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Mediation and Construction of Publics

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I'll start with an obvious or even banal statement: Like all museums and cultural institutions these days, MACBA is in the middle of a confluence of economic and political interests which shape the current transformation of western cities towards the third sector (in which tourism is a major economic target). The new urban economies in postfordist capitalism give a centrality to culture. Many theorists have described this process, from Fredric Jameson in the early eighties to David Harvey or Negri and Hardt more recently, just to mention a few among many others. "Cognitive capitalism" is what we call this fact that postfordism (which is based on immaterial, communicative and affective forms of labor) puts subjectivity to work, as Paolo Virno has analyzed in a most paradigmatic way. In this context the cultural sphere as being an autonomous space of resistance or criticism (that is preserving a relative autonomy towards politics and economy) is no longer sustainable as such. We cannot really defend the cultural sphere as based on a critique of instrumental reason, since today subjectivity itself is embedded in the processes of capitalism. Today we need other discourses in order to defend the specificity of art and culture beyond the classic modernist paradigm against instrumental reason. What discourses? Of course postmodern cultural studies give an alternative. But it can also be insufficient, or even very problematic

as we see its perverse effects in new museums such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao or the Palais de Tokio in Paris. In these museums the multicultural paradigm produces a sort of reactionary backlash: an indiscriminate and false tolerance and false participation, which leaves everyone in their own place. Such a paradigm is politically meaningless, because a romanticized respect for differences prevents any real social change. Finding alternative meaningful and emancipatory methods and discourses is precisely the problem, and I'm not offering any solution or model today. I will only speak from our experiences in Barcelona. What seems clear is that the present situation obliges us to rethink and reformulate the historical models of political art or an art produced politically, most of them anchored in an ideal of republican virtue, which is insufficient today to root a transformative thinking and action in the public sphere. In order to do that we have to work locally so we can find meaningful and relevant methods in which artistic autonomy can be redefined. We think that what we need is keeping a tension between the specificity of the artistic and the conditions and limits of each situation. Autonomy is then not something given as an essence of the artistic, but a construction, a space of negotiation. This negotiation is of course between autonomy itself and its opposite, which is instrumentalisation. Both extremes, autonomy and instrumentalisation, are always at work and both relative in themselves. Again, what is clear is that the modernist claim for artistic autonomy in a context in which that autonomy is not autonomous (but is in fact a hidden discourse of false depolitization and thus of instrumentalisation) is totally insufficient (if not, in fact, regressive). It is it necessary to look for other methods.

The museum in Barcelona is located in the Raval, a complex neighborhood in the historical center of the city, which is currently

a site of struggle between two opposite forces: first, the force towards gentrification. Since the mid-eighties the local power has promoted a social transformation of the neighborhood, historically constituted by a working class and sub-proletarian population. In this context art and cultural institutions (like universities, theaters, art centers, MACBA itself...) have played a crucial role in this social transformation. In the last few years it is clear that some parts of the historical center of Raval have been conquered for the new urban middle classes (we have seen an increasing number of new fashion stores, restaurants, bars and clubs). Also the rise of the price of housing in the area (which was until recently the cheapest area in town) is favoring the arrival of new affluence. But the struggle continues, since the neighborhood is also the most culturally complex in Barcelona and the arrival of new immigrants has enormously increased in the last few years. This is the second force in this struggle. Raval has a large Pakistani community, and there's also an important North African community (mostly from Morocco) and some other relatively large non-western communities (Philippine, Eastern European, Latin-American...). These communities, mostly constituted by poor and illegal people, are evincing a very strong capacity for growing up and re-conquering areas of the neighborhood. Urban strategies promoted by the local power in Raval are clearly designed for enforcing the security and cleanness of the area for new middle classes and tourism. Which of these two forces will win the battle and condition the future development is unclear, although what is most predictable is that capital and urban engineering will win the battle. Unless the economic model of Barcelona, oriented towards tourism, becomes inefficient.

