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New Challenges for Contemporary Art Collection Nuevos retos para las colecciones de arte contemporáneo

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Received: December 2016 Approved: January 2017

Abstract

Professionals in charge of collections of contProfessionals in charge of collections of contemporary art that focus on some practices and artistic attitudes that emerged in the sixties and that persist until today, have been forced to take into account previous processes of production and display of an artwork, and to assume the subsequent challenges this artwork will pose when being integrated into a collection. They had to accept that the concept of ephemeral is a forced condition on many instances, that temporality and process are elements that can't be ignored, and that files and archives generated by artists can be even more important than their own works. As for performance art, they must begin to integrate the idea of "collecting spaces of time". Artistic practices carried out by artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Tino Sehgal, where strict requirements to have access to the works are imposed by the artists themselves, can be a good reference to follow when thinking out new ways of collecting. In this sense museums of contemporary art must lead and promote this kind of actions, leaving behind obsolete models of collecting.

Key Words: collection, performance, immaterial art, archive, museum, collecting.

Resumen

Los responsables de colecciones de arte contemporáneo, a partir de las prácticas y las actitudes artísticas surgidas en la década de los sesenta v que siguen persistiendo hasta hov, se han visto obligados a tener en cuenta los procesos previos de producción y de exhibición de una obra, para asumir los retos posteriores que esta planteará al integrarse en una colección. Han debido aceptar que el concepto de efímero es condición obligada en muchas ocasiones, que la temporalidad y el proceso no pueden obviarse, y que los archivos generados por los artistas pueden ser incluso más relevantes que sus propias obras. Y en cuanto a las performances deberán empezar a integrar la idea de "coleccionar espacios de tiempo". Prácticas artísticas llevadas a cabo por artistas como Felix Gonzalez-Torres y Tino Sehgal, con estrictos requisitos impuestos por ellos mismos para tener acceso a sus obras, pueden ser un buen referente a seguir para incorporar nuevas maneras de coleccionar. En este sentido los museos de arte contemporáneo deben encabezar y promover este tipo de acciones, dejando a un lado obsoletos modelos de coleccionismo.

Palabras clave: Colección de arte contemporáneo, performance, arte inmaterial, archivos, museo, coleccionismo.



Sin Objeto. Arte, Investigación, Políticas is a magazine published by the University of Castilla-La Mancha. This article is covered by the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. A walk through the galleries of the Collection at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid brings up a series of questions on what it means to collect, conserve and store art, the main functions of a museum. When we come upon a piece like, for example, *Untitled (Box for Standing)*, a 1961 work by Robert Morris with a long story behind it, we are treated to a narration by the artist himself:

The first *Box for Standing* was made from lumber collected from the street. I originally made the box as a prop for Simone Forti's performance in '61. She used it in the horizontal position, crawling under it and making sounds. Afterwards, I had the object in the loft and set it upright, altered the bottom, and it became *Box for Standing*. But the work got lost or discarded, so I remade it in oak in 1994, then made it once more in walnut. Like many of the larger objects, there were no exact dimensions or definitive materials; the work was different each time these variables were manifested in a version. Of many of these larger works, it can be said that there were no "originals," just inexact reproductions (Guyton, 2014).

The first question that comes to mind when analysing this piece, which was acquired by the Museo Reina Sofia in 2008, has to do with its artistic value, given that a quick aesthetic analysis leads us all to conclude that it is lacking in sculptural interest. But thanks to the documentation found alongside it (a small black and white photo), we can see an implicit autobiographical reference, since the measurements of the piece correspond to the artist's body. In fact, the sculptural object offers very few clues, or perhaps even none at all, as to what was happening in the artist's career when it was created. At the time, Robert Morris was quite interested in the art of movement, in dance and action art (we would later come to call this performance art), which obviated the final result. Let's consider the subtitle that accompanies one of his texts entitled "Notes on Sculpture," *"beyond objects"*. As a result of these considerations, a first significant theme appears, which is worth reflecting on: the need for complementary documentation, not only visual but textual, which must systematically accompany the work so that viewers can understand the artist's message in all aspects and complexity.

