

# **NOT (YET) A MANIFESTO**

notes on research  
and politics in  
curatorial practice.

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**INTRODUCTION**

This publication was originally conceived as the outcome of the first edition of the International Curatorial Workshop held at vessel in Bari in 2011.

The theme chosen for the workshop by the curators of vessel, Viviana Checchia and Anna Santomauro, was 'the importance of research in curatorial practice', a topic that was extremely coherent with the interests and goals of the brand new organisation: that of exploring models alternative to the format of the exhibition which reflect the plurality of voices existing in cultural practice and is a strategy for giving space to unheard positions outside of the mainstream discourses within contemporary art.

Despite the fact that the original intent was seen by the group of selected curators as particularly relevant for enriching the current curatorial debate, but it became immediately evident to the group that the nodal question was not that of exploring different formats through research—a tactic that can be revealed as unproductive since it bolsters the status of quo of the information economy—but rather of questioning the very practice of curating and of research in order to re-contextualise and understand why they might still be useful tools for an operative strategy. Eventhough it seems as if an easy answer to those questions can be found; one that incorporates the reasoning of everyone, it was still almost impossible; and a common urgency emerged from the group. The problem discovered was precisely of our conditions of exploitation, of precarity, of mobility, of what united us and helped us to speak louder to a world subjected to individualism, production of information, 'normalization' and the hegemony of post-industrial capitalism.

We experienced by the means of the workshop solidarity between us and we decided that we should gather all the urgencies that we envisaged during our informal discussions into something that can be accessible for other cultural producers in order to offer them the same experience of communality that we had and further to give them a space to enrich and strengthen our position.

The idea of a manifesto came some months later when Jerlyn, Viviana and myself met in London in order to think about what should have been done in order to continue a dialogue between all the participants of ICW 2011. We were aware of the fact that our position was far from the format of the authentic manifesto as it appeared in the art world in the sixties and seventies but at the same time we thought that the radicality of the format could be a valuable starting point for making public our discomfort as cultural producers and for reacting to the current post-Fordist system of exploitation.

After sharing our ideas through Skype and emails with the rest of the group there was a general consensus about the format. We created a collective document that rather than having the formula of a proper manifesto with a full stop, we included the paradoxes and ambiguities of collaboration. Through this tactic we exposed the contradiction of collaboration but also strengthened it through opening up the community of cultural producers that participated to the ICW to everyone in the field that would like to respond through their comments to both the online version of the manifesto (<http://www.katalog-m.com/god-savethe/>) and to the printed one. In order to enlarge the collective, we created an informal reading group in which we proposed a series of texts that informed our manifesto and most importantly we handled out the draft of the manifesto in order to instigate a discussion and

to give space for reactions and feedback.

Because of the plurality of voices that emerged from the reading group "GOD SAVE CURATORS?", it became an exercise in respecting each other's positions, being aware of self-exposure and the risk of being criticised, and sacrificing some individual positions for the benefit of the community. But rather than neutralizing this dialectical discussion we decided to show it as it was, by publishing "NOT (YET) A MANIFESTO" ; a title for the open and continuous process, of developing contributions and conversations that may someday end up with a manifesto — and a full stop.

Now that we are at the first of step of this project, we are aware of how difficult it is for us to collaborate, as cultural producers frustrated by our financial precarious condition, by the condition of being constantly mobile, by the fact that contemporary art is the most productive system in legitimating and serving the information economy. But we are also aware that we are many and if we instigate discussion through re-contextualising the strategy that we have at our disposal, we can together value possible alternatives to the current economic, socio-political and cultural environment. We believe that culture is now the place for that imagination and re-contextualisation to happen.

—*Francesco Scasciamacchia*

### **SUMMARY OF THE FIRST CURATORIAL WORKSHOP**

Vessel's first International Curatorial Workshop in 2011 was successful in bringing together globally diverse young curators and mentors for group discussions centered around formulating a new lexicon for the practice of curating. It was immediately apparent that the problems and questions before us could not often be resolved by a single answer, nor could their complexities be completely unraveled in just one workshop. Attempts to define and constrain were defeated by the constant fluidity inherent in the practice of curating, muddled as always by the diverse factors — political, global, personal, financial, historical — that each leave their mark on the work and the practitioner.

The groups were composed as follows:  
(Group One) Presentations by Cecilia Guida, Viktor Misiano. Participants: Haizea Barcenilla, Stephanie Bertrand, Mary Conlon, Melissa Des-  
tino and Rachel Pafe.

(Group Two) Presentations by: Ilaria Gianni, Roberto Pinto. Participants: Viviana Checchia, Günes Forta, Jerlyn Jareunpoon, Pablo Lag, Francesco Scasciamacchia and Pieter Vermeulen.

(Group Three) Presentations by: Denis Isaia, Marco Petroni. Participants: Lynda Gaudreau, Paola Lucente, Rachel Paarman-Gonce, and Arzu Yayintas.

The group working with committee members Gianni and Pinto focused their investigation on public art and public spaces, while the group of Guida and Misiano focused on the role and importance of research. Those working with Isaia and Petroni were more concerned with the motivations of curators and the question of the audience. Nevertheless, the methods by which

the discussions were conducted remained the same for each group. The case studies which served as a basis for investigation were presented and followed by periods of open questioning, conversation and elaboration. As was stated in the final presentation, the "methodology of doubt" and value of the question was the driving force behind workshop conversations.

At the public presentation, each group was afforded the opportunity for a single speaker to elaborate on the inquiries which had taken place over the past several days. Group One worked with the case studies of refused exhibitions. They were generally concerned with the role, interpretation and methods of research in relation to the exhibition and curating itself. It was their finding that in an age of oversaturation, research and experience should be the foundation of the exhibition. Group Two had described the basis of their work as a re-elaboration of terminology. They worked with the terms public, public art and curation while exploring the juxtaposition of organic and synthetic production. Questions were raised as to the tactics involved in dealing with "charged" public spaces, and the methods of incorporating the dialogue occurring outside the public space. Group Three discussed their individual motivations as curators and investigation of the controversial term audience. The case studies further illuminated the difference in motivation from one curator to the next, and yet there was an underlying desire to create an experience, connection or possibility for a "witness" of some sort.

In regards to exhibitions, there were two differing schools of thought expressed: some believed the exhibition was a faulty means of answering questions while others saw it as the most viable method for expressing desired concepts to the public. The role of the curator was also disputed and definitions ranged from that of a mediator to that of a project manager,

researcher or facilitator. However it was agreed that in a moment of uncertainty of the future of curating, it is crucial that each curator reflect upon his or her motivations and positions, and that the process of creating and initiating become one that is carefully considered before it is enacted. Now more than ever, there is a need for curators to fully commit themselves to and sustain a position or idea through open understanding and honest investigation, despite the form taken by the final product.

One thing is certain: there will always be a constant need for redefinition. Success can only be found in the willingness to discuss, investigate, submerge oneself in honest research and allow the evolution of practice, artist, audience and curator to take its unstoppable course. The modern curator must be one able to withstand the insecurity of uncertainty, the potential disappointment of repeatedly returning to the drawing board and above all, maintain integrity as a researcher and liaison between artist-art-public in the face of globalization, commerce and institutional pressure. In order to create an honest and effective critical space, the curator must create a system of recognition, must formulate guidelines without stating anything outright. In other words, strike a delicate balance between the mind of the artist and the mind of the public.

