

## Guess who's coming to dinner

### *A Performative Presentation*

Alicia M. Velázquez

*KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture, Belgium*

*www.aliciavelazquez.com*

*av@aliciavelazquez.com*

**Abstract.** Performance As Laboratory. Paper As Laboratory Interior. School. Day.

A cross-shaped white fabric on the floor, one screen on each edge. Each screen playing a real-time video of one of four recent works by artist and performative designer Alicia Velázquez. Alicia stands first introducing her presentation (4th on her practice-based PhD), then sits in the middle of the cross.

The moment holds the capacity to create. That unique moment, with those unique conditions, under which emotional affordance (Gibson, 1979) can happen. In order to transfer this knowledge, I explore here the following proposition: the need of a **simultaneous verbal articulation and experiential, embodied understanding**. Every presentation (including this paper) becomes then a platform to **creating situations where emotional emergence can happen**, and I thus treat it as a work in itself.

This paper presents the research (at this stage) through 5 acts, formed by 4 recent works as instances of practice, and presented through their connection to one main fascination line. The 4 works gravitate around a central stage or crossing point: emotions and the concept of emotional affordance.

**Keywords.** research methodology; performance; emotional affordance; interviewing; fascination lines.

### **Introduction**

“At the end of a film - or a conversation, like this one - we are no longer the same person as at the beginning”, Hans Ulrich Obrist says. We are as dynamic as our memories are. Conversations and encounters create new memories, new dynamics of the self, and new understandings of what already is. Conversations and interviews protest against forgetting. “It” - truly - “has only just begun”<sup>1</sup>.

#### *This presentation is a meal*

I understand meal as something I ideate and prepared for you to taste, experience and immerse your full senses in. I wish you to become part of this, of this table, of this set, and vice-versa. How will it change you? How will they change because of you?

My PhD's original title is “Intimacy with materials as driver of a laboratory for emotional affordance”. In the first three presentations and stages of the research, I gave different instances on the exploration of this concept, along with the cross sections through the practice invited for by Adapt-r methodology (Architecture Design Art Practice Training research), which I follow for this PhD: Case Studies, Communities of Practice and Transformative Triggers.

#### *Fascinations are served*

In Adapt-r methodology it is encouraged to look at fascinations: recurring themes, especially those one fears to look at, and persistently present.

---

<sup>1</sup> Obrist, H. U.: 2010, Interviews, Volume II, Edizioni Charta, Milano.

I serve here fascinations as **fragments, and through several writing methods**, developed through the practice mainly from between September 2015 (beginning of this research and start of my Adapt-r fellowship) and December 2016.

One of these methodologies is **interviewing**. I started interviewing works and (abstract) “presences” within the works in June 2016, and discovered by doing that it is a great way of gathering information<sup>2</sup>. I treat interviews as conversations in the way Hans Ulrich Obrist understands and presents his compilation “Interviews, Volume II”: a series of working conversations, through which ideas are transformed into something concrete; “productions of reality”.

*Performance as a way of entering and leaving, being and not being, looking and not looking*

I have been long fascinated by the book *Ways Of Seeing* from John Berger. I devoured it in my first year living and working in New York City (1998-1999), and read it several times afterwards. I cannot point out, without looking at it again, why did it impact me so much then, or even why do I connect it to the research now. **Serendipitous encounters and unfaithful memories shape this practice** as much as conscious ideas and decisions do, and often even more. One of my roles is to allow that to happen, even embrace it.

