

Melting into Being: Albert Vidal

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON.

Abstract

This article presents the career of Spanish artist Albert Vidal, a great master of the art of movement and one of the most daring of those creators who oscillate between theatre, performance, film, music and other genres such as telluric art, which, in the area of scenic arts, stands out in the extensive range of its potentialities. The artist inherits the legacy of Jacques Lecoq, Kazuo Ohno and Dario Fo to trace his multifaceted path in art, considered by him as a path to spiritual perfection that he will be able to transmit in the future following the example of his teachers.

Keywords: theatre, performance, telluric art, path to spiritual perfection, Albert Vidal

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I already knew I would be faced with a master, but I would never have imagined he would challenge me to a fight. “You have to summon your unique, individual, combative, inner spirit,” Albert Vidal told me, sitting backlit in his living room armchair, occasionally stroking his cat’s head. It was not yet noon, and we were talking about his trajectory, about the role of art today, about reconnecting human beings with knowledge and experience. With the same tenderness with which he stroked the cat, Albert spoke the words while ensuring that none of them were uttered in vain. His eyes concealed the virtue of having seen a great deal, while his voice perfectly matched his wisdom. We talked for hours.

The first time I saw this internationally renowned actor, performer, and musician was at the lecture-performance *La vía sagrada del actor*, which the artist gave in 2013 at the Institut del Teatre in Vic, a city 69 km away from Barcelona. During that personal confession, which lasted five hours and was a kind of catharsis, Vidal measured himself against his artistic career, which had led him to visual theatre, performance art, cinema, industrial shamanism, telluric art, choir singing, telluric cabaret, and, finally, Dante’s *Inferno*. That final artistic act took place in unusual locations, such as a car park¹ or a cemetery,² and consisted of reciting six hundred verses in Florentine (the language in which Dante had written the *Divine Comedy*), attempting to restore the value of the word, reconnecting it with the meaning of human life so that he could once again situate himself in a world he does not understand.

This is exactly how I was: disoriented, stunned by the world’s messages that gradually atrophy my perception, underestimate my uniqueness, and recruit me into a brigade that daily raises the flag of similarity, I met Albert Vidal for an interview in a village on the Catalan coast. It was drizzling, but

1. In the car park of the Teatre Atlàntida in Vic (2019). Available at: <<https://youtu.be/P795Fj-Sbik>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

2. In the cemetery of Torelló (2021). Available at: <<https://youtu.be/M4qmbTa4nSQ>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

at the end of our conversation we decided to go down to the beach and see the sea. Insistently, vehemently, the waves lapped at the wall of a very old building, standing on the shore. I think we would both rather have not continued due to the danger, but neither he nor I gave up. We kept walking.

“What should we do?” I had asked Albert hours earlier, inquiring about the media avalanche that falls upon us, violating our capacity for discernment. He replied: “Well, deny everything, absolutely everything, in order to affirm one’s own dignity and say: ‘Don’t tell me stories, I carry them all inside my cells. My cells have even been crocodiles, they have even been snakes. Don’t tell me anything, I already know everything’” (Rękawek, 2016).

In fact, Albert had already warned me before that he was much more than just a certain Albert Vidal, since his determination to explore the broader spiritual dimension of the human being has become consolidated as one of the keys to his artistic and personal research.

I’m convinced we have a divine essence. All of us. All human beings. We’ll never reach a point of “this far”. And the more you can dissolve, the more you become part and consciousness of this infinity, the more a smile of knowledge and existence will reach you. A smile that goes hand in hand with goodness. Evil is the fruit of ignorance. And knowledge leads you to know that I, where I am now, and you, where you are now, are the same. I can move into you doing an interview, and you can move into me. We are the same. I always consider myself a cell of an enormous animal that has millions and millions of cells that are human beings. And this creature is humanity. I’m not so interested in Albert Vidal. I like feeling part of all this. And if through theatre I can communicate, even if it’s just a grain of sand of this feeling... This is how some artists left me, and I know I’ll take them with me to the grave. Because what they gave me was myself. (Rękawek, 2014)

Peer-to-peer

The artistic career of Albert Vidal, born in Barcelona, began in the late 1960s when he stood out among the students at the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris and soon became the master’s favourite student, who commissioned him to represent him at Giorgio Strehler’s Piccolo Teatro di Milano.

