the living» (2002: 399). Both Derrida and Nayar refer to a fear, an uneasiness caused by the proximity of animals. This uneasiness –which relates to the Freudian idea of the sinister, of what causes repulsion because it is perceived as both familiar and unfamiliar– encourages a change in the way we interpret the artistic representations of animals. Shouldn't we stop talking about animals as property or metaphors of ourselves and start seeing them as (new) subjects? Isn't it time to expel the human being from the center of the realm of subjectivity?

### 3. THREE WORKS FOR RETHINKING SUBJECTIVITY IN THE COMPANY OF ANIMALS

*Naturaleses naturals*, Miralles' second individual exhibit –and, according to her critics, her first important one– was presented in the Sala Vinçon of Barcelona in 1973.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned earlier, the exhibit consisted of the juxtaposition of natural and artificial elements, such as live and stuffed hens, plastic and wooden objects, plants, a tree, etc. Miralles described it like this: «En aquesta mostra es presentaven nou elements naturals sense manipulació i descontextualitzats, mostrant el seu procés i la seva qualitat de naturals. A la vegada, en el mateix espai hi havia quatre objectes compostats per elements naturals i elements artificials, a fi de mostrar i constatar la seva radical diferència de materials» (*apud* Pol, 2012: 94). The project used three complements (Hurtado, 2001: 53-55): the first one was the projection of a series of slides containing elements from the mineral, vegetal, and animal realms; the second one was a movie by Miralles (*Fenòmens atmosfèrics*);<sup>14</sup> and the third one involved two performances consisting of freeing a bunch of pigeons and painting hundreds of snails and later releasing them in the Parc de la Ciutadella.<sup>15</sup> In her brief essay *Materials naturals, materials artificials* Miralles broke down the objectives of *Naturaleses naturals* into four lines: «A) Approximation and

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13. For a detailed description of the genesis and materialization of the project, see Pol, 2012: 94-129. 43 years after its conception, *Naturaleses naturals* was exhibited in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional (Madrid).

14. *Fenòmens atmosfèrics* is available at the Museu d'Art de Sabadell.

15. For more details on these complementary actions see Pol (2012: 26). *Fenòmens naturals* was a soundless 25-minute-long super-8 film; there are also audiovisual documents of the two performances (*Vol de coloms*, super-8, soundless, 9:29 minutes; *Deixada anar de cargols*, soundless super-8, 5 minutes long, recorded in Parc de la Ciutadella at the end of the exhibit).

differentiation between Artificial and Natural. B) The contradictions between Form and Matter. C) The contradictions between Concept and Object. D) Context and Change» (Miralles, 1975: no page number).<sup>16</sup> Regarding the first of these issues, she wrote:

Un dels exercicis va consistir en col·locar dins d'un galliner una gallina dissecada juntament amb dues de vives, realitzant la funció natural de gallina. Un segon treball va ser la deixada anar d'una vintena de coloms vius que en obrir-se la gàbia varen volar, mentre que tres coloms dissecats no varen poder desenrotllar la seva qualitat d'ocell. En aquesta mateixa mostra hi havien dos muntatges: l'un realitzat amb materials naturals, arbre i terra; l'altre amb materials artificials, planta de plàstic, gespa de goma i ocell dissecat. [...] Avui, en el mercat, a la venda, existeixen una quantitat desorbitada d'aquest tipus d'objectes anomenats decoratius, no són res més que la representació formal d'uns elements naturals. Les flors i les plantes de plàstic, [...] l'ocell mecànic que canta, els gossos que mouen el cap o els de porcellana a tamany natural [...]. Si a cada un d'aquests objectes el contraposéssim als seus originals obtindríem un resultat a nivell pràctic d'oposició natural-artificial. (Miralles, 1975: no page number)

Although *Naturaleses naturals* attempted to show the dialectics between natural and artificial, it was also an experiment on decontextualization and a reflection on the tensions between materiality and form. In Agustí Hurtado's view:

La instal·lació consistia en l'exposició contraposada de materials naturals amb materials artificials. Materials naturals trobats a la natura, sense cap transformació [...]. Materials artificials que posen de manifest que provenen d'un procés industrial i en el seu context normal són objectes iconogràfics amb una significació decorativa, però que en exposar-los fora del seu context canvien de significat i preval el seu valor com a material artificial. (2001: 53)

According to the art critic Alexandre Cirici, Miralles tends to present *samples* rather than *forms* in order to «desposseir els objectes de llur caràcter d'objectes i accentuar-ne la pura existència física» and to «mostrar que el valor material pot substituir el formal» (1974: 43). He summarizes the purpose of *Naturaleses naturals* in this fashion:

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16. I am quoting the English translation included at the end of the text *Materials naturals, materials artificials*. For longer quotations of this same text I will be using the Catalan original.

[Miralles] organitzà una manifestació orientada cap a les quatre finalitats de patentitzar la naturalesa dels materials naturals i artificials, canviar llurs contextos, llurs semblances formals, llurs diferències materials, i manifestar la pèrdua d'importància que experimenten com a objectes. Un arbre hi vivia en una atmosfera limitada per plàstics i persianes, el camp llaurat s'estenia pel paviment artificial i les patateres eren plantades en testos. El peix artificial descansava, a l'aigua, entre peixos vivents, les gallines dissecades romanien quietes entre les que es movien. (1974: 44)

Miralles stated that in *Naturaleses naturals* «contraposava els valors de natural i artificial utilitzant materials extrets directament de la naturalesa, *sense fer-hi cap intervenció* [emphasis added], amb elements artificials formalment idèntics (planta de plàstic, ocell dissecat) però essencialment diferents: vida-mort» (A.M., 1992: 168). I believe that it is possible to link this idea of non-intervention in the materials collected from nature with what art critic Victoria Combalía called a *poetics of the neutral*. According to Combalía, in conceptual art reality is only what appears in front of our eyes: «es lo que aparece, y nada más. La realidad es neutral. Hay que “dejarla aparecer,” en un acto casi natural, sin manipulación ninguna» (1975: 71). Although the term *poetics of the neutral* has raised some controversy –probably because it seems to imply that conceptual art is incapable of political commitment– I claim that the notion of neutrality accurately describes the conception of non-imposing, non-hierarchical subjectivity that we encounter in Miralles' artwork. Moreover, I find it plausible to establish a connection between her vindication of nude materials and the Deleuzian idea of the body without organs (BwO). The BwO is the theoretical experiment of disarticulating the organism and opening our bodies to all sorts of connections. What is challenged by this idea is not the organ in itself but the (repressive) conception of the organism as a whole:

We come to the gradual realization that the BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism. [...] The BwO is not opposed to the organs; rather, the BwO and its «true organs,» which must be composed and positioned, are opposed to the organism, the organic organization of the organs. (Deleuze and Guattari 175-176)

The disarticulation of the organism attacks the idea of the body as a cluster of pieces by showing that any reunion of elements is nothing but a construct. It seems clear then that the idea of a body without organs compromises the notion of the existing limits between dead and alive, human and non-human, and, of

course, natural and artificial. The image of Miralles' half-buried body in *Dona arbre* is clearly ironic with regard to the idea of the organism.

