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CONVERSATION

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Broadcasting the Archive in Barcelona: analysing the side effects of Arte Útil projects

ABSTRACT

'Broadcasting the archive' is an independent project conceived and curated by us in collaboration with Van Abbemuseum, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima) and the Asociación de Arte Útil. The idea arose from the urgency to spread the Arte Útil archive beyond the institution, which hosts the material. Being the initial archive researchers, we started thinking about how to make visible the potentiality that the archive – intended as a tool – has. The project is the first attempt to emancipate usership around the Arte Útil archive through a year touring activity programmes such as workshops, discussions, and tours hosted by different organisations in various locations in Europe and United States.

This article will reflect on how 'Broadcasting the archive' could be considered as a new methodology to understand the porosity of Arte Útil – intended as a movement – outside and inside the institutional framework, with a particular reference to the programme we developed at Museo d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), in collaboration with the Avalancha collective, Núria Güell, Ruben Santiago and Valentina Maini. We invited them to revisit the conversations we had during the weekend for this journal.

KEYWORDS

Arte Útil, public space, instrumentalisation, gentrification, failure, institutional repurpose, side effect, do it yourself.

Alessandra Saviotti: The programme we developed for 'Broadcasting the archive #6 - Barcelona' was the richest of all of those we presented during 2015-2016, in terms of discussions and engagement with a specific local constituency. We activated a series of online conversations as well as Skype calls, to prepare ourselves and create a common ground between our partners. I think that the strength of it laid precisely in the open collaboration we activated with the collective Avalancha,¹ who hosted us, being the mediator between us, the museum and the city. At the same time, we used the Arte Útil archive looking for meaningful case studies to include in the conversation with a particular focus on which role the city of Barcelona played in the projects we chose, in particular considering the public space and its inhabitants, both temporary and permanent.

The first action toward the implementation of 'Broadcasting the archive' as a methodology started with the idea of the city tour. As the researchers who compiled the archive, we have a strong knowledge of every case study included in it, but we do not have familiarity with every geographical context where a specific project is located. Thus, we involved Avalancha in creating the context throughout a series of resources that they have been using in their practice. We invited them to curate a tour around the city and they proposed to show a different aspect of the Raval, the neighbourhood where the MACBA museum is located. The Raval is one of the two oldest neighbourhoods of Barcelona and it has been the theatre of many urban experimentations; it has been recently transformed from a very depressed and working class area, into one of the European touristic references. At the centre of the Raval lies the MACBA, the so-called *la perla del Raval* (the Raval's gem), which represents the cultural shift which the city government is striving for.

For the first time, we decided to invite the artists to join the conversation with the twofold aim to use the archive as a possible medium for connecting practitioners and to analyse which tactics they had enacted to respond to certain urgencies.

For this reason, we invited Núria Güell, Rubén Santiago and Valentina Maini who have worked in the city, and in particular in the neighbourhood, asking them to talk about the difficulties, or better, the side effects they experienced for each project.

Gemma Medina Estupiñan: The proposal of analysing the concepts of gentrification, use and abuse of the public space as a common good from the perspective of the arts, gave us the opportunity to reckon, appreciate and experiment with the history of the city and the urban process from El Raval.² The tour led by Avalancha illustrated how this neighbourhood had been transformed throughout the last two centuries with many different interventions, and it nowadays remains immersed in the course of a constant transformation that often doesn't involve its inhabitants.

Within this context, art and communities have gained a fundamental role in the formation and deformation, irruption and disruption of the public space. During the programme, we discussed art as a tool of marketing, attraction, local and international promotion, art as an instrument of sanitation, or art as a touristic advertisement. Furthermore, we talked about art as a process that burst in the public space, changing its function. We examined examples where art was a tool for protest, giving visibility to local urgencies; art that denounces; art that questions itself, challenging its limits as agglutinative or participatory art, collaborating in campaigns initiated by the citizens. We walked from the rationalist plans of GATEPAC³ to the construction of MACBA; from the Keith Haring mural, 'Together We Can Stop AIDS' to a series of sculptures marking routes as pinpoints on a map and defining a new face of the city for the Olympics.⁴ We considered projects like 'BioBui(L)t' by Valentina Maini in collaboration with BaM and others, 'Black on White' and 'Support Swedish Culture' by Núria Güell, 'How to transform a public toilet into a Spa' by Rubén Santiago or the intervention MVRDV⁵ at *Plaça dels Àngels* in front of MACBA.⁶ This last project succeeded in activating an empty and unblemished space that hindered locals' interaction just by drawing a series of sport grounds on the paving. Kids took over the space and after closing the exhibition, they maintained the sense of usership and ownership of the zone. Finally, this sense was assumed by the skaters that have colonised the

square giving MACBA a strong legitimation beyond the art world that is more than evident via Google and social media.