What does MACBA do in this context? Due to the complexity of Raval, there are no obvious or easy ways to approach the

neighborhood. What the museum can do is critically reflect on the conditions of art and culture today and keep open a space of debate. We do that. Some of our public programs and debates are precisely based on the critical understanding of the present confluence of financial capital, real state activity and culture. We are also developing projects with specific communities in the neighborhood. For example, groups working with street prostitutes in order to get legal recognition (here it is important to keep in mind the long history of Raval as Barcelona's red light district, the Barrio Chino), or working with NGOs which are active with homeless children and teenagers in order to develop activities with them. In any case it is always a matter of developing specific projects with specific groups and for specific purposes. Not all of these projects are visible or easily translatable. This is of course not limited to the neighborhood, but is a part of a larger context of thinking and practicing ways concerning how the museum can contribute to the reconstruction of a radically democratic public sphere and thus play a central role in the life of the city. What is important is to understand that we work locally in order to deal with global problems and conditions.

We think that what our contribution to a radically democratic public sphere is, quite simply, to be self-critical and open to debates. The discursive activity has a central role at MACBA. We try to counterbalance the hegemony of the exhibition media as being the main method or space of the museum. We think that publics are different and have different interests, and we have to allow different and non-hierarchical uses of the museum for those different publics. Those uses are not limited to the exhibition space. And we also try to investigate methods of circulating discourse through the website and other forms of publications and publicity. What is at stake here is an understanding of the

processes of the construction of publics and the processes of the circulation of discourse in the public sphere.

The public and the public sphere are modern concepts which contain a number of simultaneous meanings and that are defined reflexively. The public has to do with what is common, with the state, with shared or common interest, with what is accessible to everyone. Public has a cognitive dimension, but also a political and poetic one. The public has a double meaning of social totality and specific audiences. There is a historical mobility in the public-private opposition, which comes precisely from the mobility of publics and their forms of self-organization. That public-private opposition is a space of conflict insofar as it may involve situations of inequality, as we have learned from feminism.

Michael Warner has described this ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings of the notion of public very precisely in his article "Publics and Counterpublics"[1]. The central idea is that publics are elusive forms of social groupings articulated reflexively around specific discourses. Public is one of the most recurrent terms in the cultural debate and is also one endowed with the greatest legitimacy, but that does not mean that it is a simple one with an obvious meaning. It seems clear that art is a public activity, oriented towards debate and confrontation with others. But we probably need a permanent redefinition of what we mean by public.

For example, we see today that many institutions and cultural policies have gradually replaced the traditionally modern discourses of universal access to art and culture as common goods (and thus understood as accessible in themselves and as generators of beneficial effects through mere exhibition) with a new one based on the assimilation of the cultural experience into the processes of consumption. We find here an identification of public with

consumption, that is with access to commodities. As opposed to the homogenizing, abstract conception of the spectator (which is typical of modern art and its institutions) this new discourse of the cultural industries, which identifies public with consumption, tends to recognize differences, although this is not so much in terms of a recognition of political minorities, but more in keeping with the criteria of marketing. This gives rise to populist cultural policies, which follow the pattern of television consumerism and therefore have the same consequences: a growing banality and impoverishment where the critical potential and emancipatory dimension of the cultural experience (based on the articulation of real experiences and problems) is eliminated in favor of a false participation. From that point of view, working for the public means giving to the public what it is supposed to expect, taking for granted the pre-existence of such publics (which are understandable, measurable and controllable through statistical processes) and thus ensuring the reproduction of the existing social order. In Barcelona we are now anticipating the opening in May of an event called Forum Universal de les Cultures, a populist event which uses culture as a legitimation of a large-scale urban intervention. Well, in Barcelona we have seen quite a lot of this kind of culturally based consensus engineering. We could say it's a kind of local expertise. The famous Barcelona Model is in good measure the result of that expertise. Needless to say, all social movements in town are against this event and we will see a constellation of protests in the coming months.

