

# 3<sup>RD</sup> SESSION

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21<sup>ST</sup> OF JUNE 2022

RAPPORTEUR:  
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THE ROOM OF THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL<sup>1</sup>

*There is nothing worse than panic.*  
Luis Buñuel

2201.62 kilometers from Barcelona, their voices. On the other side of the ocean, time and clock. At these hours even the color of the lips fades.

— Now, all of a sudden, must art come to save us? NO FUCKING WAY — he exclaims.

The diagnosis seems obvious. Biodiversity crisis. And crisis, also, of the disciplines of the knowledge, that look at each other like lovers who have decided to break up. From all the questions that are put on the table, there is one that worries them. Science seems to be guiding the world in an indisputable way. Art, for its part, has always participated in the construction of new perspectives in crisis situations. OK. Art, then, in front of this diagnosis, would be necessary because we understand that it is a form of knowledge experimental that would allow us to unlock, that would help us understand, communicate, acquire sensitivity, open new spaces for thinking and prototyping ideas, to get out of the box, think differently. But the doubt here is about his responsibility at the time to offer messianic answers. In fact, if we stop for a moment and do an honest exercise to position ourselves in the current situation, surely we all change our minds three times a day.

1 I have been invited to write some notes about the working session of the project Roots & Seeds XXI. Biodiversity Crisis and Plant Resistance held last June 21, 2022 in the modernist grounds of Hospital de Sant Pau in Barcelona. The starting point for the working group is to think, collectively, and from different fields of knowledge, if we can have a greater capacity to respond to the current crisis and the degradation of biodiversity of the plant world with the tools, methodologies and practices that are set in motion when art and science meet. The work session was convened by Lluís Nacenta, Paula Bruna, Andy Gracie and Monica Rikic. This text is written, therefore, through his words.

About a year ago, I read an interview with the playwright Pablo Gisbert in which he quoted one sentence by Albert Boronat that said: “In front of the problem of the independence of Catalonia I can change my mind three times in the same day”<sup>2</sup>. Probably the bombing media of emotional and perceptive inputs linked to the hegemonic narrative of chaos have something to do with it. The interview continued along the lines of a discussion about the erratic politics of our lives and about the need to deny what we do in order to shed our responsibility. Michel Houellebecq, for example, confessed publicly that he takes no responsibility for everything he has written. Religion and science they need the truth. Also politics and the mass media. But the artists, on the other hand, can dispense with their responsibility because they have no truth.

#### POINT FOR FANTASY. THE ART OF GRAYS OR THE POWER OF THE UNEXPECTED

— I’m bored with the art-science relationship — he declares — I often see projects that are neutered because they have a “solutionist” will...

The group agrees on the fact that it would be more prospective to think of what art can do rather than what effect art might have. Unlike other disciplines such as architecture or design, contemporary art does not exist to offer solutions. Although it is true that both art and science are forms of understanding the complexity that crosses us, the power of art will always be that of the unforeseen. The processes of artistic creation can surprise with new perspectives, opening doors that can have consequences —rather than solutions—, and bring about change. This would be an art without end. A game that undoes structures. A change of frame of mind.

2 Gisbert, P. I Beyeler, T. (22nd of February 2018). Interviewed by Nogueira, R. R. El Conde de Torrefiel: La libertad de expresión lo abarca todo. [Blog]. Retrieved from: <http://www.fuga.es/2018/>

— The emergency that summons us is hypocritical — she asserts — as Ayuso already said: “freedom or communism”. Everyone wants bars<sup>3</sup>.

They confess that they all arrived at the site by motorbike. And they assure that “everything is one balance”. They reflect on manichaeism and the reactionary morality of our time; about how art is, more and more, in black and white; and, about the fashion of green and the fear that they feel when they see that tomorrow everything can turn around. Their concern to embrace the gray scale and emancipate themselves from the guilt and penance of our *modus operandi*, leads them to recover the idea that the conception of the individual is false.

— The colony surpasses us as individuals — she points out —. Observing other life forms, such as anthills, can be a source of inspiration. However, we must be careful not to romanticise them or attribute to nature a morality that does not exist in it.

— No one knows why one artist triumphs over another — she adds — no one has any idea what will be a success. An example of this is the market studies of the publishing world. Faced with such uncertainty, publishers who can afford to do so publish large numbers of new titles every year and thus maximise the probability of hitting the mark and having a bestselling title.

While they stretch their ideas and talk about the autonomy and ethics of art, I stop a moment the audio recording of the session, moved by the desire to consult words like “success” or “end” in the etymological dictionary as the philosophers of scientific rigor would do, and I am reminded of a beautiful book by the poet Pau Riba entitled *Al·lolàlia* (1999) which he himself described as a “collection of curiosities, vices, paradoxes, double entenders, impasses, stupidities and misunderstandings

3 Isabel Díaz Ayudo, president of the autonomous community of Madrid, was noted during the COVID-19 pandemic for lax and permissive policies.

that jump like loose hares as soon as we enter the fields of linguistics even if only with a BB gun”. I love this book precisely because it materializes the idea that art, literary poetry in this case, can transform the matrix of ideas-mother of cultural communication. A book that could be read as mere entertainment based on the curious or speculative etymology, in which he unfolds a catalog of ludo-linguistic resources such as, for example, the false derivative between “ethics and etiquette”. Well then, in entry number 55, which answers the question “Why is success so exciting?”, he says:

The success? Yes: this magic word; this word made up of four letters that express, if nothing else, what we all pursue – or better, we are forced to pursue – tirelessly, despite knowing that only some, very few, will achieve it. Success is exciting; causes an excitement that is difficult to suppress. However; does it mean excitement? No, not at all. Does it mean success, triumph, achievement? Apparently yes, but also not. Exitus is the past participle of exeo (the infinitive of which is exire, that is ‘to go out’). It is therefore a purely commercial expression - just look at how even today shopkeepers often say “this product has an outlet” before “this product is very successful” - not necessarily related to an intrinsic quality: More than what is well done, what is successful is what has an outlet, which is fortunate!<sup>4</sup>

This exercise shows how words open up potentialities, how art generates new neural connections, new imaginaries. Al-lolàlia would be a hack to philological dogmatism. And the publication would function as a toolbox, a field of meaning and possibility that remind us that, although a screwdriver serves to screw a screw, in the unforeseen place of art it could be anything else; as was, in turn, the symbolic object that lost its function as a potty.

— We must save the planet is a wrong hegemony

4 Riba, P. (1999). Al-lolàlia. Barcelona: Proa. Page 86.

— she points out — as if the planet depends on us. Make no mistake, we want to preserve biodiversity because we want to preserve our life. We don't do it out of altruism. We have a continuationist will and we don't tolerate suffering. We all know what goes wrong: the exaggerated wheel of production and consumption of Late Capitalism. We are in the exterminating angel's room and we cannot leave it.

## WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY. STRUCTURING STRUCTURES

Interestingly enough, one of the first thinkers to study the production devices of late capitalism (cognitive capitalism, capitalism of our attention) that have locked us in the panic room, revealed a fascinating case study on the relationship between the intelligence of migratory birds and the assault on our sleep. In “24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep” (2013), Jonathan Crary recalled how, every year, on the West Coast of North America, hundreds of birds migrate north and south of the same continental strip. One of the species is what is known as the white-crowned sparrow. A bird that stays awake throughout the 7 day flight that lasts from Alaska to northern Mexico. Well, what Crary explains is that over the course of more than 5 years, the United States Department of Defense, together with alliances such as the University of Madison in Wisconsin, invested large sums of their capital in the study of the “brain activity of white-crowned sparrows birds during their long period of wakefulness, with the hope of acquiring knowledge applicable to humans”. The aim of the operation was therefore to discover ways to make it possible for people to remain without sleep and, at the same time, to “work” in a productive and efficient way. In other words, his strategy consisted in the creation of an “sleepless soldier”. One new worker that would be created through technological devices responsible for alleviating discomfort through high doses of dopamine, the neurotransmitters responsible for producing the human sensation of pleasure. This would be the late stage of totalitarian biopolitics where, perhaps, art, another language, would

help us to get out. Or at least it could offer us a utopia to get our feet out of the exterminating angel's room.

— And what is the concept of sustainability in art? — she asks —. How to be sustainable in the practices of art itself? What is the price of originality? Should the art object itself be recycled? To understand that a two-year-old work of art is not something that has lost its potential? Definitely, the temporality of art is the temporality of neoliberal success and market.

— The division between art, science and technology is a window of opportunity —she emphasises—, a question strictly linked to cultural policies and to the politics of scientific research in its most vulgar sense.

At last, the key question is raised. Quo Arts, ISEA 2022. Windows of opportunity or structuring structures? Intersection networks? Money to reach? A medal? A Mini European Silicon Valley? In reviewing the statement of intent of the ISEA 2022 framework, the group reads that its “objective” is “to strengthen the digital transformation of society”. Wait a minute, so where is art without a practical purpose? His speech starts from the fact that we are a post-digital society. That is to say that digital media is considered settled, we have naturalized it. The truth is that, from my point of view, we would say that this society has been drawn by people of the West with resources and access to technologies (also pride); and, strange as it may seem, not everyone has access to the digital technologies in their world. Then, of course, from their point of view, the European Commission would say that, in front of the uncritical and sarcastic approaches and uses of digital technology by the big corporations, it would be necessary to invest a lot of money to know how we relate to the technology in relation to democracy, sustainability, education or health. And do so for a fairer social digitization. Oppose the belief that underlies the joke that technology is created in the United States, manufactured in China and criticised in Europe.