Now let's consider a new example; the alleged action performed by Yves Klein in 1960. This was the "Leap into the Void," a performance that was both enigmatic and widely disseminated. The artist himself was captured taking an unsettling leap from a second-floor window. The action was conceived as a way of proving his attempts at flying, his reflections around the concept of flight and his thoughts on dematerialization, all of which led to his obsession with death. The result of all of this was a photographic image which, for many art historians is perhaps the most relevant of the artist's entire career, and is undoubtedly the most widely disseminated, rivalling even the disproportionate number of *Blue Klein* monochromes he produced, which signified so much, which were so fully accepted and which continue to prove popular on the art market. But turning back

to this photo, it is curious to note how in the catalogue for the huge retrospective dedicated to the artist in 1983 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the caption accompanying the figure states: "A man in space! The painter of space leaps into the void! Conceptual photographic work featuring Yves Klein, by Shunk and Kender in 1960" (VV.AA., 1983, p. 358). The description of the photo as a "conceptual photographic work" featuring Yves Klein, by photographers Harry Shunk and János Kender is significant. But it is even more complex when we attempt to locate this "conceptual work" of Klein in a public collection, because it appears in the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo as a photo by Harry Shunk, and the name of the artist appears in the title of the work: *Yves* Klein Saut dans le Vide. Well, at least he is referenced together with his three monochromes, also in this collection. But the complexity of these pieces by Klein does not end there, given that this photo was first published in *Dimanche*, a fake four-page newspaper that Klein created as a contribution for the *Festival* d'art d'avantgarde in Paris in 1960. Thomas McEvilley, in the aforementioned catalogue from the Centre Georges Pompidou, dared to claim that perhaps this is "his most notable work," a publication that took its format from any number of generic Parisian newspapers, and which on the morning of Sunday, November 27th, 1960, was distributed at various kiosks in Paris (VV.AA., 1983, p. 54). Once again, art collections are faced with two complex situations: a questionable leap into the void taken by an artist, the authorship of whose photo seems to be more easily pinned down according to museum conventions, that of the photographer who snapped the shot, an action carried out by an artist who is difficult to classify and a simple four-page newspaper which, in spite of its undeniable importance, is not referenced in the collection of the Museo Reina Sofía, but is rather filed away in its documentation centre.

At about the same time, another artist, in this case Italian artist Piero Manzoni, used these terms to describe the projects he was working on:

In 1959, I prepared a series of forty-five Corpi d'aria [Bodies of air] (pneumatic sculptures), with maximum diameters of eighty centimeters (of height, with a 120-centimeter base). Now, if the buyers wish, they can buy, as well as the covering (of rubber) and the base, kept in a special case, also IL MIO FIATO [My breath], to be maintained in the covering. [...] In 1960, during two events (Copenhagen and Milan), I consecrated a few hard-boiled eggs to art, putting on them my fingerprint. The audience was able to be in direct contact with these works, by eating an entire exhibition in seventy minutes. Since 1960, I have been selling my thumbprints, both right and left. In 1961, people began to sign up and I exhibited their pieces. These works are accompanied by a certificate of authenticity (Manzoni, 1991, pp. 207-209).

The diversity of these projects, to which we must add the ninety cans of "artist's shit" from 1961, show on the one hand the numerous artistic derivations

seen in the careers of artists from this generation, like the aforementioned Yves Klein, and on the other hand, in the case of Manzoni, we can attest to the fact that he openly manifested his interest in entering an art market that would accept not only his Achromes, white paintings that could still be understood within the framework of abstract painting, but also his "bodies of air," which consisted of a wooden box, a small tripod, a balloon, a description of the piece, and a certificate of authenticity. Purchase price was 30,000 lira if the buyer blew the balloon up himself, but if he preferred to have the artist's breath trapped within the balloon, the piece became a *Fiato d'artista* and the balloon with the "breath/soul" of the artist became affixed to a wooden support and the price of his breath was set at 200 lira per litre. When the balloon was fully inflated, it held 300 litres of air. Using these facts, we can see how Manzoni reflected profoundly on the value of his pieces, on the difficulty of disseminating this kind of ephemeral project, and on how they might be included in various collections and recognized by the art market. This is why, as Nancy Spector states: "Manzoni decided to work in the very belly of the system. Through his non-discursive objects and gestures, even though they were oriented toward the conceptual, he attacked the institutional framework from within. This 'framework' does not only connote the physical location in which art is both found and defined, but also refers to that discourse through which art is inscribed and circumscribed, the economic and social system through which art is commercialized, and the ideology from which it emerges and, consequently, is perpetuated." As the author later notes, Manzoni's subversive criticism, like that of other artists in the 1970s, was proof of how his projects were irredeemably absorbed by the same system he had taken on (Spector, 1991, p. 44).

