

Cycle: White under Black

Works from the imperceptible / 5

Isabel Banal

***Via Lactea* [Milky Way]**

23.09—16.11.2014

ISABEL
BANAL

SANTAMÒNICA

White under Black

Works from the Imperceptible

The blank page has been one of the great themes of the androcentric discourse of creation, nourishing Romantic imaginary and artistic modernity. Under the threat of nothingness and the void, the blank white sheet was a metaphor both of sterility and of creative autonomy. As such, it led modern subjectivity to the desire to conquer: to put black on white, to exploit the visual as the very core of the original artistic action.

The work of a number of women artists, having shifted away from this starting point of creation, has investigated other images of white. They neither make it the complement of black nor reverse the terms –white and black, white *on* black – but make a symbolic invention of great political potential: white under black.

This was suggested by the curator Catherine de Zegher when, in 1996, she gave the title ‘The Blank in the Page’ to one of the four sections in which she articulated the exhibition *Inside the*

Visible. An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine.

The blank deployed by De Zegher, through works and creative processes that incorporate the ellipsis, margins, silences, voids, error, doubt, indecision, stammering, interjection, discontinuities, absences... showed that there is a way to read the artistic practice of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that has no need to confront contradictions in order to exist.

Forms of this blank are outlined in the photographs-cum-performances of Helena Almeida, in which the artist situates herself *behind* the pictorial support; in Gego's three-dimensional network structures, or in the performances of Lili Dujourie in the seventies, in which we saw the artist naked on the white sheets of a bed in female postures recalling famous paintings of art history. Other artists have also sought ways to make us feel this blank that often remains imperceptible, inaudible, as in the drawing/performance on paper that Elena del Rivero transformed into dishcloths of large proportions, or the schema underlying all of Agnes Martin's paintings.

Patricia Bickers wrote, referring to Avis Newman's painting installations of the eighties,: 'In fact, the canvas is not empty, nor the page blank: there is no virgin territory. It is the awareness of

all that the canvas itself represents that holds the artist back.'

In this light, Marina Garcés, evoking Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, goes beyond thinking of the blank page as the paradigm of the project of modern autonomy to place the revolutionary space there: the space at once of birth and of politics; a space where Annarosa Butarelli writes about the tabula rasa in terms of a cut, a radical political movement that serves to 'make absence profitable'.

It is this creative space of making and politics that this series of exhibitions and conferences wants to explore, starting from the revealing title of a Blanca Casas Brullet catalogue, *White under Black*. Works such as those by Blanca Casas Brullet, Mar Arza, Freya Powell, Antònia del Rio, Isabel Banal and Mireia Sallarès sketch out new spaces for thinking, as Alejandra Riera said, without guarantees, an expansion of the available fields of vision and of doing.

Assumpta Bassas and Joana Masó

Isabel Banal i Xifré (born Castellfolit de la Roca, 1963) lives and works in Barcelona and Abella de la Conca. She graduated in Fine Arts from the University of Barcelona in 1986, and has been a lecturer at the Escola Massana since 1990. She was recently granted a scholarship to the Spanish Academy in Rome (2013-2014).

She has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions: *La maleta [blava] de W.B.* [The [blue] suitcase of W.B.] (Portbou, 2011), *Nelle pieghe del mondo* (Oristano, Sardinia, 2010), *Territori Lleida* [Lleida Territory] (Centre d'Art la Panera, 2010), *Querformat* [Shaped rock] (Kunstverein Tiergarten-Galerie Nord, Berlin, 2009), *La figureta del pintor de paisatges* [The figurine of the landscape painter] (Olot, 2008), *Ascensioni* (Galleria Enrico Fornello, Prato, 2007), *A peu* [On foot] (Palau Solterra, Torroella de Montgrí, 2006), *Feix petit pel camí creix* [A small load grows on the road] (Centre de Lectura, Reus, 2004), *Allez* (Centre d'Art Contemporain, Saint-Cyprien, 2004), *Blanquejar* [Whitening] (Duoda, UB, 2004), *Rumiant* [Pondering] (Espais, Girona, 2003), *Sense revelar* [Unrevealed] (Espai Zero1, Olot, 2002), *La palabra es el hilo* [The word is the thread] (Galería Arcimboldo, Buenos Aires, 2009), *Frágil* [Fragile] (Galería Estrany-De la Mota, Barcelona, 2007).