—*Rachel Paarman-Gonce*

## PARTICIPANTS FOR THE READING GROUP

Susanna Biachini, Cinzia Delnevo, Laura di Nicolantonio, Vlad Morariu, Corina Oprea, Mette Kaergaard Praest, Carolina Rito, Assunta Ruocco, Claire Louise Staunton, Gaia Tedone, Mihaela Varzari, with special contributions by Charles Esche.

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# A NON-MANIFESTO

## A CURATORIAL MANIFESTO<sup>1</sup>

Curating is public action that necessitates a research practice.<sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup>

This is evident since:

✗ -The shift from institutional critique to the institutionalisation of curating:<sup>7,8,9,10,11</sup>

*paradigm of administration*  
The possibility of curating (which is defined for the purposes of this publication as a practice) to generate a critical space.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

-Cultural productions are trapped by funding mechanisms, collection acquisition strategies, touristic images of museums, market-driven logics, and the necessity to attract the audience.<sup>15</sup>

-Opportunistic curatorial<sup>16</sup> approach: curators orchestrated exhibitions or other cultural productions in order to suit institutions. ✗<sup>17,18</sup>

*Expand*  
There is no alternative but to change things effectively, however there is a possibility to open a space that fosters critical thought.<sup>19, 20</sup>

Even if independent curatorship seems to be the liberation of curatorial practices, it is in fact trapped in the post-industrial notion of immaterial labour.<sup>21</sup>

*importance of contextualisation of the critical process*

*OPTION 1  
RESEARCH  
BY PRACTICE*

<sup>1</sup> the first draft

<sup>2</sup> Why does publicness necessitate a research practice? Maybe it necessitates more a comprehensible practice - a way of working that reaches out and connects with people who are not professionals in the art field. A publicness that speaks to interests beyond the professional. Like good journalism for instance...

<sup>3</sup> Curating is a practice that engages with a public context. What is the public resonance and the potential for criticality of curatorial practice?

<sup>4</sup> In the name of who? We write in the name of the people. And the people, in whose name do they speak?

<sup>5</sup> ...of ethics? of responsibility?

<sup>6</sup> Connection between responsibility towards the public and the possibility of not generating any income.

<sup>7</sup> Intuitive for us is not grounded on references. CULTURAL OUTCOME

<sup>8</sup> To "instigate" something from the cultural perspective.

<sup>9</sup> How do we position the curatorial practice in relation to the institutional focus?

<sup>10</sup> Curatorship started (historically by) being institutionalized. Bucholch's aesthetics of administration applies to curatorship as well.

<sup>11</sup> Does it not come from the institution? one is never outside of the institution! ...same language.

<sup>12</sup> I ask myself if we have not had enough of critique and criticality. I think we need to be more speculative and propositional. We all know neo-liberalism and the market fail human desire but unless we can offer something that aligns more appropriately with human desire (and even human need) we are not going to defeat it. Criticality is the refuge of the intellectual who has given up the proposition and the possibility to change the world. I want to be part of the change, though criticality is useful to understand why.

<sup>13</sup> Not necessarily. To create culture is also to make people (the public) understand the system and way of life that govern us, without necessarily criticising it.

<sup>14</sup> Does not need to be outside of anything to do this.

<sup>15</sup> importance of contextualization of the critical process...

<sup>16</sup> It is not opportunistic; they do not actually have a voice. This kind of curatorial practice cannot prescind from accurate research.

<sup>17</sup> De-construction of the conflict of interest as a TKT (EMAIL HER) process that involves all the public activities.

<sup>18</sup> It is a question of responsibility again. Perhaps institutions have a kind of responsibility towards a broad audience.

<sup>19</sup> Discussions often lack accessible documentation. This could be due to the young age of the discipline. The role of the curator as such, has not existed more than 60 years.

<sup>20</sup> I agree that institutions mostly serve the hegemonic interest but it is not enough to open space. We should say how we will use that space and what we want it to look like. Neo-liberalism will swallow critique like any aged porn star. The challenge is to shift the debate into new territory by making a proposal.

<sup>21</sup> Often there is a lack of time for adequate research to be undertaken.

<sup>22</sup> Yes agree totally. An intellectual labour that only serves to justify the benefits of the superrich. We work for little to decorate their society of huge inequality. How we refuse them is another question but your analysis is right I think.

<sup>23</sup> (Susanna) Does it mean knowing everything that is going on all around the world by having the possibility of travelling? Not everyone has this chance, especially if trapped in a paid job. So, is their practice less relevant than this other one?

<sup>24</sup> This sentence doesn't make sense to me.

Curatorship is simultaneously flexible and moveable as well as underpaid due to the necessity in the art world of building yourself a place and a position.

This often pushes curators to over-production, which also presupposes inadequate research.<sup>22</sup>

The cosmopolitan<sup>23</sup> and hyper-mobilized model of independent curators and artists, while celebrated as an individual freedom to travel, to unfold a trans-national identity, is in fact a precarious system that leads to an unstable lifestyle which adversely affects us as human beings.

Behind this imperative of freedom there is an hegemonic mechanism that forces us to low wages and ubiquity, in order to fully and successfully participate in life and the Art World.<sup>24,25</sup>

Even if there are some places outside the institutions that are more research based, institutional models of education are driven by a mainstream logic:

Within the mainstream you can find a certain number of research-centered curatorial practices, often coming from people working steadily in other institutions.

For instance, how could universities, trapped as they are in research for funding and students, generate a knowledge that counters the dominant model of production?<sup>26,27</sup>

Considering as a given fact that doing research means producing a certain knowledge, there is a problematic understanding of what kind of outcome curatorial research should produce.<sup>28,29</sup>

The use of funding for research: Huge money means sometimes lack of freedom. Lack of money sometimes corresponds to respect certain standards. This generates a paradox.

The overuse of the words critical and criticality: A lot of exhibitions pretend to adopt a broad critical approach, just to claim criticality and use the term for publicity's sake.<sup>28,29</sup>

To be able to argue why we think many practices are not engaging with critical enquiry, we should define a bit more of what we understand by 'critical'.<sup>30</sup> There is a call for defining or re-establishing definitions of terminology (as usual!).<sup>31</sup>

Exhibitions that are supposed to take a critical approach towards capitalism, have not been contextualized enough.<sup>32</sup>

Lack of contextualising. First step, contextualise yourself:

In order to be able to respond with a coherent proposition that is a logical reaction to present matters, you need to understand the place and the historic and political situation you are acting from.<sup>33,34</sup>

<sup>25</sup> I think we need to try to build parallel systems of recognition. At the moment we are all fighting over the same field of recognition - more or less - one that is driven by market forces. As Brian Holmes says, neo-liberalism works because it has established that the market speaks the truth. We have to challenge that by disappearing from the market's validation radar. But to do that, and feel respected and acknowledged, we have to build an adequate alternative radar and recognition system - and one that clearly rejects the current market led model of hyper-presence/activity and financial reward.

<sup>26</sup> They cannot. Their role is to endorse the current trends, least they'll find themselves isolated.

<sup>27</sup> I think you answer it above to some extent by saying that curating is acting in the public domain. Curatorial research has to relate to public sensibility/urgency or understanding. Otherwise it serves the status quo of criticality.

<sup>28</sup> Needs always to have the public in mind?

<sup>29</sup> Exactly!

<sup>30</sup> Criticality doesn't seek social change - it seeks confirmation that things are bad and will stay bad. That is why it is useless in the situation we find ourselves.

<sup>31</sup> Being "critical", can become a device to lead to an over simplification of terms.

<sup>32</sup> Yes, as usual. Why not think more about the proposal/proposition as a way out of the bind?

