

## **Gema Alava: Brave New World**

Gema Alava is a bit of an anomaly in the brave new art world of New York City. As a Spanish-born artist, educated in Madrid, London, and San Francisco, she stands for the new global perspective evident in much of today's art. Brilliant in drawing, as well as highly inventive in her performance projects, Alava commands an international outlook that removes her from a generally European or specifically Spanish esthetic. Rather than work up a description of just how Spanish she is—this is an increasingly futile activity in today's art world—it becomes more important to see her as a global exemplar of a new age of image-making, in which the conceptual intelligence behind the image or performance becomes as important as the work itself. Alava is part of a new breed of artist, someone who struggles to identify with current culture from a slightly skewed point of reference—one that is not nationally oriented. Her works' originality safeguards her sensibility: the bit of idiosyncrasy inherent in her projects serves to protect her from the generic sameness that afflicts so much of contemporary art, no matter where it comes from.

As time goes on, the general perspective of the art world appears increasingly disoriented, as if no one knew what to do next. It is clear that broad movements in art have become anachronistic; the best we can do is to recognize an inherently pluralistic vision, in which the solitary sensibility aims to maintain itself as original. Alava, now in her mid-thirties, personifies part of the general dialogue in art; however, that means she must respond *individually* to the current facts of her circumstances. In New York, where the emphasis is on theory and a self-consciously alienated mode of production, the work may be well intentioned, and even insightful in a political sense. But often the means of expression are so limited; they present an obstacle to anyone wishing to experience metaphor or well-crafted art. Additionally, in New York there is in fact a literalism that stems from certain aspects of American pop art—what you see is what you get (consider the films of Warhol; his treatment of the Empire State Building and a man sleeping come to mind). This strikes me as a troubling limitation to what can be imagined. Alava is not afraid to work with metaphor, as well as illustrate emotion—attributes of art in New York that put her at some odds with that city's highly intellectualized outlook. This does not mean in any way that her work lacks intelligence, only that she pays attention to what may be a broader range of psychological possibilities in contemporary art.

One hesitates, in the post-feminist era, to emphasize the fact that Alava is a woman; supposedly, the art world now pays equal attention to both genders. But it is true that Alava's position has been made more difficult by her being female; too often still, the critic, curator, and viewer see women's art as somehow secondary, despite the ambition and intellectual clarity of many women working in art today. Alava's challenge is further complicated by her origins, which one might assume make her different in her approach to contemporary issues. At the same time, as a foreign-born female artist working in a major art center, Alava has certain advantages—perhaps the most important one is her ability to resist categorization. This makes her elusive, but also profoundly interesting as

an artist. Her work consequently convinces not so much by self-awareness or trends as by its ability to speak humanely to human strengths and weaknesses. Alava's vision is, finally, deeply personal, enabling her to define her interests in terms of her own emotional and imaginative life. Her drawings suggest hope in dark places, while her performances, sometimes irreverent, demonstrate an understanding of both the art world and the audience's relationship to a particular image.

In her performance *Trust Me* (2010), Alava divided eleven people into two groups, taking the individuals to one of two museums (I myself took part). After outfitting them with covered glasses, she then described the art to the participants as if they were blind. *Trust Me* asks its participants to have faith in Alava, both as a physical guide offsetting their temporary blindness and as an interpreter of the art before which they stand but cannot see. It is based upon an act of collaboration that can only succeed by trust—Alava's procedure, at least with this writer, consisted of escorting me to a room of Chinese sculpture in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I put on taped glasses that did not allow me to see. Alava and I then walked to the Chinese pavilion, where we sat down on a bench. At that point Alava described to me in close detail the surroundings of the pavilion, whispering in my ear its visual particulars. In the situation of my artificial blindness, I became alert to every word being said to me—Alava was an excellent guide, in part because of her innate sensitivity to visual media, in part because she has been doing exactly this—explaining art to the general public, including people or audiences who are blind or visually impaired—for nearly a decade. After the description, Alava walked me back to the room of Chinese sculpture, where she removed my glasses and ended the piece.

