CHAPTER 6

After Picasso: Reinterpretations and recreations of *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* in Contemporary Art

The artworks are, in general, the first interpretations of the artworks. They come from the nonchalance and anachronic impertinence of a shift in history.
Georges Didi-Huberman (2000)

We referred earlier to the possibility of finding interpretations of *Les Demoiselles* that do not originate from critical or historical-artistic discourse but come from artistic practice itself that we are anxious to explore in this chapter. In fact there are numerous versions of *Les Demoiselles* made after Picasso's version (or *d'après Picasso* in French). They include homages, copies, adaptations, pseudo-plagiarism, versions, replicas, commentaries, interpretations, apostilles, recreations or appropriations. We will take just a handful in order to try and clarify, above all, how far they are able to present new arguments on this masterpiece of modern art, especially the versions that have not been explored before in the conventional critical discourse.

In 2007, on the occasion of *Les Demoiselles* centenary, the Francis N. Naumann gallery in New York held an exhibition entitled *Demoiselles Revisited* to which they had invited some twenty artists to produce works based on the painting or to come up with new versions of the same (Gersh-Nesic 2001, 1–16). The result was an extremely peculiar homage. Viewing the outcome, it is startling to see, on the one hand, the unashamed degree of sexualisation that Picasso's young women were subjected to in almost all cases. The general wish to underline the obscene character of the work predominated and even added more obscenity to the original. Nevertheless, along with this, the irreverence and even aggression the contemporary artists displayed towards the object of their "homage" cannot be ignored. The questions of race and gender inherent in the work are the order of the day and steal the spotlight. The general tone of these renewed versions of *Les Demoiselles* is ironic, grotesque, caricatural, as if none of the art-

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ists had wanted to miss an opportunity to inflict their sarcastic and even angry criticism on the masterpiece of Modernism. More recently, the exhibition *Picasso.Mania,* held in the Grand Palais in Paris from October 2015 to February 2016, with works by Sigmar Polke, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Mike Bidlo, Faith Ringgold also revealed once again the repetition of motives involving questions of gender and race (Ottinger 2015).

It is easy to infer that the hypersexualisation opted for by most of the contemporary versions of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* stems from the fact that once this aspect was unveiled, there was no going back. Its sexual content had inevitably become the vein to explore at any price since it was virtually impossible, both for artists and art critics, to ignore or disregard it. As we have seen, it took various decades for the art critique to consider that its true interest lay in its content, but it is also possible to see that, once interest in the work was centred here, it did not budge an inch. Leo Steinberg, responsible for the state of the affairs and author of "The Philosophical Brothel," predicted in a *post scriptum* of 1987, seventeen years after publication of the first version of his famous article and height of the regression of formalism, when he said "my argument for the sexual charge of the picture seems almost embarrassingly banal. But such is the nature of my melancholy profession: [...] It is in the character of the critic is to say no more in the best moments than what everyone in the following season repeats; he is the generator of the cliché" (Steinberg 1988, 74).

On the other hand, the humorous animadversion perceived in the collected works of this exhibition is, in some ways appropriate for several generations of artists who had only ever received modern art as its official culture: thus, their reactions went from mockery to parody to aggression and, who knows if, in some cases, guided by a real instinct to put the father to death. Modernism and in all probability, its personification in Picasso, only seems to elicit an open antipathy and even aggressive instincts in these generations. And the aggression of this type of reaction to Picasso's young ladies serves to reinforce even more the equation that identifies *Les Demoiselles* with the aesthetics of Modernism.

The artistic versions of the work are, in their own way, an extension of the critical discourse on modern art using other means: an extension that takes place using tools other than those of the critic or the art historian. They are no longer the only professionals, with the encumbrances and advantages of their speciality, who pronounce authorised interpretations of modern art's masterpiece. Now it is the artists, as we shall see, who shape this criticism in their own visual language terms, and through this, allow other types of discourse and other voices to be heard with all the nonchalance and anachronistic impertinence that Didi-Huberman mentions in the title quote of this chapter.

The artistic variations of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* emerge from the ranks of Pop Art, Appropiationism, Action Painting and Performance, from the Queer, the feminist and other standpoints. As we shall see, their strategies are mostly a game of gazes and counter glances that precisely underline the subjective and culturally conditioned character of all visual perception and interpretation of art.

All these *Demoiselles d'Avignon after Picasso* have in common an openly critical nature. The majority appear to concur with the arguments that we have seen in the last two chapters, those of feminism and post-colonialism that confirm the relevance of these two focal points in the critical reception of the painting today. Elsewhere they contain reflections on the notions of authorship, copying, authenticity, counterfeiting and, naturally, genius.

Pop Art Recreations

Let us begin with some examples of Pop Art recreation of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. They are usually the result of subjecting the original composition to a graphic and chromatic style similar to that of the comic which gives the painting an aspect of an image made by mechanical reproduction techniques. There is something in these that clearly shows a wish to foster the idea of the mass culture icon that Picasso's painting had become over time but it is also a peculiar way of "commenting" on the meaning of the original.

Examples of this pop treatment can be seen in the work of several Spanish artists such as Eugenio Chicano who transformed the scene into a still-life or Equipo Crónica in their *Monsieur Cézanne en el carrer Avinyó* 1980-81 where the perfectly copied "young ladies" are suitable for a comic strip and intensify the caricaturesque aspect of the nudes in the original version. The corner of the table that appears at the bottom of Picasso's canvas is replaced here with part of a round table, apparently of marble, that might be considered to feminise the scene, were we to agree with Leo Steinberg that the corner triangle of the table had a phallic connotation, referring to the spectator's penis. Might it be possible therefore that the transformation of the table includes a proposal for a transformation of gender in the spectator gazing at the canvas? The still-life of fruit previously placed on the table is now substituted by the personal effects of the visitor to the brothel: an African mask, a bowler hat and cane, belonging to Monsieur Cézanne, we suppose.

