

# A Monster Who Tells the Truth

Exhibition series curated by Pilar Cruz

# Vanesa Varela

## Memory in Our Hands

From 18 January  
to 24 March 2019

At the centre of this project by Vanesa Varela (Lugo, 1979) is the waist loom. This ancient and rudimentary textile tool, developed in many cultures of the Mediterranean, Asia, America and Africa, has survived industrialisation and is still used today in many parts of the world.

Small in size and well adapted to a scarcity of means, this type of loom is characterised by its simple structure and portability, which are key to its easy handling. The vertical threads of the warp are tied at one end to a fixed point—usually a tree or post—while the other end is tied with a sash or belt to the waist of the weaver, who with their posture tautens the threads in order to interweave the strands. In this way, the body constitutes a fundamental part of the loom. The measurements of the resulting weave are limited by the measurements of the body that handles it—its movements are what produce the variations in texture.

As part of the installation we find bodies dressed in two types of garments associated with the imagery of work in the factory and the

field: on the one hand, the classic blue overalls worn by workers, and on the other, the floral robe: female symbol and uniform worn in traditional rural and domestic contexts. The bodies, connected to each other and to the ground by means of the loom's threads, allow the inclusion of the spectator who, as they approach, will activate a series of narrations that will transport them on a journey back and forwards in time that connects fabric and body. These threads link Herodotus with the archaeological excavations of Bronze Age Greece and the Luddite conflict of the *selfactinas*\* (term derived from the 'self-acting' spinning mule) in Barcelona, through to the robustness of Penelope's hand or the moment in which sheep decided to stop moulting their wool.

These stories allude to the oral tradition, a basic form of knowledge transmission marginalised by certain academic movements that assume that memory cannot be archived/stored orally or in the rituality and repetition of gestures, since they are evanescent practices and are therefore deemed inaccurate. But seeing as language often falls short, this project transcends the word and refers to the body as a transmitter, receptacle and central element of knowledge production. For philosopher Gaston Bachelard, the body has memory—the unconscious is stored in it—and the gestural repertoire can be transferred and inherited. As for his part,

anthropologist Michael Jackson argues that words and concepts distinguish and divide, while the body unites and promotes an empathetic and universal understanding. He also insists on the importance of bodily practices to define our social identity, even over intellectualised and privileged verbal praxis.

Overcoming the forms of discourse, language and the concepts that order knowledge, in Vanesa Varela's proposal, the materiality and physicality of bodies together take precedence and become more important. The artist considers how bodies recognise and support each other when they work collectively and are related choreographically, and how the workers alienate themselves when the gesture of work ceases to be reflected in other bodies. Varela tries to unravel textile memory: in the room, one can see drawings that reflect the gestural genealogy of different textile techniques, analysed during a previous workshop in collaboration with groups such as the Grup de Mitja Subversiva, the Niu d'Aranyes sewing group or the Banc Expropiat waist loom workshop.

With *Memory in Our Hands*, Varela upholds a reconnection with the human scale, with nature and with the ways in which we inherit knowledge,

as well as with weaving as a form of text and as a container of memory and collective identity. Her proposal is also a reflection on the world of work, through pre-industrial technologies in which the body is the protagonist and owner of the means of production, and is not mechanised or devoured by subsequently developed technologies. The textile industry has been a fundamental element in the development of the second industrial revolution and the organisation of labour, establishing a relationship of supremacy of machines over human beings. And despite having been a key sector in the history of the struggle for workers' rights, today, almost two centuries later, it remains one of the least ethical and sustainable in the globalised production system.

### Pilar Cruz

\* The introduction of the self-acting spinning mule reduced in the need for labour and allowed this type of machinery to be operated by women and children. In 1854, faced with the loss of their jobs, textile workers initiated the burning of several factories and a conflictual strike in Barcelona.

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