

Autobiography and Identity. Performance as Research

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

Which aspects of cultural and personal identity most influence current theatrical creation? How are certain signs of identity configured in a mise-en-scène and how does the audience perceive them? How can artistic research inform a doctoral study on identity? The thesis project “Identity Configurations in the Contemporary Experimental Basque Theatre Scene” is developed based on these questions with a cross-disciplinary framework that encompasses the historical, sociological, psychological and anthropological approach to the object of study plus comparative case studies and, among them, the PhD candidate’s own artistic research.

The article focuses on comparing two examples that highlight certain identity aspects relevant to the subject and the methodological approach of the doctoral thesis project. I will compare the experimental work of two women: Rakel Mazón and her durational performance *Raketa Brokobitx on the rocks* and Rakel Ezpeleta, the writer, and her contemporary cabaret *Erbeste*. Although very formally different, these two pieces share some characteristics: a questioning of the identity of their creators, the use of an alter ego to overcome traumatic experiences related to their experience as women, and the empowerment of the actresses — now authors — through the direct interaction with the audience.

These cases will be used to reflect on cultural identity and the personal, related to a certain feminist and de-colonialising criticism. Moreover, these ideas are linked to the pertinence of Performance as Research (PaR) as the ideal methodological focus to confront the conceptual challenges of an open project like this.

Keywords: experimental theatre, identity, Basque, autobiographical theatre, women artists, affects, contemporary society, culture, research/creation

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Introduction

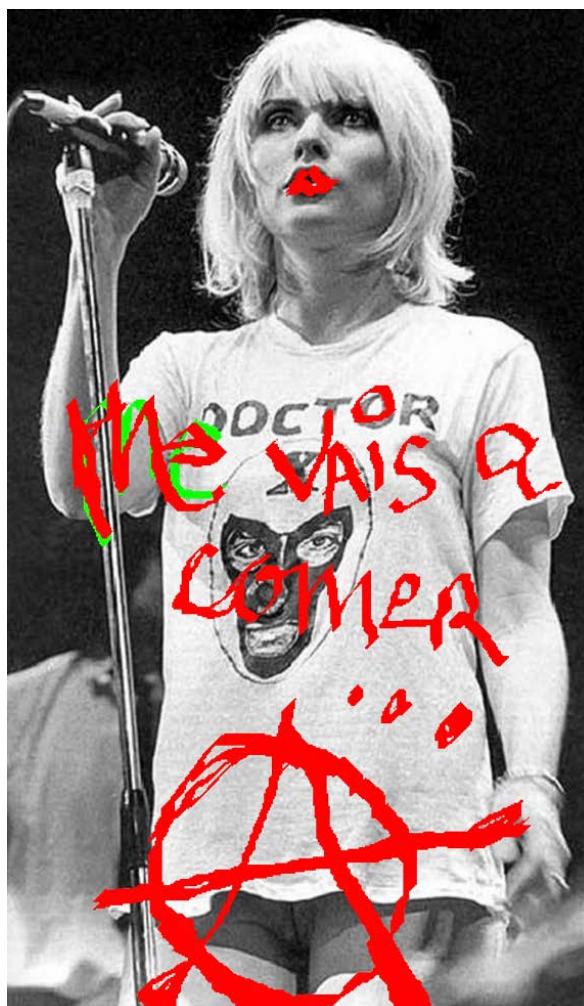
This article presents some of the ideas I am developing for the doctoral thesis “Identity Configurations in the Contemporary Experimental Basque Theatre Scene”. The project investigates diverse aspects of identity and how they are presented in the creations by artists and companies from the Basque Country today. This research involves a multilayered framework that adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical approach to the identity question, and a cooperative case study including my own artistic practice.

Among the cases studied, there are two I consider significant, both because of how they inform about the construction of personal identity and their relationship with Practice as Research (PaR). Here I will present and compare the experimental performative work of two women, two actresses in their first solo work: Rakel Mazón, with her durational performance *Raketa Brokobitx on the Rocks*, and my own PaR, the contemporary cabaret *Erbeste*. I suggest revising these two artistic projects to highlight certain aspects of identity that I deem relevant for the conceptual and methodological focus of the research project underway.