The title and the personal effects point to an evident sarcasm about Cézanne and Cubism, the two pillars of modern painting according to the canonic narrative: here we have the staging of a visit by the father of Cubism to a brothel in the Barcelona street of Avinyó.[1] Ultimately, the scene recreated by the Equipo Crónica from the Picassian *Demoiselles* could infer the following: if the young ladies are the "mothers of Cubism" as the orthodox narrative of Modernism has always insisted, at last we would have found the father in his legitimately corresponding place, the brothel where these young ladies worked. And what about the mask that lies on the table? Does it belong to one of the young ladies or did the painter leave it with his personal effects? Should we presume that the

[1] It must be remembered, as mentioned in the first chapter, that part of the Spanish and Catalan historiography has understood the "Avignon" or "Aviñon" in the original title (named thus by André Salmon and not by Picasso) to be *Carrer* (or street) *Avinyó* in Barcelona.

painter was wearing an African mask or is it on the table merely to show that the nuptials taking place here that gave rise to modern painting, are sponsored by *Art nègre*? Or, perhaps Cézanne had disguised himself with an African mask to hide his identity and go unrecognised in the most famous brothel in the history of painting?

None of these questions are trivial if we consider the historiography of the painting and, particularly, the important truth stated at the time by Chave (1994, 597–611)—author of one of the principal feminist criticisms of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, as we have had seen. Let us remember that according to her, the painting was no longer considered officially the origin of Cubism (and with it avant-garde art) from the moment it was openly recognised as a scene in a brothel.

In Equipo Crónica's proposal neither the visitor to the brothel is who he was, nor is the spectator whom we expect, and nor do we know where and with whom we are exactly either as spectators (or visitors to the brothel) or as frequenters of modernism itself. That is to say, because of the destabilization of the gaze, Equipo Crónica's version is probably the most perceptive of all the pictorial interpretations done of *Les Demoiselles*.

In 1999, another Pop artist, in this case British painter Patrick Caulfield, painted his *Les demoiselles vues de derrière (The Young Ladies seen from behind)* that showed us the scene from a diametrically opposed point of view to the one of normal spectators. By showing us the backs of the young nude women, the painting proposes the spectator place himself (or herself) among them, as if they belonged. Caulfield's Pop style resembles that of the Equipo Crónica to such an extent that, sometimes, more than a version of Picasso's *Demoiselles,* it appears to be the reverse of *Monsieur Cézanne en el carrer Avinyó.* The spectator, situated behind the women, can choose between two alternatives, two types of gaze that put them in two opposing subjectivities: if they prefer the role of voyeur, they can gaze especially at the backs and buttocks of the nude women; or if they opt for the other role that allows them imagine themselves as another of the prostitutes, they will experience the condition of the women in the painting, the prostitutes presenting themselves as goods for sale. An infrequent experience but one that is not alien to the feminine condition under the patriarchal patterns that had prevailed for centuries (men act, women appear), although in all probability, the majority of men invited to try this alien point of view would be totally unaware of this.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Caulfield's work is precisely the possibility given to the spectator to choose their role, throwing suspicion on the existence of a universal gaze.

Ultimately Caulfield focuses on the fundamental: in the end the core of the interpretations of *Les Demoiselles* rests on the multiplicity of viewpoints offered to the spectator, both in its pictorial versions and its historiography. Let us remember, furthermore, that according to Steinberg, *Les Demoiselles* are related to another coetaneous work by Picasso entitled *Two Women* painted in 1906. Steinberg ventured the hypothesis that these other young female nudes were

from behind the scenes of *Les Demoiselles* or even perhaps the women themselves before they took centre stage. Thus, Caulfield's painting might also be interpreted as the conversion of the spectator in those *Two Women*.

Lastly we have another valuable Pop example of *Les Demoiselles* by Derek Boshier, clearly a transexual version from its title: *Les messieurs d'Avignon*, dated in 2003 [Fig. 1]. The painting actually consists of a scene in which various open books can be seen. A full-page illustration of one shows the "messieurs:" all the figures have been masculinized, four of them are exhibiting their genitals to the spectator. The figure on the left has acquired undeniably negroid features, the one at his side has grown a beard and the seated figure on the lower right settles, once and for all, the debate as to whether it is facing or has its back to the spectator: legs are splayed wide unashamedly showing his male genitalia to his audience. We should probably consider Boshier's work as a queer version of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. It is something unknown and unseen so far in the work's literature. It is, nevertheless, being purposefully explored by artists. We will return to a similar version below but for the moment let it suffice to say that if the field of criticism or artistic historiography is moved to that of artistic practice, new questions will arise.

All these recreations of the painting particularly emphasize the iconic character of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, comparable to *Guernica*, or the *Mona Lisa*. It was massively reproduced and circulated to every corner of the planet and the extreme familiarity we feel in its presence makes it an ideal candidate for losing the aura and, so to speak, becoming something so familiar as to become invisible or go unnoticed. This is consideration of the emblematic image, subjected to massive and uncontrolled circulation that is stressed in the versions of the Demoiselles created by the contemporary artists. When a masterpiece becomes a celebrity it is no longer to be gazed at. It just has to be simply recognised (Gersh-Nesic 2007, 13). This is something mentioned already by Robert Rosenblum (1973, 45): "In the case of world-famous masterpieces that circulate literally in millions of reproductions, familiarity nourishes the indifference of invisibility."