Throughout the performance's duration, Jason Schmidt, the professional photographer, took pictures of Alava and myself. Those pictures will form part of Alava's post-performance event taking place in New York in October 15th of this year at the Cervantes Institute, when all of the participants will meet each other and see the photographs taken of them during their particular session with Alava. *Trust Me* records a memorable personal experience that combines performance with narrative, in ways that maintain the experience one has with art.

Alava seeks to explore the nature of mutual credence, on both a physical and metaphysical level—we see the participant literally holding on to the narrator for guidance along the hallway, from the room of Chinese sculpture to the Chinese pavilion and back again. It is a kind of living theater the participant finds himself in, and although blindness is the defining mark of the performance, it becomes clear that the true subject of this remarkable piece is the nature of trust and its openness to the experience of art. Alava is making the point that, like sighted persons, blind people can be made to understand visual phenomena, through the understanding of narration, a literary technique. So it is interesting that while *Trust Me* is predominantly a performance work of art, it also is indebted to the visual tradition of fine art and the literary convention of describing a work of art.

Part of the newness of *Trust Me* stems from Alava's willingness to mix and match categories of art experience. The notion of a literary narrative supporting a performance about communicating visual circumstances is a complex melding of several mediums. The primary experience of my participation centered on the necessary trust I had to place in Alava in order for the piece to proceed. That trust was rewarded by Alava's strikingly precise description of the Metropolitan Museum's Chinese pavilion—a beautiful installation I have often visited. There was a bit of discomfort in the proceedings—I felt awkward and, as a sighted critic, slightly uncomfortable about impersonating a blind man in a museum. At the same time, I was able to focus on visual art in a new way—through words. Because I am a writer, this approach appealed to me. It meant that my own lines of communication were being met by Alava within the same medium of words—even though the situation had mostly to do with the suppression of *visual* circumstances. As a result, Alava's transmission of information felt fresh and, because of the whispering, intimate, a communication often associated with situations of trust. While a woman's need for intimacy is often a stereotype, it seems to me that Alava both illustrates and transcends the desire for closeness. She plays perfect pitch in regard to the emotional circumstances—and consequences—of what she does.

A slightly earlier project, called *Find Me*, is nearly impossible to categorize. For this work, which occurred during 2009, consisted of Alava asking nine artists—Lars Chellberg, Barbara Holub, Paul Kos, Ester Partegas, Robert Ryman, Arne Svenson, Merrill Wagner, Lawrence Weiner, and Maria Yoon—to create an artwork with the particular understanding that she would hide it in public circumstances—without disclosing their place. In June 2009, Alava hid several artworks, including an installation, sculpture, an artist's book, and an eatable piece, in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco. Later, in September 2009, she hid other works of art (two paintings, photographs, a sound work and an installation) in New York. Alava herself has created several artist's books that include photographs and documentation of the hidden works. These books were presented during a one-day-event on October 2009 at CUE Art Foundation in New York City. In one of the books only, she discloses the precise place of each piece. The volume, titled *Find Me 2.0*, has been placed on a shelf in San Francisco's main library. So far, neither the artworks nor Alava's book has been found.

Alava's act of obscuration is radically ingenious and more than a bit irreverent in light of the prominence of the artists. Somewhere in an art school in the eastern part of America, she has hidden a small untitled painting by Ryman. Weiner's *Put Wheresoever*, a small piece (8 x 3 cm) consisting of a clear plastic sticker with two narrow, horizontally aligned rectangles separated by a red cross, underneath which are placed the words "Put Wheresoever" in red lettering, is somewhere to be found in San Francisco. Wagner's *Outdoor Painting*, a yellow oil painting depicting the letters D, E, F, I, M, and N on a gray rock, has been hidden in New York. The Spanish-born, New York-based artist Partegas donated *Have a Nice Day* to the cause; consisting of smiley faces painted with yellow acrylic and black marker on three white plastic bags filled with garbage, it can be found in San Francisco. These works, along with the others, test the limits of their authenticity in the sense that if they remain hidden over a long period, or even are never found, their viability as art may be said to be vitiated to the point of non-being. What

happens if an artwork is made *not* to be encountered? Does that mean that the piece is nonexistent, or does it mean simply that its public standing is forever lost to its audience? It seems to me that the real artwork consists of Alava hiding the pieces until they are discovered. Her action is not only irreverent, it is more than a bit subversive when we consider just how much even a small painting by Ryman would cost in today's market.

