

# STILL LA RIBOT



Sophie Hansen talks to  
Spanish choreographer/  
performance artist  
La Ribot.

*I met Maria Ribot in her miniscule new studio in the People Show building in Bethnal Green. She seemed relaxed after the success of her week of performances of Still Distinguished at South London Gallery as part of the International Mime Festival. This latest instalment takes her to number thirty four of her target 100 Distinguished Pieces, each bound by arcane, self-imposed rules. The latest pieces formed a series of mini tableaux in the gallery, some set to music, most without lighting, all framing her alabaster, naked body in complex, intriguing juxtapositions with audience and objects. Time based and sculptural, they alternated in a space belonging neither to visual arts or contemporary dance. In wig and high heels, surgical corset or foil blanket, she blankly created and recreated performance spaces amidst the throng. Despite the sell out audiences and critical acclaim, this Spanish artist cultivates a volatile identity, moving across national and art form boundaries with restless energy.*

**I began by asking La Ribot why it has been so hard to catch her in London recently.**

When I arrived in London in 1997 I was constantly performing. For the first two years I worked like crazy. But I have not performed here since *El Gran Game* (the company piece which was commissioned by and performed at Canary Wharf and The South Bank Centre in 1999). I have been touring other work around the world: in Australia, Brazil, Europe. I started *Still Distinguished* in January last year and didn't premiere until June in Spain; and then only as a work in progress. The real premiere was in Lausanne in September. I have not had the opportunity to bring it to London until now.

**What is your relationship with Spain?**

Since I moved here I am much more active over there! When I came to London I still wanted to premiere *Mas Distinguidas* in Madrid (the second series in the *Distinguished Project* which began with *13 Piezas Distinguidas* in 1993). I couldn't find anywhere to present it, so I decided to set up my own festival with my friend Blanca Calvo. *Desviaciones* is now in its fifth year and has become a very important place to show and see alternative dance; dance mixed up with other things.

Blanca and I also created one of the first contemporary dance companies in Madrid in the 1980s. We were only twenty two at the time. We had a lot to say and *Bocanada* became quite successful. We split the company after three years, but six years later we set up the festival. We work well together.

This festival raised my profile significantly in Spain. Also being in London has helped. If you go abroad you are much more prestigious in your own country.

**How do you feel in London?**

I am more optimistic here in professional terms, because I can do what I want. If the dance world doesn't like me I can work in galleries. I can find others also working on the boundaries. It makes me happy that I only have to fight for my ideas.

**Has your work changed because you are happy?**

Maybe I am more courageous. I am more supported, pushed more. I couldn't present *Still* in this way if I was still in Spain. Although I did preview there, it was within my festival. The whole focus of *Desviaciones* is on this kind of difficult, non-mainstream work.

**But recently you won the Spanish National Prize for dance?**

That's very funny! That prize has been around for several years, and only now have they decided, like they do for music, to give one prize for composers and one for interpreters. I won dance interpretation. It is amazing because I see myself much more as a creator. My friends in Spain think that this recognises that interpreters can also be creators, that dance and visual and performance art can be mixed. It says something positive about the status of an interpreter using the body. It's Spanish surrealism! (La Ribot laughs a lot about this, as she does throughout the interview.)

**Your piece for Anna Williams of Ricochet was firmly and unproblematically in the dance context though?**

Maybe I am still creating problems where there are none. When I arrived in London I was used to defending myself as a dancer. In Spain there was theatre, music and dance. If I was not a dancer, there was no place for me. Here there is no need to fight. There are a lot of places to develop your work. If not in dance, there are places where you feel more comfortable, or where people feel comfortable working with you. After all these years, I am still asking myself whether I am a dancer or not. I have to forget this!

**But you are not a mime either?**

This is just another one of those strange things that happen to me. I have a good relationship with the mime

festival directors. In 1998 they let me show the whole *Distinguished Project*, which is something I really wanted to do. I don't know what I am, but I am almost sure I am not a mime. I like to work in a slippery place with no name. You never know what to call me. It's like my name. People call me Maria, La Ribot; somebody even calls me La. This confusion makes me laugh.