I think 'Broadcasting the Archive' as a methodology has been fundamental to understand this context through collaboration. Activating the Arte Útil archive through a dialogue with the initiators of the projects allowed us to go beyond its effectiveness and its immense potential for inspiration, and to focus on the complexities of these practices. We wanted to consider the backstage, the actions and reactions of the participants; the use, misuse and abuse of/by the agents involved; the consequences or side effects of these projects, thinking about the failure or the coefficient of art (Wright 2013:13). It is an intrinsic condition and an enormous risk of these kinds of practices. In Arte Útil, *failure is the compost of success*⁷ and we wanted to delve into these side effects, consider the learning and whether some particular conditions existed that we could identify, or concrete strategies for how to face it. Let's start with Núria and her two projects.

AS: Núria, we would like to hear about two projects in particular: 'Support Swedish Culture' (2014) and 'Analysis on discourse' (2016); the latter is the development of your previous project 'Black on White' (2013). I am personally intrigued about your capacity for re-purposing institutions which commission a work from you, and at the same time, your position as a white European woman artist, who uses her privileged position to create projects that challenge the law operating in a condition of a-legalism (Wallis 2015:37). How and why did you start these projects?

Núria Güell: In the last years, as you said, I have done some projects challenging the law through my own privileges as European woman artist, and assuming the risk that it implies. Some institutions wanted to show the result of these projects but they didn't assume any risk. So, at a certain point I started to thinking that institutions can get involved themselves in the projects in a deep way too, which includes using different privileges that art institutions typically enjoy. Because they are mostly part of the national structure, but on the other hand, they are covered by the conceptual framework of the art, which implies that they can instrumentalise the autonomy that art has gained in the last century. Part of my methodology is based on including institutions as participants and exploit their privileges concerning the requirements of each project. Generally, it means to "subvert" some laws or questioning some moral rules. Sometimes I say that I use the art as an umbrella. It means, in other words, using art institutions as legal shield concerning legal structures or process, where I activate a-legal actions as a semantic resource.

The Project "Black on White" started because of my anger against immigration laws in Europe. I began because I wanted to use the privileges of an art institution to subvert the immigration laws. Additionally, I considered the racism that is involved in this kind of processes, both the one executed in an institutional way and the one that arises, unintentionally or unconsciously, through the "good will". I started a legal research in the Netherlands and later, the MACBA invited me so I readjusted it to the legal conditions in Spain. I made a proposal to one representative of the collective SOM 300, who was one of the spokesperson of the group of migrants recently evicted from the warehouses in Poble Nou.

In the case of 'Support Swedish Culture', it began with the invitation of a public art institution in Sweden. I proposed two ideas, and they chose the one related to the gipsy phobia, which was a dominant discourse of the political representatives during the campaign for the last European elections in Sweden. I did a field research in Stockholm that included conversations with Roma people from Romania that survived begging in the streets, with workers from the Romanian Embassy, and Swedish citizens. Then it becomes a legal examination and the result was a project that also subverted the exclusion of the Roma people to have any right in the Swedish society while trying to question its prejudices.

GM: I am also impressed by the fact that you totally embrace being an artist who creates 1:1 scale (Wright 2013:3) projects, which imply a certain danger in terms of control. Your position as author, in fact, mutates into an initiator at the same time as your audience becomes user and co-producer of the project. Sometimes, this shift implies a failure or a side effect in the process like it happened for the aforementioned projects. How did the temporality of both projects determine their failure?

NG: I wouldn't call it a failure. I think it has more to do with the fact that the results do not concur with the initial intentions. It is basically a discrepancy between the ideal, -that you had in mind when you created the projects- and the real -how it finally happens. In all my projects, I work with people and it means that I work with yearning subjects; therefore you cannot foresee the result.

The first project that you have mentioned contained a mistake from the beginning -maybe even since its planning-, and also because of the accomplices with whom I formed an alliance to achieve the plan. In this case, the temporality was necessary to bring to light this "mistake". In the case of 'Support Swedish Culture', the time factor played a significant role due to the fact that the presidential elections brought a change in the government during the process and from my point of view it affected the political agenda of the institution that had invited me.

AS: Finally, we appreciate your openness in talking about the side effects and your honesty in analysing the process, which you add as an additional step to the work itself. As a matter of fact, you included both projects on your website⁹ and this opens up a possibility to create a second or even third chapter of the same work. Looking back, could you elaborate on what you would change?

NG: Well, the project at MACBA was incorrectly outlined from the beginning, because beyond creating a legal framework to subvert the immigration law, it created a tool of power that could have many other applications than the ones that I could be responsible for. Because my intention was to avoid any power position within the collective, so when the project took a controversial direction, I didn't have any legal power to do anything.