<sup>33</sup> Elaborate: how should they be contextualized? How have they fallen short? Do you mean they haven't been researched properly? The next topic DOES help to elaborate this a bit.

<sup>34</sup> Yes... but I think it is not only response to conditions. A proposition must also be based on an ethical position you take that transcends the pragmatics of the local.



<sup>35</sup> By combining together? By sharing workloads? Through forms of solidarity?

<sup>36</sup> As curators, we need to engage with the public.

<sup>37</sup> Sometimes research is replaced by intuition. Curatorship is a fast-paced activity, supported by good writing. If a text is convincing do you really have to investigate its source? According to this manifesto, the answer should be yes.

<sup>38</sup> I think you have to formulate something if you are engaging with a broad non-specialized audience. It does not have to be an exhibition necessarily, but some kind of output. Yes!

<sup>39</sup> Not necessarily. I guess it depends on the artist's practice. Because, in my opinion, the curator first of all has to think with the artist, as they both are producers of culture: they inspire each other and have the same aims.

<sup>40</sup> The french historian Marc Bloch once said that it is paramount for history to embrace other disciplines (Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, etc.). Otherwise, it would just be a sterile reflection upon itself. The same goes for Art. To "speak different languages" means to pull Art outside its - still present - elite.

<sup>41</sup> I think art should be allowed to do this. To be superficial in the eyes of academia. Curating does have to be a bridge but also take a responsibility the day after an exhibition opens. Real change can only come about through confronting a visitor who doesn't understand. That's the most touching and empowering it can get.

Curating is a public action:  
On delivering this interpretation to the public.<sup>35,36</sup>

Curating has to be a bridge between a pure theoretical discourse and the public side of art. But how can this statement be related to or differ from the concept of vulgarization? (How can the fine line between public presentation and vulgarization be successfully traversed?) *→ You mean it needs to be supported by research?*

Research needs evolution.<sup>37</sup> It is a never-ending process. That does not mean that you have to finalize or formalize your research on something but that you continuously have to negotiate your position (based on *V. good.* constantly changing terms and evolving understanding).<sup>38</sup>

Curating has to embrace politics<sup>39</sup> as much as it has to embrace a lot of disciplines that can throw light on its potentiality to generate critique. Despite the fact that sometimes curatorial practices misappropriates subjects outside<sup>40</sup> the art itself, and risks ending up being superficial when not grossly misinformed.<sup>41</sup>

# PARALLEL SYSTEMS OF RECOGNITION

stephanie bertrand

*The following essay was written as a response to one contributor's suggestion during the process of conceiving the manifesto that there is an urgent need for "parallel systems of recognition that go beyond the current market led model of hyper-presence/activity and financial reward", as well as for "curatorial proposals that engage and connect to public sensibility and understanding". Some of the ideas in this essay are currently being developed as part of a larger Phd research in the department of Museology at Aristotle University in Thessaloniki.*

Despite the fact that curating is considered to be a practice, most curatorial propositions today are primarily articulated through the written material that accompanies the project or exhibition – be it in the form of a press release, catalogue essay, wall text or exhibition leaflet – rather than through the semantic content deployed in the

actual project, framing the latter as concrete proof, or as unnamable experience. These unifying exoteric curatorial propositions suggest a more or less plausible narrative context through which the public might apprehend the works. However ambiguous, they are fundamentally designed to explain and justify the selection and particular presentation of the works vis-à-vis the public, as well as the institutions and funding bodies involved.

There are, however, a few instances of curatorial propositions distinctly formulated through the fact of presentation – in other words, through practice. It is important to note in relation to the ongoing debate surrounding curatorial authorship that these propositions differ significantly from artistic authorship in that they are neither inherently given nor ultimately private. Instead, they are publicly accountable, and contingent upon the condition of their reception as

complete and meaningful arrangements. That is to say, they depend upon the audience's unquestionable recognition of the significance of their particular elections, in contrast to being received as a debatable set of inclusions and exclusions, installation devices and classifications<sup>1</sup>. These curatorial propositions neither take the form of questions, nor of statements. They are compelling multi-layered proposals that suggest legible coded structures deployed on a number of different, and at times conflicting registers, that completely derive from, and reflect upon, the works.

### Curating's contingent mode of address

Within the scope of exhibition making, curating seems to be caught between two contradictory impulses that stem from its dual essential functions: namely to mediate the work and to care for the work. On the one hand, curatorial practices are tasked with contextualizing the work for the public. As Boris Groys suggests in his essay "Politics of Installation", the curator is a representative of the public and is thus responsible for administering the exhibition space. As Groys states: "Accordingly, the curator's role is to safeguard [the exhibition space's] public character, while bringing the individual artworks into this public space, making them accessible to the public, publicizing them."<sup>2</sup>

It naturally follows that most curatorial approaches today largely focus on locating, and by extension, integrating artworks within a larger cultural context in such a way as to render them more accessible to the public through a series of discursive and educational operations that revolve around rhetorical modes of display and participatory projects. These mediating approaches take the form of a range of widespread practices, including thematic and survey exhibitions that situate the work within contem-

porary and culturally relevant narratives, as well as public activities associated with educational programmes – both of which are commonplace strategies within the majority of museums and art institutions today.

On the other hand, the curatorial is not only accountable to the public, but is also fundamentally responsible toward the work, to which it must necessarily attend. Indeed, the word curating is etymologically founded upon a caretaking operation that presupposes the existence of a singular object in need of a special kind of attention. In the words of artist Anton Vidokle: "While artists may well produce art in the absence of curators, if no art is being produced, curators of contemporary art, at least, are out of a job."<sup>3</sup>

Although curators tend to avoid making direct reference to art's singularity – given any challenge to this claim might run the risk of undermining the profession's *raison d'être* – they remain obliged to continuously reaffirm art's unique character by clearing a space for a momentous encounter. Perhaps the closest to an acknowledgement of this commitment lies in the suggestion that art becomes animated or illuminated within certain presentation contexts. This is exemplified by the commonplace use among curators of expressions such as "to shine" to describe how artworks perform, or appear, within "good" exhibitions. In this respect, one might cite such radically different curatorial texts as Ralph Rugoff's essay "You Talking To Me? On Curating Group Shows That Give You a Chance to Join the Group"<sup>4</sup> (which draws an analogy between curating and consumer packaging), and Ruth Noack and Roger Buergel's article "Some Afterthoughts on the Migration of Form"<sup>5</sup> (which develops their eponymous concept), that both readily use words such as 'shine', 'illuminate' and

'resonate' to describe how artworks register within given exhibitions.

The expression "to shine" can be traced to Martin Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art"<sup>6</sup>. In it, Heidegger describes the experience of "the shining" as a truth revelation disclosed when the work is opened up in the unconcealedness of its being. This unconcealedness is only possible as a result of a "setting up", in other words, through the act of bringing a work into a collection or placing it in an exhibition, in such a way as to invoke the divine into presence.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the experience of the "shining" relies both on the creators and the "preservers", whom Heidegger describes as those who stand "within the openness of beings that happens in the work" (p. 65). By appropriating the notion of "shining", curators thus position themselves against those practices that Heidegger denounces as pertaining to connoisseurship and the art business. They inevitably posit themselves (whether consciously or otherwise) as the privileged guardians of truth, insuring the sacrosanct encounter between the creators and the preservers by caring for, and setting up, the work.