There were other artists like Gilbert & George, who made themselves known with their 1969 Living Sculptures. Within this series, their performance piece Singing Sculpture from the following year brought them the recognition they needed to earn entry with full honours into the history of art in the second half of the 20th century. With their faces transformed through the use of metallic bronze makeup, like classical sculptures, the artists performed the song Underneath the Arches, singing along to the cassette that played at their feet. Stepping down at the end of the song from the pedestal they performed on, the artists repeated this action over and over again for more than two hours, until they began to grow weary. Very soon, however, this work evolved into Photo-Pieces in which they incorporated photos of themselves in various positions, encouraging a very personal evolution of conventional formats that had been utilized in photography up until then. With these new pieces, their work could be easily incorporated into any kind of collection, despite the fact that nearly five decades later, one of their most significant pieces continues to be their performance piece Singing Scultpure, which they continued to present many years afterward, like for example at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain de Bordeaux in 1995.

At the same time, it is also fair and just to recognize how the situation has changed, and on the part of museums, we are seeing signs that point to an advancement when it comes to the acceptance and normalization of contemporary artistic practices. The contradictions and challenges which must be faced by those who manage contemporary collections are already a subject for debate, with possible shared solutions being proposed by those in production, exhibition, collection and conservation. Recently, the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao announced two "very singular" projects for autumn 2016 in its regular programming, featuring the presentation of "The guest artwork." The first project involves the presentation of an 18th century nativity scene made up of nearly 300 pieces, and the second consists of "a performance piece by Esther Ferrer (1937), an artist from San Sebastián, who is known as being the most notable performance artist in Spain" (Museo BBAA Bilbao, 2016). A performance piece is recognized as a work of art, and not as the ephemeral, one-time affair that is normally found on the schedule of a museum or art centre. And as it is treated as a work of art, in this case it is presented within the framework of a piece of art that is on loan, one that could possibly be acquired for the collection. This fact may seem irrelevant, but actually, it comes on top of the progressive normalization of the aforementioned artistic practices.

And, if the piece performed by the artist him/herself involves this sort of reflection, and if it questions traditional concepts through which the institution of the museum operates comfortably, let's imagine for a moment the implicit questions that can be found in work like that of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Let's reflect on Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), a 1991 piece that can be found in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. A description of the piece states that 175 pounds of candy were used at the time of its presentation. This matches the weight of the artist's partner, Ross, the year the piece was created, the same year Ross passed away. The one-sheet goes on to say: "Visitors are encouraged to take a piece of candy, and the diminishing amount parallels Ross's weight loss and suffering prior to his death. Gonzalez-Torres stipulated that the pile should be continuously replenished, thus metaphorically granting perpetual life" (1). Something similar occurs in another of his pieces, also in the Art Institute's collection: Untitled (Silver Beach), from 1990, is dedicated to the city of Miami, where he made his home in the USA. The technique utilized here is described as resulting in a poster, offset prints on paper, in an unending print run which "encourages people to touch, dismantle and even use the work. We could even say the artist shows a kind of subversive generosity, tinged, as always, with sadness. As sheets are taken, the form disappears; they are replenished, and the piece thereby endures, despite its continual dematerialization" (2). From these descriptions, provided by the museum itself, it appears that it is actually a digital archive that has entered its collection. The museum is committed to continually

re-printing Felix Gonzalez-Torres's poster as they gradually disappear when on view in the museum's galleries. And the same can be said of the piece described previously. The museum has acquired a protocol, a series of instructions that it must follow to the letter, weighing out the exact amount of candies each day in order to replace those that have been taken while on display. The artist establishes the rules, the museum agrees to follow them, and the visitor participates, contributing by interacting with the piece and inscribing it with its ultimate meaning.

