

## The Rhombus Is a Horizon: Teresa Lanceta in Conversation with Nuria Enguita Mayo

[Nuria Enguita Mayo] *Adiós al rombo* [Farewell to the Rhombus] is conceived as the final part of an exhibition trilogy, but it also introduces a new twist, a reconsideration in light of the time that has passed since your first trips to Morocco in the mid-1980s. It's the consolidation of a way of working, doing and feeling that now acquires a different presence in the arena of contemporary art.

[Teresa Lanceta] From the moment I first saw them, I've found rural Moroccan weaves deeply moving. I have created three projects about them, spaced out over the years. *La alfombra roja* [The Red Carpet], an exhibition held at the Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentària de Barcelona, was the first, in the late 1980s. By then I'd been weaving for more than ten years and already had reservations about the concept of "originality", so it wasn't a stretch for me to focus on the fabrics of the Middle Atlas and emulate them. I maintained the technique, the materials and, as much as possible, the format of the original weaves. My idea wasn't general or vague; I was drawn to very specific pieces, and I got as close as I could to them in order to clearly observe the hermetic textile abstraction of the cushions and *handiras*. The result still interests me, but the romantic vision I had of the rural world at the time has been shattered; I think nowadays that idyllic perspective only exists for organised tour groups. Today, a day in March 2016, I turn to the paper and read about a bomb attack at the airport and a metro station in Brussels, a place where, back then, I would have wanted to show *La alfombra roja*, because a lot of women lived there who spoke the language of the Middle Atlas, women who had learned to weave from their mothers... But my desire would have been nothing more than a dream rooted in fantasy, because those weaver women, in travelling to the new world, had left behind not only their homes and families but also their craft, their *savoir faire*; and it's quite possible that none of them would have come to see that show, because they would have had no way of hearing

about it. *La alfombra roja* was an intuitive approach to the formal concepts of Middle Atlas weaves and the ornamentation of objects for everyday use as a form of language. The original woven creations were exhibited alongside my own. That was the idea.

The second project, *Tejidos marroquíes: Teresa Lanceta* [Moroccan Textiles: Teresa Lanceta], had a more complicated history. Marie-France Vivier offered me the chance to show my woven fabrics at the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris, where she was a curator. That invitation seemed like a wonderful opportunity to return to the theme of rural Moroccan textiles, of which that museum had an extraordinary collection, and Vivier was very receptive to the idea of showing my work in connection with those textiles. At an advanced stage in the project, the museum unexpectedly closed, but the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía agreed to take on the exhibition. The chance to present a substantial collection of rural weaves, "folk" textiles, in a young contemporary art museum like the Reina Sofía perfectly fulfilled my initial intention of contributing to a broader knowledge of this art, which up to that point had been relegated to ethnological museums. Woven textiles from the Middle and High Atlas and the Tensift plain would be displayed a few paces away from *Guernica*. And why shouldn't they be? Some of the pieces I planned to exhibit were even contemporaries of that masterpiece. Between the first exhibition in 1989 and the second in 2000, things had changed considerably, but I stuck close to the idea behind the first project, as much of what I had intended was achieved with the presence of those amazing rugs, cushions and *hanbels*, and so my work would once again underscore the most significant aspects of the original weaves and maintain the dimensions of the selected exhibits. I once again referenced the formal facet of the fabrics, but emphasising the traditional premises based on repetition and transgression. The exhibition presented historic woven fabrics and rugs from the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, from Rabat, from the Louvre collection, from the Bert Flint collection in Marrakesh, and from private Swiss collections. Nevertheless, a lot of people took issue with the show.

**Comentario [p1]:** Entendemos que son coetáneos del Guernica; añadimos esta parte para mayor claridad.

**[N.E.M.] Now we've come to the third project. Sixteen years have passed and, as you said yourself, we live in a profoundly turbulent, transformed world. Moreover, this show is presented as a conclusion, as a farewell.**

[T.L.] *Adiós al rombo* warns us of the diminished acceptance of cultural facts. In this show, weaving women appear in a series of videos and in the text entitled "White Roses". We glimpse weavers from the Middle Atlas who are now out-of-work immigrants in Alicante, young students in Fez and women I got to know in places where fabrics are made. I decided not to violate their privacy by using images they couldn't control or even see. Their stories and opinions are succinctly told in the text. The title *Adiós al rombo* [Farewell to the Rhombus] refers to a way of approaching the world that is no longer possible and is beginning to reveal its bitterest side, knowing that we incorporate the heritage of others while casting off those who created it. Heritage and young people are absorbed by a world where "ours" is much easier to digest than "we". Farewell to the rhombus, farewell to innocence.