Due to his undeniable talent, Vidal was subsequently contracted by Dario Fo’s La Comune theatre, but over time, his curiosity for other aesthetic and cultural principles led him to Japan, where he studied Butoh dance with Kazuo Ohno. After witnessing how it can take an artist four hours to cross the small studio in an extremely slow movement, the actor learned that patience and meticulousness are fundamental values when performing on stage. He inherited these qualities from a master who inspired great respect in him. Vidal recalls to this day how he would enter the rehearsal room as if he were a cat. The great tradition of masters with which the artist learned his craft is, for him, a universal heritage that deserves to be preserved as a treasure and passed on to future generations.



Figure 1. Albert Vidal.
Photo: © Leopold Samsó.
Source: Samsó, 1983.

At the time, about two thousand students passed through Jacques Lecoq, but I was lucky: in 1968, during May 1968 in Paris, we attended his classes, and there were eight or nine of us. It was a completely intimate situation. That is, being able to receive the transmission of the master, which is very different from the position of teacher-student. It's the transmission from master to disciple. This transmission takes place for those who are ready to receive it. It's not a de facto transmission. Transmission isn't included in a curriculum, just as it wasn't when I worked for two and a half years with Dario Fo, sharing the cast with him on stage, reciting with him, performing his parts when he couldn't. It's something irreplaceable. Or sleeping at Kazuo Ohno's house, who had invited me. It was a peer-to-peer relationship. This is transmission. (Rękawek, 2016)

And in this process, it is essential, for Vidal, to downplay oneself and assume the role of being a transmitter, a mediator of knowledge that reverberates in the intimate, in the unique, in what one allows oneself to experience as an autonomous act.

The experience on the rock

The tradition learned from the masters and the commitment to their transmission had laid the foundations of Albert Vidal's artistic career, viscerally linked to his evolution as an individual, which has been marked by collapse and recovery. The first crisis came in the 1970s, when the artist was performing a highly successful piece of visual theatre and, in the middle of a show, felt that his performance no longer made sense. So, he stopped and, looking at the audience with more than genuine perplexity, announced that the show was over and that the ticket money would be returned to them at the box office.

My existential experience involved sensing something that wasn't working for me in the society of the spectacle, and, so, I ended up sitting on a rock at six in the morning watching the sun rise, closing my eyes, breathing. And above all, without doing meditation or yoga, because as soon as you do something, you're already doing less. Then you become aware of the richness of the human body. The richness of having limbs. The wonder of it. The wonder that we truly are. You realise that your own body, in its attitude and position, is already revealing something about the history of humanity depending on how you hold it. And I realised what happens only in the greatest actors: you watch a Charlie Chaplin video, and frame by frame, he's a different person. This also happened to me, perhaps not as strongly, with Dario Fo and a lot with Kazuo Ohno. And, well, Lecoq was a great educator; it was he who opened my eyes to consider the energy fields of the human body. I then strengthened all of this with my mountain retreat: at the age of thirty I abandoned the society of the spectacle to melt into being. (Rękawek, 2016)

That first insurrection against himself as an actor made him change a common place in art for another unknown one, from which Vidal, inspired by the book *On the Marionette Theatre*, by Heinrich von Kleist, articulated new possibilities for the performer by putting into practice the figure of the cosmic puppeteer who takes over the stage in *El aperitivo* (1978).³ Accompa-

nied on occasion by Carles Santos on the piano, the actors no longer seemed like human beings, but were transformed into puppets controlled by a greater force in unusual locations such as, for example, an airport.

However, after another collapse and in view of his next creative renewal, Vidal gave up the idea of the cosmic puppeteer and embarked on an adventure that might seem like a leap into the abyss. He left Catalonia, where he enjoyed a certain renown, and appeared as an unknown in a musical theatre in another region of Spain. He followed a vigorous tradition of the theatre performed in the *corral de comedias* in the Golden Age, where the space was a refuge for ordinary people seeking entertainment. Years later, the actor commented on that experience as follows:

I presented myself as an unknown and for months played the character of Cachito, who had to play foil to another comic. And this



Figure 2. *El aperitivo*. Source: <https://www.albertvidalperformer.com/es/portfolio/1978-laperitui-es/>.

3. Available at: <https://youtu.be/slhfiuzVDL8> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

fascinated me. I wanted no one to know me, to be known only for what I was doing at the time. This may be why I've somewhat shied away from being a media actor, because I feel like that's when something precious is lost. (Rękawek, 2014)

Philosophy in performance

Dissatisfied with the predictability of conventional acting, Vidal broke into the field of performance in 1982 when he organised his own funeral in *El entierro*.⁴ In that artistic act, Vidal highlighted the meaning of that rite because the “corpse” was alive and he positioned himself on the border between art and life, between fiction and reality, straddling it naturally. In a simple act, he linked life to death.



