

Bestiario de Lenguitas: A Libretto

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Imagine a theatre stage covered with leftovers, pieces of leather and cotton fabric, flappy latex tubes, glass containers half-filled with natural dyes and love potions, dirty cups of coffee and mate, wigs, wooden sticks and chunks of red clay. Imagine three characters, forged out of the artist's personal pantheon of women relatives, fictional godmothers and artistic muses: the Mala-Mama, a Sister living-in-limbo and a castoff Teacher/Guardian from the future. Fumbling with a myriad boxes and objects, repeating a succession of non-productive gestures, they are shooting a series of video tutorials explaining how to maintain chaos and excess in a world calling for order, efficiency and transparency. Now, imagine that the rooms of CentroCentro had been used as a rehearsal space by these characters and their accomplices in order to test the production of their play, before they left in a hurry, leaving their mess behind for the artist and the curator to re-arrange into an exhibition...

Bestiario de Lenguitas [Bestiary of Tonguelets] is based on an evolving script by the Argentinian artist Mercedes Azpilicueta, which she began in 2017 in Paris, continued in Buenos Aires and is now deploying in Madrid.

The exhibition translates the script-in-progress into a spatial dramaturgy, leading visitors through the making of a performance that may or may not happen. Fueled by workshops, collaborations and rehearsals with artists,

researchers, designers, dancers and singers, the works on view invite a choir of grotesque characters to loudly inhabit the stage of that future performance.

They use obsolete knowledge systems, *neobarroso* poems, failed translations and ambiguous ingredients to question the ways we inhabit the world and are affected by it. Daily doses of disaster, crisis and toxic chemicals are inflicted upon us via a deluge of channels while we rush our exhausted, privileged bodies through public transport, team meetings, administrations, overpriced apartments and social media, in a desperate need to find a renewed sense of collectivity, conviviality and agency. For Mercedes, a first possible step may be to craft alternative modalities of what she calls "bodies-at-homeness", while reconsidering the meaning and roles of "home", "place" and "body".

In order to do so, Mercedes called for the help of "friends from the past" as well as from the present, who nurtured the writing of her script and play a game of hide-and-seek through the works in the exhibition. Among them, *La Dame à la licorne*, who quietly inhabits the eponymous series of six medieval tapestries at the Musée de Cluny in Paris under the motto *À mon seul désir* ("To My Sole Desire"); the feminist artist Lea Lublin (1929-1999); and the poet, sociologist and gay activist Nestor Perlongher (1949-1992), who both embody a form of resistance in exile. Under their ghostly but friendly guidance, the script was fleshed out through a series of conversations and working sessions with several close collaborators, including designer Lucile Sauzet, graphic designer Vanina Scolavino and architect Ana Ausín, as well as with performer Emmanuelle Lafon, film-makers

Hélène Harder and Quiela Nuc, choreographer and dancer Pauline Simon, computer programmer Julien Jassaud, researcher Ana Roquero, Madrid-based choir singers and various groups of students and visitors. Mercedes' writing process became inseparable from all their voices, a choral endeavour that resonates through the rooms in the exhibition.

Playing with the architectural symmetry of CentroCentro, the exhibition offers two mirroring entries, from *Côté Cour* (or "courtyard side", a French expression designating the left side of a theatrical stage) and *Côté Jardin* ("garden side", the right side). You are invited to devise your own path through a series of rooms titled after domestic or theatrical spaces. Apart from the central room — the stage — their names evoke sites of transition (backstage, dressing rooms), representation (smoking room, foyer) or refuge (boudoir, "A Room of One's Own"), where different forms of sociality, dwelling and discreet resistance may take place. Each room has been associated with a (fictitious) perfume, reminiscent of the substances that appear in Mercedes' script, suggesting a different sensual perception of the space. Olfactive suggestions will be provided throughout the pages of this booklet.

Before the opening, Mercedes performed a cleansing ritual of the exhibition space with rue, a plant that has both protective and abortifacient powers. This invisible performance paid a tribute to specific types of knowledge that primarily disseminated among women — such as midwives and witches — before religion, capitalism and modern medicine demonized them. It also recalls the ambiguous properties of many medicinal plants that

travelled across the Atlantic, from the "New" World to the Old and back, creating new hierarchies of knowledge under the European colonial order — a history retraced by Mercedes through the veins of the Royal Botanical Garden's plants. Among the knowledge devices that were gradually dismissed during the European colonial era were cabinets of wonders and bestiaries, which Mercedes reactivates in the exhibition. The title, *Bestiario de Lengüitas*, celebrates the meeting of science, magic and wonder, inviting a polyphony of languages and voices to obfuscate straight narratives.

Lastly, all the works on view may be conceived as scores, prototypes, rehearsals, décors, encoded knowledge systems or even characters responding to each other, rather than as autonomous artworks. They are windows into a work-in-progress that proliferates through multiple encounters, friendships and affections. They suggest that the exhibition is not a fixed, final product, but rather a working device, a succession of events taking place in the past, present and future, like an unfinished dance. This is how Mercedes conceives of artistic research: as a "New World Baroque" kind of movement that favors instability and proliferation over the quest for a single truth.