All this could be related to philosopher Rosi Braidotti's thoughts on connections between species. Braidotti revives Spinoza's concept of the monistic universe: that is, the idea that matter, the world, and human beings are not dual entities structured according to opposition principles (here Spinoza is criticizing Descartes and his mind-body distinction). Although Spinoza's monistic model was long considered politically inefficient and holistic, it was given new life in the 1970s by a new group of thinkers (Deleuze, Macherey, Negri, etc.) as an antidote against the contradictions of Marxism. These new thinkers were interested in the idea that it is possible to overcome dialectic oppositions and understand materialism in a non-dialectic way. Therefore, Spinoza's legacy consists of an active concept of monism that allowed those thinkers and theorists to define matter as vital and self-organizing: a vitalist materialism. Instead of the «metaphoric habit» of constructing a moral and cognitive bestiary «in which animals refer to values, norms, and morals» (2009: 528), Braidotti suggests a material –she calls it «neoliteral»– relation with animals: «The old metaphoric dimension has been overridden by a new mode of relation. Animals are no longer the signifying system that props up humans' self-projections and moral aspirations. Nor are they the keepers of the gates between species. They have, rather, started to be approached literally, as entities framed by code systems of their own» (2009: 528). In this neoliteral relation the animal is not interpreted metaphorically but taken in its radical immanence. In a way, Miralles follows this kind of materialism.

All these issues reappear in *Imatges del zoo* (1974). The work was installed in a room with pictures of caged animals on the walls and featuring, in the middle of the room, five actual cages containing a dog, a cat, a sheep, a frog, and Fina Miralles.<sup>17</sup> It seems that the initial idea was to cage a child too, but Miralles could not find any parent who would volunteer to do this (Hurtado, 2001: 56). Miralles denied the connection between this exhibit and the anti-Francoist resistance, and she stated that her aim was to emphasize the manipulation of animals by humans,<sup>18</sup> thus rejecting, once more, the meta-

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17. Parcerisas points out the idea of continuity: «Incluso la propia artista se encerró dentro de una jaula, subrayando así la naturaleza del hombre-mujer como especie animal» (2007: 81).

18. For his part, Hurtado denies not only the political bias of the work, but also its feminist character: «Es pensa, erròniament però amb una certa lògica, que, a causa del tema i la instal·lació en si, però sobretot de l'època i de les seves circumstàncies polítiques i culturals –últim any del franquisme– [...], que *Imatges del zoo* és una “metàfora” de la falta de llibertat política, cultural i social del país i una reivindicació d'aquests mateixos temes respecte a

phorical interpretation (or rather the *exclusively* metaphorical interpretation) of animal presence in her work. As Donna Haraway –talking about dogs in her *A Companion Species Manifesto*– says and repeats: «Dogs are not about oneself. Indeed, that’s the beauty of dogs. They are not a projection, nor the realization of an intention, nor the telos of anything» (2003: 11). Maia Creus considers that in *Imatges del zoo* «l’artista apunta a una constant en la cultura occidental hereva de l’humanisme romà i cristià i de la incomprensió, marginació i menyspreu de l’animal o la dona» (2013: 47-48), and she adds:

La fundació del zoològic com a parc temàtic de la cultura urbana, i el desplegament sistemàtic de la civilització industrial de la mort posava de manifest, sense reserves [...], la història d’una brutal relació de dominació no limitada als animals i la natura, sinó també de l’home sobre l’home. El cos de Fina Miralles engabiats al costat d’altres animals domèstics dins d’un espai expositiu ple de fotografies d’animals del zoo de Barcelona donava forma a una crítica punyent contra l’humanisme occidental: l’aparició d’una forma ultramoderna de poder i dominació global del món, el denominat biopoder. (2013: 48)

Although caging oneself is a somewhat classical form of protest –remember the PEN Club’s performance in which caged writers were «exhibited» on the Rambla of Barcelona to commemorate the Day of the Imprisoned Writer– Miralles’ captivity has a singular meaning: she becomes both agent and participant of her artistic piece. However, the nature of her participation is not totally evident. It is useful to recall in this respect the description of *Imatges del zoo* written by conceptual artist Lluís Utrilla, for it contains a fair amount of criticism:

A la gran sala blanca se sent la música estrident, molesta i alienadora d’un programa de televisió de gran anomenada entre els infants: «Había una vez un circooooo»... A les parets envoltant tota la sala fotografies, una al costat de l’altra amb imatges d’animals en un Zoo, amb la fal·làcia que representa la semilibertat o la decoració ambiental. [...] Dins les gàbies, animals que els homes consideren domèstics i que no estan normalment engabiats. Una mosca, la granota, el gat, el gos, un be i l’home. El gat i el gos notaren el captiveri d’una manera semblant, varen quedar com aclaparats, àdhuc amb símptomes físics de decaïment.