This consensual discourse has demobilizing consequences in civil society, so we are proposing another one against it: the public does not pre-exist as a predefined entity that has to be attracted and manipulated. Rather it is constructed in open, unpredictable ways in the very process of the production of discourse and through its

different means and modes of circulation. Therefore the public is not simply there, waiting passively for the arrival of cultural commodities; it is constituted within the process itself of being called. The public is a provisional construction in permanent mobility. The consequences of that perspective in terms of cultural policies and practices is a radical question of the dominant conceptions of cultural production and consumption, according to which those roles are immovable and closed, and therefore merely reproduce what already exists. Refusing the consensual discourse opens up a range of possibilities for new actions, in which the public takes on an active role as producer, which can therefore enable the emergence of new social structures. In that way, the public seems to be a project with the potential of constructing something that does not yet exist and can give rise to other forms of sociability. It is that very non-pre-existence of the public (which we can call a phantasmatic dimension) that allows us to think of the possibility for a reconstruction of a critical cultural public sphere. And it is precisely that very opening which guarantees the existence of a democratic public sphere, a space that does not need to be unitary (that is consensual) in order to be democratic, as Chantal Mouffe has articulated[2].

A multiplicity of publics is preferable to a single public sphere. Nancy Fraser speaks of the need to explore hybrid forms of public spheres and the structuring of weak and strong publics where opinion and decision can find forms of negotiation and a recombination of their relations. In the end that exploration leads to a post-bourgeois public sphere, which does not necessarily have to be identified with the state. Today we can recognize symptoms of the appearance of non-state public spheres which have emerged from initiatives of civil society, which the Situaciones group from

Buenos Aires have called ‘new social protagonism', referring to what happened in Argentina on December 19 and 20, 2001[3].

From that refusal to consensual publics there emerges an educational method in relation to culture designed to favor the autonomy of publics and the experimentation with forms of self-organization and self-education. The purpose of this method is to produce new structures both in terms of artistic and social processes (networked, horizontal, decentralized, delocalized structures). It is a matter of giving the publics ‘agency', of providing conditions for their capacity for action, overcoming the limitations of the traditional divisions of actor and spectator, of producer and consumer.

At MACBA we try to rethink the dominant conceptions of the public and experiment with other methods of cultural work based on these other possible ways of mediation. The point is to rethink and redefine the public from the contributions of feminism, queer theory and the experiences of the new social movements. And then to understand publics as transformers and not as reproducers, thus overcoming the current inadequacies of traditional political representation based on a bourgeois concept of the public sphere. In this process we pay a special attention to the activities of the new social movements.

The experiences from MACBA I will describe are from the last three or four years. The central question in them is how to construct new forms of mediation.

The workshop *Direct Action as One of the Fine Arts*, in the Fall of 2000, was our first attempt to conjoin artists collectives with social movements. It is important to understand the centrality of social movements in Barcelona. There is a local history and singularity of

Barcelona in terms of having a particularly active civil society, which has probably to do with the fact of the city being a capital without a state. In this context, the real political influence of the neighborhood associations' federation (FAVB) has been very important since the political transition in the late seventies and the restoration of democratic institutions. The FAVB is a real political power in Barcelona and determines urbanistic decisions. This doesn't mean that Barcelona is a social-democratic paradise, though. I'm just trying to identify the specificity of the local conditions.

The workshop was organized around five topics:

Under-employment and new forms of precarious labor. Here we had the participation of groups like Ne pas plier from Paris who worked together with the Renta Básica (universal basic wage) local groups in order to start a new journal.

Frontiers and migrations, for which we had the campaign network Kein Mensch ist illegal, promoted by Florian Schneider, working together with local NGOs active for the rights of the illegal immigrants. This debate was the origin of several Border Camps that took place the following summer in southern Spain.

Urban speculation and gentrification, with the participation of the group from Madrid and Seville Fiambrera Obrera, who were also the general coordinators of the workshop. They worked together with Reclaim the Streets, who are now famous for their imaginative strategies of protest intervention in public spaces.