Although they are structurally and formally very different, these two pieces share some distinctive characteristics: their questioning of identity; their use of an alter ego to transcend trauma or crisis; being constructed around social issues related to gender; and the empowerment of the actresses — who also become the authors here — through audience interaction to set out their personal experience and social reality. Getting to know these two pieces and their respective creative processes will be useful for later reflecting on the construction of cultural and personal identity. Moreover, the second case outlines the map of how PaR can provide conclusive information in an interdisciplinary doctoral project such as this.

Raketa Brokobitx on the rocks: *El arte de morir, esperando la sentencia* and *A thousand miles are there to come back*

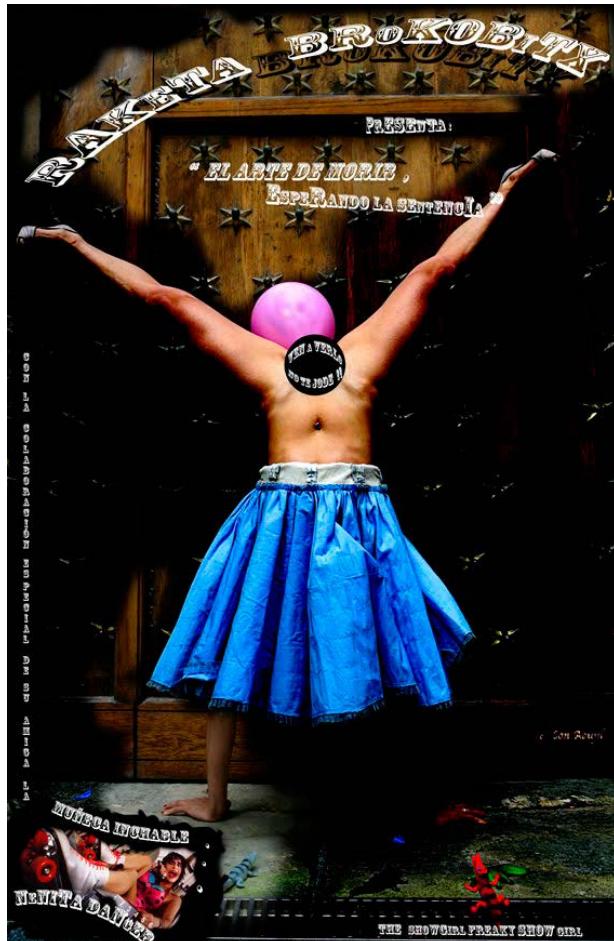
Rakel Mazón is an actress, singer and dancer born in Bilbao who regularly works artistically with other local creators and companies. In 2008 she began her own artistic project while she was living in Madrid: there she was working as a waitress in a sex shop when, after being abused by her then boyfriend and in reaction to this, one night she decided to perform a unique striptease for the club's customers. The actress explains that the striptease was a cathartic performance, an artistic response to all the frustration and shame she was experiencing because of the abuse, and during the performance she felt "full of resentment" and at the same time "independent and strong."



Raketa Brokobitx 1: Promotion of the striptease. Photo from: <http://raketabrokobitx.blogspot.co.uk>.

That performance, with those feelings, gave birth to her alter ego, Raketa Brokobitx, who gradually revealed herself and developed in the following striptease-punk performances that took place in the sex shop and became the basis for the show *El arte de morir, esperando la sentencia*, occasionally presented during 2008 and 2009. The performance was never the same. It included improvisation and space for her alter ego to express herself, in

whatever way, and could include the collaboration of guest artists or elements such as juggling balls or tap dancing. According to the performer, it went down so well that word spread through Madrid, and not only the regular sex shop customers but also people from other areas including local artists and some influential creators came to discover Raketa Brokobitx's show.



Raketa Brokobitx 2: Promotional poster for *El arte de morir, esperando la sentencia*. Picture from: <http://raketabrokobitx.blogspot.co.uk>.

After that experience, and having overcome the process of catharsis through performances that included exhibition, denouncement, protest and confidence, Raketa Brokobitx brought an end to her time in the sex shop with *El arte de morir, esperando la sentencia*. However, Mazón's alter ego continued to evolve and train for her next public intervention, the second part of the trilogy *Raketa Brokobitx on the Rocks*. Each stage of the trilogy shows the evolution of the alter ego, based on that personal experience. And if the first part of *Raketa Brokobitx on the Rocks* was about the rebirth of the protagonist and about denouncing, the second part is focused on how this reborn ego finds a new place in society and on transmitting a hopeful message from and for those who had been through a similar experience.

