

Issue 156 

## Julia Montilla

ESPAI 13, FUNDACIÓ JOAN MIRÓ, BARCELONA, SPAIN



Julia Montilla, archival still from *La construcción de una aparición* (The Construction of an Apparition), 2012–13

Julia Montilla's exhibition documented a minor miracle: between 1961 and 1965, in the tiny Cantabrian village of Garabandal, four young girls allegedly received repeated supernatural visitations from the Virgin Mary and were entrusted with her prophecies. However, the so-called Garabandal apparitions are not recognized by the Vatican, though they continue to be championed by a sprawling network of international enthusiasts. Montilla documented the visions – or, rather, documented their documentation – stressing how the beholding of physical testimony can access a vast surplus of politics and patriarchy, belief and body language.

Montilla was not primarily concerned with debunking the girls' visionary experiences. Instead, the exhibition's four annotated display cases (*La construcción de una aparición*, The Construction of an Apparition, all works 2012–13) – containing books, magazines, proselytising pamphlets, religious journals, collectors' postcards, slide-lecture packs sold by 'Garabandalist' organizations, and so on – contextualized them with a forensic attention to how they were produced and publicized through photography. The girls' theophanies and trances could be understood, it was proposed, as site-specific performances in a post-Lourdes tradition of remote 'scheduled apparitions'. A monitor looped a 1971 television documentary, while an overhead projector beamed a 1994 newspaper article reporting that Hollywood were set to dramatize the autobiography of Conchita, the most precocious of the 'seers' (three of whom left Spain for the US in the 1970s) and that Luciano Pavarotti would sing the theme. Two slideshows entitled *Soportes vivientes para la fabricación de un mito* (Living Supports for the Fabrication of a Myth) were

## About this article

First published in  
Issue 156,

by Max Andrews

[BUY THIS ISSUE](#)



[Save this Article](#)

[Print this review](#)

Share this article:



## Other Reviews in this city

[re.act.feminism #2](#)

[Sculpture/Object](#)

[Utopia is Possible](#)

[Xavier Le Roy](#)

[Daniela Ortiz](#)

[1979, a Monument to Radical Moments](#)

[Ibon Aranberri](#)

[Are You Ready for TV?](#)

[Ignacio Uriarte](#)

[Manoeuvres/Maniobres](#)

## Other Articles by Max Andrews

[Utopia is Possible Issue 150](#)

[Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige Issue 148](#)

[Focus: Francesc Ruiz Issue 146](#)

[Duncan Campbell Issue 144](#)

[The Spiral and the Square Issue 143](#)

[Ibon Aranberri Issue 138](#)

[Ignacio Uriarte Issue 130](#)

[2nd Canary Islands Biennial Issue 123](#)

[Universal Archive Issue 121](#)

[Estratos Issue 116](#)

[Alexandra Navratil Shows](#)

[José Antonio Hernández-Díez Shows](#)

(26 Total). [View all »](#)

RSS Feeds 

Get the Universal feed, or the Magazine Issues feed to be updated of new reviews in this section.

accompanied by Montilla's commentary and, along with *Garabandalistas*, a new publication edited by the artist, compiled dozens of archival shots of the girls' ecstatic night-time walks, taken by various amateur and professional photographers. Staring fixedly up into the beyond, offering crucifixes and rosaries, conversing with the divine, or open-mouthed to receive invisible communion, the girls are portrayed clasping their hands together or individually writhing on the ground, stupefied by Marian divinity, and all the while seemingly oblivious to the crowds, microphones and lenses around them.

Tracking the emergence of 'trance photography' as a cult genre, Montilla considered how the documentary materials themselves have acquired venerated status as certificates of veracity. The quirk that some of the projected archival images had been noticeably pixelated in their to-and-fro from print to analogue display seemed like a confession of sorts, of Montilla's own evident hand in their ongoing dramaturgy, here in an artistic context.

In the visionary events' shift of emphasis from the small street where the first apparition was said to have appeared, to embrace the 'epiphanic landscape' and pious tourism throughout the entire context of the village, Montilla's voice-over and captions proposed how the performances conformed to the expectations of naive and spiritually pure rural life, where hoax or conspiracy would be unthinkable. Through astute bibliographic research and juxtaposition of source materials with commentary, the apparitions' enthusiastic casting as an apocalyptic warning was shown in its entanglement with the Franco dictatorship's demonization of Communism and the left. Furthermore, as a sign that Spain's peasantry had been chosen as spokespeople of God without the middlemen, Montilla articulated how the folkloric fervour of the apparitions' thronged crescendo in 1965 would have spurned the concurrent doctrinal reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Yet, Montilla's bravest and most calibrated area of enquiry intimated how the moving imagery of the girls' rapture established a legendary motif for the performing or occupied female body as an index of radical obedience, even to the extent of self-harm. Correspondingly, the two screens of *El contagio visionario* (The Visionary Contagion) and *Ídolos y ídolos* (Idols and Lesser Idols) showed fragments of a 1961 film of the entranced girls alongside a video shot by the artist in Garabandal in 2012, showing a muttering woman devotee supposedly in a trance herself. In urging feminist questions about Garabandalism seemingly as a form of infectious hysteria, Montilla echoes Elaine Showalter's 1997 study *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* in which alien abduction and – more controversially among other case studies – Gulf War syndrome, are interpreted as fictional epidemics propagated through support groups, popular magazines, talk shows and the Internet. Whether the seers and believers of the apparitions reflect extreme symptoms of cultural anxieties and traumas, as Showalter would argue, or represent exultant communiqués from the Blessed Virgin, Montilla carefully beseeches that we must still pay attention to what they continue to tell us.

**Max Andrews**

### Combined subscription offer

Subscribe to both *frieze* (8 issues) and *frieze d/e* (4 issues), and have both



### Podcasts

**Do you speak English?**  
Added on 15/10/11

Frieze Projects 2011  
LISTEN / DOWNLOAD

### Stay updated



Sign up to our email newsletter

Name: