Conversing the Action, Narrating History, Eliciting the Present

Notes on Artistic Mediations and Practices Outstripping the Museum’s Usual Functions

Since 2009, the Subtramas (Diego del Pozo, Montse Romaní, Virginia Villaplana) artistic collective has been conducting artistic research that explores the interface between audiovisual production, radical pedagogy, collaborative practices, and social activism.¹ Based on this ongoing investigation’s discursive guidelines, the What, How & for Whom/WHW curatorial collective invited us to take part in the exhibition Really Useful Knowledge at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid.² Our response was undertaken in two directions. First, we presented the semantic diagram we call ‘Anagrammatic ABC,’ which reviews the potential for collaborative practices in the field of audiovisual production.³ Second, we developed mediation and public programmes in conjunction with the exhibition. For this purpose we devised an installation called “Four Questions on a Yet-To-Come Usefulness,” which served as the starting point for each of the itineraries in the mediation programme, and also provided a central hub for activities we organized throughout the duration of the exhibition. Both programmes were aimed at exploring and reinforcing the exhibition’s ability to function as an apparatus for (co)learning.

The mediation programme was based on four different routes through the exhibition, which could be easily followed by the public thanks to the corresponding leaflets. Each of the itineraries detailed tours through a specific selection of works that were meant to elicit a certain reflective or performative dynamic, to be individually or collectively enacted by the viewers. Each of the four routes was guided by one of these questions: Why is learning together useful? How could we energize our imagination to envision a form of non-capitalist-managed happiness? What sort of learning arises from social movements? What sort of politics can be triggered by images? The intensive work of Silvia Zayas and Eduardo Garcia as route mediators contrasted the conventions of standard, commentary-driven guided tours, resorting instead to Subtramas-inspired methodologies that seek to create conditions where viewers become political subjects comprising new kinds of publics.⁴ The aim of the programme—which we felt we came a long way to achieving it—was to engage the audience in rich debates and discussions on the issues raised by the exhibits. For example, ‘walking assemblies’ formed in a kind of sustained collective performance whereby the public took the leading role in sharing (and questioning) learnings generated by other learnings. Events appeared to shift the terms of enunciation and listening into new frames that critically replied to institutionally authorized knowledge, resituating listener and speaker within the same plane of resonance, but here we found inspiration in Elizabeth Ellsworth’s ideas on modes of address in visual culture. Against prevalent structuralizations of the mode of address in audiovisual communication, Ellsworth sees the mode of address in education as performative rather than merely communicative, allowing space for viewers to become aware of themselves, the world and others. See Elizabeth Ellsworth, Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy and the Power of Address (New York: Teachers College, 1997).

2. The exhibition took place from 28 October 2014–9 February 2015.
3. “Anagrammatic ABC” along with all the project materials can be consulted online at http://subtramas.museoreinasofia.es/es/anagrama.
4. Silvia Zayas is an artist and performer and Eduardo Garcia is a freelance curator and cultural mediator.
bound by mutual interpellation. It thus seemed possible to learn how to break the indifference-contract through which we are commonly shaped into consumers-viewers-citizens, and to grasp how our connection with others is affected by what we know or fail to know, and how other people’s knowledge also affects us in turn. A key objective for us was to observe the cross-currents of knowledge and affect between viewers in each itinerary (who were supposed to be strangers to one another), and how their viewpoints might be altered, or their imagination might open up to new possibilities.

“Nos nos representan” (‘they don’t represent us’ or ‘there’s no representing us’) — the rallying cry of the 15-M Movement or Indignados against neoliberal austerity policies in crisis-ridden Spain — referred to ‘representation’ in the full, multifarious sense of the term, and not merely in the narrow confines of electoral politics. For us the need for a thorough rethinking and overhauling of democratic institutions also extends to cultural institutions, due to the new centrality of culture in postindustrial capitalism. As we know, the map of cultural centres and museums created in Spain between 1982 and 1995 played a central role in the reconceptualization of the nation-state in times of capitalism’s global financial hegemony. The museums were caught between the responsibility to provide cultural capital to a democratic citizenry, and their own assimilation into the culture of spectacle. According to this, the nature of the museum has proved to be performative: it was structured by devices regulating our behaviour, our reflection, and our habits, no less than our experience of exhibitions and space itself.

The need to work for a new democratic institution seems to be urgent. How to overcome the museum’s failure to enunciate representation of the citizen? How is it possible to open up spaces where subjects can re-appropriate their own power to produce behaviour and actions in different situations within the museum? Given that Really Useful Knowledge focused on artistic practices in opposition to capitalism, we felt the urge to experiment with instituent processes seeking to rethink the museum’s own institutional nature. In this regard, the programs we organized were aimed at questioning the museum’s institutional operation along with the exhibition itself as the museum’s privileged locus of ‘mediation.’ For this purpose, we held long discussions that sought a deeper understanding with (and between) different departments within the museum (exhibitions, public activities, education, and communication) as well as other collectives that we invited to take part in the project. Although the Museo Reina Sofía has its own programme of public activities, including lectures and debates, it was crucial for us to go beyond the subaltern status of said activities and to move them—for the first time at this museum—from the lecture hall to the exhibition space, attempting to dismantle hegemony and legitimacy of the latter within the institution.

Drawing on our ‘autonomy’ as artists, we established a network of connections with certain social and cultural collectives from across Spain that form a kind of decentralized constellation of resistance (some of them committed to the struggle against EU- and IMF-imposed austerity policies). With their collaboration we planned and carried out a series of activities within and around the exhibition that were museum-producing rather than...
museum-produced or museum products. Under the rubric ‘Actions on Really Useful Knowledges,’ we thus managed to (albeit temporarily) bring the common, direct expressions of popular sovereignty into the museum.

There were three types of activities: conversational, narrational, and instigational. Each category included four activities related to the above-mentioned guiding questions:

**Conversational activities** comprised a series of dialogues on the collective production of knowledge and experiences—and the ensuing conflicts and repercussions of this. Participants included: WHW in dialogue with representatives from the Museo Reina Sofia exhibition and public programme departments; independent publishers association Contrabandos (Spain) in dialogue with open, collaborative library Bookcamping (Spain); collectives Esta es una Plaza! (Madrid), El Patio Maravillas (Madrid), La Casa Invisible (Malaga), and Observatorio Metropolitano de Barcelona (Barcelona); and Los Lindes (CA2M, Mostoles, Madrid) and Cine sin Autor collective (Madrid) in collaboration with the Museo Reina Sofia’s educational department.

**Narrational activities** began with a public reading of texts on the decolonization of knowledge, history, and desire. Participants included: artists’ collectives Declinación Magnética (Bilbao/Madrid) and Somate克斯 (Madrid); feminist and queer groups coordinated by activist Fefa Vila; and anonymous people who read a series of entries from Museo Reina Sofia’s incidents reports and suggestions sheets.

Participants in **instigational activities** drew on their own self-representation strategies and methodologies to recount achievements connected with current social struggles. Groups included: movement in support of public education Marea Verde [Green Tide] (Madrid); movement in defence of public healthcare Marea Blanca [White Tide] (Madrid); (pro-universal healthcare) platform Yo Sí, Sanidad Universal (Madrid); domestic workers’ collectives Senda de Cuidados and Territorio Doméstico (Madrid);^8 and Peninsula (Spain) postcolonial theory & research group.

In an effort to break down stereotypes of the ‘working class,’ Jacques Ranciè re wrote that accelerations, delays, and gaps determined by the system forced proletarians who were ‘secretly in love with useless things’ to experience a fragmented time. The first step in their emancipation was to re-appropriate that fragmentation of time and create forms of subjectivity that would allow them to live at a pace other than that dictated by the system. Contemporary forms of precarious and intermittent work now appear very similar to this experience of the useless.

We connected notions of non-specialized, nonfunctional, non-capitalizable aspects of time—drivers behind Really Useful Knowledge—to the communal learning among social movements and groups that turn their back on individualization processes. ‘Actions on Really Useful Knowledges’ tested out a different type of usefulness which could contribute to changing social structures—uselessness as a kind of usefulness that is still to come.

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^8 These are autonomous grassroots movements and organizations operating outside the institutional umbrella of officially sanctioned trade unions, which many in Spain believe to be discredited as traditional political parties. The emergence of these post-union movements can be seen to be part of the ‘crisis of representation’ in the country after May 2011 (translator’s note).