With this objective, in summer 2010, Raketa Brokobitx began a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela accompanied by a donkey and wearing a bridal gown and mountain boots. This was the pilgrim performance *A thousand miles are there to come back*.



Raketa Brokobitx 3: Raketa with the Maxari donkey. Photo from: <http://raketabrokobitx.blogspot.co.uk>.

The inspiration for this performance, explained Mazón in a personal interview, came from what she felt when she decided to report the abuse from her boyfriend to the police. The consequences of her police report made her feel like “an abandoned bride: unloved, unwanted... nothing” and that feeling led to Raketa Brokobitx’s motivation — another example of personal overcoming — to go on a pilgrimage to Santiago: because that abandoned bride who lived inside her would not stay by the altar or housebound, complaining or feeling sorry for herself. Instead, she would go out, meet people and celebrate life, while launching an encouraging message she would communicate through artistic interaction.

On the way to Santiago de Compostela, Raketa improvised stops where she would interact with the locals, men and women, tell them “her story” (how she had been abandoned at the altar by her fiancé and how nevertheless she had decided to go on the path), and give brief performances, short concerts, dance shows, recitals and other carefree performances, either solo or with semi-spontaneous collaborators (acquaintances or friends of friends who could be found near the area she was passing through and who, at short notice, she told of her arrival and invited to participate).

On the journey, which lasted around one month, she documented some of the meetings and performances with photos and videos, and posted them on an online blog with texts from her travel journal. She also talked to the local media, giving interviews to press and radio stations interested in the story of Raketa Brokobitx. Sharing her story and experience along the path was one of the major objectives of her journey. In fact, for her, the most important part of this adventure was coming across people and giving them (and as far as possible infecting them with) her positive energy and the encouragement to go on.

In this durational performance, Rakel Mazón’s internal procession and the pilgrimage of her alter ego are mixed: the latter is presented as an



Raketa Brokobitx 4: performance on her way to Santiago.
Video capture from: <http://raketabrokobitx.blogspot.co.uk>.

abandoned bride who decides to forge ahead and make every day of her life special; while the former wants to celebrate her experience of overcoming with other people who have also suffered abuse (“of any kind,” notes the actress). On the path of transforming “shame” into “celebration”, with this initiative Rakel Mazón/Raketa Brokobitx seeks to extend the idea that “you deserve to feel like a queen not only on your wedding day but every day.”

To complete the presentation of this artistic work, I stress that in each part of the open project *Raketa Brokobitx on the Rocks* she artistically re-works a stage of the process of overcoming a traumatic experience. If the birth and rebirth of Raketa Brokobitx in that sex shop provided an outlet for recognition of trauma and inner strength, the later cathartic pilgrimage meant the public recognition of the feeling of abandonment, and the third part of the trilogy, expected for late 2018, will focus on the collective, on weaving nets of solidarity between women. In short, Raketa Brokobitx is an alter ego born on the stages of the underground to also remain outside of them. Raketa Brokobitx is the courageous, active and positive version — the woman who does not want to live as a victim — of another woman who saw herself ignored and victimised by the male violence she lived with. A woman who appeared to occupy her space.

Erbeste (Loca por complacer)

“Erbeste” in Basque means “exile”, “foreign land”, and “alien”. With this in mind, the initial premises for the creation/research I would develop within my doctoral project were: 1- It would be called *Erbeste*, the name of its protagonist, my alter ego yet to be discovered and developed; 2- It would be an exploration of the meaning of personal identity; 3- I wanted the exploration to happen through movement, music and text; and 4- I wanted to respond,

as a creator, to the following questions included in my thesis project: which aspects of cultural identity (language, tradition, gender, social stratum, personal memory...) most influence my artistic work? How are they perceived by the audience?

The process of creating *Erbeste* began with the idea of playing with the consequences of exile and repeated migration on the cultural and subjective identity of the performer, a Basque actress-singer who tries to make a career in Barcelona after having also lived temporarily in the USA and Paris. Incidentally, while thinking about the idea of “exile” and when writing the first dossier for the project, I introduced a “poetic” sentence on the first page that, as we will see, would be prophetic in terms of the results of this exploration of the author’s identity: “being exiled from oneself → being alienated.”



