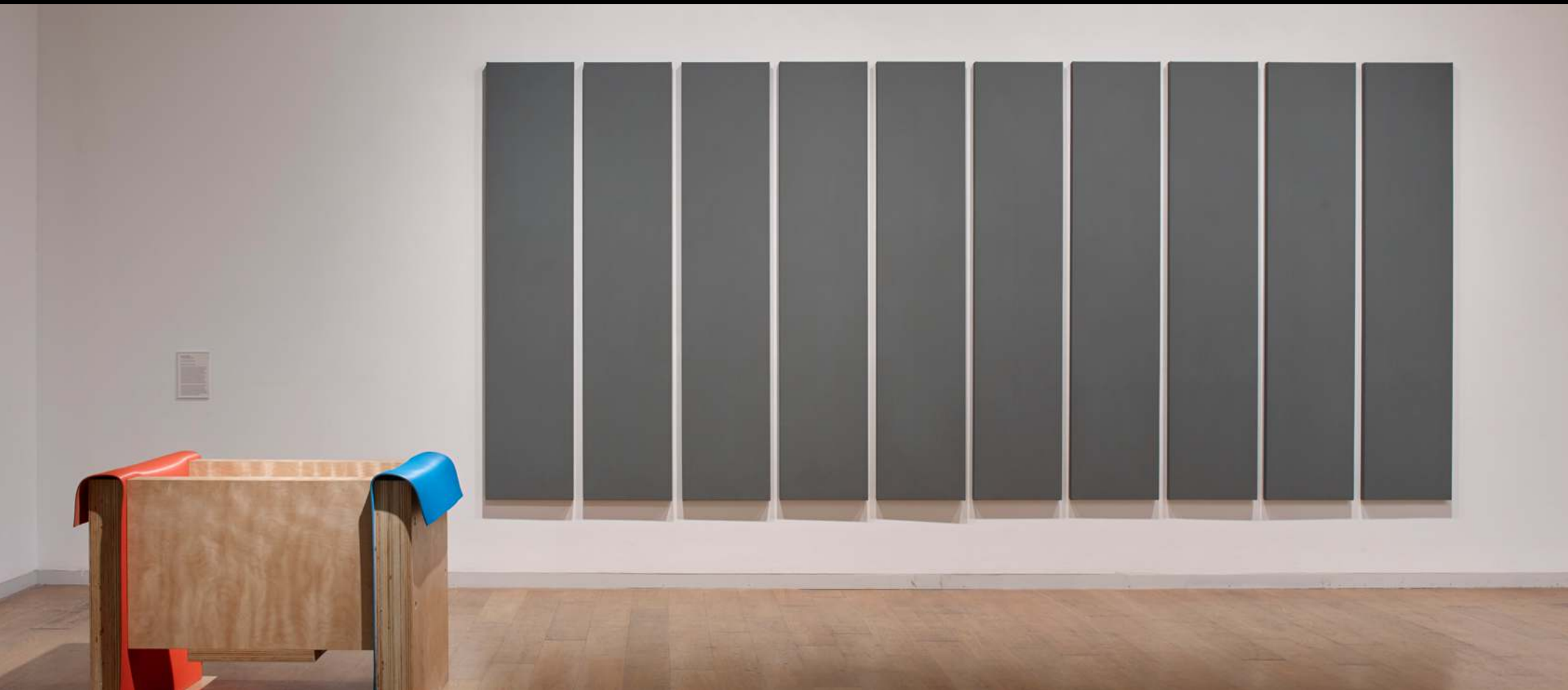


NINE QWERTY BELLS



A project challenging
normative forms of
exhibition-making and the
traditional museological
terminology of audience
interpretation.

Type of output:
Exhibition
and Book

by
Maria Fusco

Cover Image: Installation
of the exhibition, courtesy
Whitechapel Gallery.
Photo Credit: Steve White

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SUMMARY

Nine Qwerty Bells is a curated exhibition and sole-authored book by Fusco, commissioned by Whitechapel Gallery, London.