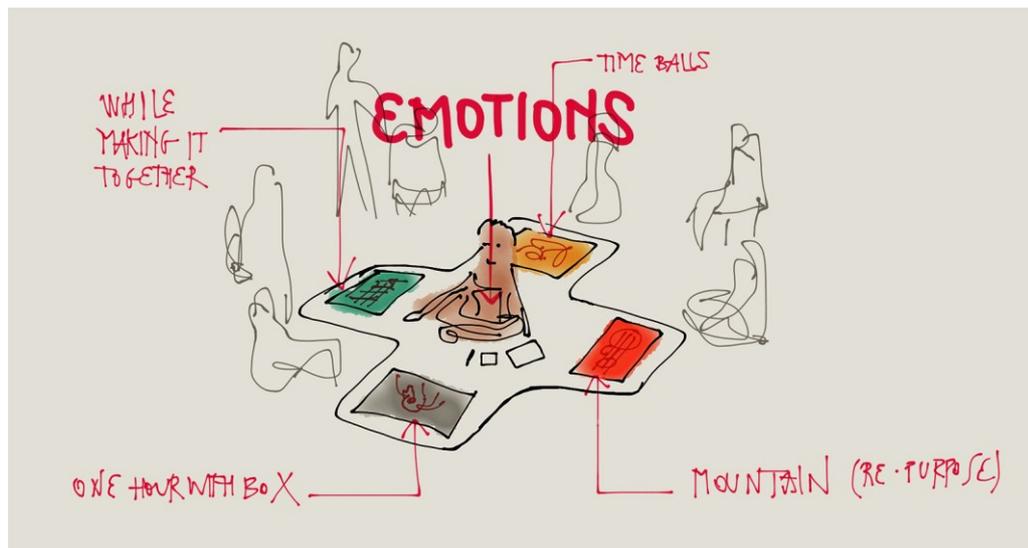


Figure 1  
Vision sketch of CARE presentation.

Presentation begins. She is nervous, lacking proper preparation - or so is what she learned a presentation needs to be fully successful. What is successful, practice?

Successful is when you risk and make that which you believe is good, you can learn from it and contribute to the knowledge of others, trigger a discussion and thinking.

You mean inspiring? Yes.

---

<sup>2</sup> I understand information as “that which informs”: the conscious formation - mental, verbal, embodied of a particular feeling, emotion, memory or invention, happening during the process of engaging with body” as a presence, material (object, its making or unmaking) or abstract (notion, concept).

## Act 1 - Home

**Connecting words:** Building, holder, architecture, scaffold, structure, fashion, pink, belonging, care, self.

Alicia Velázquez is a performative designer embracing the worlds of art and architecture. By producing objects and spaces in front of audiences or camera, and inviting others to do so, she searches to provoke emotional reactions. She invites to inhabit situations by creating either the environments (interiors) or objects (sculptures). As trained and experienced architect, her purpose is to create homes for stories to happen, emerging from processes she designs where a common space, between human and human, or human and thing, can be built and experienced. Scaffolds for unspoken stories, individual and shared, perhaps forgotten, that may find in this tangling their unique storage, their unique expression. A dialogue through bodies.



*Figure 2*  
*Instance from Box Me: One Hour With Box.*

**Preferred work: One Hour With Box**, video performance. 2016. Made for Adapt-r traveling exhibition. Assignment: show my practice and research focus, next to all other Adapt-r fellows', in the given cardboard box.

I was invited by Adapt-r to meet Box. I decided to spend one hour of uninterrupted, intimate time with it, and together we investigate the concept of emotional affordance: what does Box afford, what do I afford to Box. So next to body, I am also Box.

## Interviews fragments

- **Pink**<sup>3</sup> {Interview I, 29.06.2016; Interview II, date unrecorded}  
**Pink:** I connect with your work because I remind you of the womb. Of that primitive home.  
**AV:** Oh, I never thought about that. It makes sense though.  
**Pink:** Yes. Of course I am also the color of flesh, inside the body. Shared with red. I am close to blood, though I am more gentle. I am a mother for you.  
**AV:** Really? Is that why I use you so much?  
**Pink:** Yes. I am a mother. I am the protective mother that embraces and creates a place for you to stay, to dream, and most of all, to be yourself.
- **Fashion**<sup>4</sup> {30.06.2016}  
**AV:** Are you home?  
**Fashion:** Why do you ask me that?  
**AV:** Because I ask that question to all my interviewees. Are you home?  
**Fashion:** No, I am not. I am only a tool, I can serve your home as well as you. But I can never be home.
- **AVA**<sup>5</sup> {31.03.2017}  
**AV:** Is it relevant what you are making? I mean, does it matter whether you make bread or embroidery on a feminine pad?  
**AVA:** No, not really. The object, the production is only a means. It acts on another level. It projects other truths, other questions, other dialogues beyond the moment. It is a holder.

