Metropolitan
BARCELONA BE PART OF IT
OCTOBER 2010 | Nº 165 | FREE



ART EXPOSED

THE CITY'S PUBLIC ART AND WHERE TO FIND IT


Bunny Me! - La Reial Companyia

DIY CULTURE

There's a growing trend for small-scale, accessible arts performances in Barcelona with the focus on audience experience and unconventional venues

Text and photos by Sara Blaylock.

In a city infamous for a history of makeovers and takeovers, change is no new thing. But could this change be the very thing that threatens the evolution of Barcelona's cultural identity? Consider the 20-year evolution of La Rambla, an area of the city cleaned up for the 1992 Olympic Games. The once locally loved promenade, teeming with street artists and performers, has gradually been replaced by a crowded circus where bullfighting memorabilia and tacky t-shirts act as ambassadors for Barcelona's cultural offerings.

And yet, this cloud has a silver-lining. A number of Barcelona-based artists, musicians and dancers, keen to demonstrate the region's historic propensity for the unconventional, are currently participating in a grass roots movement that could get the city back on track in terms of being considered as a serious location for the arts. This scaled down movement, international in scope but particularly vibrant in Berlin and San Francisco, replaces 'high culture' with a do-it-yourself vibe that relies on the homespun. It redefines form through location and audience and reinvents the modern art gallery experience and stage with a strong emphasis on audience experience, collaboration and community. A testament to the power of the people, the trend focuses on the inclusion of previously untapped audiences.

Owing to its historical proclivity for the quirky, this city proves a particularly good location for these kinds of projects. So say Jérôme Lefaure and Olivier Collet, co-founders of Home Session, an artists' residency programme they host at their Poble Sec apartment. The couple lived in Paris for several years and were involved in the arts there too but after nearly a decade in Barcelona they agree that this city has a more willing, receptive public. They argue that the audiences here don't have fixed agendas; that they are more fluid and not judgemental. This lack of pretension means their artist residency and ensuing programmes tend to attract a broad range of participants.

Artists' residencies, wherein an artist is selected from a pool of applicants to live and work for a short time in a new environment, are generally considered essential to the pro-

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Creative Passion

fessional growth of the artist. However Home Session breaks with the traditional residency convention most obviously with the location; very rarely will a private home host such an endeavour. In addition to housing about three artists a year for one-month residencies, Lefaure and Collet curate exhibitions, lectures and film screenings in their home and also participate in arts festivals and exhibitions. Their latest initiative, Site Specific: Invited-One-Day, invites Barcelona-based artists to create an artwork or performance in the Home Session space that will remain for one day only.

Home Session blurs the line between the public and private, placing an intimate demand on its hosts. However, Lefaure and Collet both emphatically agree that their project is no sacrifice. Lefaure explained: "Everybody in Barcelona is sharing flats with strangers… we're doing the same." Collet added: "And, we get to be a part of an artistic investigation."

Not limited to the plastic arts, Home Session has invited Esther Freixa to present her solo *Medea (a la carta)* in the space. Freixa performs this work exclusively in private homes for audiences of 10 to 15 people. Her hosts choose two of the four Medea pieces, each representing a different approach to the Medea myth, which Freixa then adapts to her location. After every performance, she initiates a discussion where spectators share their experiences and critiques. These discussions, said Freixa, inspire the evolution of her pieces.

Freixa also believes that the intimate format of Medea benefits her audience because it engages them more closely with her performance. She explained: "In a conventional theatre, the stage creates a barrier between the audience and the dancer. I want to break that barrier."

Luis de Arquer, a concert pianist, agrees with this paradigm. Classically trained, de Arquer left his career as a soundtrack composer and performer a few years ago and turned his 19th-century Gràcia home into a concert venue. With a maximum of 45 spectators, de Arquer calls his romantic-looking space, *El Teatre Més Petit del Món*. Every Saturday night at 9pm, he performs 50 to 75-minutes of his classical repertoire on an 18th-century grand piano, an instrument which has been around since the time of Beethoven. This special, ancient instrument, combined with the size of his venue, mimics the original settings for 18th-century concerts; he performs Beethoven's music as Beethoven would have.

When de Arquer changed his career, he did so to both improve his experience as a performer and to bring an ideal venue for the solo piano to Barcelona. Like Freixa, he appreciates the audience contact and the ability to repeat and improve upon his repertoire. "I get to perform every week, not once every few months in a huge anonymous theatre. I prefer this as an artist. It keeps my work fresh." As a passionate musician, with a long family history of artists and musicians in and around Barcelona, he is thrilled to bring this singular musical experience to his native city.