Sly as she is, Alava has undermined the market by unusual means—a finely developed sense of whimsy. Her fanciful imagination rejects the notion of an art object as transcendental or priceless, thus implying that the work can be stripped of both its meaning and its price as a commodity by being lost to time. Only the act of discovery will restore their reality as art. Interestingly, here the physical act of discovery works as an allegory of the psychic encounter and intuitive excitement we experience when we encounter a successful piece of art. Finding the artwork establishes its identity within both the market and the public's desire to recognize a work of art as such. Circumnavigating the general avenues of public recognition, Alava instructs us to note a world of no value, magically transformed by the sudden reappearance of the genuine art object (should it be found). This means that the element of surprise in one of the works' uncovering constitutes a work of art in itself, one that is interestingly similar to our emotion when we come across the very good, *publicly displayed* piece in a gallery or museum.

The difference between private and public states in regard to art is not something easily turned away from. We expect major artworks to have public careers—the museums remain the public caretakers of acclaimed objects. At the same time, in a world in which contemporary art museums are being built with remarkable speed, the idea of permanence—in work that is too recent to undergo the continued scrutiny that accompanies the general acceptance of its validity—falls prey to a kind of romanticism. Who can say that with certainty that a new work of art will stand the test of time? By removing the art object from public knowledge, Alava places it outside and beyond the market, where a work's staying power is understood in terms of its pricing. As a result, the piece's identity enters an empty space, in which its meaning is suspended. Returning the object to general commerce does not necessarily determine its future value. The contemporary museums today are flooded with works that are not likely to last; perhaps Alava's action, in the spirit of Joseph Beuys, constitutes a humorous view of the intense romanticization—indeed, the fetishizing—of an artwork that may well be forgotten, that is, *lost* to time. I don't know whether the pieces hidden by Alava will become a permanent part of our esthetic legacy, but determining that is not as important as revealing the way reputations are made. In *Find Me*, she humorously shows us how precarious the process is.

Besides performance, the other category of art in which Alava has distinguished herself is drawing, the most immediate and vulnerable art activity. A winner of several national prizes including a Penagos Prize for drawing while a college student in Spain, Alava has expanded the definition of a drawing to include works that enact linear visions in three-dimensional space. This does not mean that the artist has gone over into sculpture, only that she has pushed further the notion that drawing can exist in space as well as on a flat

surface. Again, it seems to me that Alava works best in the interstices between convention and change. In her rich, remarkable drawing, titled *Unveiled* (2007), Alava has installed threads in the space between a window and the interior edge of the sill. Lines are attached to nails driven into both sides of the sill; these threads create beautiful, complicated patterns as they crisscross each other at an angle. Suddenly, and with the simplest of means, the drawing comes alive and invigorates the space in which it takes place. The light passing through the window glass creates a bright background, contrasting with the dark threads of the drawing.

Clearly, *Unveiled* stems from the geometric styles of modernist art. Yet it is something else as well. Much of the best art today is made by combining categories of expression, and Alava's drawing does just that. She fills the space with lines that remain true to the attributes of drawing even as they occupy three dimensions. As a result, the mediums she addresses are made larger, accepting an expressiveness that takes part in more than one classification. This has been done before, but in Alava's case it has been extremely well executed. Drawing is ephemeral in nature; it lacks the permanency of oil painting. Yet, increasingly in contemporary art, drawing has become a major vehicle of declaration. To Alava's credit, she has been able to work out a highly interesting piece that belongs to no particular idea of what a drawing should be. Here we recognize that her exploratory sensibility is most taken with the creation of a hybrid work, in which the difficulties arising from the use of two mediums are held in check by an artwork that combines them. Just as Alava conflates performance, photography, and narrative art in *Trust Me*, so does she fuse drawing and sculpture in *Unveiled*.