## Act 2: Death

**Connecting words:** Pain, destruction, fear, blockage, demon, longing.

Alicia designs, performs, makes objects and invite others to make emotional homes, colorful scenographies for a shared theater of emotions. Whispers from and within the ordinary inviting to be... human.

---

<sup>3</sup> A recurrent color in my work, one which has persistently shown, from chosen garments to be unwoven, to set background both for One Hour With Box and While Making It Together. Pink appeared first, innocently (this is a constant in all of the later persistent items in the practice, innocent as appearing with lack of knowledge or intention) as an accent over my last name (Velázquez) in my logo.

<sup>4</sup> I worked as a fashion model during my architecture studies, for a period of five years. I have long been fascinated and attracted by fashion, particularly by the magical images and transformations that happen through the production of a fashion product. From the textiles, those soft presences that change the body, to the feelings that they convey both for the wearing body and to that of the viewer. There is a fashion eye, or a tendency to produce my works, particularly photographs and videos, using tools that remind of fashion products and attitudes. Many of my recent works are also wearable, mostly neckpieces.

<sup>5</sup> Acronym for Alicia Velázquez Atelier. It is a recent “finding” to name this practice and its (possible) brand. I first used it and published it in my monthly email/newsletter to my group of professional and personal contacts, on March 1st 2017. AVA is the first time I understand and represent my practice as a **female presence**, an avatar, with the ability of traveling, connecting, having a personality and presence beyond myself.



Figure 3  
Instances of *While Making It Together*, first epoch (9 intimate moments of making).

**Preferred work: While Making It Together (WMIT)**, self-initiated work. 2016. A sculpture grown by the addition of different objects, brought one by one by 9 guests, who wrapped them using thread together with Alicia during intimate acts of making. In a second epoch, WMIT was part of the exhibition *Adapt-r* (London, November 2016) where it got thread-wrapped to its exhibition table during a collective making event. WMIT is the making of a moment of togetherness by means of making an object - a new body. Using existing, personal, meaningful objects - brought by them, plus a first one by me - and thread. I see WMIT as an embodied cabinet of memories: those of the objects we bring, of the moment we share, those we remember, construct, and even forget. WMIT is at the moment waiting to continue its growth by being wrapped to new objects in new locations.

### Interviews fragments

- **While Making It Together** {Interview I, 15.10.2016; Interview II, 24.10.2016; Interview III, 21.10.2016}

**WMIT:** I am an organism. I have a life. I am born, and I die.

**AV:** Do you mean that you symbolize life and death?

**WMIT:** No, I mean I am alive, that I have been born, and that I will be dead at some point.

**AV:** I can't believe that. I have dreamed you, like I've done with other works to stay open ended!

**WMIT:** Is that important for you?

**AV:** Yes, it is very, highly important. Even though I am fascinated by working with death and rebirth, I cannot stand close ends. I am totally driven by the eternal growth, the eternal presence, the timeless, the soul of things, the part that survives no matter what, the part that keeps traveling even when there is no physical body to hold onto.

**WMIT:** It sounds like you are talking about immaterial things, energetic, mmm emotions?

**AV:** Emotions sounds too superficial for me at this point, to define them. Emotions have a beginning and an end, in fact, they have a pretty petty short lifespan. A soul, on the other hand, is infinite. A feeling, like love, can also be infinite, an infinite

pouring out, or in, I don't know where it pours but I can identify from where it does and when it happens.

**WMIT:** Where do you think I am pouring from?

**AV:** Desire. Of tending connections. Of drawing lines - relationships, temporary dances, bodily moments of communication, threads of discovery, of surprise, of connecting to past moments, to existing experiences, to new or invented ones, to disappointment, to awe, tending a line to catch deep fish inside, the bigger fish from the deeper waters.