— If we want to promote the intersection, perhaps we

should not start from such specific objectives — she reflects — I, in this context, would exclude myself. I honestly question that this is the only question. The science-art-technology intersection would deal with many other issues beyond the post-digital. For me, it is not trivial that the question is this because, then, the tools that can be generated from here will be one and not the other. Do you understand me? The study of the transformation of the Mediterranean, for example, would be left out.

— I think this is a commercial strategy to get financial funds — she adds —, perhaps they use this discourse because they believe the digitization of the world is the most socially recognized vector. Now, what do they do? I do not know. Will this be a space opportunity? No idea.

— What do we need? — she insists — Let people do what they are already doing but with more means. We don't need new monstrosities, new borders or large conglomerates of entities.

## A COLD WINDOW. A BLANK CALENDAR

After a long time dedicated to listening to the collective desire, share their needs and gather the topography of their field of possibility, they arrive at what I have decided call the “cold window”. It's very easy to understand: we need the resources that we don't have. We need access to the conditions of possibility beyond the wheel of fortune of the open calls. A window that we can open when we think it's necessary. A window that helps us ventilate the room, that accompanies us in the how, and that facilitates specific infrastructures. Concrete support in infrastructures for free use and access to funding channels at the various stages of a project and/or of a career.

— Mhhh.... I think we confuse objective with instrument — he clarifies — that's why people vote for Trump. Everyone needs what we ask for. To live in acceptable

conditions. But do we take it seriously? I know that I will continue researching with the means at my disposal, but if I want to carry out projects that have the capacity to question, to produce change, then I need to be taken seriously. I firmly believe that there should be, for example, a professional pathway for artistic research, just as there is for scientific research. If Barcelona really wants to commit itself to research, the working conditions of artist-researchers should be taken into account, like those of any other worker, providing them with work spaces and sustainable medium- and long-term working conditions. In fact, ours is a very strange situation of a legality, because, in any case, from that legality we are also within the institution.

— I would say, without hesitation, that the economy of art does not exist — he continues —. There is no work, there is no union. And this is because the artistic career is based on difference and singularity. I know what a writer does, he writes, but I don't know what a poet does. I know what a sculptor does, he makes sculptures, but I don't know what an artist does. Perhaps if we abolished the figure of the artist we would free all artistic intelligences... I often wonder if we artists are the buffoons of this party; why art and knowledge are invited to the party of power and money? Why we are admired and at the same time despised in that party? Why, if art is so close to money, money doesn't reach art? Precarity is then deliberately implemented. It is not a structural precarity. Or yes it is. Its structure would be that of "the money is elsewhere".

— Isn't it also a way of controlling what art says and questions? — he asks —. To be inside, but so precariously inside, would be a way of controlling the field of possibility. I, for example, would not want to participate in stuffing a research or a cultural activity based on participation over change and transformation. There are currently research centers. Ok. And we also have a scholarship system in which you spend half of your

life writing applications, for a maximum of 6 months of research. Ok. A new window would not be needed for art-science opportunities. It would be enough to expand the institutional framework for the arts and the sciences, so we could access it cold-door, with security and guarantees, with greater stability of our bodies and our lives.

— The self-designated "inter-institutional plus inter-disciplinary" networks can have one important role. Very often a node does not know that it can act from its multiplicity, from a quasi-quantum reality. Suppose an artist wants to create a project: he could approach the network and materialize it based on his unique needs, and this would also add a new intersection. Perhaps it would be interesting to move away from the institution as a node and support the artist as a node, as the spider-that-weaves-a-net. Then, the artist could be the substantial agent in the creation of networks and toolboxes because, knowing what their needs are, they would configure a situated fabric. But to achieve this, the institutions should put aside their "ego", since what usually happens is that each institution works for its own benefit. Once again, competitiveness is placed above competence. The ethics of etiquette. It is very difficult to find networks dedicated to confluences devoid of hierarchy.

We reach now the core of the matter under discussion. To create a box of tools it would be important to think in a generative form (the what-how). Let's consider an example: if you were invited to participate in an academic symposium, most likely you would rush to write and publish a paper. If, on the other hand, the invitation was to give a workshop, you would surely prepare thematic content, methodologies and activities. But... what if you were invited to be a part of a structure instead, and they offered you, with total confidence, a blank calendar? Imagine what would happen if you arrived at a blank site with a blank calendar through a cold window. I'm pretty sure the forms emerging from this opportunity would surprise us all.

Let's remember that table that the German artist Agnes-Meyer Brandis installed in the woods next to the meteorological station where she held her artistic residency, so that the meteorologists of the same station could take tea quietly and recognize themselves outside of their normality. That is it. The scale of art. The what-how of power-form. Let's ask ourselves, in the end, what would happen if instead of building things from the outside (transcendence), we built them from the inside (immanence). Let's ask ourselves what would have happened if instead of having met to reflect - with ideas and words - sitting around the work table, Quo Artis had gathered us in a remote location because we all wanted to do something. I wonder in my heart if this could be the minimal and most honest form-power for change and transformation. What happens when we become aware of the space they take part in but that is not given as a structure? Something like a speech of people who do not speak.