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la situació de la dona en concret [...]. [D]e fet, més que possibles lectures feministes de l’obra de Fina Miralles en aquesta època, seria més adient fer referència a qüestions de caire antropològic, lligades als “costums” o fins i tot al “folklore”» (2001: 56).



El be es va rebel·lar, donant constantment cops contra la tela metàl·lica i omplint la sala amb els seus crits.

L'home (una dona), que hauria estat una bona experiència que es mantingués dins la gàbia durant tres dies, ho convertí en una acció tan sols teatral, en sortir cada dia en acabar l'horari de l'exposició. (1980: 96)

What Utrilla seems to be criticizing here is a kind of inauthenticity that he associates with the theatrical dimension of the performance, that is, with the substitution of representation for presence –which is the core of our reflection: if Miralles is intentionally performing some kind of dramatization, she posits a radical distance between herself and the rest of the animals, which are by no means intentional performers. Be that as it may, Utrilla's notes remind me of the exhibit *Postfotografia*, shown in Barcelona (Arts Santa Mònica) in 2013, in which the artist Thomas Mailaender presented *Chicken Museum*, a small farm-yard in a display cabinet containing live hens. An anecdote of the exhibition seems relevant to me: the gallery staff were deeply annoyed when they learned they were supposed to clean up after the hens every morning. The discomfort shown both by the animals in Miralles' exhibition (in Utrilla's vision, at least) and by the staff in Mailaender's installation is indicative of the objectification implicit in any work that makes use of animals, even when the purpose of that work is to defend their rights. It therefore casts a subtle shadow on both projects, and this shadow takes the shape of a question: is it really possible to speak for the animals?

On the other hand, because of its classificatory structure (each beast is in its own cage), *Imatges del zoo* posits the question of what Barbara H. Smith (2004: 3-4) calls «ethical taxonomy.» The conceptions of and discourses on animals are determined by a polyphony of classifications based on non-neutral categories. For example, what allows us to distinguish between a savage beast and a pet? What determines if an embryo is a human being or not? (In this second case, the answer will depend on our position on abortion.) These cages/categories act symbolically as Foucault's «dividing practices,» or normative divisions (mentioned at the beginning of this article): they classify living creatures and set limits between them. By emphasizing these limits, Miralles unveils their arbitrariness.

Finally, I would like to make a brief comment on the *Matances* series (1976-1977), in which Miralles developed what Maia Creus called «una extensa cartografia documental, al·legòrica i simbòlica, de les relacions entre Poder i Mort» (2012: 23). In 1978 the project was presented in Barcelona (Galeria G) and in Sabadell (Sala Tres). The exhibition consisted of a multiple-object, a series of 34 photomontages, and a super-8 film. The multiple-object was the

installation «Diviértase matando,» a composition with shooting targets with human shapes and a bobblehead dog. The photomontages included several works centered on animals who confronted death in different ways –such as «Gat masque,» «El gos era,» «La guineu,» and «Gos amb màscara de gas»– but they also depicted human political executions –in fact, some of the montages were inspired by Goya’s *Los fusilamientos de la Moncloa*. As for the film, it showed a pig slaughter –Vivaldi’s *Concerto per Flautino* was used as the background music– mixed with images of Miralles’ childhood.<sup>19</sup>