**Was it your decision to work in the South London Gallery?**

When I arrived in London I saw Gary Stevens there and loved it. I thought of the space when I started *Still*. I wanted to take my work out of theatres, or not only in theatres. The *Distinguished Project* must be moving all the time. One series is very good for theatres but also for galleries, the next is good for galleries but also for theatres. The work can spread out of the place in which it is born. Next I am going to Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. To the big 400 square metre stage. We will play with the audience on stage. What is this? It is not a theatre space.

It is important to present the work in exactly the right context. At least for the premiere. Afterwards it is okay to change. *Mas* moved from theatres to galleries over four years. Now it is completely perverted. I am so deeply in the work because the context has changed so radically. The work is now more in my body than in the environment.

**Is it still the same work?**

The pieces are exactly the same. It is really only the canvas which changes. (She illustrates her point, by placing the same object across several items on her cluttered desk.) The essence doesn't change.

**How do you feel in the gallery context? You must be very aware of people around you?**

I see the audience a lot. I feel them in a very specific way. I feel their breath. They are very close. At the beginning of the show I feel individualities, and as I concentrate more I feel mass. It is not so much the differences between nationalities, but the day to day changes which amaze me. At the premiere in London, people completely surrounded me. They were completely stuck to the walls the next night. But they were fine, they didn't need to move. I realised that *Still* is fake detailistic [sic]. It's a landscape. You don't need to see the small things. The blood in *Another Bloody Mary* is a lot of small pieces, but if you don't see them, you lose nothing. The

piece is more like a sea, constantly moving and changing, because of the audience. It is about the relationship with space and time. You can decide as an audience where you put yourself. Depending on where you are, it's a completely different version.

**Sometimes the group dynamic interferes with this, however.**

Yes. If there are more than eighty people in the space you have to fight to see. When we are eighty, you have the space to decide where you are. You don't have to consume; just enjoy space and time passing. The only way for me to put you in this mood is to leave you the space and the time. That's why I am using the 'seven minute rule'. I have small rules to define what is a *Distinguished Piece*. It has to be between thirty seconds and seven minutes long. I made *Mas* in very short time intervals, with only one seven-minute piece, to establish a new kind of relationship with time and space, a contemporary time scale. In *Still* I wanted to work more with you as an audience. I give you the facility to work by giving you approximate time and space. These are never defined. You know that you have time, but you don't need a clock. It is an environment. You can go outside the piece, see the others moving, move yourself.

**Some people really move, but others remain glued to the spot. There seems to be a hierarchy, based on confidence.**

That's what happens in the theatre. You just don't see it!

**Are you conscious of the provocation in your work? It is potentially confrontational.**

I think work must provoke reactions, but not directly uncomfortable reactions. I made *Still* knowing that the situation could be quite uncomfortable for some people, so I try to be very soft. I never touch people. If they are in the way, I change my piece. If the audience is uncomfortable, I am uncomfortable. I am doing things to move thoughts, or stomachs, or emotions; to move people and me; to rethink things. In an uncomfortable situation you cannot think and feel.

That's why I put the video piece at the start of *Still*. At the preview in San Sebastian I began with *Candida Illuminaris*. The piece was against the wall, so of course I had to move people. I was naked and very close. It was not working. I knew I had one more piece to make, but I was bored and had no idea how to finish. So I thought, let's forget *Still* and keep going with my research in

video. I started *Pa amb Tomaquet* as an exercise. There are a lot of rules in it which are not 'distinguished'. There are four versions! But then I remembered the problem in San Sebastian! So now it is your space for twelve minutes. You walk around and decide a lot of things so that by the time I enter, we are on the same level.

**In Still, the video piece is the only one not for sale.**

After making this video, I decided to stop selling. Something has changed and I need time to understand this. I don't know when the *Distinguished Project* will continue. If the thirty-fifth piece is a video maybe I have to stop? Or maybe it is just an exception and I continue to make work with my body. I want to do two or three more videos this year, just for myself.

**The visual arts connection is very strong.**

I have been asked to present *Still* in a gallery in Madrid and am starting to have a lot of interest from visual artists. I don't want to sound pretentious, but I think it is important for dance to communicate with other art forms. The dance world is conservative. Those of us who work on the boundaries are feeding everybody because we are eating from everybody.

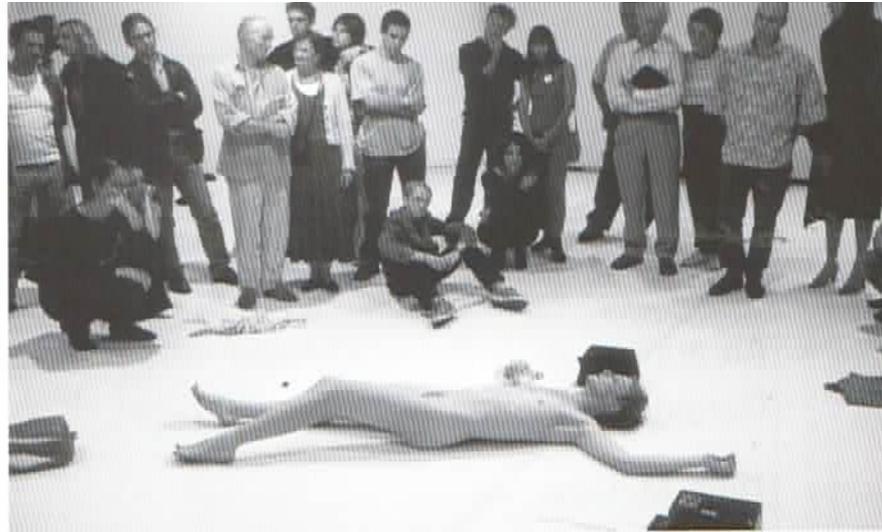
**You certainly seem to be inspired by objects in your pieces.**

I have a lot of things that I love! I wanted to use the foil blanket (used in *S liquide*) in *Mas* and the blond wig (in *Another Bloody Mary*) was in *13 Piezas*. And the chair was in my first ever choreography! I have been using it since 1985. I was fed up with it! Anna Williams and I smashed it up, but we couldn't find anything to do with it in *Singles*. When I started *Still* I kept its pieces in the studio for a whole month. Suddenly I picked it up... (and she mimes putting it on her body in the style of the splints used in *Chair 2000*.)

**So it can take time to reach your ideas?**

I took nine months to do *Still*, although I had some breaks for touring. I work more like a visual artist than a choreographer. (She shows me a package of coloured string.) I don't know why I bought this, but I love it! One day I will use it.

With *Mas* I worked differently because I was very stressed. I moved to London and had to premiere the work in my festival at short notice. So I worked very closely with Pepe Rubio, Daniel Demont and Eduardo



Bonito (her long-standing producer). They would make and find things for me. That work is more sophisticated in theatrical terms because I had collaborators. But with *Still*, I wanted to go as far as I could in the direction of visual art. I knew that the only way to understand this was not to ask others to do things for me, but to have time with my objects. All the objects in *Still* are silly things that I have found or made myself. That is why they are so fragmented. I was no longer thinking in chairs but in parts of chairs.

**Was this simply your process for Still or has this changed forever the way you work ?**

I have wanted to work like this for a long time but the theatrical apparatus was getting in the way.

It has taken a long time to understand what I understood in *Still*. *Still* is not only *Still*, but eight or nine years of work. I have come to a calm flat place. It is a good feeling for performing, for living, but not for producing. I need artistic problems and things to go against. Something inside me is full up. (She blows out her cheeks and looks perplexed.) With the *Distinguished Project*, I was fighting to understand things. One of the things I have discovered is that I have to work alone. As a way to touch my things, not because I don't like other people. Now I can ask Pepe to make me a dress, because I understand the rest. I was asking for very different reasons before.