Appropiating Picasso

Some of the earliest versions of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* date from 1958 in the form of tapestry wall-hangings by Jacqueline de La Baume Dürrbach. They can be seen decorating Picasso's studio at La Californie in the photographs taken by Edward Quinn or Paul Popper around 1960. The collaboration between Picasso and Jacqueline de la Baume Dürrbach dates back to the 1950s. The weaver's workshop in Cavalaire (that had once belonged to one of Picasso's mentors, the Cubist painter Gleizes), produced 27 tapestries based on works by Picasso. In the majority of cases, three copies were made of each one, and, as was the case with *Les Demoiselles*, Picasso kept one for himself, as well as overseeing the product from the first cartoon sketch to the final result. These tapestries pose interesting questions about authorship, originality or the

multiple problems inherent in collective works. Therefore, truth to tell, they are precisely that: multiple personality works that are the fruit of a collaboration between various artists. This leads us to reflect on the copy and the original as well as the adaptations and interpretations of Picasso's works. In short they are just one more of the interpretations of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* because Jacqueline de La Baume's tapestries are always different to Picasso's originals. In fact, as Godefroy assures us, that of *Les Demoiselles* was not approved of by Alfred Barr, the former director of the New York MoMA who considered the weaver had taken too many liberties with both the colours and the composition while Picasso himself not only approved of it but hung it in his studio at La Californie and, according to different testimonies, considered it better than the original (Godefroy 2015, 4). In general one perceives that in the tapestry the brushstrokes become lines of colours that endow the whole with a more decorative aspect than in the original. Curiously, as in the case of the more Pop interpretations of the work, its character of a comic strip or drawing and the asymmetries of the faces as well as the transition between the different shades of colour is accentuated. In addition, the dimensions of the tapestry are slightly larger than the original. In the authenticity certificate of the tapestry both the name of the weaver and the painter are included. It is, therefore, an example of artistic collaboration that by implicating the creator best embodies the notion of 20th century genius (with all the connotations of the ineffable and inimitable character associated with this notion) and signifies also an authentic challenge to the cliché of the genius.

Many of the questions raised by Jacqueline de La Baume's tapestry on authorship, authenticity, interpretation, falsification, the copy, the original and more, are those on which the artistic activity of one of the outstanding trends at the end of the 20th century are centred: Appropriationism. And if we observe this trend, we can see that the works of artists like Mark Bidlo or Richard Prince, based on Picasso, underline precisely the open character of the work of art through a strategy of dethroning the "author" in order to snatch away the monopoly of the work's meaning and offer it, in part, to the spectator.

In 1972, the critic Leo Steinberg had ventured to suggest that *Les Demoiselles* could become the paradigm of Modernism because it was inclined to grant the spectator, not the author, the responsibility for the cohesion of the work. At the end of the 20th century, the literal copy, stroke by stroke that Bidlo made of this key work in his *Not Picasso (Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907)* in 1984 short circuited any attempt to give the work an original meaning. Neither Picasso the painter, nor his person and biography, nor even the historical moment when the work was painted, 1907, would serve as clues to puzzle out a meaning that now would be considered misleading if not nonexistent if it emanated from these causes or factors.

Bidlo's version is so literal that some would have no compunction in describing it as plagiarism. However, all appropriationism implies a modification in the way of perceiving what had been perceived before. Bidlo himself comments: "These works of art (celebrity masterpieces) are like found objects

and a lost visual vocabulary waiting to be unearthed, and reassessed and renegotiated for the present day and time" (video cit. by Gersh Nesic 2007, 13).

It is widely known that the theoretical basis for Bidlo, Prince and other appropiationist artists in the 80s and 90s was to be found in French post-structuralist phlosophy, specifically in the theories on the absence of the author formulated by thinkers such as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. In the famous essay by the former, "Death of the Author" he affirmed that positivism, summary and result of capitalist ideology, had given the greatest importance to the "persona" of the author when interpreting a work of art, dragging the common culture with it to convince it that the author tyrannically dominates its centre with his person, history, tastes and passions and it should search for the explanation of the work almost exclusively in its author who was divulging his secrets while creating it (Barthes 1984).

In the field of plastic arts in the 70s and 80s the climate propitiated by the French theory could be detected in art criticism as well. This was especially true in the case of someone as influential as Rosalind Krauss who, as we saw in the previous chapter, would take the specific example of texts about Picasso as the paradigm for a critique devoted—wrongly—to the author instead of centering on the work. As we have seen Rosalind Krauss (1981, 5–22) was sufficiently explicit and critical in an article eloquently entitled "In the Name of Picasso," about the type of historiography based on the biography of authors and it is precisely what has been preferably applied to the work of this painter. We have seen how, in earlier chapters, Picasso not only lay down on the couch. His erotic, sentimental and sexual inclinations have been explored to almost obscene extremes in an attempt to discover the ultimate meaning of *Les Demoiselles* and much of his artistic production, proving what Krauss, Barthes and Foucault may have suspected: that the reduction of a work of art to the biographical vicissitudes of its author is one of the most fruitless solipsistic ways of understanding art. According to Foucault, the author's request, not as the individual who writes, speaks or pronounces a text but as the origin of the union of the discourse which reveals the hidden meaning of the work, articulated from his private life is no longer relevant (Foucault 1971). Both Mark Bidlo and Richard Prince explore the same type of arguments in their artistry; the author as a succession of masks or even as a dissembler. Ultimately, the author will be he who claims for himself the spoken word, the written word, the painted but not its owner, let alone its best interpreter.