The project challenges normative forms of exhibition-making and the traditional museological terminology of audience interpretation by addressing the perceived muteness of singular art works. Fusco created an exhibition (8 May - 1 September 2019) which had the writerly characteristics of a book and, in parallel, wrote a book which had the temporal characteristics of an exhibition, to create an intertextual experience.

It was part of a two-year project in which Whitechapel Gallery invited four internationally acclaimed writers to address works from Spain's La Caixa Collection of Contemporary Art.

Fusco selected underrepresented works from the collection by eight artists (many had not previously been seen in public) which address speech in an integral way and employed two interrelated concurrent methods to give them voice. Firstly, she repurposed the editorial tools of a writer to create an exhibition in which the art works are the main characters. Secondly, she wrote a book in which the art works are speaking, in the first person, about their subjecthood and assessment of the other artworks. Crucially, the art works can only speak from the physical position that they are in the gallery space, so have highly subjective and limited viewpoints. This hybrid blend of the creative/critical voice is the project's key methodology.

The exhibition was free, attended by 73,334 visitors. The dual language book was distributed internationally by Thames & Hudson. It has been reviewed internationally in publications including: *ABC Cultura*, *Art Daily*, *El Dario* and Spanish national newspaper *La Vanguardia*. Fusco has been invited to discuss the project at a range of venues including The British Library (May 2019) and to co-run a public course on hybrid writing at Arvon Lumb Bank (October 2019).

INTRODUCTION

Nine Qwerty Bells was an exhibition curated by Fusco at Whitechapel Gallery, London and a sole authored, dual-language 112 page book *Nine Qwerty Bells: Fiction for Live Voice* which Fusco wrote to accompany the show, published by Whitechapel Gallery and distributed internationally by Thames and Hudson.

The practice-led project challenged normative forms of museological exhibition-making, labelling and contextualizing history to explore and embody what happens when art works are given a fictional voice and how this affects audience participation and interpretation, through the use of curation and hybrid creative/critical writing.



Above and left: Image stills from *Astonishment, Disdain, Pain and So On* by Esther Ferrer.

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Aims and Objectives:

Fusco was commissioned by Whitechapel Gallery to produce a new exhibition and sole-authored book.

Her project questioned the perceived muteness of singular art works by addressing the three following areas:

- What happens when art works are given a fictional voice?
- In what ways does hybrid creative/critical writing in parallel with curatorial production contribute to audience participation in an exhibition context?
- How does writing behave in public galleries?

Fusco's objectives were to create an exhibition which had the writerly characteristics of a book and to create a book which had the visual and temporal characteristics of an exhibition in order to achieve an intrinsically intertextual experience for the audience.



Above: Image still from *The History of the Typewriter Recited by Michael Winslow* by Ignacio Uriarte.

CONTEXT

The underpinning research in this practice-led project addressed conventional art historical and museological terms of audience interpretation of displayed artworks.

By eschewing the traditional labeling of artworks and instead setting artworks in direct dialogue with each other Fusco facilitated a more direct form of audience interaction. In this way, this research is significant not only to gallery professionals and art historians but also to a more general audience (the exhibition received 73,334 visitors) because it invites the audience to engage in and to devise fictional narratives for the works on display.

For a major four-part display running from 2019–20, Whitechapel Gallery has partnered with La Caixa - Spain's leading collection of contemporary art - with each of the four 'chapters' curated by an internationally acclaimed contemporary writer, Fusco was the second. The other commissioned writers were Enrique Vila-Matas (Spain), Tom McCarthy (UK) and Veronica Gerber Bicecci (Brazil).

There were two main collaborators for this project, Whitechapel Gallery and La Caixa Collection, the gallery funded by Arts Council England.



Above: Installation of the exhibition, courtesy Whitechapel Gallery.