Like de Arquer, Jordi Centellas and Laia Alsina are trained professionally, but have also chosen an unconventional path to showcase their talent. Both graduated a few years ago from the Institut del Teatre where they co-founded La Reial Companyia de Teatre de Catalunya. The troupe aspires "to offer an alternative to the current theatrical circuit, saturated with commercial productions and big public spaces [with restricted access] while maintaining a professional standard." Since its inception in 2007, the Reial Companyia has performed throughout Spain, where there's an evident and ever-growing popularity for this non-mainstream approach to theatre.

Centellas and Alsina cite local and historical inspiration for their project. Speaking of General Franco's rule and his subsequent oppression of cultural practices, they state that after Franco's death in 1975, Catalan people celebrated the cultural liberation by creating a wealth of performance art and theatre. The Reial Companyia seeks to revitalise that special history and to inspire other actors to follow in their example. In particular, they want to engage today's passive spectator through interaction, using stumble-upon or unconventional venues and by introducing themes that allude to topical social issues. Their latest production, *Bunny Me!* is a child-friendly format that addresses the economic crisis. »



Jérôme Lefaure and Olivier Collet



Dressed in rabbit costumes, Centellas and Alsina sing and dance in vacant shop windows hoping for adoption. So far, they're still looking for homes.

After almost 20 years in Barcelona, Experimentem amb l'ART leads the city's community-focused arts organisations with a taste for the unconventional. Founded in 1993, the association based in Gràcia, resides in a former convent which has been transformed to house a few dozen artists' studios, an art 'laboratory' for visiting student groups, a newly renovated courtyard and administrative offices. Before finding its present home, Experimentem focused on bringing contemporary arts to small towns around Catalunya, sending artists to teach and work on projects in communities previously underexposed to theatre. Though understaffed and underfunded, Experimentem has maintained its educational vision and now includes programming that engages with their local neighbourhood. They want to activate the local audience through creative events and collaborations with other Gràcia arts organisations. For instance, in May this year Experimentem worked with four other Gràcia arts groups to put on Nodes de Gràcia, a weekend of street performances, concerts and other cultural happenings.


Espai Experimentem amb l'ART

Experimentem continues to evolve. Charela Díaz, Experimentem's all-purpose coordinator, explained that the centre plans to rebuild its facade to improve visitor access. This will be particularly important in 2011, when Experimentem hosts a year of garden-as-art exhibitions and events. Of note, the centre will, with the help of artists and community members, design and plant a vegetable garden.

These and a handful of other artists, organisations, musicians and culture makers are keeping Barcelona's cultural agenda fresh. As history reminds us, artists shape the underground which subsequently becomes the cultural norm. Today's underground focuses on the accessible, asking for an interaction that begins with the home-grown.

Some dates for your diary

Esther Freixa will perform at the l'Antic Teatre on October 6th, 18th and 27th October and November 3rd, 8th and 24th.

Luis de Arquer performs every Saturday at 9pm. For bookings call: 93 284 9920

Espai Experimentem amb l'ART has an exhibition, 'Disseccions Oníriques' from October 2nd to November 20th and they will also be hosting a concert Dispositiu de Tardor LEM (as part of the LEM festival) on October 22nd at 8pm

Home sessions
Invited One Day 4: Aníbal Parada, October 7th, 8pm. Homesession (www.anibalparada.blogspot.com)
Invited One Day 5: Mariokissme, October 24th, 7pm. At the home of the artist. (www.mariokissme.com)

La reial companyia de teatre de Catalunya will perform *Bunny Me!* at Festival Cos Reus (in Reus) on October 23rd.

More info:

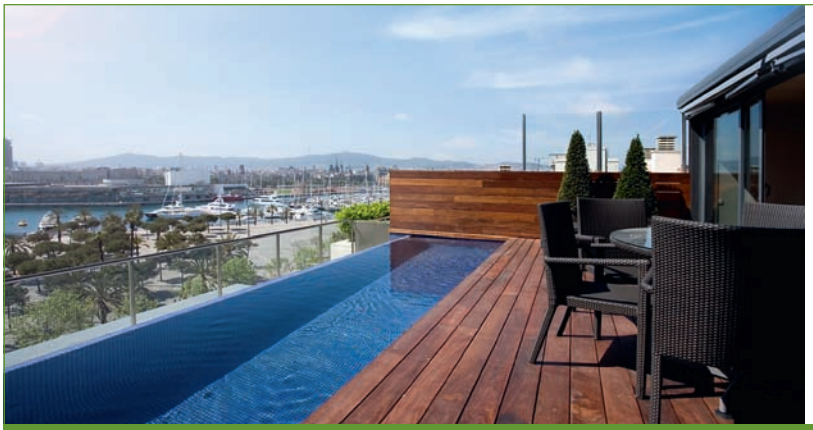
Home Session
www.homesession.org

Esther Freixa
www.medealacarta.wordpress.com

El Teatre Més Petit del Món
www.elteatremespetitdelmon.com

La reial companyia de teatre de Catalunya
www.lareial.net

Experimentem amb l'Art
www.experimentem.org



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