With the author dead, a whole series of considerations open around the spectator, as we have been seeing. For Barthes (1984, 66), the rebellion against the author's tyranny is a rejection of God and the trinity of reason, science and the law. It requires forsaking only one sole point of origin and explanation of the work. Thus, on removal of the author figure, a whole constellation of elements previously silenced emerges: chance, recognition of the multiplicity of meanings and the importance of amending the work through the eyes of the recipient, questioning the truth and beauty of the content and so on. Then the work becomes an *opera aperta*, a "meaning machine" as Octavio Paz wrote about Duchamp. The work now depends on the spectators because they set in motion the mechanism of the signs that comprise the work.

> At the present time, Barthes adds, we know that, rather than being a line of words that conveys one divine meaning as if it were a message from the Author-God, a text is a multi-dimensioned space in which different scripts are reconciled and contrasted, none of which is the original. The text is a fabric woven from quotations and citations from a thousand cultural sources. (Barthes 1984, 65).

From the literal copy proposed by Bidlo, in a task akin to that of Borges' *Pierre Ménard* with Quixote, we must add the variations of the same theme that some of Richard Prince's series gathered and which were shown at the Picasso Museum in Malaga in the spring of 2012 (Lebrero 2012). Notions such as those of Barthes can be observed in the recreation that Prince made of the female figure from Picasso's works. His series comprise works that are a collage of images of women, or more precisely, of nudes, combining photographs with painting, to which he added graphic details such as fragments of bodies (especially disproportionate legs or hands) or faces. These latter are superimposed on the bodies like masks and were, undoubtedly, inspired by the female faces Picasso created at different moments in his artistic life and offer an almost complete repertoire of the artist's work. When contemplating some of Prince's compositions, the spectator feels urged to remember the different Picassos (the painter appears multiplied) and accept the nude not as a natural item of reality but as an entirely artistic genre referred to in recreations that can be traced back through the history of painting. Thus the fact that Picasso resorted to Ingres, Delacroix, Cézanne and many other painters to give shape to his nudes is in the forefront just as Ingres and classical painting, who in his turn accomplished this by copying, whether real nude women or statues from Greece or Rome. Furthermore, Roman sculpture in its turn came via the statues from the classical Greek civilisation, as far back as the first classical female nude, the Afrodite of Knidus. And having returned thus far, we must admit that the creation of this first female nude in Greek sculpture, long-lasting sign of the sensuality and voluptuosity of the woman down the centuries of Western culture, might be considered, judging by some patterns of femininity, as an unusual female body. Her relatively small breasts, her child-like pubis or the almost rectilinear silhouette of the trunk, waist and hips might make it difficult to find her model in a real woman.

Thus, the reference for Prince's bizarre bodies is not a real or tangible woman but one who has gone astray or is lost and shows that the images can only be explained through other images that arise from an immense, previously prepared catalogue. A catalogue that admits, furthermore, that this imagery is not composed exclusively from a repertoire concocted within the too-narrow framework of high culture. It also includes mass media communication and cultures, other than the European that has been called "primitive" for so long. Barthes wrote "a text is constituted by multiple writings—as the Prince/Picassos demonstrate, we might add- from various cultures that together establish a dialogue, a parody, a questioning" and all this abundance of diversity is gathered up in the reader/ spectator, in the space where all mentions of the work are inscribed and reveal

that the unity of the text resides in him, whose birth was made possible by the death of the Author (Barthes 1984, 67).

In the case of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the recognition of this brings about two immediate consequences: on the one hand, the absurdity of trying to explain the work through Picasso's biography (which may affect questioning of the painter's huge bibliography); and on the other, recognition that as there is no sole origen, there is also no sole gaze which, in turn, signifies the opening for other meanings of the work from a multiplicity of gazes. Or, in other words, challenging the universal, natural and objective validity of the gaze through which the work had been considered and evaluated previously. As we have seen in a previous chapter, everything was now prepared for the emergence of gazes that did not conform to the hegemonic and would even occasion a fierce questioning of it, especially a condemnation of the universalist claim of an interpretation that now, unmasked, revealed the overly-narrow attitudes that the feminist critique had been disclosing since the Sixties. It is also a seam frequently exploited by artists.

The Emergence of Other Gazes

We have already seen that within the critique of Modernism, the gender and post-colonialist approaches had already raised these questions and opened the way for the problematization of the relation between work and spectator that, up till then had seemed, neutral, natural and not subject to conditions such as the "identity" of the gazer. There are examples of artistic practice within these same parameters that even Picasso himself made use of.

The painter Damien Elwes, specialised in recreating the studios of famous contemporary artists (like Calder, Warhol, Frida Kahlo, Miró, Matisse, Yayoi Kusama and so on) made a series of Picasso's successive studios from different periods. In the one corresponding to the beginnings of Cubism he captured the inside of Picasso's studio in the Bateau Lavoir building [Fig. 2] showing *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* together with other period pieces like *Three Women* and other drawings from his sketchbooks of the time. He also includes the small Iberian figure from the Cerro de los Santos. Nevertheless, I really want to point out the many allusions to tribal art in the works that we normally see in photographs of Picasso or his group of friends at that time. For example the *Mukuyi* mask from Punu in Gabon that appears in the photographs of Picasso's studio in Boulevard Clichy, is hanging on the wall. There are also a pair of male and female 19th century *Kanak* sculptures from New Caledonia, a royal tom-tom drum from the Congo c. 1900 and a 19th century *Kele* harp from Gabon which, from photographs, was also in the studio at Bateau Lavoir. In his own way, Damien Elwes's painting establishes a strong link between Cubism and non-European or tribal art.