Hence, the two fundamental yet ostensibly contradictory impulses at the root of curating's operation: to mediate and to care, frame the latter as a practice that ultimately sets art to work in the service of a community – by making it fulfill a social function – or in the service of a divine Other – by positioning it as the vessel for a mystical encounter or Levinasian face to face.<sup>8</sup> Given this state of affairs, it is no wonder that both artists and curators have sought to extricate themselves from this compromising entanglement. In recent decades, a number of curators have proposed social research projects that circumvent artworks altogether, while others still have laid claim to the artist's singular capacity. Conversely, artists have struggled to

reject both attempts to instrumentalize their work, and to eliminate the figure of the artist altogether from the system of cultural production.

While this unresolved power struggle between artists and curators continues to produce interesting literature, the fact nonetheless remains that curating today seems to perform an operation that is necessary for the work of art. Thinkers including Boris Groys have gone so far as to suggest that curating "cures the powerlessness of the image"<sup>9</sup>. Even Anton Vidokle in his essay "Art Without Artists?", which makes one of the most forceful cases against curatorial interference, has conceded that: "as artistic production becomes increasingly deskilled—and, by extension, less identifiable by publics as art when placed outside the exhibition environment—exhibitions themselves become the singular context through which art can be made visible as art."<sup>10</sup> This does not mean of course, as Vidokle has rightly pointed out, that curators are necessary for the production of meaning, or have the power to designate something as art. But if curating is not endowed with such capabilities, why is its influence so prevalent? What is the nature of its operative function? How does the curatorial effectively sustain the work of art?

The answer to these questions is two-fold and goes back to the curatorial's basic functions, which in effect are not as contradictory as they might initially have appeared. On the one hand, through the act of mediating the work, the curatorial effectively safeguards artistic sovereign freedom by enabling artists to develop their practice independently from any public concern or justification. Indeed, by fulfilling an institutional role, the curatorial essentially buffers public demand, allowing for the possibility of a free open space, beyond the reach of an ever-expanding institution, within which artists might practice. As Groys accurately suggests, artists can temporarily occupy the public space of the



museum or art institution with an artistic installation. But in reality, such incursions are ultimately predicated upon their temporary nature, which allows for artists to retreat from the institution, once the project is complete, to a space beyond the contemporary masses' reach.

On the other hand, in the process of mediating the work for the public, the curatorial also tends to the work. It cares for the work by ensuring that the latter does not only become legible to an audience to the fullest extent of its interpretive potential within a given context, but also, that it does not become legible in any way which is not commensurate with the work. As Walter Benjamin has famously written, the aura of the work of art disappeared in part as a result of: "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly".<sup>11</sup> Unchecked – i.e. unimpeded by some form of mediation – this desire for absolute closeness inevitably leads to an ownership claim over the work via the imposition of a private authored misreading<sup>12</sup>. While such misreading may well lead, in some cases, to new creative constructions, they run the more generalized risk of merely serving as cathartic confirmation of the spectator's individual worldview. For instance, a physical trainer might interpret Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling within his own frame of reference as an ode to bodybuilding.<sup>13</sup>

With the shift that Benjamin signals from cult value to exhibition value, the immanence of the work moves from divine incarnation – the ability to channel an Other – to semantic saturation.<sup>14</sup> It becomes predicated upon the artwork's unique capacity for communication: its unrivaled ability to compress and deliver a vast amount of data that is both sensual and textual in nature.<sup>15</sup> Where the curatorial "cures the powerlessness of the image", it does not substitute meaning that the form has lost, nor conjure up the god into presence. It establishes, through the selec-

tion and installation of artworks, a series of coded systems (or intelligible interpretive contexts) through which the public might decipher each work's unique language and receive works pieces to the fullest extent – within a given time and place – of their informational value.

### Terms of a particular form of legibility

In his essay "The Hamburg Project: A Farewell to Discipline"<sup>16</sup>, curator Viktor Misiano suggests that the traditional exhibition, which he describes as a "collocation of self-sufficient artifacts", is in a state of crisis owing in part to its association with an institutional culture of discipline. He argues that: "lacking any common symbolic horizon, rooted only in personal contexts, isolated artworks become less and less accessible to any form of communication".<sup>17</sup> As a way out of this state of affair, Misiano proposes a non-disciplinary, process-oriented mode of curating, using one of his own endeavors, "The Hamburg Project", as an example for this type of alternative presentation. In his text, Misiano describes the latter as an unmediated year-long exchange, which he organized with a group of artists within the context of an institution (Moscow's Contemporary Art Center). He further explains how the project evolved organically and produced a collective installation that changed over time following the participants' on-going conversation.

In advocating for this type of unmediated presentation, Misiano effectively challenges the contemporary culture of discipline, with its emphasis on bio-politics, by publically presenting a new form of community, interconnectedness and labor relation via a private conversation and collective installation staged within the museum. Moreover, while circumventing the disciplinary hierarchies that regulate the fields of curatorial and artistic practices, Misiano also addresses the crisis within the traditional exhibition. He

does so by promoting the "constituent coexistence of immanent singularities"<sup>18</sup> through a type of unmediated display characterized by a "common interconnectedness in which there could be no substitutions".<sup>19</sup>

Misiano's proposed curatorial approach, which rejects the traditional exhibition's static presentation of discrete artworks, is one way of remedying the latter's current state of crisis. But the question remains as to whether making the public witness to a private conversation and an open-ended display is the ideal means of doing so. If the problem is the work of art's growing inability to communicate within this type of exhibition format, then perhaps the answer lies not so much with a discursive and process-oriented approach, but rather with a curatorial model that will provide a series of contextual markers to decipher the unique language and symbolic horizon of the individual works. Thus, the underlying challenge posed by Misiano's essay becomes whether it is possible to rethink or reconfigure the traditional exhibition in such a way as to conceive a mode of presentation characterized by the "constituent coexistence of immanent singularities" within a configuration where there can be no substitutions.

Beyond his chosen approach, Misiano is correct in his assessment that curatorial mediation, in its most commonplace forms, is partly liable for the crisis within the traditional exhibition. The latter derives to a certain extent from curatorial practices' attempt to either establish a unifying narrative context to justify and prop-up unique works; or conversely, to produce momentous encounters by creating displays in which individual artworks appear as absolutely singular objects that bare no relation to one another or to everyday life –in other words, that turn away from everything outside themselves, only to become visible as impenetrable hermetic forms, or shining objects of cult.

These modes of curatorial mediation negatively interfere with the works by closing down their semantic potential. They either substitute a unifying narrative for the works' singular content, or render the works mute by alternatively framing them as cult objects or impenetrable formal arrangements. Moreover, such approaches are incapable of generating displays immune to revisions and substitutions, given that their particular elections are, in essence, neither exclusive nor definite. For instance, within a thematic or survey exhibition, it is always possible to question the show's particular set of inclusions and exclusions in relation to its overarching curatorial premise.

Nevertheless, curating's mediating capacity should not be abandoned altogether. On the contrary, as previously states, it performs a necessary operation vis-à-vis the work. Through the process of selecting and installing artworks in space, the curatorial has the capacity to establish a series of normative systems –or contextual baselines– through which the individual pieces' own singular structures and deviations might become apparent to an audience. In doing so, it fulfills the added purpose of warding off the white cube's inherent randomness – the process through which this predominant context seductively elevates all objects through the forceful imposition of disconnectedness and isolation.