Erbeste 1: premiere at Antic Teatre. Photo by Alessia Bombacci.

When I completed the first creative residency with the first director involved in the project (the Italian choreographer Simona Quartucci), I realised that I needed to work on three aspects of my identity (being Basque, being a woman and being an actress) separately with directors of different geographical and professional backgrounds. Thus, the creation process continued with the collaboration of the Basque director-playwright-actor Iñaki Rikarte and was completed with the collaboration of the Catalan dancer-actress and video artist Neus Suñé. Each one used a different method of stage creation — Quartucci’s centered on the emotional and corporeal, Rikarte’s centered on

ideas and texts, and Suñé's on the visual and sensual. Based on the material generated during those residencies and with the help of the researcher and creator Esther Belvis, Rakel Marín created the final dramaturgy. The common objective of this whole complex process was to give space to the exploration of subjectivation, to research what "one" reflects against the viewpoint of the "other".

The resulting work is a multidisciplinary and multilingual satirical 75 minute solo, with humour and drama. It shows the unstable social and intimate reality of a woman desperately seeking a job, always trying to please "others" while trying to adapt to ever-changing circumstances and to overcome a crisis of personal identity, strengthened by her need for someone/something/a place of belonging.

Throughout the creation/research process we discovered that in the shaping of the identity of this performer, her sense of belonging to her professional vocation was more determining than her sense of belonging to a territory, a language, a culture or a country. And, above all, what most influenced her sense of belonging (actually, the lack of it) was the feeling of loss and desire for a family. The impulse underlying the whole creation was based on a previous, personal and delicate event: a recent abortion induced by her state of poverty and instability and lack of hope, and that resulted in a serious personal crisis of the actress/researcher. It was not until the last stage of the creative process that we discovered that this was driving the whole creation. It was then when I wrote the final scene that would close the piece: a kind of confession in which the alter ego Erbeste and the actress/researcher Rakel Marín Ezpeleta fuse and, moving from theatrical to performative acting, the



Erbeste 2: Premiere at Antic Teatre. Photo by Alessia Bombacci.



Erbeste 3: Premiere at Antic Teatre. Photo by Alessia Bombacci.

actress stops hiding behind the parody of herself (a clownishly anxious performer in pathetic circumstances) and faces the dramatic implications of her situation, addressing the audience personally and directly.

The prevailing idea in this piece is that the best way to confront ongoing changes, unstable contexts and precariousness — which are increasingly more common in our liquid society, using Bauman's analogy (2010) — is to look inside ourselves, heed our own desires and dreams, rather than looking for the external regard and locus (as did the character Erbeste throughout the piece: pre-conditioning herself to the approval of her interlocutors in each situation in which she found herself, to the point of always showing herself the way she thinks is required or expected). This idea coincides with the substrate of the “prophetic” phrase I introduced in my first notes, which united the concept of “exile” with what I experienced by embodying Erbeste during the creation: the process of “estrangement”. As reflected by thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur (1990) and J. C. Aguado (2004: 52), the process of estrangement is inevitably linked to that of identity. Identification, distinction, estrangement and otherness are abstract concepts that might very well be materialised by artistic research, as was the case with *Erbeste*. During the creative process, inside and outside the rehearsal rooms, the researcher discovered her natural impulse to please others and try to adapt to others' expectations, which prevented her from knowing “who she was”. This was her biggest discovery in relation to her own identity and it not only informed the research/creation but also influenced the focus of the overall PhD project.

To complete this introduction to the work by the two creators, if we compare them we can conclude that they share an instinct for overcoming trauma or crisis through the theatricalisation of private emotions and their expression and interaction with the audience. There are other questions they also share: as