Via Lactea [Milky Way]

*returning alone
with my load of rice:
The Milky Way!*

Takeshita Shizuno-jo

Gathering, collecting: bend down towards the earth. Lowering the gaze, contemplating what, when seen at a certain height, we consider less important.

The miniscule, the tiny, the humble. Raising it. And then placing it, relocated, at another level: that of the eyes.

Making a temple: the area between the top and the bottom, between the head and feet.

Raising it not towards the sky, but instead to the arms and the heart, for the correct action, when the hands are working, the heart accompanying.

Placing in the centre what the head, lifted up, dismisses or what it ignores without seeing, without understanding: without any possible understanding.

Bending the spine and raising what the earth bears with the hands and heart to display it. To give it to us to see. To approach the insignificant.

Isabel Banal's work lies here, in this approach, a templar ritual: focusing, framing, pointing. Making a temple. A square, a place where the course of an event is observed.

Course: way... *Returning alone / with my load of rice / The Milky Way!* A detached gaze suddenly looks out. It has traced the link and the miracle occurs: the grains of rice become stars; the load, a path.

Isabel returned to the living room with that beautiful haiku on her lips. She gave it to us with the innocence of someone asking a question without what knowing the answer was. As soon as she recited it, the collected fragments, scattered on the table, rose up, the invisible became visible, the meaning was given.

Lightened, the back of our character, now cut over the void, regained its role as an axis: tightening the rope between the top and bottom, between the feet and the consciousness, while the mind learned to reject the habit of accompanying the various degrees of inclination of the head with value judgments.

How not to thank someone, who in this manner and with such modesty, is able to show us the way?

Chantal Maillard

Poet and essayist. She has lectured in Aesthetics and Art Theory at the University of Malaga.

Trusting in white

From the beginning, Isabel Banal has trusted in white like someone who trusts a seed. In the mid 1980s, white appeared in her pieces as pictorial material: little piles or bags of pigment or paint that put the finishing touches to natural twigs and tables, two iconic elements in her installations (*Table with branches*, 1988). White springs out, as if the paint wanted to branch out in a tête-à-tête conversation with nature without losing its innocence. Gazes and words are exchanged at ground level or from the windowsill. The white ensures that the words do not stray too far from things, and that things remain faithful to their common name, despite an occasional celebration with metaphors.

Nature has never been an abstraction in Isabel Banal's work, but rather the element that embodies and evokes foundational experiences. The girl who grows up leaning over the balcony in Castellfollit de la Roca, looking at the gardens and fields, soaking up the landscape. The girl who is absorbed with the eyes of nature composed in the paintings of her father, an amateur painter in a region, the Garrotxa, that is well known to by landscape artists. The student who leaves for the city and buys oranges in plastic bags. So painting the branches and tables in white can be read as cherishing those things that you are, sealing a secret agreement with one's inner landscape and repeating to yourself quietly, like a mantra, that you will never leave it, despite

the distance and contempt of masculine culture to which it has given rise.

It is not a sign of nostalgia, but rather an act of symbolic independence. The aim is to tighten the link, not to tie us, to everything that is given to us and that helps us grow: our mother, tradition, our home, geography of our birthplace, our language. Other whites that appeared in those years are related to this primordial nutrition. For example, the white of milk, which is present in the metonymy of the dairy farm or in miniature flocks of sheep and cows which began grazing on highlands and lowlands in the installations of the 1990s.