A similar dynamic can be found in the series of works created by Ignasi Aballí using dust. From almost the beginning of his artistic career, this artist began to observe the dust that gathered endlessly in his studio. He decided not to fight it, but rather to re-use it. He was fascinated by the idea of understanding dust as a synthesizing material, more specifically as the result of all that which is working to erode our surroundings, that which he understood to be an amalgam of all kinds of materials. To all of this, he added a profound reflection on the passage of time, and the unwieldy nature of creating a work of art, while at the same time he began to require the participation of viewers, like active agents who would help him give meaning to his creations. And out of this bundle of reflections came *People* (2000-2012), an installation piece that starts with a white wall, untouched, and it is the viewers who use their feet in a mundane gesture to leave the mark of the passage of time on the immaculate walls of the museum. Other pieces this artist has created using dust include Gazes, featuring a long smudge of dust left at the height of the artist's gaze, as though marking the trail left by his own eyes, and Dust, two different presentations in which the artist completely covers a wall or a glass window in the gallery with dust. The difficulty with incorporating these pieces into a collection is evident, given that they make use of a material that is residual, fragile and even bothersome. They require the ongoing participation of either the artist or visitors to the exhibit. Or perhaps even more complex, they require the constant collection of dirt for each new presentation, given that once it has been employed once, it cannot be re-used. In theory, the acquisition of any of the pieces mentioned above requires a strict and detailed protocol, a protocol which has become commonplace for many of the installations created after the 1960s. It also requires the continual collection of a material as unartistic as dust, which is less commonplace. But another question that also comes up with this kind of acquisition is that there is no doubt this will be a piece that will have to be drawn up from scratch each time it is exhibited, and the result will perhaps also be different. So the documentation that will be added to the piece's dossier will end up taking on great significance, and will thus respect its ephemeral, continually changing character. This is how it was understood by the FRAC Lorraine in 2007, when it had no problem acquiring *Pols* –a 1995 piece that made use of dust to dirty up and black out a window- for its public collection. With the "variable measurements" listed on its information sheet, we can only assume that the

comments made above will be taken into consideration in future presentations.

Other artists, on the other hand, managed to find an outlet for their artist projects by getting around the visibility difficulties inherent to the first years of any artistic career, opting for new formats. Such was the case with Ed Ruscha and his artist books. From 1962 to 1972, he created 17 artist books, cheap selfpublished editions, none of them signed, very few numbered, but all of them later re-printed. Quite the opposite of what was common for limited editions of books for bibliophiles in the first half of the 20th century. Over the years, an artist who at that time was not even 25 years old, an emerging artist as we might call him now, on a search for alternative forms and spaces for the production and distribution of art, managed to put himself on the map with this series of artist books, perhaps even more so than with his paintings. Despite the fact that in 1963 he had already had his first solo show of paintings in an LA art gallery, he defended the ordinary nature of his books, which had been printed in masse in a very professional manner and were in no way artisanal. He even founded his own publishing company, Heavy Industry Publications after he was rejected by traditional publishers, as German artist Dieter Roth had also done. 2016 marks 50 years since the publication of his first book, Twenty-six Gasoline Stations and his gallery is celebrating the anniversary with the exhibition Ed Ruscha Books & Co., the same one that published Books by Ed Ruscha 1963-2000, a luxurious black box with 14 books which provides specific information about each edition or reedition. This collection proves the relevance achieved by Ruscha's artist books, while also leaving room for a certain level of contradiction, given that this object led directly to a luxury edition, signed and numbered, the sort of edition that the artist rejected outright back in the 1960s.