**[N.E.M.] Let's go back to your early days for a moment. You began weaving when you were still an art history student in Barcelona, in the late 1970s. Since then you've produced a body of work which is quite extraordinary, for both its uniqueness and its rigorous consistency, as the result of your choice to take a firm position and remain committed to an idea.**

[T.L.] In the 1970s I lived in Barcelona. I was surrounded by good conceptual proposals shot through with political denunciations. I knew that they had something powerful to offer, but I stumbled across a skein of natural cotton thread that I'd never seen before—in those days it was all acrylic—and that led me to woven textiles, especially of the "folk" variety. So, although I realised that my decision would create a huge gap between me and the art around me, I didn't hesitate to make it. Others rejected my practice, but fortunately youth is bold, so it didn't bother me.

**[N.E.M.] Since then, you've remained loyal to a precise technique, based on the conviction that weaving is also an art form and overcoming the idea that what is considered mechanical and "popular" can't have a "higher" value.**

[T.L.] I was primarily interested in the weave itself, its basic structure. I was also drawn to its soft, ductile materiality, a quality appreciated by other artists like Eva Hesse, Joseph Beuys and Robert Morris starting in the 1960s: the exact opposite of the hardness and rigidity of traditional painting and sculpture. I made my choice, and I've stuck to it with constant, unswerving determination. I decided to work with the most basic, primal aspects of woven fabrics, their ligaments, techniques and materials, and with their linguistic tradition. Weaving has allowed me to understand a primeval, universal code that reveals its internal law, transcending physical, temporal and cultural borders. I wasn't interested in palace tapestries or lavish cloths made by obedient hands acting on the orders of others; my interest was in the woven creations of predominantly textile cultures in which manufacture and practical usage go hand-in-hand, fabrics that develop a language as a testimony of culture and art.

**[N.E.M.] In fact, usefulness has been one of the theoretical pretexts for labelling decorative folk arts as "lesser" arts, as opposed to the self-sufficient "greater" arts of painting and sculpture. But, as you have already pointed out, weaving is one of the tools of art and it, too, ministers to the human soul. With your work, you've proved that the so-called decorative arts are, in fact, "pure" art. You've also explored those premises from the perspective of art theory: the structures of repetition of the 20th century are something that folk art and avant-garde artists have in common. And that assertion creates a shift, focusing attention on the art object itself rather than on the circumstances in which it was created or the pedigree of its creator. In this way, the object is endowed with its own "agency". It seems to me that the rugs of the Middle Atlas with which your work is associated also possess that characteristic, in the sense that their meaning is not exhausted in either their aesthetic or their primary function. In fact, they have the capacity to deploy fresh new meaning with each change of context. I've often heard you say that weaves are necessary presences because of their beauty, their social function in bringing people together**

**around a shared task, their promise of warmth and shelter and, above all, the complexity of their language, which speaks of the lives and emotions of the women who made them.**

[T.L.] In the 1970s there was a feminist art practice that involved the critical and satirical decontextualisation of fabrics, but I was more interested in talking—positively—about the work of women who generate language and art using their own methods and tools, and who are generally overlooked because of their dual subaltern condition as females and residents of poor rural areas. These women, through their weaving, define and transmit the culture to which they belong; they are creators of an artistic language which, once mastered, permits a more profound exploration of inherited ideals, and it is impossible to deny that their useful objects can also be art. To think otherwise is to gainsay the universality of art; such notions penalise precariousness and are an affront to the essential value of cultures which, in this day and age, might even be upheld as models of artistic sustainability. Women weavers construct a human space through which we can come to understand the true definition of artistic creation and of art. If we reject useful art, art for life, we sidestep the issue of ecological reflection and the responsibility which it, like any other medium, has to the environment. Western art, now a widespread cult of globalisation, avoids defining its interlocutor and half-heartedly questions its dependence on the political and economic powers that be.

When I think of all the myriad objects in existence, all the superfluous, unnecessary objects that are produced, and their consequent environmental impact, I've always found consolation in the thought of my fabrics returning to the place from whence they came, dissolving in that great pie in the sky that will eventually absorb and dissolve us all. And if some of their thrill and language is lost along the way, at least they'll still be useful: they'll protect someone from the cold, serve as a rug or construct a space.