Neither is white a mythical land or a paradise at the end of the road in Isabel Banal's work. Her characteristic clay figurines, which seem to come from a nativity scene (a landscape of initiation, a custodian of some of the mysteries of life, as the artist has studied) roam a very mundane land. Somewhat defenceless, they come and go from one place to another, tracing the unique nomadic paths that we humans take from the countryside to the city and from one place to another, for reasons as diverse as shopping, washing in the river, seeking refuge or exile.

Recently, white has been the backdrop for the "laden figures" – pictures clipped from newspapers (with a white background (notepads of figures with loads, 2003)). Taken out of the nativity scenes,

as if we took a character out of a historical painting, each “figure” becomes a portrait, and its load becomes the particularly distinctive attribute of its story. A portrait that is not quite complete until we turn the pages and discover that the figures and loads merge. The final photograph is an image of the family that is always incomplete and moving. Like a parade in which we participating (as another part) of the immense diversity of worlds that coexist with our own, of both wealth and poverty. A infinite catalogue of lives which careen like the peaks of mountain ranges.

At this point I think of a reflection by Canadian painter Agnes Martin when she writes about the feeling that the smallness of human life inspired in her, and the great excitement that overcame her and she humbly accepted – and not without significant internal effort – the wealth that this insignificance brings. To record this experience that enlarges the soul, Martin chose a series of rectangles, a basic structure – a holistic composition – that underscores her paintings and prints. Why the rectangle? I quote her words from memory: “All men and women were like these rectangles, like grass... If you can imagine that you are a grain of sand, you know the centuries of rocks (...) and all your tribulations disappear”. In Martin’s case, this discovery opened up a path to inner freedom.

But that’s not easy. Isabel Banal’s work also includes many blank pages that remain blank which

are spread across the balcony of a house, as offerings of surrender. In these cases, would the blank space signify the impossibility of constructing meaning? Or is it the opposite, in other words, of the clear testimony that the meaning already has in advance? And that perhaps in order to recognize it, we only need notice this continuous foundation that sustains all our unique everyday actions?

When answering, we would be wise to think about playing with the size and scale of things. In her installations, the measure of one thing gives it a relationship with the other. As does the change of perspective, the interplay between soil/earth, wall and/or table. It is a sculptural working method inherited from the minimalist vocabulary, but goes beyond it. For example, in the work *s.t.* (2004), the painted figurines of washerwomen, placed on white sheets on the floor of a room, seem like small islands in a vast space. The white makes the humble gesture resonate, yet also undoes the counterpoint that could give us a reference point for the dimension that we wish to give it. We need another benchmark but we only have the land and the colour white to pat it.

As for the size, I remember that Agnes Martin declared herself dissatisfied with their production of the 1950s when she wrote: "I paint mountains and they turn into ants" and struggled to find a language that was able to translate the emotion that suddenly overcame for no reason based on a

mundane experience – often while contemplating a landscape. When Isabel Banal draws ants, they are still those little creatures who stubbornly do the same job every day. But the artist glimpses a gigantic dimension in this simple action from the inside out and the outside in – a movement that as a loop is a sign of infinity – they can be considered “big” without changing the size.

I've always felt that Isabel Banal's white is carefully arranged. Arranged in the small and everyday sense of the word, but also in the large and internal sense that is derived from the word “order”. Her poetry speaks to me of the advantages of being arranged by our human dimension – which gives us our love for our roots. So we can trust that “all roads lead to Rome,” as in the title of one of her most recent works.

Assumpta Bassas



taula amb branques [table with twigs], iron, twigs, and lines
on the floor, 20 x 74 x 32 cm (1988).



sense revelar [unrevealed], used camera films, graphite, wood, glass and paint, 73 x 53 x 8cm (2002).

I used the films to photograph various parts of the Garrotxa region. The unrevealed film acts as a negation of the image and a container of experience.