previously noted, they are the first solo creation of their performers. Of course, neither of them has done their work strictly on her own but they are artistic projects in which the performer takes the reins, leadership and responsibility for the most important artistic decisions. In both cases the actress becomes the author. As a result, in both processes the woman is empowered as an artist. Both pieces seek the personal and direct relation with members of the audience: in the case of Raketa Brokobitx, by maximising her chance meetings with other pilgrims and residents in the different places on her way to Santiago and offering spontaneous performances at diverse points of the journey; in the case of Erbeste, by opening, after each performance, a debate with the public attending, inviting them to share cheese and wine from her homeland in a relaxed environment, while passing round an optional survey on questions of personal identification. Both projects have a strong experimental component and are built upon autobiographical elements. In Mazón's piece, experience and personal memory are the driving force of the project, and in the case of Marín Ezpeleta, the memories and autobiographical inspiration are revealed as the piece progresses. Once again, in the two processes and performances, trauma, crisis, sharing and overcoming are important and visible elements. However, there is a difference in the tone prevailing in each case: while Brokobitx's journey is born out of trauma and denouncement and moves towards sharing and overcoming, Erbeste's journey is born out of the state of overcoming a crisis and mutates into rendition and sharing. Finally, both autobiographical creations work as a reflection of a social reality, contemporary society. In relation to this, we should note that sharing personal memory plays an important role in the composition of this portrait of contemporary culture, as it documents it. In my view, and adopting Gluhovic's appreciation (2013: 131) in his analysis of Kantor's work, the aesthetics of the autobiography can act as a cultural witness.

In short, what is reflected in both pieces is the universe of two women with their personal and social conflicts, their concerns, doubts and questionings, affects and thoughts. It is a universe that mixes and parallels big and small themes, as in everyday life they influence each other. Thus, just as recent feminist theory advocates inverting the androcentric focus of interest of philosophy and traditional cultural studies — around the “big” abstract themes, normally far from any domestic concern — (Morris, 1994: 169), these actresses' two creations stress their personal daily life and “small” stories to compose an image of our contemporary social tensions, while giving space and voice to their “gendered” point of view. The urge to set out this point of view results from specific cultural and social circumstances in which these artists live. In this respect, it is interesting to compare the references to current Catalan women artists studied by Gázquez (2015). In his thesis he argues that the contents and forms of the latest works by these artists — and, in particular, the flourishing of solo creations — are determined by the social and personal tensions and predicaments they suffer as middle-aged women artists living in a society and a cultural reality regulated by neoliberal cultural and economic policy in Spain. The same can be applied to the Basque creators presented here. Therefore, again, their work not only pays witness to their culture but is also a consequence of it.

Emotions, Affects and Identity

Having presented these examples, we wonder what they tell us about the construction of identity. To explore this question, PaR conducted with *Erbeste* has been crucial. As I mentioned, in this case, the actress' prior intuition — or her “tacit knowledge” revealed subsequently through embodied research, using the terminology proposed by Nelson (2013: 37-38) — has substantially enriched the research. It has determined the affective motor of the whole creation and has also revealed the key to the issue in the identity of the artist/researcher: her external locus.

At the start of this research/creation I did not establish any prior guideline that could restrict or endanger the experimental factor of the exploration of my own identity and its shaping into stage language. Nevertheless, I did have vague expectations, intuitions and appetites about what I wanted to explore. As the process advanced, the work drifted in different directions and took unexpected paths. But, in the end, the practice itself led me to finally define the vague images, thoughts and emotions that in the first instance had motivated the creation. Thus, artistic practice concretised in a propositional way (with the texts and the dramaturgy) and in an allegorical way (with the images and sensations proposed by the mise-en-scène) that tacit knowledge that otherwise would have been very difficult to make explicit. In general terms, intuition, embodied knowledge and embodied research in this project have not only informed the artist but also the public, the process and the doctoral thesis as a whole.

What I have discovered through the PaR carried out with *Erbeste* — and I have been able to reassess with the study of other examples of Basque theatre that will be included in the thesis — is that the driving force of artistic creation is in the affects, even more than in the ideas. Prior to the idea was the affect. I support this hypothesis in the “affective turn” pointed out by P. Clough (2010) and in the theories developed by the social psychologist J. D. Greenwood, for whom the intrinsically social dimension of identity and

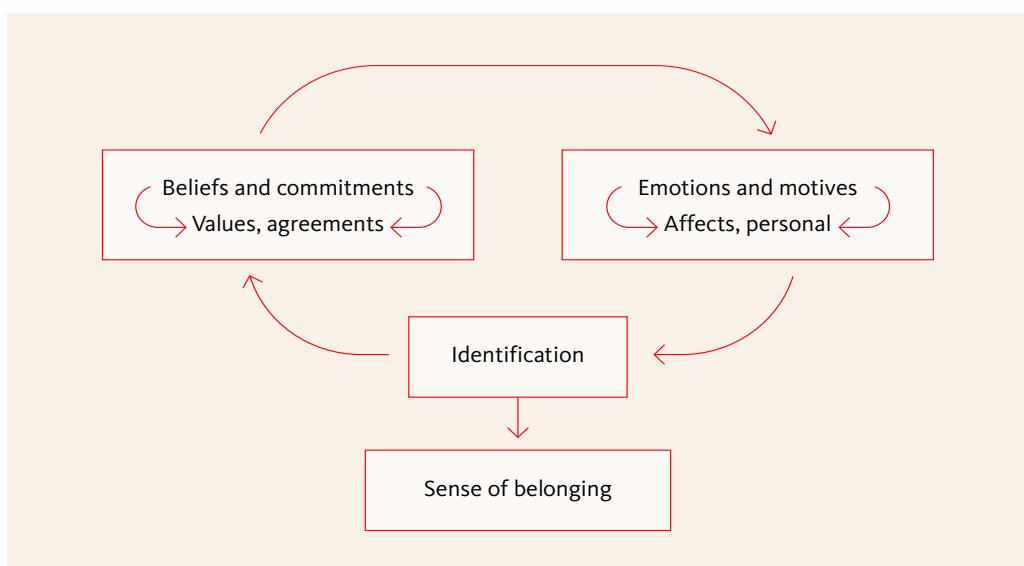


Diagram 1: Developing identity based on Greenwood's thesis.

of emotion explains the relationship between both: individual emotions and motivations lead to and are the consequence of a prior interpersonal commitment to certain socially shared beliefs, values and conventions. “In the absence of joint commitments to these arrangements, conventions or agreements, there would be no identities and no emotions” (Greenwood, 1994: 94).

According to a common definition of contemporary psychology,¹ the affective is the susceptibility experienced by a human being faced with the alterations of his/her real or symbolic world. Following this idea, my hypothesis is that the urge to present certain aspects of personal identity through performance is an affective response to the alterations of the real or symbolic universe of the artist. Artistic creation is, continuing this argument, an effect of the affect. In the same way that identity is an effect of the affects.

It is worth noting that the word “affect” comes from the Latin prefix “a” (belonging) and the verb “facere” (to act, to perform) — in other words, at root identity and affect are linked by belonging; affect could also be defined as “belonging put into action” —, and, since Roman times, the verb “afficere” (to affect) has been used as a synonym of “to produce”, to place in a specific mental or physical state. In other words, identity, as an affect, is produced. In this sense, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* argues that gender and sex are cultural constructs within which identity acts (or is developed) and on occasions is subverted. She also reaches the conclusion that identity is in some way a product of the affects. But, as she says, “for an identity to be an effect, [it] means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary” (Butler, 1999: 177). Therefore, the research into the relationship between culture, affects and identity is still open.

In the examples introduced here we have seen the identity aspects related to gender, memory and trauma but, in my opinion, the rationale behind the idea that identity is constructed and performed, and that it is inspired and produced by affects, can be applied to all the signs of identity (such as nation, religion, social class, political ideology, etc.). This is the base idea of my discourse in the development of the doctoral thesis. Through the comparison with other cases and my own creation/research I seek to provide new insights into how this production of identity is theatrically shaped.

Before concluding, I wanted to add that these hypotheses and this discourse are linked with certain ideas developed by de-colonising and feminist critics such as De Sousa Santos (2006 and 2010), Grosfoguel (2007, 2011a and 2011b), S. Harding (1991), J. Butler (1999), D. J. Haraway (1995) and N. Fraser (2003). These critics, from their particular respective perspectives, have questioned and challenged the notion of established knowledge, based on rationality, logic, dualism and positivism, related with prevailing academic thought, traditionally male, white and westernised. Thus, hegemonic thought has been challenged in the last few years by different feminist, queer and de-colonial theories, but also by PaR. This, in its different methodological variants, recognises and enhances “situated knowledge” as a process, intuition, emotion and “embodied knowledge”, with the particularity

1. Such as in Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affect_\(psychology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affect_(psychology)).

that it also puts them into practice. All these ways of “knowing” form a valuable, verifiable and evaluable part of the academic work of PaR. The project “Identity Configurations in the Contemporary Experimental Basque Theatre Scene” is an attempt to connect these theories and practices through theatre in relation to identity and its affects and effects.



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