**AV:** Maria<sup>6</sup> told me that she connected you and the fact of wrapping with the work of Judith Scott. What do you think?

**WMIT:** Yes, totally. I have something of Art Brut. I come from the gut. I, as all the work you have done in the outskirts of design (means works that start from an inner spark that you follow and act upon, and not from a brief or a need to project a solution for something) all the work you've done in the outskirts of design, comes from a deep desire.

**AV:** Desire of what?

**WMIT:** Of speaking out, of giving a voice to the demons and angels inside.

- **Time Balls**<sup>7</sup> {15.06.2016}

**AV:** Why tangling? Why thread?

**Balls:** Thread is like your thoughts. A continuous loop of stuff that is produced by your system. Ad infinitum, until the moment your body turns off forever. At that moment the stream will finally shut down, until then you have an eternal spool in you, that, whether you unravel it or not, it will unravel. You may choose to do it purposefully or let it unravel and surprise you. It may fill up your system if you do not channel it out, like making balls for example, or writing, as you are doing now.

**AV:** The moment I made you you were dying.

**Balls:** Yeap.

**AV:** Are you then a shrine? A tomb?

**Balls:** No.

**AV:** A representation of a death moment?

**Balls:** We are a home for a moment that died while we were being made. We were the tomb for that moment to die through us. But the moment is not there any more, we are now an empty shell. Like when you find the empty shell of a butterfly that is gone, or the empty shell of a shell-crab without the living creature. It is an object with more or less beauty under your eyes, and can remind you of a live that happened inside, of a change that happened inside. It held the threshold of change for a particular moment in time. And when you find it, it is empty. Is it a tomb? No. It is not holding any dead body. Does it have a feeling of funeral object? Yes, because the moment is gone. Imagine, then, that we are a collection of those empty shells. You may decide to make yourself a necklace of those empty shells. You may decide to line us up on a shelf, and admire us as objects. You may decide to throw us back to the sea, or bury us in the sand. It doesn't matter. We do not care. We are not sacred. The moment is passed. **We only hold the remembrance that that moment existed**, without actually wanting to represent it.

---

<sup>6</sup> Maria Gil Uldemollins, artist based in Brussels and one of the 9 guests to WMIT.

<sup>7</sup> Self-initiated performative work (see Act 3: Time).

### Act 3: Time

**Connecting words:** Ritual, control, rules, father, trust, eternal, love.

Surfaces, in Alicia's work, are the holders and transmitters, bridges between the immaterial world of emotions and the material world of sculptures and objects. Skins covered with skins, layers over layers, moments by moments, an allegory of the impossibility of eternal time, of the time that we consume.



*Figure 4*  
*Instance from Time Balls.*

**Connecting work: Time Balls.** Self-initiated performative work. One thread ball is made during each city-to-city commuting trip, and during every commute within the city - mostly Zurich and Brussels. Over one hundred balls were done between January 2016-June 2017. Rules: made from door to door, whenever public/communal transport was involved, and when hands are free (stopping for actions like security checks, eating or drinking). No ball-making during weekend traveling, unless work related. No listening to music or books while doing it. Conversations are allowed. Time is measured. Filming or sound recording is done whenever technically possible, and at times ball-making is stopped to take photos, or accidentally when ball jumps out of hands.

## Interviews fragments

- **Time Balls** {15.06.2016}

**AV:** Why do I give you a body, and how can this body serve (me, you, us, other people, architects)?

**Balls:** You need it. Not us. It is your need of putting us in a physical home, so you can make sense of us, you can ask us questions, you can ask yourself questions through us, you can start a conversation because of us. The body, this container, is only a medium to help you export our being, our sense of presence, our reason to be there, our existence. It helps you export us, hold us accountable. It is the only way that you, humans, are able to recall what we may mean, or start grasping that. You can only understand and identify this kind of presence. The invisible and intangible is only possible for you to grasp when you can document, articulate, transport and transfer it. And the only way to do so is to give us shelter, a physical home.

