

## As If It Were a Harp

As I write these words, I am watching *Urdimbre* (2008) and *Tramas* (2008),<sup>1</sup> two videos by Teresa Lanceta in which images of her loom succeed one another, rhythmically, willing to build a picture.

A warp is a set of yarns into which weft threads are carefully entwined. But instead of a cloth, what we see here is a projection in the making on a loom. While this is happening, a sound exercise in percussion is playing out.

We also see the artist's hands, which hint at the peaceful body of one engrossed in the repetitive gesture that anticipates representation and exercises the imagination. In *Tramas*, representation is defined by flowers, fleeting nuances and flashes of light; in *Urdimbre*, by a succession of colours that inverts the roles of patterning: the weft tinges white and from the warp emerges colour.

Then comes the gaze and, with it, the confabulation – that which describes another kind of weave: the interpretation. What does this representation reveal? Teresa says, 'For a botanist, *trama* means "flowering"', and 'for a writer, it is a storyline'.<sup>2</sup> But for a weaver like herself, this crossover gives rise not only to a utilitarian object, but going further still, it becomes a 'standard of culture'.<sup>3</sup> Whether weavers, writers or botanists, we are all ultimately in thrall to composition.

In conversation with a student, Teresa said that 'weaving is like life: you have to live with your mistakes and build on them and create something you didn't anticipate'.<sup>4</sup> Weaving is an open code from which one reads, transforms and transmits a knowledge that is always complex and circumstantial. Time becomes a unit of life experience, a measured choreography.

And so, as Lanceta approaches weaving, without a plan and embracing error, I write these lines, consciously resisting argumentation. What drives me is admiration and intuition. And first-hand experience. I mean, I have recourse to knowledge gained from mounting an exhibition. My intuition grows with the words, the sound of the keys tapping in truncated melody, the heavy silences that fold into the sonorities at the frontiers of our bodies – keys and strings – doubling as soundtrack.

I long for a voice that sings. Writing is the closest I get to fulfilling this desire I am denied.<sup>5</sup> This remark gives us clues as to why in *Tramas* and *Urdimbre* we can hear the sounds of fingers, needle and comb working. As if the loom were a harp, and written words a voice. At the keys, meanwhile, another composition awaits. Because in Lanceta's work orality begets a story, and Teresa knows well that a storyline conspires to the detriment of memory.

So, let us cast our minds back. These two videos were made in 2008 following the financial blackout that

opened the austerity gap, the same gap that two years later crept into article 135 of our Constitution during the hot August holidays. For during that summer of 2011, we were 'sold out', as Lanceta says, in the great bank bailout: 'All levels of Public Administration will adapt their actions to the principle of budgetary stability. The State and the Autonomous Communities shall not incur a structural deficit that exceeds the margins established, as the case may be, by the European Union for its Member States.'<sup>6</sup>

It is, however, an altogether different European story that *this* loom is weaving: that of the industrial restructuring of the mid-1980s, when Spain joined the European Economic Community, and I was born, ignorant to how this story would define an entire generation. Like so many others, my maternal family was part of the great rural exodus of people forced to leave Andalusia. My grandmother sewed, and my grandfather, with his bare hands too, built the railway for a train that years later would take us away. When my mother was only ten years old, she was put in charge of an orange warehouse and made to travel, while my Mediterranean father, the son of an *espadeneyera* (an espadrille maker) and a boat repairman, pedalled thirty kilometres a day to learn the trade of carpentry.

The suburbs (*ravals*) were rife with stories such as mine in the lead-up to democracy. Outside the walls and far from the centre, these areas, with their centripetal force, were magnets for those lured by an ideal of progress, a longing, a desire – though these were met with varying degrees of good fortune – that would replicate elsewhere in connivance with the emancipating promises of the new technologies. The gap between wages and salaries would grow. These stories progressed even as the conditions governing territorial access were being redefined. With trains and planes, new holiday periods began.

The touristification of the common experience features regularly in Lanceta's work. *Tramas* includes pictures taken by the artist on the flanks of the iconic Step Pyramid of Djoser, in Saqqara (Egypt), where, during her participation in the Eleventh Cairo Biennale, Teresa had the opportunity to visit an orphanage. The children in this orphanage wove non-stop, and those pictures provide one of the few occasions in which Lanceta illustrates otherness. Her work, which spans decades, has skirted representation. For, as indigenous peoples know full well, you don't remain in an image. The rugs of the Berber communities, from whom Lanceta has learned so much, reflect this belief; indeed, it is well known that historically barbarians were wary of having their photograph taken for fear their soul might be 'captured'. Perhaps that is why, as the pages of this publication show, faces tend to escape their stories and leave the door open to confabulation.

*Tramas*, however, is an exception. The 1980s was a decade of widespread industrial re-structuring. New models of competition and exchange were imposed in what amounted to an intensive shock treatment calculated to balance the ratio of supply and demand that would lead to plant closures, redundancies and early retirements. A new post-Fordist system of organisation and management based on services and tourism brought about the destruction of countless appliances, among them many looms.

Luckily, one of them had the good fortune to fall into Teresa's hands. It turned into a harp and from it emerged another story that arose from the blackout – not the financial one, but the artist's own personal obfuscation in a period of transition: Teresa stopped weaving, although she did not stop connecting threads of another kind. In those years of industrial change and disenchantment, Teresa turned her creative attention elsewhere. The moving image gave continuity to a narrative that embraced another discipline, one in which orality and ethnography approached the demise of *work* as the epicentre of reciprocal recognition and social relations.

*Cierre es la respuesta* (2011) is a plurivocal chronicle that Lanceta made the same year that the principle of budgetary stability was imposed on and over social spending. The closure of a tobacco factory in Alicante is related via the experiences of an affective community, reminding us that individualities are always shaped by multiplicities.

The women, the cigarette-makers, the protagonists of this other video, made of loaned video materials and oral accounts, were characters in a story about skill and loyalty – a story about an industry established in our country in the seventeenth century which in its early days enacted a tacit – and extraordinary – agreement between employers and employees that facilitated the reconciliation of childrearing and caregiving with work.

Such craftwork required skills and experience. Seated around a large table, the women hand-rolled cigarettes non-stop; and when industrialisation took over, they carried on much the same but with machines. From artisans to machine workers, they personified the dangers of mounting alienation, prompting the women to form a social collective founded on principles of solidarity that would transform the factory into a public space where they could talk, compare experiences, disagree and let off steam.

Mothers, sisters, cousins and friends. New hierarchies in the workplace brought new enemies, as managers were told to 'divide and rule' to improve productivity. 'I got my fighting, working-class spirit from my mother',<sup>7</sup> says Carmen in a shaky voice, the daughter, niece, granddaughter and great-granddaughter of cigarette makers. This is the legacy of a manufacturing community dispersed by closures and relocations to other regions, mainly Morocco and Eastern Europe, a legacy whose processes

had sedimented for three centuries, gathering voices at the frontiers of their machinist hands, and which Teresa recorded to commemorate collective work as life experiences.

As happens in *Tramas*, in which the learning processes in Saqqara reveal the uses and abuses of rising touristification, *Cierre es la respuesta* shows how one can approach *inheritance* as a vector of experience of a present perfect facing a future perfect. In short, a legacy tinged not with blame, rejection or unease (colonial, racist, debtor), but with a power capable of linking temporalities. A legacy, finally, that serves as a sediment of reciprocities and co-responsibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note: The word 'trama' can be translated into English as 'weft', 'weave', 'plot' (both storyline and conspiracy) and 'in blossom', definitions that the artist plays with and connects.

<sup>2</sup> Teresa Lanceta, <https://www.teresalanceta.com/es/Sakkara.php> [access 10.12.2021].

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Lanceta in an unpublished interview (teaching material).

<sup>5</sup> Teresa Lanceta in conversation with Ángel Calvo Ulloa, 'Una búsqueda. Tan inadvertida que pueda confundirse con el azar o la fortuna', *Dardo Magazine*, no. 37, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Amendment to article 135 of the Constitution, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa Lanceta: *De mi madre he heredado. Mujeres e industria tabaquera en Alicante*, Fourteenth Bernat Capó Award, 2011.