According to the artist, her aim in *Matances* was to explore different physical and psychological forms of death in humans and animals together with the concept of manipulation (Miralles 2008: 17). The project had a political purpose –the post-dictatorial context in which it was conceived conferred strong social significance to it– but also an autobiographic one that was related to the death of the artist’s mother (Creus 2013: 48; Parcerisas 2001: 43). However, another –liminal, and yet essential– suggestion of the work is the criticism of the contemporary idea of subjectivity. The word *matances* refers both to humans and animals, thus denying the «radical break» (DeMello, 2012: 42) between the two groups and reinforcing their «deep continuity» (Calarco, 2015: 13). Distinctions are not made when it comes to talking about suffering, injustice, and repression. But at the same time *Matances* warns us about the difficulties of accepting such continuity. Surprising as it may sound, one example of this is smell. Due to the strong smell of formaldehyde and disinfectant in the room where the exhibition was shown, some of the visitors were forced to use masks. The smell of disinfectant functions as a protection against the fetidness of death, but it also serves as a metaphor for discontinuity. The stink incarnates the abject, the rotting, and the corruption of the flesh that equals us to animals, and it is for this reason unacceptable and needs to be covered with tangible or intangible barriers.

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19. The 17-minute-long documentary *Matances. Poder i subjectivitat. Una lectura visual a l’arxiu Fina Miralles* (created in 2012-2013 by Maia Creus, Tamara Díaz, and Inés Martins with the participation of Victoria Sacco, and produced by the Fundació Ars and the Museu d’Art de Sabadell) explains the conception of the project and includes parts of this film. It is accessible on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/82548778>).

#### 4. DIS/CLOSURE

The works mentioned so far are not the only ones in which Miralles interacts with animals,<sup>20</sup> but they offer a solid ground for reflection. Of course these pieces of art are not univocal. Of course they raise questions about animal suffering. How would the real pigeons and hens react to the nearby presence of their sinister others (the stuffed pigeons and hens)? Were they scared? Were they anxious? Where did Miralles find the dead genet used in «Gat masque»? What happened to it? How did it die? How would a human being react to seeing a stuffed person nearby? Remember the controversial *negre de Banyoles* [the black man from Banyoles], a taxidermized African warrior shown at the Museum of Banyoles until 2000, or the provocative human plastinations by German anatomist Gunther von Hagens. The border between presence and presentation is thin. The border between presence and violent representation is also thin.

Nonetheless, Miralles presents the idea of human/animal continuity in a suggestive way. The connection between animals, bodies, natural elements, objects, and other *aliens* (such as the tree-woman) in her works reveals an idea of subjectivity that goes beyond the humanist paradigm, and it also promotes a rethinking of the notion of alterity. There is a blurring between self and other in Miralles' work, and I believe a logical consequence of this blurring is the extension of the notion of subjectivity,<sup>21</sup> which ceases to be circumscribed by the limits of the rational self-conscious body. As a result of this extended notion of subjectivity, alterity means no longer what is alien to the self and becomes a necessary condition of one's identity.

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20. See, for example, the piece *Mediterrani t'estim* (1978), in which Miralles synthesizes the ideas of death, manipulation, and animality: a funeral stone with the text «Fly seagull, be aware that man is here» lays on a surface covered with sand; on the wall, a fox skin with a bullet hole in the heart; and a mosquito net covers the space like a tent, symbolizing life in the mother's womb. For a description of this work, see Miralles 2008: 18. The action *La grenouille-fontaine, à propos de Marcel Duchamp*, in which she plays a frog, serves as a more contemporary example of Miralles' performance of animality: «La Fina va començar a fer la granota, movent-se com a tal i propulsant amb la boca grans rajos d'aigua [...]. Com va explicar després, ella mateixa se sentia granota de ben petita, així que no se n'havia pogut estar» (Casellas, 2012: 20).

21. «La escritura de Fina Miralles nos induce a resucitar, junto con la subjetividad del cuerpo, la subjetividad del paisaje [...]. El paisaje [...], junto con la palabra, forma parte del momento de nuestra individuación y subjetivación» (Creus, 2015 b: 70).

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