**AV:** Could then your home be anything, any material, any size, anywhere?

**Balls:** No, we have chosen this medium and size because it is the one we need right now, and the one you need to understand us.

- **Time**<sup>8</sup> {27.06.2016}

**AV:** Are you home (for me)?

**Time:** No. I am not. I cannot be anybody's home. Only physical things can be home.

**AV:** But you feel to me so important in all what I do.

**Time:** Yes indeed. I am important for everything you all humans do.

**AV:** Does counting you, packaging you and numbering you help me to respect you?

**Time:** Not really. But it is a way where you are starting to acknowledge my presence and make sense of my presence. **By counting and numbering me you give me a body.**

## Act 4: Body

**Connecting words:** togetherness, being, belonging, forever, death, soul, presence.

Through the embodiment of imaginary personas Alicia helps architects design branded interior spaces. And through the embodiment of the things she makes while she is doing so she believes objects speak through her. She places herself as instrument for moments to happen. Alicia's textural skins sometimes hide, others transmit, others collect and hold deep desires, longing for homes, for understanding of being, of not being, of connecting, of not connecting, to world, to place, to others. They are built to surface emotions, to the surface of our skins, and through material skins. Textures are the poles to transmit, or trigger, those emotions. Design spaces have the intention of mundane, curated desires that connect with brand wishes - feeling embrace, well being, welcome. Performance and sculptural pieces wish to fish for deeper emotions: shame, fear, sadness, pain. Those emotions that all humans share regardless of the skin we are born with, or the fashion we wear fear, sadness, pain. Those emotions that all humans share regardless of the skin we are born with, or the fashion we wear.

---

<sup>8</sup> My witness, friend and enemy. I fear it and at the same time I am totally compelled by it. It rules. In my works I either try to control it, measure it, or surrender to it.



*Figure 5*  
*Mountain, a repurposed shirt. During its destruction and final piece after its re-formation.*

**Connecting work: Mountain.** A re-purposed and first-commissioned performative piece, coming from the petition of transforming a long-used party shirt into a neckpiece for the owner's wife. AVA's proposal was to perform the destruction/liberation of the shirt on the owner, in front of the camera. The reorganization/remaking of the "liberated" shirt happened in the solitude of the atelier. Mountain ended up becoming a scarf-like garment, and will mostly hang on the wall of the wife's bedroom.

#### **Interviews fragments**

- **While Making It Together** {Interview I, 15.10.2016; Interview II, 24.10.2016; Interview III, 21.10.2016}

**AV:** Are you a kind of language? A non-verbal language, which, through object, thread, body moves, synchronicity, temporary togetherness, makes explicit something implicit, unknown, unseen or unexplored?

**AV:** And what about emotional affordances? Why aren't they in the surface?

**WMIT:** No need for. There is much more than emotional affordance here. There is symbolism. Connection. Truth, and lying to each other. There are invisible threads of transformation. Many of them are emotional, yes. But not all of them. And not all of them are important neither for you, nor for others, or even myself to be emotional. As I said before, emotions come and go.

- **Myself**<sup>9</sup> {Interview I, 25.10.2016; Interview II, 27.10.2016; Interview III, November 2016}

**AV:** Is remembering the emotional affordance?

**AV:** No, not at all. At that moment, I remember that we felt the following: the emotional affordance comes from the moment. The moment is the affordance, builds the affordance. That moment of presence while we were walking, like those moments of connection during making in *While Making It Together*.

**AV:** Because we are present, they afford us emotion, and not only that.

**AV:** Memories.

**AV:** Exactly.

**AV:** Stories.

**AV:** Yes.

**AV:** Feelings.
- **While Making It Together** {Interview I, 15.10.2016; Interview II, 24.10.2016; Interview III, 21.10.2016}

**WMIT:** Are we, your creations, whether big or small, dialogues?

**AV:** Yes, definitely. You are characters for me. I build you up as beings, as beings with whom to have a dialogue. To learn from, to have a conversation with.