Hence, rather than formulate a unifying exoteric narrative to explain and justify artworks to an audience, curating's mediating task becomes to create displays that establish semi-autonomous contextual structures derived from the works, through which the public might apprehend the latter according to their own singular modeling systems. In other words, by selecting and installing artworks together in space, the curatorial's role becomes to make manifest a decipherable

series of repetitions and disruptions between the pieces' formal (color, shape, scale, etc.), symbolic and conceptual elements. Its operative function becomes to introduce predictable relations and entropic deviations between these different aspects of the works so as to saturate the individual pieces by highlighting as much of their semantic potential as possible within the framework of a given presentation context. By contrast to the aforementioned mediating approaches, this curatorial mode precludes any substitution as every choice pertaining to selection and installation becomes inscribed within one or several of the structures that it establishes between the works<sup>20</sup>.

Undoubtedly, a single exhibition cannot account for, or highlight, every possible interpretation commensurate with a work, nor can it guarantee that every viewer will grasp all of the readings that are made more accessible through the particular display. But by establishing multiple semantic contexts that wholly derive from, and reflect upon, the works, the curatorial insures that the latter are neither perceived as illustrative props, nor as cult objects animated by the divine. In allowing for the works to become legible on their own terms, the curatorial does not render them didactic, nor infringe upon their sovereign claim to authority, singularity and immanence. It merely highlights what might otherwise have remained hermetic for lack of an understanding of the language that the individual works create and through which they speak.

### Bagdad Spacecog Analyst

*Bagdad Spacecog Analyst* is a small group exhibition that was presented at The Frith Street Gallery in London in the summer of 2008. Curated by Andrew Renton, it featured works by four artists: João Onofre, Diango Hernández, Gabriel Kuri and Eugenio Dittborn. The exhibition bor-

rowed its unusual title from the opening verse of The Fall's song "Guest Informant", whose exact words remain subject to debate. In doing so, the show clearly enounced its curatorial intent from the first to begin with a misreading, deliberately staging the artworks in such a way as they would not fully register until the close.

Nearly all of the pieces included in the exhibition were installed on the ground floor of the gallery. These consisted of two and three-dimensional discrete objects: paintings, photographs, and furniture-sized sculptures. In the entrance way of the space, the show opened with 3 works: Gabriel Kuri's "A Satisfied Consumer" (2008): a sculpture consisting of used bars of soap carefully aligned on a table covered with blue felt cloth; Diango Hernández's "My Propaganda, my drawings" (2008): a series of black and white Xerox copies on white, orange, yellow and blue paper representing some of the artist's drawings alongside his personal research into 1970s socialist propaganda in Cuba; and João Onofre's "Untitled DB (first line 1st verse w/ back vocals)" (2008): a text piece borrowing the opening line of David Bowie's song "Absolute Beginners" – "Papapa-ummmm-hi've nothing much to offer" – printed in barely decipherable letters on black cotton paper.

Ummmm nothing much to offer – this initially seemed to be the case. The poverty of the materials and stubborn opacity of these works beyond the artists' mysterious practice set the tone for the rest of the show, at first confirming Misiano's less-than-favorable account of the traditional exhibition. Certainly very little could be fathomed by way of a relationship between the strikingly different works, including Onofre's group portraits of gravediggers in Lisbon ["Every Gravedigger in Lisbon (Olivais Cemetery) (Ajuda Cemetery) (Carnide Cemetery) (Benfica Cemetery) (Prazeres Cemetery) (Alto São João Cemetery)" (2007)], Hernández's collection of broken records ["Drawing (Your music has

ideological problems...)" (2005)] and Eugenio Dittborn's Airmail Paintings ["Absent Feet Airmail Painting No. 153" (2002–2003 and "Corche Airmail Painting No. 163" (2004)], save for a few recurring references to music and weak formal connections established through the show's predominantly black and white palette broken up by hits of bright color.

All seemed to conspire to present the works—in the way one might expect from a group show in a commercial gallery during the slow season—as isolated curios: the product of idiosyncratic practices, ideally suited for the purposes of decorating a minimalist home. The press release accompanying the show eluded any substantial explanation for the particular selection of works, remaining deliberately vague.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the exhibition appeared to have been installed somewhat at odds with the architectural layout of the space. This seemed unusually gauche on behalf of the seasoned curator, whose previous exhibition *Stay forever and ever and ever* at The South London Gallery a year prior offered visitors a masterly composed tableau overview of the show from the SLG's elevated landing, leaving one to wonder whether The Frith Street Gallery's commercial nature might be partly responsible for the exhibition's apparent shortcomings.

After an initial tour of the ground floor, viewers were inevitably drawn to the gallery basement by the intermittent sound of music rising up through the stairwell near the offices. By contrast to the ground floor, there was but a single work in the basement, as if all pretenses of a desired connection had finally been dropped. There, one found the only time-based piece in the exhibition: João Onofre's "Untitled version (I see a darkness)" (2007). The video documents two young children in a recording studio interpreting Johnny Cash's song "I see a darkness" with clear high-pitched, high-hoped little voices

in marked contrast to the country singer's deep bass-baritone, as the video image goes from pitch black to blinding light over the course of the song.

As the last piece in the show, the video prompted a surprising rereading of the whole exhibition. Its gradual saturation from dark to light came to elucidate the show's underlying curatorial proposal, which up until then had remained hidden in plain sight. Following the short time-lapse afforded by the moving image work, viewers reemerged into the main space of the exhibition from a completely different vantage point, only to find that all of the previously seen works had suddenly clicked into place and into view.

Onofre's group portraits of gravediggers wearing sunglasses to shield their eyes from the mid-day sun recalled the beloved country signer's recent death. Moreover, these photographs now suggested an inability to see, not only commensurate with the exhibition's curatorial proposal, but also with some of the deliberately obscured works in the show, including Hernández's Xerox copies and Onofre's own barely legible black text pieces. Meanwhile, Hernández's collection of broken records gained a profound affinity with Kuri's used soap bar assemblages, which both appeared to have been amassed and arranged in such a way as to try and communicate a deeply personal meaning against all odds, using the most limited and modest of means at their disposal. In turn, these works highlighted Dittborn's act of mailing large-scale paintings throughout the world from out of a dictatorial regime, itself throwing into relief Hernández's personal research into the political propaganda of his native Cuba. Even the exhibition's obvious formal and referential aspects, namely its black and white color scheme and multiple allusions to music, took on a new symbolic horizon within this second reading,

suggesting a wealth of previously unsuspected interpretations deployed across a number of different registers, alternatively connecting and disconnecting the works.

Marking its curatorial configuration, this preordained rereading of the show precluded any questions as to the particular selection and placement of the works, which in retrospect appeared absolutely necessary and significant. Yet far from registering as an overarching curatorial installation, the arrangement encouraged viewers to consider the works individually, by allowing for their singular structures to become more readily accessible through the semi-autonomous formal and conceptual contexts that it established between the pieces. That the works be considered independently emerged as being not only fundamental to the show's particular curatorial proposal, attesting to a shared desire for solidarity with unknown others who might recognize a particular worldview inscribed in discrete form, shaped by one's personal struggles, context and experience. It also emerged as being essential to the show's curatorial approach, aimed at presenting works on their own terms rather than subsuming them within a unifying exoteric narrative.

In this way, while drawing attention to unique works, the exhibition concurrently formulated a multilayered practice-based proposal, suggesting a different system of recognition from more widespread curatorial arrangements that place inherent value on intense proximity, immediate visibility and full disclosure. Through its structure, it marked a legible distinction between understanding and sensibility on the one hand, and affect and hyper-visibility on the other, articulating a claim for intelligibility over pure presence, and a more remote form of solidarity against the great flattening out characteristic of today's prevailing instantaneous social culture.