Media was a transversal topic in the workshop. The central idea was how to articulate new alternative networks. The debate in the workshop was the origin of the Indymedia network in Barcelona. We also had the group RTMark, who brought their experiences of

the tactical appropriation of corporate strategies, which were a strong influence in local campaigns as we will see later.

And finally of course, and also transversally, there was the question concerning direct action politics. The discussion on direct action and its relation to certain artistic traditions rooted in politicized practices was naturally at the center of the whole project. As Ernesto Laclau has argued, direct action and self-organized forms of politics are a postmodern reaction to the limitations of traditional bourgeois forms of political representation and a symptom of the structural dislocation of capitalism. Laclau speaks of a "spacialization" of events as an alternative to temporality. Dislocation has a potential for radical democracy[4].

The purpose of the workshop was to start certain kind of processes or an articulation of local political struggles with artistic methods in order to have continuity. For example, the workshop was the origin of Indymedia Barcelona, the first in the Spanish State, and moved from there to other locations in Spain. The workshop was successful in terms of articulating a wide spectrum of new social movements in Barcelona in a very special moment, when new political organisms were emerging, such as the MRG (Movimiento de Resistencia Global: Global Resistance Movement, very active between 2001 and 2002, and now disintegrated).

The Direct Action workshop was the beginning of a more ambitious project that developed immediately afterward and as a logical consequence. Las Agencias (The Agencies) took place in spring and early summer 2001.

We had been dealing with this notion of "agency" in the museum for a while. It has two meanings for us. One is that of empowerment, of giving agency to the publics according to the

idea of the plurality of productive forms of appropriation of the museum I described before. And the other meaning is that of a sort of micro-institution, a kind of mediation organism between the museum and the publics.

In order to understand the impact of Las Agencias it is important to keep in mind the context in Barcelona in the months prior to the World Bank meeting, scheduled for June 2001, but finally canceled because the organizers feared the possible violence it could generate in the city. This was the moment after Prague and Stockholm, when the anti-globalization protests were becoming more and more influential. And it was immediately before Geneva, also June 2001, which was probably the turning point in the cycle of protests that started in Seattle in 1999 and the beginning of its end in a way. We didn't know it at that time. Among other consequences, September 11, 2001 had an impact on the increasing criminalization pressure on the movement, which has had a long-term effect on the movement itself. In Barcelona this moment was the strongest one for what we call the anti-globalization movement. A counter-campaign was organized in Barcelona, and Las Agencias played a central role in it in terms of creating strategies of visibility, which transformed the traditional methods in anti-capitalist movements. The situation now in 2004 is totally different from then at many levels, but that's another story.

Las Agencias was a permanent workshop, so to speak, an experiment in self-education and also a proposal for a pedagogical method based on the assumption that learning is derived from immediate needs and it is produced in the context of direct confrontation with real problems and struggles. Learning is a result of the need for empirical discursive and effective solutions to the problems we are confronted with.

There were five agencies:

A graphic one, which produced posters and printed matter for the counter-summit, such as *Dinero Gratis* (Free Money), and all the posters against the world bank, using parodical appropriations of the official municipality campaigns.
A photographic agency produced images and an archive for the different campaigns, and a media agency was crucial in the development of the Indymedia Barcelona station and also the magazine *Esta tot fatal*, which was the communicative and opinion-making instrument of the counter-summit.

Another agency designed and produced tools for intervention in public space in protest situations. They produced projects like *Prêt a revolter*, fashion for safety and visibility during demonstrations, or Art *Mani*, a kind of photo-shields for protection against police charges. And also the Show Bus, an adapted bus equipped with a sound system and video projection screens, which could be used as a mobile exhibition space that allowed a plurality of uses in public demonstrations or actions. All these projects were visible during the events of June 2001 in the streets of Barcelona.

And finally an agency carried the bar of the museum, which became a relational space, a space for food and drinks, but also a social space for events with groups, video programming and free Internet access.

Besides these projects, in the context of Las Agencias we also had specific workshops with invited artists such as Marc Pataut from Ne pas plier, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Allan Sekula. The workshops were also conjoined with the needs of the groups involved in terms of the production of images and tools.

Las Agencias was taking place in the museum at the same time as two exhibitions, *Antagonisms. Case Studies* and *Documentary Processes. Testimonial Image, Subalternity and the Public Sphere*. *Antagonisms* was a big museum exhibition, which presented a series of case studies of moments or situations in which there has been a confluence of artistic practices and political activity in the second half of the 20th century. For example, parts of the exhibition included a reconstruction of a political reading of minimalism according to Carl Andre's radical materialist approach; or a selection of the multiplicity of graphic work produced in the context of the AIDS protests of the eighties; or the more recent *Services* project by Andrea Fraser, dealing with the transformation of the productive status of artists in the context of a "biennalization" of the art sphere, just to mention a few examples.

The third element of this constellation was the smaller group exhibition *Documentary Processes*. This was an attempt to organize an exhibition as a form of direct action and thus as an instrument for the counter-summit and anti-capitalist groups' needs in terms of providing images for a critique of neo-liberalism. The exhibition was a reflection on documentary as a historically political genre constructed around the representation of subalterns and tried to offer a debate on the status of the documentary image in the digital age. The hypothesis was that in order to have a real political effect, documentary had to sophisticate the mediation methods and for that the discussion on testimony was crucial. The exhibition provided images that represented the effects of privatization policies and the decline of public services in corporate capitalism. The exhibition included work by Allan Sekula, Ursula Biemann, Harun Farocki, Marcelo Exposito, Patrick Faigenbaum, Marc Pataut, Frederick Wiseman and several others.

What were the effects of these projects?

Of course they generated a certain perception of the museum as a space of debate and critique. The museum became relatively recognizable as an antagonistic space for the anti-capitalist groups, and it is significant that the following year the movements organized an anti-capitalist circus in the square across from the museum during the campaign against the European summit in March 2002. The museum was not involved at all in that campaign.

But there were other effects on other levels: Indymedia Barcelona became a permanent structure that contributed to a transformation of the communicative discourses of the movements. Also there is a before and after the graphic campaigns of 2001. From then on new forms and communicative graphics have appeared in the methods of the movements and continue to develop.

There are other significant projects that have contributed to a transformative use of the exhibition space. In 2001 we presented an exhibition on filmmaker Pere Portabella, which consisted of the conjoining several different elements in a kind of hybrid space. The exhibition combined different discursive spaces: a film theater, an archive, a lounge and a public debate space. The exhibition included several programs and a series of talks, in which several experts were invited to offer counter-narratives to the exhibition in order to make relatively transparent the epistemological structure of exhibition and curatorial methods. This project attempted a reinscription of concepts of relationality and use value as have been practiced by institutional critique into the exhibition space, but not as museumization of those methods but rather as their critical continuation.

This experience has driven us to a program of what we call relational spaces. We have made several projects of film and video programs, which we have presented both as a series of screenings and as a free access self-service video and reference space for entertainment, instruction and sociability. The first of these programs *Buen rollo. Políticas de resistencia y culturas musicales* (Good Vibes. Politics of Resistance and Music Subcultures) was precisely constructed as an analysis of music subcultures as generating alternative public spheres. Music subcultures were understood as case studies for the potential (but also the ambiguities and contradictions) of culture industries in terms both of resistance and commercial interests. The notion of music networks as models of alternative (or plebeian) public spheres and networks in the forms of organization and circulation of discourses and cultural products was also the starting point of the program *Tan diferentes, tan atractivos. Vida urbana y cultura popular en el capitalismo de la abundancia* (So Different, So Appealing. Urban Life and Popular Culture in Wealthy Capitalism). Here there was a connection with a Richard Hamilton retrospective exhibition. These projects are a response to the imperative of rescuing relationality from the monopoly of the Palais de Tokyo or Utopia Station rhetoric and simulacra, a kind of false politicization and banalization of a true articulation of artistic and social processes. We understand that historically the experiences for such articulation have originated in attempts for alternative forms of sociability and have been rooted in radical transformative political experiences and objectives, and that's why our models come from the Russian Revolution or the sixties. Relationality involves a reconsideration of the hierarchical relationship of high and low culture, but not at the expense of a museumization of low culture and kitsch, but rather as a recomposition of the inequalities involved in the antagonism between the two.