**WMIT:** We would be like a trojan horse. We would bring something and plant some seeds to grow other things while people are distracted. I would love that.

**AV:** Ok guys, but we need to turn this into a business. How do we do this? Can we have some references to build this up? What kind of brand are we?

**WMIT:** We are a brand that makes both commercial and artistic products. Sometimes they intermingle. It means, the product seems commercial, but it is artistic, and the other way around.

**AV:** That sounds too confusing to me. I think we need to focus and be clear ourselves otherwise we keep going in circles.

**WMIT:** Our brand is very much about ambiguity. Embracing ambiguity. It is about spatial experiences, skin experiences and human experiences.
- **Myself** {Interview I, 25.10.2016; Interview II, 27.10.2016; Interview III, November 2016}

**AV:** Our work seems superficial in the surface of things, with our wish for fashion and looks, our fascination with the visual presence and colorfulness, the complexity and noise, but it is very. Very deep.

**AV:** It always starts with one thread. Like WMIT. Do you know which is my favorite moment? When I hand out the spool to the person, holding the fresh end in the other hand. That moment is so unique, full of hope, of possibilities. That moment of rebirth, every time, is fantastic. When everything is possible, the holding breath waiting to be surprised. Like the moment right before the performance starts in the theater, when the curtains start opening and the orchestra playing.

---

<sup>9</sup> Interviewing myself proved to be a revelatory format. It happened spontaneously, usually starting from a reflective or even descriptive writing style. During a conversation with myself alternative and even surprising information would arise. This conversation allowed different to Alicias appear: the designer, the maker, the performer, the brand creative director, the researcher, and the person, in their intimate, open, uncensored selves.

## Act 5: Closing The Curtain In The Theater Of Emotions

Alicia sometimes depicts her own emotions, and others she builds structures - physical, temporal, energetic - for others' emotions to be expressed, with objects acting as the recorders and translators of those feelings. She intends to create homes, architectures, scaffolds for emotions to be unveiled, shared, with or without her, in front of a camera or of an audience. All bodies, human or inanimate, material or immaterial, are structures susceptible or recording, storing and transferring those emotions.

**AV:** Why making?

**AVA:** Why not?

**AV:** Why making?

**AVA:** Because I search for answers.

**AV:** Why?

**AVA:** Because I have many questions, which I do not know even how to articulate.

**AV:** Is your making how you do it? How you articulate those questions?

**AVA:** Yes, I believe so.

**AV:** Why?

**AVA:** Because when words are not able to tangle the questions that linger inside, the movement of the hands while making something might do the job.

**AV:** Why do you think that that happens?

**AVA:** I don't know, and honestly I do not care. I find much more relevant to talk about the fact that it happens.

**AV:** Yes, but, how are we, listeners and viewers, going to connect with that knowledge if we do not hear about it?

**AVA:** You can only experience that knowledge. Otherwise you only imagine that the knowledge exists, because I tell you so. You know, some truths are not possible to comprehend fully by the reason only. The head will hear, will nod, and will forget, even question, judge, because it has no experience of that happening. And, in that way, you can have faith on it. Believe it because I say so. I might be convincing. But I do not search to convince through words. I can only present it, conduct it, invite to it through words.

Their contribution -works, practice, research - is about **creating a bridge, between selfishness and the crowd**. From a process that is absolutely personal, about voicing out my demons inside, those coming from my long and early history, from those personal implications, stories and moments, how can my moments influence your moments. How can **the way I process my moments influence the way that you process your own moments of creation and of production**. Your own meals. Interior. School. Day.

## **References**

Berger, J.: 1973, Ways Of Seeing, Penguin Books, London, England.

Gibson, J. J.: 1979, The ecological approach to visual perception, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Obrist, H. U.: 2010, Interviews, Volume II, Edizioni Charta, Milano.

Peiry, L., Judith Scott, <http://www.notesartbrut.ch/judith-scott/> (30.04.2017).

Scott, J., The Work of Judith Scott, <http://judithandjoycescott.com> (30.04.2017).