

Elena Asins

Fragments of Memory

In the work of Elena Asins (Madrid, 1940) the 20th-century avant-garde Constructive tradition converges with the data computing and theory of the 1960s via Op Art and Minimalism. This process, which involves the use of calculus theory and algorithms to obtain aesthetic results, made of this artist a pioneer in computer-aided art in Spain as well as one of the few representatives of one area of Conceptual Art - where the idea is regarded as the true driving force behind art¹ – virtually uncharted within Spanish Conceptual Art. Placing special emphasis on the first twenty years of her career, the aim of this, the most complete exhibition of Asins' production to date, is to underscore the vitality, complexity and variety inherent in work which, while characterised by pure, reductionist formal resolution, has never been restricted to formalism or stagnant disciplines but has remained open to a wide range of formats (concrete poetry, drawing, book, sculpture, installation or video) and interests (music, architecture, town planning, etc.). The exhibition catalogue brings together a large number of texts written by the artist herself in an attempt to reveal her wide-ranging theoretical activity, for hers is a special voice within Spanish theory and criticism. The aim of both catalogue and exhibition is to systematise, document and display an oeuvre whose exposure to the public has often passed over major aspects of her contribution to art.

¹ Consistent with the American artist Sol Lewitt's famous 1960s' notion, "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand, and execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless." Sol Lewitt. "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", *Artforum*, June 1967, p. 80.

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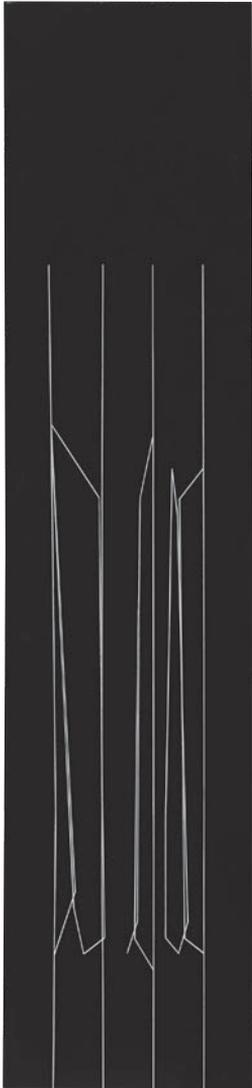


Untitled, ca. 1968
Welf paper and
transferable letters
on paper,
65 x 50 cm
Collection of the artist
Photo: J. Cortés / R. Lores

Early on Asins turned away from the figurativism that had initially interested her to research space and geometry through work primarily abstract in nature. Up to 1968, she frequented experimental circles, including the *Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana* (“Cooperative of Artistic and Artisan Production”), an initiative of Ignacio Gómez de Liaño’s together with Herminio Molero, Manuel Quejido, Francisco Salazar and others in an atmosphere open to discussion in which the plastic arts coexisted with poetry, linguistics, philosophy, music and architecture. Following a certain opening-up in the social context consistent with the policy of development promoted by the technocrats of the Franco regime, the members of these groups were able to make contact with

people and initiatives similar to their own abroad. Asins began exploring options ranging from Op Art to monochrome painting (along the lines of Malevich’s Suprematism), experimenting and often incorporating unconventional supports and standard procedures of labelling and typing to create works more closely akin to Concrete poetry. It was at this juncture that she found herself working along lines similar to those of members of the second generation of Spain’s post-war geometric artists, although with a standpoint detached from the notion of self-expression present in the prevailing poetics. While those artists maintained that artistic practice was research, trusting in art to dissect and eventually transform modes of perception, they now added a facet more closely centred upon other, linguistic aspects. This was the background to the Constructivist tendency in Elena Asins’ work, geared now as it was towards research into and analysis of the language of plastic art as both system and process.

By 1968 Asins had developed a language and preoccupations of her own and this is the date chosen as the exhibition’s starting-point. 1968 was an important year in her career in that it also saw the first “Automatic Generation of Plastic Forms” seminars (Spain’s first experience of the incorporation of cybernetics into artistic processes) at the Complutense University’s *Centro de Cálculo* (“Computer Centre”) in Madrid. In this she was accompanied by others artists, including José Luis Alexanco, Barbadillo, Luis Lugán, Eduardo Sanz, Soledad Sevilla, Eusebio Sempere and José María Yturralde. From then on, using computers to apply algorithms was to prove of



Untitled, 1975
Watercolour on
canvas, 176 x 40 cm
Fundación Juan
March Collection
Photo: P. León

increasing importance in her work. That year also saw her first two solo exhibitions, at the Galería Edurne in Madrid, and the Cercle Artístic de Sant Lluc in Barcelona. The philosopher Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, a companion and friend during those years, has written: “Evident as early as 1968 was a yearning always present in Elena Asins’ work to achieve the maximum effect with the minimum of elements, and somehow secure the spectator’s participation in the aesthetic realisation of the work.”²