Photo Credit: Steve White

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Fusco's curatorial decision making began by selecting underrepresented works from the La Caixa Collection by international artists - Alan Charlton, Esther Ferrer, Cristina Iglesias, Pello Irazu, Astrid Klein, Cindy Sherman, Ignacio Uriarte and Christopher Williams - most of these works had not been seen in public previously.

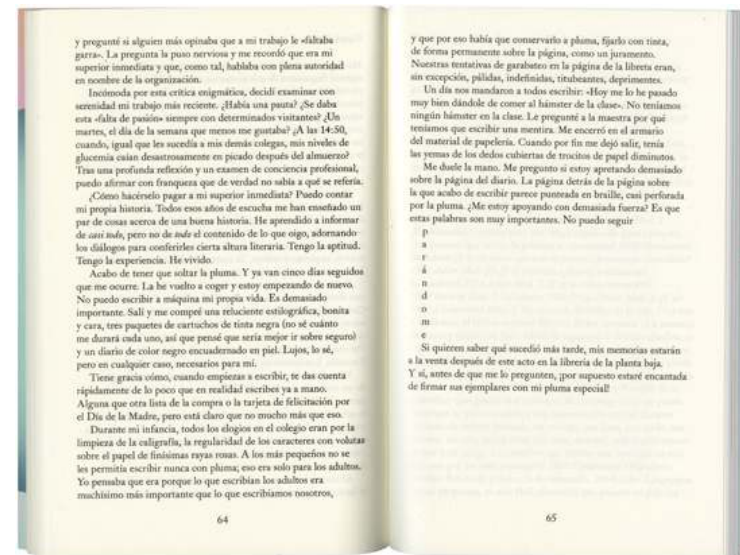
The works included by Fusco are suggestive of the pregnant moment before speech (Esther Ferrer), the denial of speech (Ignacio Uriarte) and the impossibility of comprehensible speech as we might perceive it (Charlton). This is important methodologically as it introduces the audience to relatively unknown works (such as Astrid Klein's piece) and goes on to create a fictional underpinning concerned with speculative audience participation rather than with factual art historiography.



Right: Book cover, courtesy of Fraser Muggeridge Studio

Fusco then employed two interrelated methods to achieve this project. Firstly, she repurposed her editorial tools as a writer to create a three-dimensional exhibition in which the art works are the main characters. Secondly, she wrote a book in which the art works are speaking - in the first person - about their subjecthood and assessment of the other artworks, crucially, the art works can only speak from the physical position that they are in the gallery space, so have biased and highly subjective viewpoints.

This is indicated in the book's subtitle 'Fiction for Live Voice' where the implicated 'live voice' is that of the artworks on display. This hybrid blend of the creative/critical voice is the central subject and method in this research project.



Right: Book spreads, courtesy of Fraser Muggeridge Studio.

DISSEMINATION

The exhibition was free and open to the public for five months over the summer, the busiest period for the gallery. 73,334 visitors experienced it. The book was distributed internationally by Thames and Hudson.

The works have been reviewed internationally in publications including: *ABC Cultura*, *Archyworld*, *Art Daily*, *El Dario* and *La Vanguardia* (Spanish national newspaper).

Fusco was invited to discuss the curatorial and writerly methods she employed in the project at:

- The British Library, 'Artist's Books Now: Writing' May 2019
- Arvon Lumb Bank, 'Hybrid Writing' October 2019
- Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, 'Research Writing Assembly' January 2020



Right: Installation of the exhibition,
courtesy Whitechapel Gallery.
Photo Credit: Steve White

ABC Cultura

https://www.abc.es/cultura/arte/abci-inaugurada-segunda-exposicion-coleccion-caixa-whitechapel-gallery-201905150125_noticia.html

Art Daily

<https://artdaily.cc/news/113408/Whitechapel-Gallery-opens--la-Caixa--Collection-of-Contemporary-Art-selected-by-Maria-Fusco#.XbnM2i-cbm0>

British Library Event

<https://www.bl.uk/events/artists-books-now-writing>

El Dario

https://www.eldiario.es/cultura/escritora-Maria-Fusco-Caixa-Londres_0_899060985.html