We are currently continuing our research through different projects.

For example we are working in a project called *Desacuerdos. Sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado español* (Disagreements. On Art, Politics and the Public Sphere in the Spanish State), a network project that aims at the construction of a counter-narrative and counter-structure of contemporary art in Spain, which has been largely determined by the hegemony of market structures in Spain since the 1980s, whose paradigm is ARCO. We try to demonstrate that in Spain after Franco a false cultural transition was a substitute for a real political transformation of the State. The project involves research, a series of public events, and an exhibition scheduled for February 2005.

We are also working in the city with local groups in a process that started in early 2003 with a series of debates called *From Glories to Besos. Cambio urbano y espacio público en la metrópolis de Barcelona* (Urban Change and Public Space in the Metropolis of Barcelona), which we organized in the context of Muntadas' retrospective exhibition. The series of public debates and workshop was an attempt to present a report and public debate of the situation of Barcelona immediately before the Forum 2004. This big event will mean a change of the scale of the city and the most important urban transformation since the Olympic Games in 1992.

This was the formal beginning of a process of collaboration with neighborhood and local groups from the Poblenou-Besòs area, particularly the Forum Ribera del Besòs. Our idea is to be integrated locally in order to work citywide, worldwide. This project is now developing under the working title *How do we want to be governed?* with the curatorial participation of Roger Buergel. The project consists of an exhibition opening in September in the

Poblenou–Besòs area, which is intended to be a counter-museum and a counter-history model and for which we have worked with local groups in a sort of "board of trustees from below" kind of situation. We are having meetings and discussions with the curator and the local groups in order to produce the exhibition. Some of the projects in the show will be anchored in local struggles and will give visibility to them. These are struggles dealing with precarious labor, industrial memory, public housing and public services, and a reconstruction of subaltern histories that the new developments of Forum 2004 seem to be erasing. Part of the process of this project was visible last November at the occasion of the conference *The Construction of the Public* and the seminar with Paolo Virno.

We are also continuing to investigate the notion of "agency" I mentioned before in a more complex way, which is articulated with the main discursive fields of the museum. At the moment, those fields are: criticism (writing and critical discourse), therapy, gender and representation, the city (local forms of organization and metropolitan experience) and politics (the new social movements). At the moment and after the work of the last few years, we are discussing the idea of starting a study program which can more consistently articulate the output of the discursive areas of the museum.

This is just a short report on what we try to do at MACBA these days. There is a radical complexity in these projects in terms of how to communicate them, how to represent them or make them visible. We think that sometimes certain processes need invisibility in order to be effective and remain as processes. Art is overdetermined by a regime of public visibility that can have negative effects in terms of a subjective appropriation of creative methods. Visibility can weaken vitality, can be a form of institutionalization, a narcissistic fossilization of the potential of

creativity. Beyond the regime of visibility, whose paradigm is the exhibition, we think it is possible to restore forms of the subjective appropriation of artistic methods in processes outside the museum.

What you see here is a project and a process. Our purpose is pushing the limits and contradictions of the institutional framework. A museum is nothing other than what you do with it, the forms in which people appropriate it. This is our contribution to a radically political redefinition of artistic relationality.

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[1] Published in Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002.

[2] See for example "Introduction" to *The Return of the Political*, Verso, London, 1993.

[3] Colectivo Situaciones, *Argentina. Apuntes para el nuevo protagonismo social*, Virus, Barcelona, 2003.

[4] Ernesto Laclau, *Nuevas reflexiones sobre la revolución de nuestro tiempo*. Nueva Visión, Buenos Aires, 1993.