As the pieces exhibited here reveal, this is evident in her optical-kinetic works of that time. Although some affinity can be discerned between her work and that of Eusebio Sempere and other artists who had worked along similar lines, also evident is a specific preoccupation with signs and language that is more consistent with the new generation’s fascination for semiotics. In 1970, Asins moved to Stuttgart, where she met Max Bense, the father of “computer aesthetics”, who advocated the fusion of art and technology in the pursuit of an “objective and material” form of aesthetics based on semiotics and mathematics. Bense’s ideas were already circulating among the Cooperativa group and at the Centro de Cálculo. Being of the same mind, Asins applied them to her systematic study of “the structure of the plastic field”. In the early 1970s, she began to elaborate on the notion of structure with pieces similar to those of artists of the previous generation such as Pablo Palazuelo. Furthermore, the extraordinarily long compositions (offset paper rolls) she was then producing revealed an interest in the dimension of time.

In the mid-1970s, she turned towards a more methodical study of structures. The exhibition features a large group of works from the *Strukturen* series, which Asins numbered with musical nomenclature. Realized on various supports, these pieces differ widely where composition is concerned and their elements produce a constant interplay between the variables of space, time and rhythm. Here Asins transferred the

² Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, “Elena Asins o la danza silenciosa de las líneas”, in *Elena Asins. Fragmentos de la memoria*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011, p. 21.



Untitled (Model for Scale), n.d., Glue cardboard and pencil on cardboard, 15 x 105 x 0,6 cm, (model n° 3 of 10)
Collection of the artist.
Photo: J. Cortés / R. Lores

dimension of time in music to the plane, explaining in a text of 1979, “This is not a new optical experience but a new conception of the image: in which the fourth dimension absorbs the others. THE NUMBER IN SPACE turns the latter into *Time*.”³ Asins was now displaying combinations and variations in which she was already beginning to toy with the idea of the negative and an assessment of the void: indeed, lines and planes maintained structural relationships among themselves instead of tracing forms. Inspired by Mozart’s string quartets for Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, the *Prussian Quartets* (1979-81) intensified both the purification of the by now strictly linear plastic elements and deep concentration on the notions of spatial sequence, motion and rhythm in an allusion to the sensations of music and dance.

In 1980, Asins was awarded a grant by the Fundación Juan March to study at the New School for Social Research in New York. Exposure to this American city brought to the fore a preoccupation with three-dimensionality that is evident in her approach to issues connected with architecture and town planning, as with *Project for an Architecture* of 1981, the prelude to her extensive *Scale* series. In February 1982, while researching at Columbia University, Asins began work on *Paradigm for Scale*, consisting of 272 drawings in pencil, ink and enamel on tracing paper, which appear together for the first time ever at this exhibition. Evident here are different stages in her studies of the structure of the plane through progressive and generative forms, based on the concept of scale. Evident here, too, are the terms in which she admired the work of Piet Mondrian: as she wrote in an essay on his work in 1969 “For Mondrian this space-plane is a positive void, as it is an essential condition for objective existence. *Creating the void is the main action and therein lies true creation, because this void is positive; it contains the germ of the absolutely new.*”⁴

³ Elena Asins. “Estudios y reflexiones sobre pintura”, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

⁴ Elena Asins. “Consideraciones generales sobre la obra de Mondrian”, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

For Asins the visual memory in the cognitive system is based on data processing; computers are thus essential for its understanding: “I continually compare cybernetics with the human brain, since data processing and memory share the same circuits in a computer as in the cerebral cortex. Therefore the style of the computation and the style of the memory *must be intimately linked*.”⁵ While at Columbia she met Noam Chomsky, whose generative grammar she had been familiar with since the 1960s. The Department of Computer Science at the university allowed her the use of their resources to produce drawings on continuous listing paper with the help of computer and printer. These drawings clearly reveal the highly conceptual tendency of her work. During her stay in Hamburg from 1987 to 1990, Asins concentrated on computer-generated forms. Also during this period, inspired by religious and philosophical texts ranging from the Old and New Testaments to Wittgenstein, she produced a number of little known books. These include *The Enigma* trilogy, *Ludwig Wittgenstein-Zettel*, *Scale* and *Metanoia*. In the 1990s, she continued this line of computer-aided drawings with their highly spiritual content through *I Ching* (1994), digital impressions based on the Chinese “Book of Changes”.

Since the 1990s Asins has also ventured into new formats, such as sculpture, installation and video, which she continues to work on today. During this period her production has taken a direction which might be described as ascetic in that seeks to combine the rigour of her research with a more transcendental approach. Video enables her to use the moving image to continue her exploration of the ordering of space and time, essential aspects of her work. In the Nineties, her *Dólmenes* and *Menhires* series spanned not only graphic work but also reliefs and sculptures: “I would like to make it clear that the question here is not one of reproducing what a menhir as a megalithic monument is but of finding the archetype that most effectively demonstrates the deepest yearnings in human life,” she explained. In these two series, she created variations on basic figures such as the rectangle or the parallelepiped in which she stressed the idea of the void as possibility.

⁵ Elena Asins. “Memoria visual”, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

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Images

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