But, the combination of the post-colonialist and feminist positions on the prostitutes of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* can be seen, above all, in the work of Faith Ringgold who we must place in the framework of the Subaltern Theory. At the start of the 1990s, Faith Ringgold, an Afro-American artist born in Har-

lem in 1930, made the series *The French Collection*, a collection of *story quilts*.[2] These works combine visual language with verbal narrative in a story made of scraps of fabric surrounded by a band telling a tale. It is a creative process traditionally associated with a labour considered appropriate for women.This type of quilt, typical of popular culture in the United States, was a sewing task usually bestowed on females. In fact, it was a way of representing and conserving a memory of the family's own story and customarily was inherited by the female line so that the continuity of the story and the conservation of the family memory was guaranteed down the years.

Ringgold conceived the idea for her story quilts in 1980, after deciding to focus her artistic career in the direction of Africa, instead of gazing towards Greece (Graulic and Witzling 2001, 184–209). In one of the quilts in the first part of the series, *Picnic in Giverny* the artist establishes "the role of women (above all Afro-American women) in art" as one of her basic themes. The quilt depicts a group of colourfully dressed women, picnicking on the grass—*déjeuner sur l'herbe*. There is only one representative of the male sex, in the lower left corner in a doubly eccentric situation: he is a copy of the naked woman in Manet's *Déjeuner* although his face is that of Picasso, taken from a well-known photograph, wearing a typical Cordoban *sombrero*. The women, on the other hand are clothed and they are not generic, nor are they symbols or allegories of anything as they have normally been depicted throughout the history of Western painting. They are portraits, in the majority of recognised feminist activists, some even friends of the painter. The key to this work is the presence of women who are neither generic nor symbolic: who are there representing themselves in their singularity as individuals, speaking with their own voices. In fact, the "painter-genius" Picasso assumes the passive role of the model (even to the point of having a naked female body) while the active function of the creator is entrusted to a woman, the protagonist of these tales, called Willia Maria, who we can identify on the right, painting and "immortalizing" the scene on canvas. It is clear from this that Ringgold's work has to do with questions of gender and ethnic minorities, specifically Afro-American. Her work embraces, unambiguously, her condition of a black woman artist, moved by the need to speak with her own voice (Graulic and Witzling 2001, 186). We should also remember that Ringgold, as well as an artist, has also published children's books and other narratives.

This series of quilts tells the fictitious story of Willia Maria Simona, a young woman who decides to go to Paris to study Fine Arts during the 1920s as a way of inserting Afro-American presence into the heart of Parisian Modernism, in other words, into one of the bulwarks of male artistic hegemony. Hence the presence and humorously ironic allusions to the illustrious painters of modern art like Picasso, Manet or Degas. The story quilts of the *French Collection* always

[2] Patchwork quilts that tell family stories, typically traditional in the USA, made by women and according to legend, linked with the history of abolitionism although at the time some might have been made by supporters of it.

include a masterpiece of Western modern art and Graulic and Witzling assure us that "her quilts are a solid affirmation of Afro-American women's creative authority and their potential redeemer" (Graulic and Witzling 2001, 188).[3] Willia Maria, Faith Ringgold's *alter ego,* explores the possibility of these muses and models being subjects talking of their own lives.

In one of the works of the series, *Picasso's Studio, The French Collection, Part I: #7,* we can see an interesting reinterpretation of *Les Demoiselles*. The scene depicts Picasso's studio: on the lower left corner the artist, in underpants (his usual wear) is painting. The portrait he is painting on the blank canvas is presumably the portrait of Willia Maria who is posing, nude, in front of him, holding her arms on high, hands on her head and surrounded by African masks and Picasso's canvases, including *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* among them. Willia Maria is sitting with her back to the canvas and appears to be surrounded by the young women, as if they were her faithful companions. There is no doubt that she identifies with the models and not with the artist-painter, despite the fact that according to the narrative of the series Willia Maria is a painter or she is studying painting in Paris. The texts of these quilts, that tell us of the protagonist's adventures in the capital of avant-garde art, transcribe a correspondence between Willia Maria and her aunt Melissa. This correspondence is used as a resource for relating the aunt's advice, for recounting the young painter's life in Paris and uses this medium to offer opinions on art and especially the role of a black woman in this milieu. Willia Maria shares her feelings on posing in the nude with her "Aunt Melissa" and tells her that while she posed, she heard the voices of Picasso's masks although over these she was hearing her aunt referring to the ancestral role of artist's model as she tells her, among other things in an inscription on the quilt itself:

> 3. Europeans discovered your image as art at the same time they discovered Africa's potential for slavery and colonisation. They dug up centuries of our civilisation, and then called us savages and made us slaves. First they take the body, then the soul. Or maybe it is the soul, then the body. The sequence doesn't matter... (Cameron 1988, 137).

Willia Maria continues telling her aunt that she became an artist because it was the only way to free herself: "*N'importe* what color you are you can do what you want *avec ton art*", just as Picasso did. She adds "the European artists took a look at us and changed the way they saw themselves". And above all, sitting there in Picasso's studio amidst the *demoiselles,* "It's the African mask straight from the African faces that I look at in Picasso's studio and his art. He has the power to deny what he doesn't want to acknowledge. But art is the

[3] In this same interview, with regard to the presence of French artists in her work, Faith Ringgold explains that she was formed as an artist copying these artists whom she had to emulate and adds: "these artists were inside me and I had to cast them out because they could have become lethal" (Graulic and Witzling 2001: 189).

truth, not the artist. Doesn't matter what he says about where it comes from. We see where, everytime we look in the mirror" (Cameron 1988, 137). To wit, a declaration of principles on the debt owed by the work to African art. In this manner Ringgold's work underlines the reproach Gikandi directed at the authors of the modernist narrative for denying the crucial role played by African art in the eclosion of modern artistic forms that we associate with the varied and contradictory declarations by Picasso on the matter in the phrase, as famous as it is offensive: "*Art nègre? Je ne connais pas*."