Thames and Hudson book

<https://thamesandhudson.com.au/product/la-caixa-collection-maria-fusco-nine-qwerty-bells-fiction-for-live-voice/>

Whitechapel Gallery book

<https://shop.whitechapelgallery.org/products/nine-qwerty-bells-fiction-for-live-voice>

Whitechapel Gallery exhibition

<https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/la-caixa-collection-maria-fusco/>

La Caixa da voz en Londres a su arte más silencioso

Maria Fusco elige ocho obras para la galería Whitechapel

JUSTO BARRANCO

Londres
Enviado especial



Son sólo ocho obras, pero que encajan de manera sorprendente. Y están casi todas mudas –con una muy sonada excepción–, pero establecen un diálogo intenso y muy cargado. Es *Nueve campanas Qwerty. Ficción para voz en directo*, la segunda de las cuatro exposiciones que la Fundació **La Caixa** propondrá hasta abril del 2020 en la galería Whitechapel de Londres. Si en la primera muestra fue el escritor Enrique Vila-Matas el que eligió las piezas entre las más de mil obras de la Colección **La Caixa**, ahora ha sido la escritora vanguardista Maria Fusco (Belfast, 1972), que une en sus escritos ficción y filosofía, la que ha escogido ocho y les ha puesto voz, como si se tratara de una conferencia de obras de arte. “No intento hablar por las obras sino darles voces específicas que generan contrapuntos y expresan temas como la ansiedad, la reputación y la simplicidad”, explica.

La primera obra seleccionada por Fusco da el tono de la sala: una pantalla muestra el rostro de una mujer septuagenaria abriendo la

boca, mirando al cielo, mostrándose sorprendida, dubitativa, triste, dolida, convencida o casi en éxtasis. Todo ese ruidoso teatro facial transcurre en silencio, sin que el espectador escuche un solo sonido. Es *Extrañeza, desprecio, dolor y un largo etcétera* de Esther Ferrer, pionera del arte de la performance en España.

Le sigue Cristina Iglesias, con una escultura que tiene como pies dos fragmentos de viga de hierro que soportan un arco deformado, como si fuera una ruina de una

La muestra reúne trabajos de Esther Ferrer, Cristina Iglesias o Cindy Sherman

antigua civilización a punto de caer. Silencio y vacío, pero también muchas posibles historias detrás, como en la de Ferrer.

Diez poderosos rectángulos grises de Alan Charlton –que configuran más que un cuadro casi un muro con rendijas– dan paso a un extraño mueble de Pello Irazu, *Espacio para dos*, como si se tratara de dos sillones fusionados

que no dejan entrar a nadie pero dejan en su interior un sonoro espacio vacío. También hay una fotografía de 1981 de Cindy Sherman, una joven chica en cuclillas con una camiseta de tirantes, sugestivamente sexual, frágil y melancólica, pero a la vez empoderada porque ella es su propia modelo y porque habla de cómo se representa el cuerpo de la mujer. De nuevo silencio e historias que dan paso a la fotografía abstracta y ambigua de Astrid Klein y a dos fotografías de dos neumáticos Michelin realizadas por Christopher Williams, que toma una perspectiva lateral para convertir las ruedas en óvalos que parecen espejos a veces y otras vacío. Unas ruedas casi iguales que protagonizan un interesante diálogo de pareja frustrada en la obra que Maria Fusco ha escrito para la muestra y en la que da voz a tanto silencio. La única obra que lo rompe, y cómo, es *La historia de la máquina de escribir* recitada por Michael Winslow, un video de Ignacio Uriarte en la que Winslow, el actor conocido por los miles de efectos de sonido que realiza con la boca en *Loca academia de policía*, da vida a los sonidos de míticas máquinas de escribir cuya historia, cuyo sonido, hoy ha quedado silenciado. ●

Above: *La Vanguardia* Spanish national newspaper review.