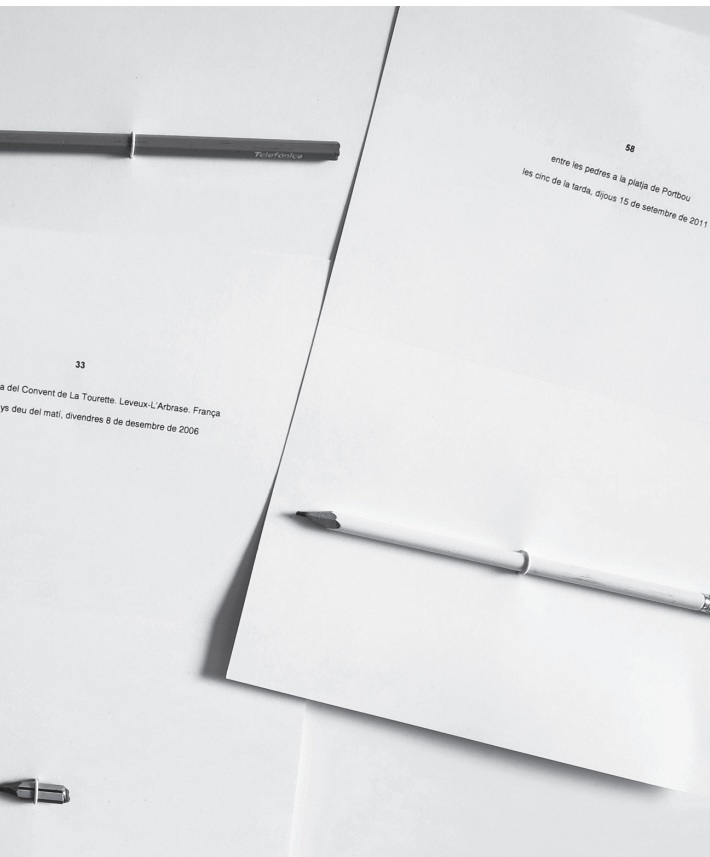


s.t., sheets of paper and clay nativity figures (washerwomen)
(2004).



llapis trobats [found pencils], pencils, cardboard, text, elastic, 65 items, 21 x 29.7 cm each item (begun in 1999, project ongoing).

When I find a pencil, I collect it and I make a note of where and when I found it.



33

a del Convent de La Tourette. Leveux-L'Arbrase. França
ys deu del mati, divendres 8 de desembre de 2006

58

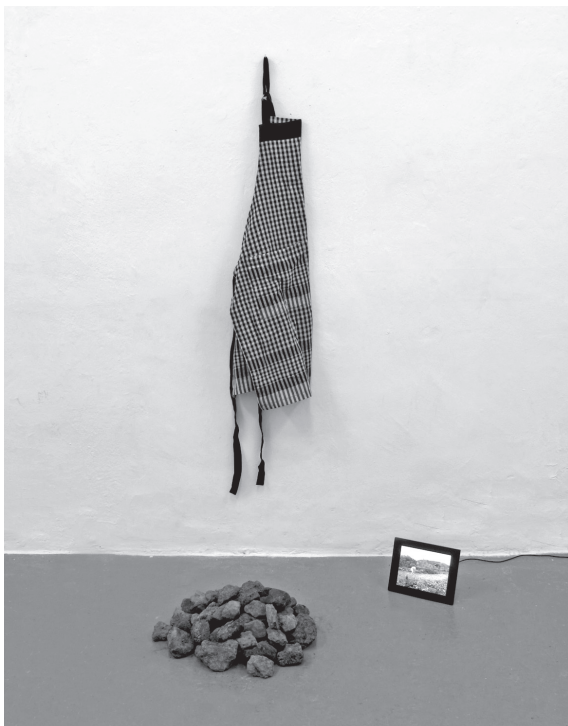
entre les pedres a la platja de Portbou
les cinc de la tarda, dijous 15 de setembre de 2011



amb fons blanc [with a white background] (notepads of laden figures), collage, A4 spiral notebooks, (begun in 2003, project ongoing).

I collect all the laden figures that I find in newspapers and magazines. I cut out the outlines and paste them onto a blank page.





faldes [slopes], apron, stones, digital photo frame, 3' video loop,
170 x 100 x 0.80 cm.



faldes [slopes] [Olot] (2010). *faldes* [slopes] [Castellfollit de la Roca] (2010). *faldes* [slopes] [Formentera] (2012). *faldes* [slopes] [Abella de la Conca] (2013).