Certificates of authenticity, like those of Manzoni (or those produced by Dan Flavin, which were nothing more than a drawing that ensured the future fabrication of one of his fluorescent light sculptures and that registered in his inventory of artwork, confirming that for him, the work was the certificate itself), and dossiers of instructions for future presentations, as provided by so many artists, have led to the obligation of museums, who are charged with the future conservation of contemporary art, to expand their traditional mission of conserving artistic objects to include the conservation of those artistic practices that have characterized art in the last few decades. And all of the above can also be applied to private collections. Consider the German collectors who acquired the Lawrence Weiner piece presented in When Attitudes Become Form: Works-Concepts-Processes-Situations-Information (Kunsthalle Bern, 1969), Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall. The artist himself travelled to Cologne and cut out a square section of one of the walls in his home, creating something that was more a void than an artistic object. He is an exemplary artist when it comes to the redefinition of standard systems of artistic

distribution. His work can be on the wall of a museum, under the stairwell in an apartment building, or in a book, as demonstrated in his multiple editions, which have become emblematic.

Those responsible for collections of contemporary art which involve the artistic practices and attitudes of the 1960s, some of which continue today, have been forced, as we have already discussed, to take into account the previous processes of production and of exhibition of a given work of art, in order to take on the later challenges posed when including said piece in a collection. They must accept that the concept of the ephemeral is often a required condition, that impermanence and process cannot be overlooked, that the concept of *in situ* establishes norms that must not be ignored, that the presence/absence of the artist will leave an appreciable mark on the final meaning of the piece, that documentation will take on the character of a work of art, that the way in which a work is received can require the active participation of a hypothetical viewer, that they assess the value of the debate between originals, reproductions and versions of given pieces in their ongoing exhibits, and that they must protect certain artistic attitudes so as not to turn them into some sort of "fossil." Such is the case with Untitled. Sleep on Earth, Eat on Sand (2005) a piece by Rirkrit Tiravanija in the Tate Modern. A series of objects, or "remains," according to the information provided, engage in a participatory performance piece, in which the artist cooks a Thai dish for all viewers. On the same information sheet, the museum expresses its doubts: "Transferred to the museum or gallery context, the work raises questions about the value and use of a work of art and the structures within which it is shown" (3).

Consider the "plastic photograph", the one utilized by artists starting in the 1960s, the one named by Dominique Baqué (2003). If it didn't have excessive difficulties entering museums, then neither did video art or the limited-edition or open edition single channel device proposed by Andrea Fraser with her video performances, to cite just one example. Nor was it a problem for video installations, thanks most certainly to the contributions of Nam June Paik. Nevertheless, in spite of this normalization, some artists like Christian Boltanski are searching for other ways of relating with those people who may be interested in their work. In the case of the project Storage Memory, the artist tapped into the possibilities offered by a website and offered, in exchange for a payment of 120€ each year, the chance of collaborating with him to anyone who might be interested. In addition, they will receive ten original one-minute films each month. Over time, these films will make up a sort of self-portrait of indeterminate duration, as the artist intends to continue the project as long as he is living. In the proposal found on the project's website, collaborators are told they will receive an email with a certificate of electronic ownership for the totality of films received.

Despite these innovative and risky projects, what is certain is that the current challenge lies in how to collect those projects which are not exactly objects, but whose value comes from the fundamental premises of process, space and time. And in this sense, the performance continues to have its difficulties, in spite of the challenges it has already overcome, some of which are discussed above. An example of a certain level of normalization can be found in The Tanks, a recently opened new space at the new Tate Modern for live art, performance art, installation pieces and films, and for pieces from its collection like the two-person performance piece *A Life (Black and White)* (1998), by Nedko Solakov, which was donated by a private collector in 2009.

But we must also consider that for these sorts of projects, perhaps one possible solution would be to promote those archives and documentation centres which are attached to museums, and instead of understanding their function as supporting documents which accompany the activity of the collections, to grant them the title of "artwork," which is precisely what they are: documentary materials, letters, postcards, written reflections, sketches, drawings, photos, etc., and they are often much more enlightening than some of the works themselves when it comes to achieving a full understanding of certain artistic projects. And further, perhaps we could somehow avoid initiatives which, with the passage of time, aim to turn something into a "work of art," when that something is nothing more than working material for facilitating the dissemination of a piece by an artist who has vanished or when institutions simply cave to pressure from the art market.

For all of these reasons, those responsible for collections of contemporary art must continue to explore the aesthetics of artistic behaviour, they must understand that certain artistic practices are proposed as a way of life, and as a result, it will be the museum that must adapt to them, and not the other way round. They must ignore old nomenclatures that can already be said to be obsolete, and they must share with artists this unstoppable evolution. And consequently, they must accept that certain artistic projects, when decided by the artist himself, do not follow the statutes of a traditional work of art and its persistence in time. Rather, they may be just an experience, a "situation," which is what Tino Sehgal calls his performance pieces. This artist forbids any kind of documentation, whether written, photographic or video, of his performances. Even videos posted on YouTube are placed there against his will. He insists that documentation is unnecessary because the action can be repeated, and because "the heart of the work is the experience of the viewer." He prefers to offer the quality and precision of an experience, instead of worrying about its future distribution, which is why he accepts only legally valid verbal contracts. When he sells a piece, the verbal contract is still binding. In this case, the gallery owner takes on a significant role, given that he is now charged with repeating the experience for future buyers. Faced with his conviction that if he were to provide precise written instructions, his performances would become perverted over time, he has imposed these drastic conditions, which have already begun to be accepted by certain museums. In 2005, the Tate Modern acquired *This is Propaganda* (2002) for its collection, a work which is listed as a performance piece, with no identifying photo or video. Pip Laurenson, a curator for the museum, agrees that contemporary art museums have the tendency to continue functioning as though the "work-object" paradigm were still in force. But Tino Sehgal shatters that paradigm; he offers nothing that can be conserved, whoever wishes to collect one of his pieces must accept the challenge of collecting only "a space in time," which leaves us to reflect on memory and the future, when it comes to the preservation of ideas (Tromp, 2011).

It is then that, once again, the importance becomes evident of taking into consideration the future role of the archive and of the documentation centres in contemporary art museums, as part of the museum structure that will safeguard and place value on these kinds of artistic initiatives, and most especially on the role that curators and restorers must take on under such circumstances. We must consider, as Tino Sehgal encourages us to do, that it is more important to "conserve" concepts, than the other materials that may have come out of a certain "situation".

Notes

1) Art Institute of Chicago Collection. Retrieved from http://www.artic.edu/aic/ collections/artwork/152961

(2) Art Institute of Chicago Collection. Retrieved from http://www.artic.edu/aic/ collections/artwork/184373

(3) Tate Modern Collection. Retrieved from http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/ tiravanija-untitled-2005-sleep-on-earth-eat-on-sand-t12899

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Suggested citation:

Picazo, G. (2017). New Challenges for Contemporary Art Collections. Sin *Objeto*, 00, 12-23.

Doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.18239/sinobj 2017.00.01

Biography

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Glòria Picazo studied Art History at Barcelona University. She is an art critic and independent curator, and has collaborated with several museums, among which CAPC Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, and MACBA in Barcelona. From 2003 to 2015 she was Director of Centre d'art la Panera in Lleida. She has taught courses in contemporary art and curatorship for La Casa Encendida (Madrid), and for several MA degrees in the following universities: Barcelona University, International University of Catalunya in Barcelona, and Polytechnic University in Valencia. She also directed the course *Coleccionismo y comisariado de exposiciones* (Collecting and Curating Exhibitions) at UIMP University in Santander, 2014. In 2016 she was designated as member of the Advisory Board for the Contemporary Art Collection of the Comunidad de Madrid.

She has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Gina Pane* (Palau de la Virreina, Barcelona and Salas de la Diputación de Huesca), *Orientalismos* and *Nómadas y Bibliófilos* (both at Koldo Mitxelena, San Sebastián), or *El instante eterno* (EACC, Castellón). For Centre d'Art la Panera, she curated the exhibitions *Paisajes después de la batalla*, *Mediterráneo(s)*, and several solo shows of artists like Cabello/Carceller, Abigail Lazkoz, Juan López, Marina Núñez, Francisco Ruiz de Infante or Francesc Torres, among others. She has also published in art magazines, including *Transversal*, *L'Avenç*, *ExitExpress*, and *ExitBook*.

She is currently preparing the exhibition *La Biblioteca*, that will be presented at La Casa Encendida in Madrid (May 2017).