This is the moment to remember an earlier-mentioned fact. In the present installation at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that was completely remodelled in 2019, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* is no longer surrounded exclusively by Cubist paintings as it had been before. Now it shares the space with a canvas by Afro-American Faith Ringgold entitled *People's series #20. Die*, from 1967 and a sculpture, *Quarantania 1,* by Louise Bourgeois. The name of this room, "Around *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*" was chosen because Picasso's young ladies share space with two women artists of the 20th century whose work involves a systematic challenging of the canon of Modernism's assumptions from feminist and post-colonialist points of view. The so-called Kremlin of modern art that is the MoMA thus accepts and embraces the impact of the new critical discourses through new expositive discourses.

It is also possible to identify a post-colonialist style proposal in two works from 1985 by Robert Colescott entitled *Demoiselles d'Alabama (Naked)* and *Demoiselles d'Alabama (Clothed)*. This is appropriation understood as the process of taking a painting and giving it a different meaning or use to that originally intended by the artist, contemplating the possibility of even giving it a diametrically opposed meaning. "In some sense, he confesses, I would be stealing the painting -its idea and aspect- for my own use" (Fitzgerald 1997, 14–9). Both versions depict a multi-racial group made up of three black-skinned women, one brown-skinned and a blonde. In the first instance the intention is to focus on the racial differences, perhaps to call attention to the popular stereotypes of black people in sexually explicit circumstances as Beth S. Gersh-Nesic proposes in *The Demoiselles Revisited* catalogue. It could equally be an explicit declaration on the debate of African art in Modernism that we have discussed earlier.

If Ringgold's or Collescott's young ladies are avenging the determining influence of the feminine and the Afro-American in the conception of modern art, in the reinterpretations executed by the Spanish artist Rafael Agredano the result is hyper transexualization of the work with an undertone of queer. One can also find an ironic questioning of Picasso's own sexuality, a sort of jocular visual comment on the psychoanalytic theses on the painter's alleged homosexuality although Agredano belies the seriousness and gravity of these hypotheses with an image overflowing with sarcasm and humour.

In this regard it is interesting to note that there is a curious interpretation of *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Duchamp's famous postcard of the *Gioconda* with a moustache and goatee beard, which we owe to Dalí who once compared museums to broth-

els because they were full of naked women. And in the midst of all these unclothed women, there is the *Gioconda*, dressed in her heavy robes, performing her role of the great asexual mother and refusing to be contaminated by the brothel context. And lastly, as he added that as the only way to sexualize the Mona Lisa would be to convert her into a man, Duchamp did this by painting her with a moustache and goatee beard. Changing the sex of Picasso's young naked women could have the same effect and Agredano achieved this in his 1994 versions of *Les Demoiselles* as *Avignon Guys* (referring both to the "boys" and the gays of Avignon) or *La chambre en noir* (1995-96) as we have also seen in Derek Boshier's work.

In both these works the young women have been converted into "young men" and the experience of a sex change has reinforced their sexual character: in Agredano's case there is also the renewal of the sexual service options offered by these personages as professional sex workers for sale. They have become male prostitutes. The *Avignon Guys* look extraordinarily like the young women of Avignon: they are clearly recognisable, now trapped in their brawny masculine bodies and their well-groomed short hair. Their male genitals are barely hidden by jockstraps—a remarkably efficient source of hilarity—or fabric. The typical resource of hachure or hatching, (that formalist historians have always stressed as a Cubist technique of affirming the painting in itself and that in the original version served as an indication of the female breast) has become a mark with irreverent connotations on the young man in the upper right corner: male chest hair. And for the figure in the lower left corner, Agredano, as did Boshier, resolves once and for all the old debate as to whether the young woman was positioned with her body facing backwards or forwards (in which case the obscene character of her figure and the painting would be doubled because she would be brazenly exhibiting her genitals to the spectator). The body of the young man sprawling is definitely, without a shadow of doubt, facing forwards. Another detail of this reinterpretation is the accentuation of the mask effect on the faces of three of the figures.

La chambre en noir, on the other hand, is not just another male brothel scene because the presence of bondage and black leather serve to establish a more specialised menu of sadomasochist practices. It is impossible not to associate this SM presence with comics or cinema; impossible not to remember the sequences in *Pulp Fiction,* Tarantino's movie that converted the fancies of a couple of perverse sadists into an occasion for macabre humour.

In any event, in both paintings the sex of their personages has been transformed and this transexuality causes a disturbance in the relation between the work and the spectator. It may be that they continue to favour the fact that the spectator will be masculine but they have destabilised his gaze by offering a preferably homosexual, and not heterosexual, bias. There is clearly a humorous and sarcastic element in these which does not exclude the serious inferences that we can use to interpret *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon.* The humour reveals itself as a firm ally of the destabilizing gazes of the hegemonic interpretations and forces us to question ourselves, the nature of our gaze and the conventions about our sexuality.

Here the spectator is no longer a macho predator of female flesh, as apparently Picasso was, but what about female spectator? Perhaps now she is fully recognising her role as an accomplice of the protagonists. Whatever the case, both for him and for her, extra consideration on the nature of the conditions of their gaze is needed so that they can become totally conscious of their condition as spectator and voyeur.