Alava's ongoing "Silences" series shows us that she is every bit as capable with traditional drawing media as she is with exploratory procedures. Done on the subway in New York with a ballpoint pen, "Silences" comprises a group of small, mostly dark works on paper, in which, however, the darkness is almost always broken by light. Looking at the series, one recalls the "Black Paintings" created by Goya at the end of his life. (While this comparison is in some ways facile, it is interesting to link Spain's great painter to a contemporary Spanish artist, thus connecting Alava to her place of origin—despite the fact of her internationalism.) New York's subway system systematically puts its riders in the dark as the train travels from one station to the next, so Alava's effort could well be in response to her experience riding the underground. At the same time, it is fairly easy to allegorize her sequence as a metaphor for the persistence of the human spirit in the face of darkness. One thinks of dark experiences in prisons or pre-modern madhouses; the literal stands in for the figurative in "Silences." The contrast, however, between darkness and light can be read either way—as an emphasis on the fallen condition of man or as an understanding that light prevails even in the darkest of spaces.

One of the drawings consists of a darkened space with an open entry into a lit room in which posts have been installed. The posts leave shadows that fall across the floor, and beyond them are a series of tall, narrow windows that echo the verticality of the posts. It is an intense work of art, made more so by its small dimensions (18x14 cms). Likely the viewer feels as though he has been imprisoned, looking outward from his cell into a lit, public space. Alava here does not

deny the darkness, but she provides us with an illuminated space as well. In a closely similar drawing, the open space occupies the middle and middle left of the composition, while the posts' shadows occur in an atmosphere of much lesser light. Here it feels as if it were nighttime, which in the imagination is usually seen as mysterious. The contrast between the two drawings is meaningful, although in both cases there is the conundrum of their individual attitude toward darkness and illumination. In a third drawing, Alava intensifies the enigma: in a narrow slot of light occurring between two blocks of darkness, we see the shadow of a person. In this work as well as the other two, the source of light is never identified.

What are we to make of such unsolvable expressions? In a modern sense the drawings are existential, reducing vision and people to the bare minimum of recognition. They serve to warn us of the weakness of light's power in an environment of gloom. And then again, they also emphasize the fact that the light is found in every drawing, even should it be surrounded by shadow.

By asking her audience to consider the properties of darkness and light, Alava returns us to basic meditations on their figurative meaning. This does not necessarily mean that their properties exert moral force, but it is possible to see the drawings in that way. Given the complicated nature of contemporary life, one hesitates to draw ethical conclusions from art. Yet the drawings in "Silences" lend themselves to such speculation. It does not even matter whether Alava intended discussion of moral issues, for the drawings are large in spirit and can be comprehended in different ways. Allegory may well be seen as a weakened trope in current times, yet inherently it retains its ability to awaken a comparative reading of good and bad. When Alava works on so archetypal a level, it proves hard not to see her drawings as messages of both hope and despair—emotions that link themselves to our fundamental views of life.

In the long run, we can appreciate Alava as an inspired and subversive artist. There is no overt political imagery in her art, yet the conclusions we draw from it include social concerns and fundamental perceptions of our dual and contradictory natures. Her performances are in the slightest way outrageous, for they communicate a whimsical disregard for convention. Why *should* we trust her? It is an open question that the artist refuses to answer. Just as important is the consideration of her more than thirty ballpoint pen drawings, which refuse to take sides on whether optimism or pessimism is a better way of looking at life. Alava's brilliantly conceived projects evoke matters of trust in art, which inevitably demands a moral gloss. This may place her on the margins of the art world; however, that may well be a highly honorable site in today's world. In a world in which social and ethical considerations seem to be losing their force, Alava presents us with situations that linger in our minds as ethical conundrums. Ultimately we trust her sensibility, even though it tends to be reclusive and difficult to discern in her art. The brilliance of her methods remains a way of making contact with her audience, transforming them from passive viewers into active participants. Even her whimsy has a moral power. Such a vision belongs to the very best of art.

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