Figure 3. Albert Vidal in *El entierro*. Photo: J. M. Montaner.

Source: <<https://www.albertvidalperformer.com/es/portfolio/1982-lenterrament-es/>>.

One year later the artist did his most famous performance, called *El hombre urbano*,⁵ based on the idea of showing a person's daily routine to an audience. In that performance, presented in more than forty zoos around the world, Vidal lived the life of an executive, showing his daily habits to zoo visitors, who could observe him as if he were an animal. The idea of illustrating the daily routine of an executive to an audience had predated the television format of reality shows, although the performer's purpose was not only to entertain the audience. By setting his performance in a zoo, surrounded by animals, Vidal wanted to question the primal nature of human habits

4. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/rWAunwVHZcg>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

5. Available at: <https://youtu.be/LqinC_M18iQ> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

in a society that was vertiginously accelerating the pace of progress without thinking about it or understanding the seriousness of its consequences, which we endure today.

Frequently dismissed as a “provocateur”, which he himself considers “fruit of ignorance” (Rękawek, 2014), the artist always regarded performance, a genre of art he abandoned in the 1990s, as an existential attitude. “I don’t ask myself whether it would be nice to hang from a lamppost or walk along the edge of a roof. The philosophical fact involved in approaching this medium of expression is what moves me. The aesthetic aspect is a consequence of the conscious or unconscious philosophical conception of what one does” (García Ferrer; Rom, 1985: 48).

The performance ceased to be a means of artistic expression for Vidal when it became institutionalised as one of the strategies of the advertising market. The artist has always questioned the legitimacy of a profession that encourages consumption and, with a few exceptions, has denied advertisers the status of respectability. “What are they telling me? And what have I come to this world to do? Who is appropriating the time I have to live? Why are they telling me to consume, to buy, to go crazy, to win, to crush? Why do they want to steal this wonderful time from me?” (Rękawek, 2014).



Figure 4. Albert Vidal in *El hombre urbano* (1983). Photo: © Leopold Samsó and Albert Vidal. Source: <<https://www.albertvidalperformer.com/es/portfolio/1983-lhome-urba-es/>>.

From the bowels of the earth

Vidal's role as a banderillero in the film *Blood and Sand* (1989), starring Sharon Stone, caused another collapse in his artistic career. Unable to stomach that portrayal of the Spanish cliché imposed by the Hollywood industry, the artist took refuge in an industrial warehouse where he studied the carcass of an animal. For two months, Vidal watched the flesh of a dead stoat decompose, and he ended up feeling like he was accompanying the advance of death, which would be, in a way, the life of death.

That visceral experience led him to the next phase of his artistic career called "industrial shamanism", in which Vidal sought to communicate with the viscera of the earth disturbed by urban progress evident in the construction of the Vallvidrera tunnel in Barcelona. The artist's naked body, seated inside the tunnel under construction, uttered a shuddering sound and, mobilised by the energies of nature, expressed the pain of the bowels of the earth, which shaped one of the first performances of the telluric art: *Canto telúrico a los espíritus de la montaña* (1990).⁶

Emblematic in the telluric art phase was *Canto telúrico a los cimientos del teatro en la Expo 92*⁷ in Seville, where the artist created a ballet with the diggers and hung from a helicopter hovering overhead, much to the surprise of those attending, who were the politicians responsible for organising the world fair. Vidal recounts that, at the end of the performance, he received much praise from the dignitaries, who, nevertheless, had no qualms about leaving him alone once it was over and going to dinner...

Beyond your anecdote

In the 1990s, the artist deepened his philosophical inquiry into the essence of the human being and, inspired by his contact with other cultures he had encountered in India, Bali, Japan and Niger, focused his research on the *entity*. Different from identity, the *entity* operates, according to Vidal, within our being as a divine power with which we must connect: "The *entity* is found in the cat, in the plant; that is, in any manifestation that exists. It is a testimony of creation, of who we are. When you reach a communication with this entity that goes beyond your anecdote, your body expands" (Rękawek, 2014).