**[N.E.M.] As you've already mentioned, in your works on the weaves of the Middle Atlas there is no appropriation in the sense of imitation or reproduction, nor do you use their forms to give them another meaning in a new configuration. Your work**

**dialogues with a collective, time-honoured art and thought, with a set of traditional norms, motifs and habits and, through variation and personalisation, intensifies its openness, subject to change and yet evidencing a continuity of forms developed by a community over time. There is a vindication of the merits of a certain type of knowledge, a technique, but there's also an affective component that leads you to interweave your life with those of others, to understand, enjoy and modify.**

[T.L.] Art proposes ephemeral conclusions open to other meanings. That is precisely why it endures. Art is the "open-source code" of a collectivity whose members can read, appropriate, transform and transmit it because, as a collective language, art not only proposes a dialogue but also reveals the internal law that holds it together, a law that allows those who know and master it to delve deeper into their inherited ideals and attain expressive freedom—and, with it, creativity. Woven fabrics are art because many women weavers reach that climactic moment where the familiar is transformed, offering a glimpse of that which is hidden. Moreover, perhaps because of their colours or their materiality, weaves appeal to our senses and our need for joy and pleasure. Accepting these fabrics means accepting the other art and the art of others, as well as the possibility of designating, of establishing universality as something everyone can achieve, without hindering anyone's ability to do so. If an artist can designate an object as art, why shouldn't the spectator do the same? And, most importantly, why shouldn't the woman weaver?

**[N.E.M.] Like that woman who wove a *handira* that has accompanied you ever since you bought in at the souk in Marrakesh in 1985.**

[T.L.] That woman has been a major figure in my life. She wove a Beni Ouarain *handira* that has accompanied me, as you say, since 1985 and has always been a source of delight and knowledge. I think of her when I work, and the text I wrote for this catalogue is dedicated to her. Her *handira* was an unexpected gift, a concise assertion: it revealed her presence to me, the fact of her as a real, flesh-and-blood person rather than an anonymous, anodyne, interchangeable being. Her woven creation made me

understand that collective art is neither a uniform magma nor an enormous hand that makes everything; it is about concrete persons, each a singular and unique individual.

**[N.E.M.] The weaves of the Middle Atlas have ornamental structures that clearly set them apart from other textile traditions. As Bert Flint has noted, in both Moroccan poetry and in your tapestries, the whole is the sum of individual parts, like verses that combine to form an intelligible, independent unit, unconnected to a central totality: "The whole results from a juxtaposition of equal parts with no introduction, climax or conclusion."<sup>1</sup> There are other characteristics, such as repetitive non-figurative structures, the absence of a visual centre, the lack of clearly defined borders or edges and the importance of details, which refer to the nomadic lifestyle of those peoples, in stark contrast to the stable sedentarism of Western societies. In their writings on "nomadology", Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari also explored this opposition between the state and nomads. Here I think it's pertinent to recall what they said about the jewellery-weapons "assemblage" that characterises the nomads versus the tools-signs assemblage of the centralised state: "The relation between them is not that of form-matter but of motif-support, where the earth is no longer anything but ground (soil), where there is no longer even any ground at all because the support is as mobile as the motif."<sup>2</sup> This also ties in with the rhombus, an irregular shape, a design that doesn't fall neatly into place and is always moving, as opposed to square-based shapes.**

[T.L.] In the 1980s and 90s everyone was talking about the nomadic facet of certain famous artists. Those comments always made me laugh, because in reality their "nomadic" lifestyle consisted in owning holiday homes in exotic places like Mali or India, but they certainly weren't about to give up their primary residences in New York or Paris. When you get close to the gypsies, when you live with them and enjoy their art, when you discover the rugs made on portable looms, the world becomes a bigger place; your land is the ground you tread and your home is wherever you go, not where

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<sup>1</sup> Bert Flint, "La dinámica del arte del tejido en Marruecos", in *Teresa Lanceta: Tejidos Marroquíes*, Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2000, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 401.

**Comentario [p2]:** No hemos encontrado versión inglesa de esta publicación. Traducción libre.

you come from, because the return trip isn't a homecoming but an endless journey out. This is the rhombus. A rhombus has no horizontal or vertical lines; it's made entirely of diagonals that form infinite designs. In its reiterative expansion, the rhomboid network does not reveal any coordinates; it has no centre or frame, just a network of equal parts. Repetition is not an enemy but an asset capable of assimilating variations and transgressions. The rhombus is a horizon.

**[N.E.M.] For a long time, the "other" was viewed as a source of artistic merchandise by Western elites eager for exotic novelties. Your work has been more quiet and understated, but also more ambitious. However, I'm struck by the lack of critical feedback on your work during the final decades of the 20th century. It seems to me that the new century has opened up a different horizon, one where, thanks to the consolidation of feminist and "decolonial" thought and new anthropological approaches, certain dogmas are being shattered. The world has changed, but so have points of view: the decolonisation of modes of knowledge holds out new possibilities for evaluating work like yours, formerly relegated to the decorative arts category, in a different light. New theories about the body and movement in performance and dance also shine a spotlight on artistic practices that cast off oppressive dualities like technique and theory, body and mind or reason and emotion.**

**The reconsideration of ornament as the dynamic opening of form (neither abstract nor figurative), as a disequilibrium, which Deleuze describes in his *Difference and Repetition*; the consideration of the art object as an "animate" thing endowed with "agency", according to sociologist Alfred Gell, who drew attention to the ways in which an artefact is capable of affecting people, triggering emotional responses, sparking ideas and provoking a variety of social processes and actions; and the vindication of a technical knowledge emancipated from theory for contemporary art, which we can trace in the ideas of thinkers like Bruno Latour or in the performance theory of Bojana Cvejić: all of these open up a new space from which to re-examine and reconsider your work.<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, London: Continuum, 2004; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998; Bruno Latour, *Enquête sur les modes*

[T.L.] The reflection on and recovery of ornament as a value in itself, which we see happening today, interests me more than the appropriationist current infused with irony and criticism of the 1980s and 90s. Do not clouds and waves ornament the vast colour field that is the sky or sea? Do they not ornament to proclaim that the world moves without ceasing, without direction or meaning? Women did not enter the art world in the 1960s and 70s to do what was already being done; they wanted to say other things, and say them another way and with their own tools. They refused to let their bodies be the battlefield in order to be the battle themselves, so that they would not be the place where events happen but the happening itself. And now we see that artists from "artistically subaltern" countries burst onto the art scene in a different way, with heterogeneous ideas and themes, from a more emphatic stance. The number and quality of these artists from nations once considered peripheral has grown considerably. Many of them live in places where traditional trades are still practised, allowing them to incorporate unusual collaborations. That broadens the knowledge and enjoyment of art. Personally, I wish I were in a better position to dialogue with those works, although I also know that some of those artists want to get away from what they see as ancestral hindrances.

**[N.E.M.] *Adiós al rombo* is also, by your own decision, a "collective" exhibition. You've invited two artists to participate who are also activists and data analysts: Nicolas Malevé and Lot Amorós. And you also decided to include a group of young artists who were students of yours at the Massana School in Barcelona in recent years, when you've been very active on the educational front. Earlier you were telling me that now is the time to work with others, that you never want to work alone again. Therefore, this seems to be a natural evolution of your work and the fulfilment of a desire. Not to get into autobiographical details, but I do think it's fascinating—as Pedro G. Romero magnificently recounts in this catalogue—how your**

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*d'existence: une anthropologie des modernes*, Paris: La Découverte, 2012; Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović, *Public Sphere by Performance*, Berlin: b\_books, 2012; and Bojana Cvejić, "Un infiel regreso a la poética (en cuatro argumentos)", in *La réplica infiel*, Móstoles, Madrid: Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, 2016.

life has become interwoven with the "other": gypsies, weaving women and all sorts of subalterns. And now, other artists.

[T.L.] As soon as the other appears, whether one by one or collectively, there is a fragile, unstable part of us that is fortified and magnified—even when that other isn't what we expected or as positive as we thought, as we find over and over again in close relationships or migratory movements. Of course, as Sartre said, other people may be hell, but even so they complete us, move us and make us happy.

With regard to Nicolas Malevé and Lot Amorós, I admire what they do and how they go about doing it, each for his own reasons. Nicolas is an artist, software programmer and digital activist, but in reality he's a poet. He works with computers like bees, barely grazing what he touches, just enough to pollinate a network, data or files. I find Lot stimulating because of his facet as an IT inventor and his activism. Salim, Marta, Clàudia, Eulàlia and Andrea were students of mine. When you have people with so much personality by your side, the best thing you can do is try to put your experience to good use, protect them from bureaucratic interference while you try to understand what they're incubating.

This time my invitation was quite timid, but it's reaffirmed my interest in future invitations and collaborations. In the same way, the incorporation of recycled objects from the Centre d'Investigació de la Trinxera (Corbera de Ebro, Tarragona) in my project *El paso del Ebro* [Crossing the Ebro]<sup>4</sup> has made my own work grow and confirmed this idea as a form of commitment.

**Comentario [p3]:** Acentos añadidos.

**Comentario [p4]:** Traducción libre.

**Comentario [p5]:** Omisión de "de" en ESP en la nota, cf. amarillo.

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<sup>4</sup> Included in the group exhibition *La réplica infiel* (Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Móstoles, Madrid, 2016).