#### notes

<sup>1</sup>All aspects of a work of art are significant a priori. There can be no errors in a completed artwork, only meaningful deviations from an established code. As the Russian structuralist Yuri Lotman suggests: "The language of an artistic text in essence is... a model of the universe, and in this sense its whole structure belongs to the sphere of 'content' – it carries information" (...) "anomalies in art take on a structural meaning, and by virtue of that fact they differ radically from anomalies in other modeling systems" (See Lotman, Yuri. *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1977). By contrast, a curatorial text deployed through a particular display will not register as whole and significant per se, but might be deemed as such a posteriori.

<sup>2</sup> Groys, Boris. "Politics of Installation". In *E-flux Journal*. Number 2. January 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Vidokle, Anton. "Art Without Artists?". In *E-Flux Journal*. Number 16. May 2010.

<sup>4</sup> In Marincola, Paula (ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?*, Philadelphia: PEI, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> In *Afterall*, no. 18, Summer 2008, p. 5-15.

<sup>6</sup> In Heidegger, Martin 2001 (1971): *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (transl.) Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper and Row.

<sup>7</sup> As Heidegger writes: "When a work is brought into a collection or placed in an exhibition we say also that it is "set up". But this setting up differs essentially from setting up in the sense of erecting a building, raising a statue, presenting a tragedy at a holy festival. Such setting up is erecting in the sense of dedication and praise. Here "setting up" no longer means bare placing. To dedicate means to consecrate, in the sense that in setting up the work the holy is opened up as holy and the god is invoked in the open-

ness of his presence." Heidegger, *ibid.* p. 42

<sup>8</sup> In the opening chapter of his book *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Jacques Rancière develops the idea of art being put to work in the service of a community or in the service of an Other. However, in contrast to this essay, he places curators squarely on the side of community relations. See Rancière, Jacques. *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, (transl.) Steven Corcoran, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Groys, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Vidokle, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, (transl.) Harry Zorn, London: Pimlico, 1999 (1955), p. 211-244

<sup>12</sup> In reality, this misreading usually stems from an inability to comprehend the language of the work.

<sup>13</sup> I owe this example to Dr. Brian Foss who used it in one of his undergraduate Art History lectures at Concordia University. It has stayed with me ever since.

<sup>14</sup> In his book "How to Read a Poem", Terry Eagleton discusses the notion of semantic saturation versus textual incarnation in relation to poetry, referring to the writings of Yuri Lotman. Eagleton and Lotman's ideas have been key to developing this essay; however, it is important to re-emphasize here the distinction between curatorial proposals and artistic authorship. See Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Cornwall: Balcckwell Publishing, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> As Yuri Lotman states: "Art is the most economical, compact method for storing and transmitting information" (...) "by comparison an

artistic text conveys considerably more information than a non-artistic text". Lotman, *ibid.* p. 23 and 31.

<sup>16</sup> In *MJ-Manifesta Journal* "Artist & Curator", Number 5, Spring/Summer 2005, p. 186-196.

<sup>17</sup> Misiano, *ibid.* p. 192

<sup>18</sup> Misiano, *ibid.* p. 192

<sup>19</sup> Misiano, *ibid.* p. 194

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that this process does not correspond to an act of translation, as some curators have suggested, since the curatorial does not generate an autonomous modeling system into which the works are transposed.

<sup>21</sup> It merely stated: "Bagdad Spacecog Analyst celebrates a strong physicality in the manifestation of the works on show. The exhibition does not pursue a theme or organizing structure – what might connect the works by these four artists is their making visible the processes of making – often with a 'hand-made' sensibility – and also making visible the journeys that works make as they come to be seen."

# GOING PUBLIC: TELLING IT AS IT IS

haizea barcenilla garcia

*In March 2012 Bilbao held an important event: the ENPAP (European Network for Public Art Producers) celebrated its first public symposium after two years of hard work behind closed doors. News in a low voice about the creation and internal work of ENPAP had been spread around the art world, but so far, the network had not produced any public event yet. The final "coming out of the closet" took place in Bilbao and had a more than meaningful name: "Going public: Telling it as it is".*

*The event was structured around three days with quite varied programming but with a well built common ground: during the first day, the host organization, - consonni- had curated five artist interventions in public spaces around the city; the second day was focused on a series of performative lectures and crowned by a beautiful party. Finally, the last day was dedicated to a caucus in which*

*the funding organisations, presented below, invited some others and a few outside critics and researchers to add their comments to the discussions that the members had been maintaining so far, and to envisage potential collaborative steps in the development of these discussions and production activities in the future.*

*For a better understanding of the process, it must be said that the ENPAP was founded in 2009 as a collaboration between six public art producers operating in Europe: the BAK – Baltic Art Centre from Visby and Mossut-stallningar from Stockholm, both in Sweden; consonni, from Bilbao, Spain; Situations from Bristol, England; SKOR from Amsterdam, Holland; and Vector from Iasi, Romania. With no doubt, the belief in the production of public art was the main leitmotiv uniting these groups in a two-year long discussion, re-*

*search, and feedback network. The objective was to look back on their ways of working and articulating ideas, to compare systems and contexts, and in short, to exchange thoughts and worries with peers who have similar concerns and who could help find useful expressions that you had not yet mastered. But perhaps of most interest to our peer network of artists, curators, funders and stakeholders was the emergence of a common language "to distinguish a visual arts curatorial approach to art in the public realm from gallery-based curating, public art consultancy and outdoor art event management."*

*Thus, for two years the members have embarked in a series of seminars in each of their contexts of origin, in order to get to know the place, time and politics of action that frame each production situation. It was an intense process which brought to light both fundamental differences and unprecedented common places, some of which I will try to address in this paper. Nevertheless, since these case studies were performed behind metaphorical closed doors, we can only relate to the fruitful event "Going public: Telling it as it is", together with impressions, critical reflections and some gathered comments of participants.*

## **Going public: telling it as it is**

Although superficially literal, the name chosen for the symposium of the ENPAP holds significance which is not immediately obvious. Literal, first of all, because the nature that unites all six organisations above any other difference is the claim for the public as a field for art production. However, "going public" does not only assert the grounding conception of these production groups: it makes their quest even stronger due to the fragility of their position when presenting their outcomes. At the end of the day, the process of analysing one's practices to the light of foreign

eyes; of finding your own strengths but also your own weaknesses is a very private challenge. There is a certain kind of responsibility and transparency in the act of opening the doors of home and inviting strangers to look around. It should not be forgotten that the research process of the ENPAP was basically closed, a working frame to improve what might have brought up interesting changes in each organization's proposals, but did not forcefully imply an open sharing of results with the public.

In that sense, "telling it as it is" is as well a meaningful proposition, which signals a will for honesty and humility, as if the organizations were sitting in front of the art community and saying "this is what we've been able to bring you, we hope you enjoy it". And still, it could at the same time be interpreted as the recognition of the possible problems that the network had to face during this process. As if they were telling us instead "this is the panorama nowadays, these are the questions we have come to, we have no definite answers."

This second possibility seems as the more plausible one for the current situation, and for the attitudes that were to be noticed in the caucus that took place on the third day of the event. Indeed, "telling it as it is" is a too clear name for a field of work and research that can bring little definitive certainties, if any field of art production can.