Vidal's metaphysical exploration from the 1990s onwards had a precedent in 1987 when he incorporated the myth of the serpent into his artistic work in *Alma de serpiente*,⁸ which set out his concept of art as a channel of spiritual perfection. In that performance, the artist emerged from the earth like a serpent while the drums that usually accompany Holy Week celebrations sounded. His subsequent artistic projects, such as *El mundo, el demonio y la carne* (1991), were inspired by the myth of the serpent (a symbol of knowledge in search of love) who awakens from slumber and re-emerges

6. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/jTuNe93-SCM>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

7. Available at: <https://youtu.be/SHng_or8RCg> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

8. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/wUzxK3nkLog>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

in search of the water lily flower to merge with it. However, first, he must confront the world, full of temptations and obstacles that he will gradually overcome by crossing various states of consciousness. He will encounter the devil, in whom he will glimpse a heart and a pain that he will find understandable, and also “flesh”, something that transcends animal sex, and uses it as a sublime celebration of life based on love and knowledge.

Artistic and personal research, understood as a path to spiritual perfection, led Vidal in the first decade of the 21st century to create a character whose origins lie in the myth of the serpent and that represents the fusion of love with knowledge. Conceived as an archetype, Kugu, the protagonist of the monologue *El príncipe* (presented in several places in Spain from 2003),⁹ takes on the role of the prophet, a cosmic jester who consecrates human beings from the stage as “telluric jewels” destined to oscillate between opposing categories and seek mutual understanding.

In the role of the Cosmic Prince of the Universe, Vidal addressed issues related to art, the spiritual dimension of human beings, the power of money, consumerism, the figure of women, and the relationship with the body. Kugu, “the president of the International Telluric Movement”, complained in that performance that art was dead: “Art that is stolen, sold, bought, plundered, or auctioned” (Vidal, Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, 2004). The cosmic jester concluded his speech by addressing the audience with the following words: “Art is you. Your way of seeing, your way of thinking. Art is transmuting yourself second by second” (Vidal, 2004).

As Vidal’s alter ego, Kugu diagnosed the unhealthy tendencies of the society in which we live, which have worsened over time and, in fact, have resulted in an apocalyptic situation highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The artist thus commented on the pre-apocalyptic panorama before the spread of the virus:

We are in a very active breeding ground, and if this isn’t stopped... Because sometimes I’m amazed at how we, as human beings, can become so entrenched in this mess. And how this feeling of subjugation is so deeply rooted in human beings. I believe that joy, humour, self-respect, and love for others are what most free us from the idiots. (Rękawek, 2016)

Cultural archaeology

Purified by the catharsis of *El príncipe*, Vidal focused his subsequent research on the oral traditions of Asia, Africa and also Catalonia, fascinated by the power of the exact word used in this form of communication with others. His interest led to a new direction in his career: musical theatre in the show *Juan del Oso* (2010),¹⁰ which in an exercise in “cultural archaeology” revived

9. Presented in Sevilla (2005). Available at: <<https://youtu.be/-hbQNazcck>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024]. Presented at the Teatre Principal in Olot in Catalan. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpBZ2_OfYRs&t=8s> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024]

10. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdLKLpn6ZY0>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

the story, present in several cultures, about the son of a woman kidnapped by a bear. Delving into the roots of oral tradition, accompanied by live traditional music, the actor thrilled the audience, surprised by the thriving collective memory that reverberated powerfully on stage through Vidal's body and voice.

The stage reconstitution of collective memory was a clear approach to his own roots, which the artist had been able to appreciate more through his "self-exiles" in other cultural contexts. In this regard, it is worth remembering that Vidal spent several seasons in Mongolia articulating various artistic projects, such as organising telluric chants in a maximum-security prison. Asked about what he learned from those experiences of living with otherness, the artist responded as follows:

On the one hand, to take off the mask of "I am so and so." Of travelling around the world as a Spaniard or a Catalan. On the other, the opposite: to learn that, through travel, you refine the links in the chain of memory that lead you to the very deep origins of humanity. In every part of the world, there is a different manifestation of energy, a wisdom that is inherent to that place and that, if profound, can be universal. What you learn from these trips is to better understand your oral tradition, your roots, things that have been lost. (Rękawek, 2014)

Union in the diverse

Interested in exploring the energy that emanates from a community and envelops the gregarious body, from 2012 Vidal focused his interest on creating collective choirs that could restore the bonds of authentic communication between people. He organised mass events such as *Silencio blanco*, held during the Festival Internacional de Teatro y Artes de Calle held in Valladolid in 2012,¹¹ where in a kind of improvisation the participants emitted sounds that ended up creating an impressive harmony.