I would not want to conclude the commentaries on "the young men" of Avignon without mentioning, albeit briefly, the load of subversion and irreverence they contain that points directly to discrediting the perhaps excessively entrenched Picasso myth. Above all because there are other artists who are currently working on the critical questioning of this "myth" as we shall see. In fact, parody and demythologization are what can be found in *The Modern Procession* (New York 2002) video by the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs[4] and in the collective workshop *Surviving October,* promoted in 2012 by the artists Rogelio López Cuenca and Elo Vega who have worked for many years on what has come to be known as the "Picassofication" of Malaga, the painter's birthplace that has had its rejoinder in the "Malaganization" of Picasso.

In 2002, when the MoMA of New York moved from its location in Manhattan to its new premises in Queens, for reasons we will see further on, Alÿs proposed to the board of trustees that a performance take place, with the public symbolically processing and carrying some of the masterpieces of the collection on their shoulders. Remembering here the context is important: prompted by the winds of change that were blowing in the critical discourse on Modernism at the close of the 20th century the great avant-garde institutions were reorganising their collections, as we have seen before. Thus, in 2000 the museum temporarily closed the doors of its premises in Manhattan to undertake architectural improvements as part of the process of renovation of its museology and museography. It had urgently to confront the critics who were saying that the influential discourse flowing from the museum had become so obsolete, so canonic, with such a narrowlackluster and authoritarian vision, that it had rightly earned the title of "The Kremlin of Modern Art." To postmodern eyes everything that stemmed from it appeared too much like mainstream: an inadvisable impression for a contemporary art centre with avant-garde vocation.

Alÿs proposed his performance in this context of reorganisation of the accumulated contemporary art collections and the updating of their discourses, basically sharing these critical points of view. Understandably his procession did not use the authentic works but was staged using reproductions of the iconic works in the museum where, naturally, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* occupied the place of honour. They were accompanied by a Giacometti sculpture, Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* and a work by the living artist Kiki Smith. From

4 Download the video of the procession on http://francisalys.com/the-modern-procession/ (consulted 25.02.2017).

photographs and a video we can watch the young ladies in procession along the avenues, streets, tunnels and bridges of New York. Alÿs's proposal was, among others, a literal reproduction of one of the most famous quotes on *Les Demoiselles* that we owe to André Breton: "*Voilà le tableau qu'on promènerait, comme autrefois la Vierge de Cimabue, à travers les rue de notre capitale*!" (cit. in Dupuis-Labbé 2007, 134). Dated in 1924, it would now be revealed as the fulfillment of a prophecy. Nevertheless, the performance also contained a sarcastic commentary on the whole process of uncritical exaltation of 20th century avant-garde art. If the photographs and videos of the event transmitted to perfection the festive atmosphere, in the sketches and collages made for the project by the artist, an ironic or parodic character can be perceived. The transfer of the MoMA masterpieces emulated the way in which the Catholic Church processes its sacred images through the streets during Easter Week. The artist was inspired by the religious traditions of Latin-America and so, the demoiselles, the bicycle wheel and the other works were escorted by a specie of lay penitents, fanfares, horses and MoMA banners. In one of his collages, next to a drawing of the participants in procession along the route sketched on a map of New York, there is a reproduction of *Les Demoiselles* next to an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, deeply venerated in Mexico where Alÿs, albeit born in Belgium, has lived and worked since 1986. Two kindred spirits and a warning wink against all uncritical consideration and glorification of modern art.

Something similar could be said of the collective workgroup who worked on the *Surviving October* studio project [Fig. 3], coordinated by Rogelio López Cuenca and Elo Vega (<http://elovega.net/surviving-october>). This project is part of a work in progress that proposes "a series or critical rereadings of the collective identity processes surrounding the figure of Picasso in the city of Malaga" (Vega 2012) in the context of their widespread use for selling the Malaga trademark in the global tourist market. The rampant and mythomaniac cultural activity happening around the figure of the "genius of Malaga," with the process of commercialization of culture and the unconditional surrender of the city to the contemporary tourist logic is identified (and condemned as reprehensible).

Arising from the *Surviving Picasso* initiative developed during 2012, the title of which (borrowed from the biography of Françoise Gilot, one of Picasso's partners) is more than eloquent, the *Surviving October* workshop became critically involved in the "Picassian October." This is an official commemoration of exhibitions and cultural activities centred round the painter that is celebrated yearly in Malaga to mark his October birthday. The collective proposed a kind of exhibition on the website http://www.malagana.com/surviving_picasso/intro.html, comprising the resemblance to an Advent calendar that offered a daily proposal on Picasso's work and his links to the city. Just as artistic proposals of the post-colonialists used *Les Demoiselles* to offer a critical observation on the stereotypes that linked blackness and sexuality, in this workshop Picasso's young prostitutes served as a base for critically considering the true state of prostitution in the modern world by contrasting the artistic image of the prostitute, usually

aseptic and neutralizing, with that of their actual condition and real problems. In this project *Les Demoiselles* occupied a place of honour, not as an object of general admiration but to express criticism on the use and abuse of the figure of the prostitute in the history of painting. This was particularly so in the avant-gardes where the availability of naked female bodies was exploited while systematically eluding the true condition of the women who worked as prostitutes at that time. Once again we observe by emphasising the female body, specifically that of prostitutes, it appears merely generic and allegorical, hiding reality. At the same time it contextualizes the problem of present day prostitution in the 21st century, in a southern European city like Malaga, affected by the economic crisis and appeals for solidarity with this group of workers against the repression they suffer from different municipal rulings. On the 3 October of this curious calendar on the web *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* appear to decry that the invasion of high art by prostitutes as objects of fantasy and admiration can only happen by socially degrading their flesh and blood until they become invisible, excluded and silenced. To do this the web for that day combined texts about modern-day prostitution with news items on the real situation and the actual criminalisation of prostitutes in Malaga, revealed to be linked to the gentrification process of the city, and illustrated with Picasso's erotic drawings. The 4 October presents an appeal to demonstrate indignation in the face of these circumstances by downloading and printing masks of the five young ladies' faces [Fig. 4]. The 9 October offers the possibility of downloading the slogan "We are all Demoiselles d'Avignon" in three languages—English, Spanish and French—to print on T-shirts and thus "show, wear and display dignity and dissent." This slogan is a fitting synthesis of the majority of contemporary artistic proposals: they invite us to experience putting ourselves in the place of the Demoiselles, as the subject and not restrict ourselves to being merely its passive spectators. All art-gazing does, after all, imply accepting the challenge to construct a renewed subjectivity.