One of the main questions, often avoided in such symposia, as it was in this one too, is how we define "public". This seems a pressing question especially in the context of Europe and even more in light of Spain's recent bail-out, where the whole institutional social system is facing an enormous reduction and possible partial disappearance. When Europe was the land of wealth and happiness, everything seemed to be somehow public: space, politics, sponsorships, communities. Of course there were interesting discussions happening around the issue, but they were mostly



circumscribed to a circle of specialised professionals, such as those conforming the ENPAP. The only partly-related question that the art world would discuss with a certain passion, was that of participation, which merited even one of the numbers of the Documents for Contemporary Art by Whitechapel, and was reflected often when confronting the views surrounding the thesis by Bourriaud and Rancière– to name two major sources of theory. Whether or not these conflicted views of participation took place in a public or private sphere, with public or private funding, they were mostly second-level notions.

But simultaneously occurring with the tremendous shock of Holland radically cutting funding for the arts; Spain began to charge for some health resources; Britain is raising its education rates beyond the possible; private companies and banks are being refinanced with public funds in Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain while their citizens' space of movement, decision and choice becomes smaller and smaller; all these events have brought up a radical and basic urge for the positioning of art practices grounded on the public sphere. Socio-political movements such as the Indignados or Occupy are demanding new ways of thinking through the public and, moreover, the common. Thus, some discussions that used to be specialised become a centre point on any politically and critically engaged practice.

And yet, what is that public sphere we would reclaim? And relating directly to the ENPAP, is that public sphere the same in Spain, Holland, Britain, Romania and Sweden? Is it similarly understood, activated and appropriated in all these different contexts? Is it the same sphere we identified before the 2008 crisis, or have our conceptions around it have changed? Many of these specific questions were left unanswered at the ENPAP meeting.

It is obvious that the ENPAP could not face the definition of a single understanding of “public” that would lead us through all situations and problems; it would be irresponsible from on our part to ask them and from their part to dare. Nonetheless, one of the main points of the manifesto in the ENPAP’s web page directly refers to the constitution of a common syntax. A language can be common in form but not in content, and attending the caucus of the ENPAP, one could feel that the step of surmounting this difference had not been overcome yet. It could also be noticed that some of the organisations were much more aware of this décalage between form and meaning than others.

Some of them felt the necessity of addressing the issue and did so when presenting the points on which they thought the network had to continue working, while others not only did not feel that urge, but even took for granted that general consensus was a fact.

In these cases, they departed from a supposedly common understanding of some basic concepts, which included “public”, and proposed to work from that point on. It was surprising to see this bipolarity among groups that had been able to pull together such a coherent set of artistic interventions.

That is why it is relevant to depart from the question at hand to a more literal understanding of language, specifically, an analysis of the attitudes and comprehensions shown when deciding upon the use of English in the symposium

### **A common language**

The desire of a common language of specialised concepts seems logical and congruent with the kind of work performed by ENPAP members. That is why it could look relevant to get to this point departing from the situation risen around

the more literal understanding of language, or more specifically, analysing the attitudes and comprehensions shown when deciding upon the use of a common one, English, in the symposium. Telling it like it is” was held, as said before, in Bilbao, the biggest city of the Basque Country, a bilingual region (Spanish and Basque are spoken) in Spain with a strong cultural and nationalist feeling. The use of the native language of the Basque Country can have profound meaning in the context, and it can send signs and messages that locals perceive rapidly but might appear difficult to discern to strangers.

All artistic interventions were curated specifically for the first day and the party on the second day were aware of this fact, and responded to it by either not basing their work on literal linguistic meaning (as in the case of Alex Reynolds who established a sounding system in an abandoned shop window, in a way in which life outside was being “voiced” as if it was a film) or directly tackling and converting it as part of the practice, thus addressing another fundamental term for public art: translation. This was the case in the work of Itziar Barrio, who decided to engage a New York based anglophone poet and a Basque Country based bertsolari (an improvised verse-making traditional in Basque culture) in the development of new texts departing from Adele’s popular song “We could have had it all” (Song title: “Rolling in the Deep”, chorus “We could have had it all”. Different languages, forms and possibilities of understanding and enacting ideas born from those six words were displayed at the outside and at the inside of the Arriaga Theater in the centre of Bilbao, translated again by the artist into separated sound and image forms that would meet with the viewers (and listeners) in diverse closed and open spaces.

The series of performative lectures of the second day was radically different. First of all, the previous interventions, being articulated in different public spaces, were indeed more likely to meet

casual viewers, while the performative lectures were to expect a more specialised art-world public. The six performances were offered in English with Spanish translation, even in the case of Asier Mendizabal and Patricia Esquivias, whose mother language is Spanish. Taking into account the reality of the local art scene, where most people do not master the English language in order to follow actors developing complex philosophical concepts with a British accent, many listeners felt frustrated for losing a big part of the feeling through the voice of the simultaneous translator hidden in a box behind the scene. Although this is a recurring situation in a world of art where English has become the lingua franca, the contrast with the practices presented the day before, all in a context of public-concerned art curators and producers, was flagrant. It was obvious that the context and the public was not Bilbao anymore: it was the abstract and global world of art itself.

This fact leads me to a point I'd like to address: when we talk about the public, we might be using it as a far too open-ended expression; flexible enough to fit context-specific practices and highly specialised art discursive events. In fact, the performative lectures were as publicly funded as the previous day interventions had been, and they did indeed treat and analyse the same corpus of ideas, those basic to the production of public art; what changed instead was their context. The first-day interventions were placed in several open fields where the expected public was, in fact, unidentified, but generally related to a concrete socio-political context: no matter who could enter or pass by the spaces, see the newspaper interventions (as there were two such practices) or turn the television on when one of the works was being broadcast, the works were, in general, accessible to them, because they talked about a series of concerns they felt recognised with (translation, language use, use of images for political means,

the current economical situation). The context of the performative lectures was, instead, thought for and directed to a highly specialised and selected group of international experts who were familiar with a set of basic shared ideas, managed the codes of an international language and were ready to talk in rather abstract ways about the practical performances they were witnessing. The artistic practices of the day before could maybe have happened in other places, but all of them had the strongest meaning in the place in which they were shown; the performative lectures could have happened anywhere.

### Public, common and context-specific

Although this article has departed from a specific example related to a certain kind of art production, I would like to get further in this last section and generalise the discussion about certain terms.

The previous points of the article can make us think that our use of the term “public” might have been adequate and sufficient until some years ago; but the rise of neocapitalist logics and their inference on politics and common living in the last years has created a certain paradox-logic relating to the term. In the sense that “public” has become, in many cases, a void and misused word that can be applied to anything and everything, and at the same time –it rests as a key term for critical thinking. This causes some problems, as seen at the ENPAP caucus, where even specialists infer that they mean similar things when using the term, while others realise that this is far from being true.

The concept of “public” might relate to urban space, to social policies, to services, to political rights among others; but now, when the public and the economical sphere are getting more and more mixed, we realise, on the one hand, that some non-public organisations have a bigger

influence upon spheres that have been assumed as public until now, or previously designated as “public”, as big enterprises and banking companies wield their influence upon the decisions of impoverished state. On the other hand, some objects that are per se, of private possession are shared through the web, creating flows of exchange that are closer to many ideas of the public than some spaces generally identified as such. Thus, the dissolution of the realm of the public and the influence of the capitalist market into all spheres makes also that a separation that had been often re-vindicated between “public” and “gallery” spaces (not based in any real incompatibility, by the way) ceases to make sense, since all these realms are included in a much more complex public-private logic that affects any space, social organisation or economic situation. And this logic needs to be acknowledged and dealt with in any single case.