In that performance, Vidal took on the role of a catalyst of energy, guiding the people through the streets, accompanied by a band of drums like in a Holy Week procession. Participants stopped when the music ended and turned to each other to look into their eyes. It was a very powerful experience for the people, who were not used to stopping in front of a stranger and simultaneously giving and receiving attention, much less singing together without rehearsing first. Vidal himself commented on the event as follows:

A state is created from which each human body utters its primordial sound, and a completely celestial harmony is formed. I like to explore provoking the state of trance with a community. A harmony of chaos is created because it's not just that everyone sings the same; everyone sings in a different way. It's unity through diversity, where each person is themselves.

11. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/1lcWdoyp-bk>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

[...] Without realising it, I've been carried away by the drive to provoke a free choir singing in others. The harmony of the sound vibrations of each human entity creates an authentic sense of the choir. And the choir is not everyone singing the same, but rather being oneself, part of a unity that reveals the essence of humanity, the wonder of life. (Rękawek, 2014)

In later creative processes, Albert Vidal explored the idea of the telluric cabaret,¹² in which he addressed current issues such as the political manipulation of citizens, immigration, the healthcare system, and social media. In improvised mini-monologues, preceded by hours of energetic preparation, he carried out a kind of creative “outpouring” assisted by a collaborator/catalyser of the event.

In this context, it is worth noting that Albert Vidal's artistic actions have been marked by a boldness that constantly transforms his career, leading to such surprising ideas as, for example, the prospect of creating shows remotely, through telepathy, in an empty space. Vidal had already experienced this when he recorded an album of telluric chant in a mountain cabin, bowing at the end in front of an audience that wasn't present. The audience was “the disembodied souls” (Rękawek, 2016). In the context of these events, the ideal chant would be the chant that cannot be heard.

These things will be commonplace in thirty years. I could telepathically perform a show on an empty stage remotely, and I could send electromagnetic waves that intensify the space. This hasn't happened yet, [...] but in 30-40 years we'll have accepted it. The fact is that we're far behind the machines we have invented; we still have a neuropsychological constitution from two thousand years ago. Machines have surpassed us, and what we have to do is evolve and learn with our bodies everything we've created. That's why it's possible to work with a virtual audience and with many experiences yet to come. (Rękawek, 2016)

And from now on, Vidal will be able to propose these new experiences, exploring what he calls “collective dignity” in his own space called Zona Zero. Housed in a former ceramics factory in Vic, with four-metre-high windows, black walls, and two red columns, Espai Albert Vidal will present the steps its founder continues to take on the artistic and spiritual path. It will also welcome projects from other artists attuned to telluric art, far removed from art understood as mere entertainment and willing to return to the origins, seeking virtues in the simple act of living. Emerging alive after the devastation: this will be the purpose of Zona Zero - Espai Albert Vidal.

A world in each word

The character of art as an existential, unique, and unrepeatable experience is present throughout Albert Vidal's career. From the beginning of his career, the artist was very reluctant to repeat the shows he had created in a

12. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/rKT5otRZAMo>> [Last accessed: 30 November 2024].

sequence as if they were easy-to-reproduce recipes. For him, the magic of theatrical communication lies in embracing each performance as a new event, and perhaps that is why the artist decided to recreate during his lecture-performance *La vía sagrada del actor* one of his most famous pieces in visual theatre from the 1970s called *Charter*. In it he played an everyday citizen who takes a plane for the first time. “I did *Charter* when I was 30 and it lasted until I was 40. And I’ve always loved it. Twenty-five years later, I presented it here as memory. And then I questioned whether it was fair for me, at 67, to try to reproduce the dynamics I had when I was 30” (Rękawek, 2016).

Vidal revisited that piece, seeking a dynamic that matched the experience of his aging, and consequently wiser, body. As he began rehearsing, he realised that the creative process was leading him toward the work of a clown of a certain age, and this shift from his old artistic approach to a more mature body gave the actor an unexpected perspective on his work: “[...] I had to rediscover the emotional drivers of that piece and experience them with my current body. And this led me to experience something slower, denser, and deeper. Each word was a world” (Rękawek, 2016).

Exactly like the ones he was uttering during our conversations, in which he revealed to me that his desire was to dissolve. Why? “To be.” And when I remember it now, the dates blur together, the words crisscross my mind like nebulous worlds. And yet, one image remains intact: Albert and I on that path by the sea. The rain falling, and we, absorbed, contemplating the force of the water, its power, its rage. Neither of us said a single word. We remained still, silent. Dissolved?



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