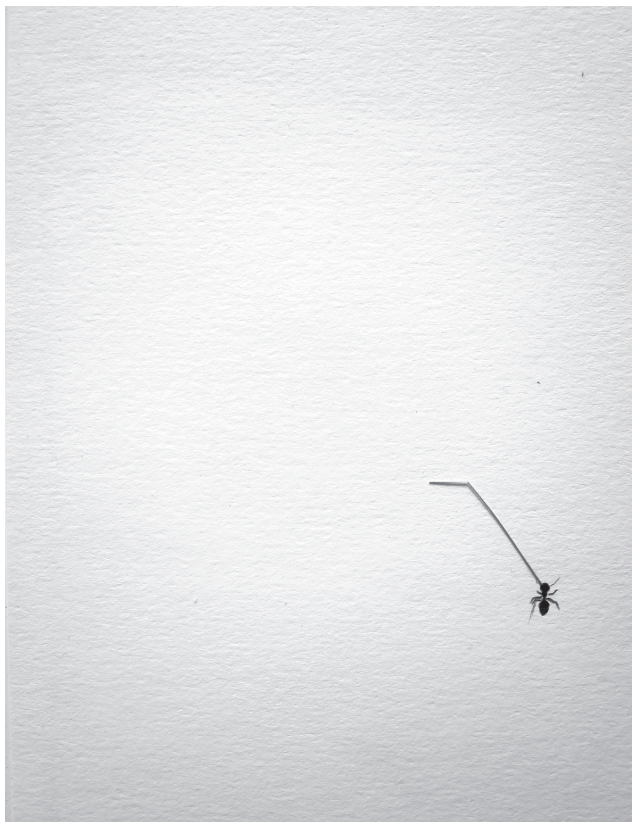
The work relates two items – the apron, a reference to housework, female work, and indoors – and the stones – a reference to the landscape, to the outdoors, with an action, of picking up stones and putting them in the apron bought in the area, until it is full.



tots els camins porten a Roma [all roads lead to Rome]
graphite on paper, 70 x 100 cm, collection of 16 (2014).

I have collected fragments of surface from the streets of Rome using the frottage technique. There is something written on each one - deleting - the different types of streets in Rome.





cada dia..., [every day...] pencil, collage on paper, 10.3 x 14.7 cm, collection of 29 (2013).

Watching ants entering and leaving the nest. I drew one of them every day and pasted the load it was carrying on the collage.

**Extracts of conversations between
Joana Masó and Isabel Banal**

The projects on display in this exhibition are ongoing and long-standing projects, most of which were started in the late 1990s or early 2000s, with a common denominator: it is a collection of seemingly insignificant objects and materials that you come across and collect. Your work is often associated with the French director Agnes Varda's film The Gleaners and I (2000). Could you tell us about your understanding of this economy of collected objects and to what extent it is a simultaneously minimal and political gesture?

Oh, the film! Yes, I liked it very much. I suppose that it resonated with me because it showed the entire range of the gesture of collecting, from jobs in the country, the perversions of the agricultural industry, the basic need to feed oneself or as an attitude to life, resistance...

For me, the act of collecting is closely linked to farming, the world of the farmer (not just the crops in the fields and orchards but also gathering things in the forest – firewood, mushrooms, asparagus, berries...). Paying attention to what surrounds you, observing, using things... establishing a dialogue...

Apart from when I have collected natural things, like in the pencil series, where I treated them as writing tools, now I'm thinking about the work *rumiant* [pondering] (series from I to XII), where

what I collected were scraps of paper with a blank space, like the margin of a newspaper, an open envelope, a napkin, a space that is waiting, which can be used to record a thought or to draw something. I'm interested in the strength of an object from everyday life, everything that it can transmit.

There is also the idea of the job to do, the repetition of a single thing, some patterns, a ritual... in which time is important.