We have looked at a very wide range of versions of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the repertory of contemporary artistic creation but those we have analysed are by no means all. Confronting them we come to the conclusion that the artists have devoted themselves, fundamentally, to reversing the wave of aggression that the conventional critique of the work has traditionally attributed to the prostitutes represented therein. Consequently, the aggression, according to the most recent versions, does not stem from the naked woman, let alone the painted prostitute. Rather it stems from the oppressive condition to which the real prostitute, and female subjects in general, were exposed. Almost all these versions of the young ladies plead for them to be freed from their condition, pinpointing the origin of their submission as much in Picasso the painter as in modern painting and the canonic critical discourse on Modernism until very recently. In short, it is directly a ferocious questioning of the very presuppositions on which modern art itself is founded.

Fig. 1. Derek Boshier, *Les Messieurs d'Avignon*, 2003. Website Derek Boshier: https://www.derekboshier.com/about-paris-winter-2003. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 2. Damien Elwes, *Picasso's studio at Bateau Lavoir 1908*, 2010, mixed media on canvas. Collection of Antonio Banderas. Courtesy of the artist.

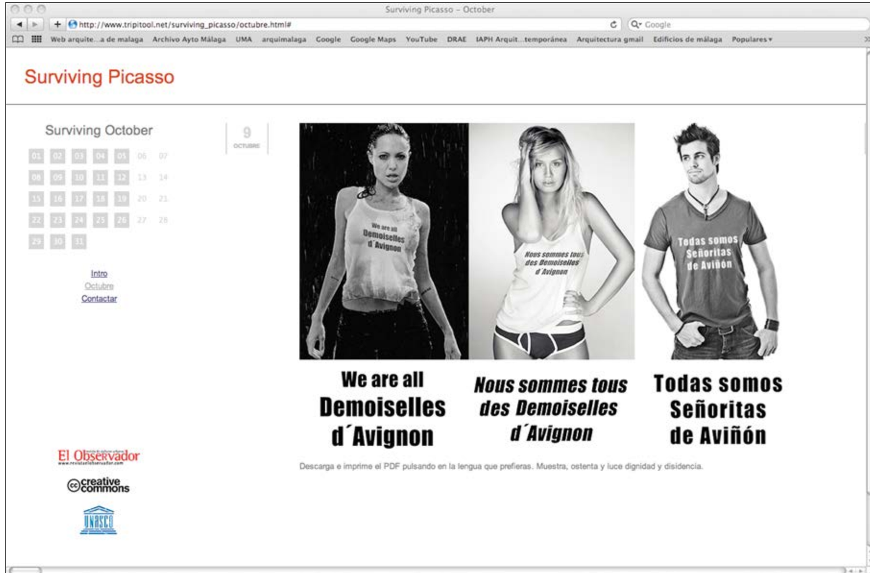

Fig. 3. Rogelio López Cuenca y Elo Vega, Proyecto Surviving Picasso / Sobrevivir a Picasso October, 2014. Website: https://www.lopezcuenca.com/proyectos/surviving-october/octubre1.html#.

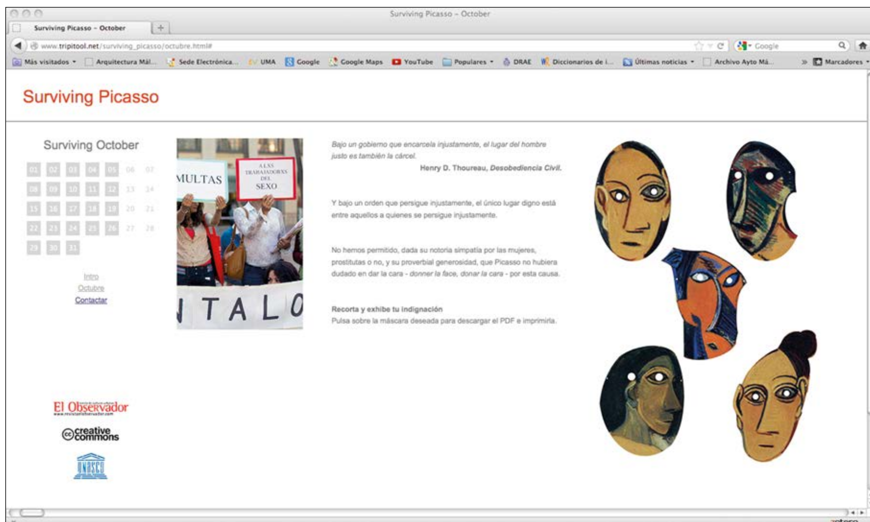

Fig. 4. Rogelio López Cuenca y Elo Vega Proyecto Surviving Picasso / Sobrevivir a Picasso October, 2014. Website: https://www.lopezcuenca.com/proyectos/surviving-october/octubre1.html#.

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