(*Still* concerned with the idea of fullness, she illustrates with a brimming glass of water.) Too full, too established! In a way I am scared. When you understand something you are still. Maybe it is time for me to rethink my ideas about the distinguished proprietors, about video. I have not arrived at a concrete place, but now I am ready for the next problem. ○

**Sophie Hansen is Drama and Dance Projects Manager at the British Council. She writes regularly for dance journals and has a specific interest in dance and technology.**

NOTT Dance, in its twelfth year, yet again gave Nottingham an opportunity to sample the celebrated and the obscure, the global and the local, all within a festival that has the redefinition of dance at the heart of its mission. The reasons why Nottingham, of all places, should be such a fertile environment for creative experimentation are too involved to go into here, but the key is the presence of not only arts practitioners but also a well informed and artistically literate public. The city attracts people by virtue of its ongoing reputation and because of the facilities and organisations that are based here: the Contemporary Arts course at Nottingham Trent University has been particularly significant in putting the city in the vanguard of live and interdisciplinary arts practice, but other major players include The Future Factory, The Bonington Gallery, Powerhouse, Dance 4 (producers of the NOTT Dance Festival), Reckless Sleepers, Gob Squad, Live Art Magazine, Angel Row, the NOW Festival, eXpo and numerous other arts initiatives, on top of all the usual mainstream activity that goes on in a city of its size.

Dance 4's director, Jane Greenfield, has a strong commitment to bringing non-mainstream work into the city in addition to nurturing what is already here. The investment made over many years is reflected in the often substantial audiences that attend festival events. Part of its success is the loose 'family' of artists that have gathered around Dance 4 and these relationships are maintained, offering performance, touring and research opportunities for the artists. Jérôme Bel and La Ribot are regular performers and the festival has been both supportive and visionary; indeed before NOTT Dance showed an interest in the former's work he had only performed once in the UK, some years earlier. The spin off for the festival is that its wider reputation is enhanced and it is now highly regarded on the European mainland, far more so it seems than in the UK. Nottingham benefits too, by being perceived as a vibrant place and it is true that few other places in the country can support the diversity of activities that go on in the city.

That some of the content of the NOTT Dance programme is not dance should come as no surprise to anyone. It could even be termed anti-dance. Definitions however are becoming increasingly irrelevant. As Jane Greenfield puts it, artists in NOTT Dance 'are creating work as a result of their knowledge and understanding of the dance form. This involves an altogether different kind of dance language, one that is as much about context as content'. [1]

William Ewing in *The Body*[2] attributes the contemporary artist's focus upon and rethinking of the body as a response to scientists' and engineers' attempts to restructure and reconstitute it. Whatever the source of the impulse, the body (along with the mind) is surely the most fascinating site for creative investigation. As you might expect, artists like Jérôme Bel, Felix Ruckert and La Ribot - who all appeared at this year's festival - pose questions around the body that demand consideration. The issue is not simply around the artist's body either but the audience's bodies too. Interesting confrontations arise when art, typically seen as 'different' to real life, utilises direct experience and includes the observer in the action as its subject, particularly the case with Felix Ruckert's piece *Ring*.

Barriers between artist and performer are flexible and as members of an audience we might expect to find ourselves in situations that are without precedent. In such situations, with senses heightened, there are opportunities for the artist who wishes to, to leave his/her

audience with more than just an unread programme and yet another performance to tick off the list.

La Ribot dispensed with many of the rules for her third presentation of *piezas distinguidas*, Still distinguished. Although not at all threatening herself, the work had a provocative aspect to it due to the stark imagery used and the unrelenting scrutiny that both she and the audience were subjected to. From the start, when she entered the Bonington Gallery, switched on TV monitors and left us to watch by ourselves; to the end, when she took the applause and stood, unflinching, returning the audience's gaze, not retiring to her dressing room, conventions were overturned.