It is often a gesture, as you say, at least, the body and the hand are the important thing, which gathers, touches, breaks, begins, collects... My recollections may be absurd, but they may be alluding to this primary, ancestral gesture, I would say.

And of course it's political, all gestures are... Making this intimate gesture, repeating it, collecting valueless things, giving importance to something that's very small...

Is there any link between this gesture of collecting which in a way could be seen as an "anti-productive" gesture and your interest in working on a small scale, that is very evident in several of your installations, in which you work by mismatching or reducing the size of the things and figures?

Well, I don't know, I've never thought about it. For example, in the *faldes* [slopes] series, the act of picking up stones and filling the apron may seem

absurd but it is also an action that is performed in the peasant world ("clearing stones" means removing stones from a field so that crops can be cultivated there). And so is taking part of the place away. Probably almost everyone has done it once: picked up a pebble from a little bay, a handful of desert sand to remind you of the landscape you have visited, to testify to it... That is, in fact, the role of the "souvenir". I think that is something very profound, primitive - the need to have something material... today, when everything is so easily recorded with images.

As for the changes of scale, and especially the use of miniature, it is something that excites me... In the same work mentioned above, *faldes*, I pick up the stones by hand, but when they are stacked next to the digital frame showing the video of collecting, they become a mountain for the little figure that I am.

Thinking about why I use this relationship, I have believed for some time that it could be because I was born and grew up in a village perched atop a rock - Castellfollit de la Roca, where the most normal thing was to always look down on the small world below... Very similar to the nativity scene, people working in gardens, walking laden uphill along the road, someone fishing in the river... Also a car on the road... Having a panoramic view.

Doing the nativity scene, another subject very close

to my heart... I have often used elements of it, such as the version of the laden figures, small and white because they are nobody and we are everyone. For me, what is small “concentrates”; it is experienced in a mental space...

I also remember the installation *rumiant* [pondering] at Espais in Girona, where the laden figures traced paths on the floor across the entire room and occasionally you came across the real items that they were carrying: a box, a backpack, the shopping trolley... In a text he wrote, Saretto Cinicelli talked about how the people walking around felt addressed, as if they could also become figures if they imagined themselves picking up those tools.

What link do you establish between the laden figures and the landscape?

When we talk about the landscape it is often more the idea of looking at it, looking at a place from outside ... For me, the landscape has to be walked, felt, experienced with the senses... So walking through it, treading it, the land, is very important... There is a verse by Pedro Salinas that I like very much: *Ground. Neither more nor less. / And let that be enough for you.*

So, we, the figures, we are part of it, and we also modify it, we adapt it to our needs ... Going back to paintings of landscape, from Patinir to Constable or Vayreda, they have always contained figures working, carrying....

In my collection of laden figures from newspapers, curiously I isolate them from their surroundings, I cut them out and I transfer them to a blank page, as Assumpta Bassas said they almost become portraits.

You have been carrying out projects in which these figures carry many loads and are increasingly anonymous, as in the series blocs de figures carregades [notepads of laden figures]. So it seems that your work is deeply rooted in the landscape and the local area, while at the same time it is as if you are inviting us to think about a process of generalization or multiplication of this link. Is that what is involved for you in these works?

The common denominator in the figures I cut out from newspapers and magazines, many of which are anonymous, others of which are well-known, are that they are carrying things (ranging from a few supermarket bags to a suitcase, from scrap metal found in the rubbish to bags of rice for humanitarian aid...) and perhaps they can all tell us about the human condition, with its complexity and diverse realities.

The versions of the Nativity scene figures I made carrying items from the present day (a shopping trolley, backpack, box ...) and which are white are also anonymous, and therefore more generic. We are all laden figures.

For all these reasons, it's obvious that I base myself

on what is local, on personal experience, I think that is the only way... The challenge is for what you do to come close to talking about what is essential, which we can all perceive but not explain...