Moreover, and touching only slightly on another controversial word in the title of the ENPAP, now that the European crisis is a fact, the utopian and somehow naïve view that all Europe is basically a same cultural bunch, that we are all different but all the same, has completely disappeared. Greeks are irresponsible, Spaniards arrogant and false, Italians spectacular and lazy and Germans greedy and controlling. The good thing about coming back to the national differences, as topic stereotypical and simplifying as they might be, is that at least we agree on the point that each context is different and needs to be understood as such. And of course, we are not referring to big macro-structures such as states: already even neighbourhoods in a city are all basically diverse. Members of the ENPAP had been aware of this for long, but as aforementioned, linking this idea to the previous one, maybe it is time to look for some basic vocabulary that might help us face new times and situations.

One term that has been in circulation for a while

and might be of use is that of “common”. The common implies an object, service or capacity that might be public or private, but has always a share value. It is put there for the use of a community, and no matter whose property it is, all have the right to use it following an agreed set of norms. Many might seem in this definition something very similar to the “public”; the difference is that the public is supposed to be of shared property among its users, while the common is not. Thus, the quantity of knowledge that is common is much more than the public, and even more so in these times of reduction of common property for the privatization of goods, resources, services and values.

As a word inherited from public art practitioners and their discussions, “common” might be a word to help us establish a ground for communication and understanding among different curatorial practices, but able (is unable?) to expand to all the realms of contemporary art. As curators, we should think of what is it that we have, where is it that we operate, and what is what we can share, both us, the artists, the public and other agents working with us. The common might be the space of gathering, of showing, of acting, but also the hopes we express and the expectations we have: the common might also be the critical stare upon what is shared and what is closed, what is for who and how is it distributed.

Another term with a long history that could be useful for the present situation is that of context-specific. This concept has been fundamental on the definition of art in the public realm, in the expanded field and in social environments among others. But maybe now it is time to think that all the environments in which we work as curators are social environments; all of them are expanded fields of knowledge, economy and social organisation, as long as we try to develop a practice based on the principles of the common. And what is made public, in a sense, always par-

ticipated of what is common. Context-specificity should be helpful making us be aware of the complexity and particularity that form the venue, space, public, organisation and economy of the project we are involved in. Context-specific does not mean putting a bank in a park or responding to an abandoned industrial building: context-specific should mean, in the present situation, to be aware of the internal logic of the organisation of the ideas, spaces and agents that we are involving in our projects, of the location where we act, its economic, social and cultural particularities, and to be critic and responsible of all these when practising curating.

Until now, it seemed that the public, the shared and the participative were questions just relating to the so-called public space. Now, the general situation makes us aware that the terms and ideas that organisations such as those at the ENPAP have been working upon have become indispensable for the whole critical and responsible curatorial and artistic activity. The ENPAP might not have come to a final definition of “public”, as we said, and might at some point have resented the missing of a common ground. But in general, they have made a great contribution, both by their previous work as by their symposium: they have included us in their conversations and they have opened a door to keys that might help us locate ourselves in the coming world situation.



**MAESTRO IBARRA 1****ESC2 6B****MURCIA- SPAIN****30012****MONDAY, JULY 30**

Dear vessel,

It seems like yesterday, but it's been over a year since we met in Bari, and while it may sound pedantic, my professional duties have not allowed me to scrutinize this publication, which I'm sure you have devoted much effort and many hours. Thank you for the invitation. As agreed, I am writing you these few lines in order to explain what the vessel International Curatorial Workshop and Talks meant to me at that time.

Due to my character as a conformist (only in this kind of situation), I must admit that when I arrived in Italy I didn't have very high expectations. As they say, no expectations means no major disappointments. This is not because of your professional work, which I know you just started; I never questioned this. On the contrary, you have undoubtedly shown me that even if you start from a local context you can have an international impact providing you have a good program. Despite this, the idea of living together for three days with colleagues around the world was very appealing. I learned many different ways of facing curatorial practice, which in fact, was my goal right from the start. Now I can say that my initial expectation was a mistake.

As for the workshop and its formalization, I remember that it had an experimental character, which implied some advantages and also disadvantages, something common in all

that involves risks and is a departure from previous existing models. In the end, this risk is what turned this encounter into an engaging experience. With regards to its development, once the case studies were brought forth by the advisory team and guest curators Vessel began discussions and debates. I would be lying if I didn't tell you that I felt somewhat out of play because I was the only one who came from a public institution — this meant being the “enemy” for many of my colleagues at that time. Although, to date you cannot really blame them, given the role that they are exerting on the current crisis, which with few exceptions, most have invested their time in complaining, because of the lack of financial input needed to transform the rigid, hierarchical structures, though adorned with a halo of false modernity that have exalted the last decades. So, I'm glad that the second edition of the workshop was to analyze critically the role these institutions play in society and its relationship to politics and public managers.

After this little digression, what I really want to tell you is how important it was for me to participate in this workshop. I didn't realize this until many months later. Without realizing it, the experience is now ingrained somewhere in me and the effects are now, over a year later, becoming more apparent. It is true that in those days we wondered over and over again: “What is a curator?”, “What do they do?”, “What are their responsibilities and obligations?” We did not find any answer that was completely valid, but we also entered into a multitude of contradictions, which in my view is extraordinary. Such contradictions are what makes debates interesting and the desire to perfectly define and delineate everything around us.

Without trying to stray from the subject, since our talks, I have radically changed my view and have acted accordingly. I left

the institution because I had the need to seek a more intellectual pursuits, new challenges, and projects. I also wanted to get rid of the lethargy and the feeling of control I had held in order to give way to rich and inspiring ideas; for better or worse. I wrote in a message a couple of months ago a sort of decalogue of what I believed it was to be a curator. At one point I stated that it is good that the curator receives some training and that's precisely what I am doing. Not that it is really important but one of the ideas that I would like to remember during our talks is the fact that curators have to abide by certain rules that can't be broken just because they want to, something that in our talks in vessel did not happen.

I imagine you would expect in this letter to find a longer description of what we had discussed and concluded back then. I am sure this book has excellent texts that explain it much better than I would, but what I think is relevant at this point, is to state that projects such as the talks in vessel are what really create artistic structures of a small Italian town.

I end this letter here before language and pure rhetoric exercise condition my thought, as Francesco Scasciamacchia once said...

All the best,  
Pablo

### mission statement

vessel is a platform for the development of a critical discourse related to current cultural, social, economic and political issues. Defining our practice as politicized, we approach our themes of interest by using the tools that art and culture offer. We are interested in exploring socially engaged practices in relation to their context of emergence, to their geographies and psychogeographies, to their imbrication into fixed political ideologies; we are also eager to investigate how social imagination could be enhanced and how its concrete products could articulate strategies of critical resistance against the current dominant neo-liberal order. In order to develop our practice we will adopt a methodology that will make an effort to incorporate a broad range of disciplines such as geography, political science, anthropology and sociology. Through this strategy we aim to facilitate interaction and exchange between different subjects envisioning the creation of a multi-centered body of knowledge that can put emphasis on the limits and criticality of working unilaterally (or uniquely) in the contemporary scenario.

Vessel is aware that a multi-layered conceptual approach, as the one described above, will require also the necessity to incorporate different media and strategies that will suit, case by case, the issues on investigation and will facilitate a development of a more imaginative aesthetic layer in which a series of possible alternatives can be tested.

The aim of engaging into social practices and politicized art is not that of creating a definitive solution or outcome: we are rather interested in enlarging, through their means, the even more limited space for 'questioning'.

### special thanks to:

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