The use of the naked body by an artist such as La Ribot invariably has to be questioned, because the body comes with a great deal of baggage. Primarily it provides a ground zero of style for the performer, without the 'distractions' of clothing, subject to fashion. There are undoubtedly issues of sincerity and commitment that come into play, and there may also be an intention to desensitise as this is the inevitable effect of seeing a performer naked for a period of time. In *Mythologies* Roland Barthes wrote that 'woman is desexualised at the very moment she is stripped naked'.<sup>[3]</sup> We approach art and sex with different hats on, so to speak. Performers appear naked and yet are clothed by their intention and the reading of their activities as art.

After the video *pieza distinguida* La Ribot reappeared and began her performance. A member of the audience who sat on the floor close to her became part of an accidental duet as the artist moved across the floor, creating a trail of items, arranged as though she was sorting out her belongings on her bedroom floor. The task complete, she lay down as though sunbathing.

Moving to a large ball of string she bound it tightly around her head, neck, shoulders and on down her body to her ankles until she was trussed up like a parcel, complete with oversized airport baggage label. Her face grew red with the pressure of the rope as she held the pose long enough for us to be asking ourselves how much longer this would continue. At length she unwrapped herself, the tightness of the cords evidenced by the marks on her flesh.

Moving on she arranged a collage of red items of clothing and put on an unconvincing hairpiece together with a pubic wig. Her feet slipped further and further apart until she went into a split, held for what felt like an eternity. Each audience member was forced to confront this unrelenting tableau vivant, the spectacle of La Ribot, her legs splayed on the floor in front of them. There was no hiding place for either artist or viewer with the room so brightly lit and the silence so deep. An odd electronic version of 'Silence is Golden' was played at this point, making its point. Finally she stood up, removed the wigs and moved to a place where some pieces of broken chair lay. Each was taped to her body in the fashion of hastily applied splints, forcing her to stand erect, arms extended like a ballerina on the top of a music box.

La Ribot's mastery of the space was total. The performance not only felt honest, it demanded honesty in return.

Nigel Charnock's *Asylum* was a bold experiment that never came off. Good to see both artists and programmers prepared to take a risk, particularly on the stage of the Nottingham Playhouse, but this 'physical play with songs' felt out of place within NOTT Dance. Charnock's provocation lay in creating a work that courted the mainstream and confounded many in the audience. My personal disappointment was that Nigel Charnock himself was not

on the stage. In a sense he was, as the five performers appeared to be impersonating him, albeit without the man's charm and charisma. There were chuckles of approval from sections of the audience but the overwhelming talk in the days afterwards among people who go all the way back with Nigel to DV8 was of disappointment. However it is apparent that Nigel Charnock has moved on since DV8 and is not about to apologise for the fact.

Jérôme Bel's work is apparently simple and yet deeply enigmatic. It was unconventional programming on the part of the festival coordinator Ayla Suveren, to show the company's signature piece Jérôme Bel only two years after it was last seen here. However I was pleased to get the opportunity to experience it again and many others had missed it the first time. The performers apparently reveal all, their names, telephone numbers, bank balances, naked bodies, even their own sweat and urine, yet still remain ciphers. Bel reduces dance to its component parts - space, time, the body, with lights and music in the form of a hand held bare light bulb and a breathily-sung rendition of the Rite of Spring.

Words and symbols written in chalk or lipstick determine or give a name to what we see. What we do see are the kind of games lovers might play, passing the time doing things with their naked bodies. The performers gradually up the ante until the 'release' of the climax, and then wipe away selective traces of the chalk from the blackboard to leave us with a quirky ending. In the way they used their bodies, particularly in apparently passing an object around under the skin, they suggested that the body is a 'suit', or at least 'skin pants' and a 'skin vest'.