Some artists of your generation have also explored strategies of localism and ultralocalism as ways of resistance to not only hegemonic narratives, but also those with a claim to universality and generality. Do recognize yourself in this gesture?

For me it's natural to start with the reality around you, your environment... and it's what you're talking about with your more poetic or more direct way of working. What concerns you, what you see, what you experience... When with Jordi Canudas we started the project *Hospital 106, 4t 1a*, we were driven by concern and the issue of the change that was taking place in the neighbourhood where we had our studio and where we worked.

Now over the last six months in Rome, I've finished the work *Tutti Roma. Contemplando instantáneas* [*Tutti Roma. Gazing at snapshots*], which is the result of experiencing and observing one of the tourist cities par excellence, experiencing how places are visited.

Cycle: White under Black

Works from the imperceptible

Blanca Casas Brullet

28 January – 2 March 2014

Mar Arza

11 March – 20 April 2014

Freya Powell

7 May – 22 June 2014

Antònia del Río

1 July – 14 September 2014

Isabel Banal

23 September – 16 November 2014

Mireia Sallarès

25 November 2014 – 11 January 2015

Activities

Tuesday 23 September, 7:00 pm

Inauguration

Friday 26 September, 7:00 pm

Lecture on Catherine de Zegher by the artist Simryn Gill: The absence of work. On the versatility and reversibility of art

Catherine de Zegher was Director of the Drawing Center in New York and is currently the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent. In 1996, she curated the exhibition *Inside the Visible. An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art: in, of, and from the Feminine* which is one of the benchmarks for this exhibition series.

Lecture in English. With simultaneous translation

Wednesday 1 October 7:30 pm

Lecture by María-Milagros Rivera Garretas: El blanco en el suelo

The Barcelona-born essayist, translator, mother, grandmother, housewife and University professor

and researcher at the Duoda Research Centre will study the deep-seated relationship with white as a source of creativity she has observed among women, suggesting links with a thought of experience. Specifically, in the poetry of Emily Dickinson and the art of Isabel Banal.

Lecture in Spanish.

Wednesday 5 November, 7 pm

Lecture by Annarosa Buttarelli. *Tabula rasa* and *anarché*: the generative thought of women

The Italian philosopher of the *Comunità filosofica Diotima* and lecturer at the University of Verona (Italy) considers a science and creativity based on the teachings of Carla Lonzi and María Zambrano. On the one hand, relying on presence and experience in the present; and on the other, placing us beyond historical mediations.

Lecture in Italian. With simultaneous translation.

Wednesday 12 November, 7 pm

***Apuntar al blanco* [Aiming at the target]. Poetry reading by Chantal Maillard**

in the Exhibition Hall

Chantal Maillard is a poet and essayist. She was a lecturer in Aesthetics and Art Theory at the University of Malaga. *Contra el arte y otras imposturas* [Against art and other frauds] (2009), *La baba del caracol* [The snail's slime] (2014), *Bélgica* [Belgium] (2008) and *India* [India] (2014) are some of her most recent books. She won the National Poetry Prize with *Matar a Platón* [Killing Plato] (2004), and the National Critics Award with *Hilos* [Threads] (2007).

Saturday 25 October, 11 am – 6 pm

Entremestres workshop with the artist

Free registration from 23 September to 24 October by e-mailing entremestres@gmail.com

More information at: <http://entremestres.blogspot.com.es>

Limited places available: group of 25 people

The lecture series and the workshop will be held in the Santa Mònica Auditorium, La Rambla 7, 08002 Barcelona.

White under Black. Works from the imperceptible is a programme of exhibitions and talks directed by Assumpta Bassas and Joana Masó.

In conjunction with Maria José González and Montse Romaní.

Corrent altern / Alternate Current is a series of get-togethers, resonances and overflows related to the exhibitions which will be announced over the course of the programme.

The sessions in the programme **Entremestres: Visual artists and teachers** will be run by the participating artists especially for teachers.

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Admission free

Tuesday to Saturday 11am -7pm

Sundays and public holidays 11am -5pm

Closed Sundays

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