There was more of a buzz around the Felix Ruckert piece than around any I can remember. There also seemed to be a lot of people among the audience who I had never seen before, a sign that people had travelled some distance to witness this work. The mechanics of Ring are straightforward enough. Twenty-one performers, one for each member of the 'inner' audience. A ring of twenty-one seats on which the inner audience sit, facing the 'outer' audience who observe the proceedings from the edges of the space. Once all the seats were occupied the performers each approached an audience member and spoke softly into their ear, flattering them, making them feel good. A clap from somewhere in the room and the performers move onto the next person, thus bringing each audience member and performer together at least once. After further sweet talk, the contact becomes physical and increasingly intimate, with our hands being held, moved across the performer's body, and deep and lingering eye contact made and held. The performers hold us closely and the feel of the unfamiliar bodies trembling, hearts beating fast, sweating, is truly compelling. The contact grew yet more intimate and reached its climax with the kissing of necks and arms. Stranger than the contact with complete strangers was the contact with the people I already knew among the performers, as students, colleagues and friends.

Susan Sontag wrote that 'art is seduction, not rape, and art cannot seduce without the complicity of the experiencing subject'.<sup>[4]</sup> I was very much seduced, complied utterly and loved every minute of it. To conclude, we were informed that we had one minute to do whatever we wanted with 'our' performer. What ensued was a riotous display of couples skipping around the room, reciprocal massage and even, allegedly, some toe sucking.

It was over all too quickly and another audience's turn. The feelings we had experienced were powerful, more so than in practically any other art context. This was 'real'. I knew of groups who interacted with the audience in order to 'smash the art barrier' but this was far more subtle. People's expressions showed their acceptance and pleasure at the experience. For the observing audience the sight of forty-two performers carrying out unusual choreography was

impressive and stirred echoes for me of Pina Bausch's TanzTheater Wuppertal of which Ruckert was a member before setting up his own company.

There was no opportunity for me to applaud in order, as Richard Schechner describes 'to conclude the performance and wipe away the reality of the show, re-establishing in its place the reality of everyday life'.<sup>[5]</sup> I felt opened up and desperate to tell people about it, although when I tried the words were inadequate. You just had to be there.

Another successful NOTT Dance then, with some excellent work. Other highlights included Michael Hulls' Shadowspace a coolly detached series of large projections showing a dancer's shadow; Déjà Donn e's Aria Spinta, a comedic denouement of life certainties and the illusions that prop up a theatrical performance; and Bert van Gorp and Sean Tuan John's Dances for Aliens that left everybody smiling.

However to suggest that all in the garden is rosy would be remiss. Local politicians could demonstrate their support for the arts by addressing the City Council's paternalistic licencing laws which lump J r me Bel and La Ribot in with lap and table dancers, the latter from which they are presumably trying to protect us. Two security guards had to be present for the shows of the two artists in the Bonington Gallery in order to obtain a temporary entertainment licence. What is the role of a bouncer in an art gallery? What or whom are they supposed to be protecting?

I perceive another, more serious threat derives from the relationships that are formed between art organisations and large institutions such as universities. For example, it has just been announced that due to a shortfall in recruitment across Nottingham Trent University (but not in the Faculty of Art and Design) the budget for the Future Factory, which in turn provides financial support and facilities to NOTT Dance, is to be cut by half. The apparent ease with which worthy initiatives can be blown away by distant decision makers needs to be taken on board by all those who have or are considering relationships with such institutions.

Andrew Brown is a freelance arts lecturer and writer. He performs with the music/film group Left Hand Right Hand and co-ordinates the activities of the experimental theatre company Reckless Sleepers. Email: [andrew.brown@ncn.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.brown@ncn.ac.uk).

1 Greenfield, Jane. 'Between the margins'. *Animated*, Winter 2000:21.

2 Ewing, William A. *The Body* London: Thames and Hudson, 1994:9

3 Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paris: Editions du Soleil. 1957.

4 Susan Sontag quoted in Ben Chaim. *Daphna*. *Distance in the Theatre: the aesthetics of audience response*. Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981: 43

5 Schechner, Richard. 'Magnitudes of performance' in Schechner, R & Appel, W (eds.) *By Means of Performance: intercultural studies of theatre and ritual*. Cambridge University Press. 1990 28-39