Some of my mistakes were based on believing in the discourses without being aware that, even when they are akin in ideological terms, they can be just pure rhetoric. For example, I trusted one of the leaders of the movement whom the left wing had legitimized to be its spokesperson,

without questioning and verifying if he was considered as legitimate within the community that he supposedly was representing.

On the other project, 'Support Swedish Culture', I would not change anything. I would repeat everything as it was conceived. Maybe I should have been just more strategic in our last meeting with the director of the Institution who cancelled the project, when I let myself be carried away by emotion.

And yes, I included the projects on my website because I think that although the results were not the expected ones, both projects can be very useful as a knowledge device, also to rethink this kind of practice. Habitually, the projects that are shown are the "happy ending projects", but I felt important to show the "failed" projects as an exercise of honesty with the real and its complexities, avoiding the idealistic discourses.

GM: *Rubén, your project 'Turning a Public Toilet into a Spa' (2007) operated in the public space and the public sphere, tackling some urgent issues such as the lack of services for homeless people and the presence of drug addicts and dealers in the square. Why and how did you start the project?*

Ruben Santiago: I moved to the neighbourhood *Barri Gotic* in 2007, while a process of gentrification started to become visible. There, while I was artist-in-residence at Hangar,¹⁰ I realised *Turning a Public Toilet into a Spa* at George Orwell square, commonly known as *Plaza del Tripi*, which refers to the most used psychedelic drugs consumed by people around this square, and due to the presence of a supervised injection site close by. The area was so dangerous that you would often hear tourists screaming after being robbed on the streets. I got very inspired by the neighbourhood, it was where I lived, so my perspective was coming from the inside. I felt part of the community and sometimes I experienced the same conditions: the first time I moved to Barcelona, I was very young and sometimes I slept on the street, too. My idea was not to realise a patronising or charity project, but I wanted to create something to which I could relate personally.

Despite the fact that the Gothic was one of the most overpopulated neighbourhoods in Barcelona in 2007, the city council decided to install just one public toilet in the middle of the square. I decided to commit an act of vandalism, because I did not ask any authorisation to the city council, and with the help of the inhabitants I turned the toilet into a spa. Basically, I hacked (Wright 2013:32) the hydraulic system with the help of some friends and I installed a hydro-massage shower, I provided home-made body soap, shampoo, and towels that I would replace regularly. People who lived in the square and the owner of the bars helped me to control the spa, especially to avoid clashes with the police, but unfortunately the spa lasted just three days, because it was vandalized by some drunk tourists.

AS: *Did the police ever come or try to stop you in the process?*

RS: No, they never came and probably nothing would have happened anyway. It is pretty hilarious because George Orwell square was one of the first areas where the city council decided to install a CCTV system. Once again, the inhabitants of the area reacted to it, but they did it in a festive way, dancing in front of the cameras and so on.

GM: *You did not have any institutional support in this case, right?*

RS: No. But I would like to comment on the term institution. Earlier with Núria, we were mentioning institutions in relationship to the use of funding. I personally think that art is an institution in itself. I will try to explain it better: if I declare myself as an artist, I can have a certain degree of privilege. At the same time, I might also hate the idea of being in a sort of power, but the meaning does not change. Therefore, if an artist is stopped by the police, he or she could always say: 'I am making art'. Then the action acquires an institutional value.

AS: *We can say that sometime artists use art as alibi.*

RS: I was an artist in residence at Hangar at that time, so the idea of using art as an alibi amplifies here. Speaking of which, once I realised a project in Santiago de Compostela¹¹ where I was able to alter the proportion of chemical components needed for water purification for domestic use. As a consequence of that, people in Santiago drank, cooked and took showers using modified water. I could do that precisely because of my status as artist. I could have been considered a terrorist if the action would have occurred outside the art context.

GM: *Valentina, you are among the initiators of 'BioBui(L)t Xtema' a project that was awarded with the Pla de Buïts grant by the city council of Barcelona. In your case the project was officially recognised by the city, so could you please introduce it trying to underline the relationship with the city council, the public space and the users of the project?*

Valentina Maini: 'BioBui(L)t Txema' started as a collaboration between volunteers from the BaM association,¹² that is still leading the project, and four other local associations.¹³ Our idea was creating a project where one could learn and experiment with natural, compostable and re-used materials. Our aim was to provide a free space in which to develop a programme of activities to build bridges among citizens, private companies and institutions. Our interest was to learn, teach and discuss self-building systems, providing new models to implement in the public space. We also wanted to connect with other institutions in the cities, specifically the University, the MACBA and the CCCB¹⁴ using the public space as an excuse and a motivation for doing it. After submitting the project to the open call promoted by the city council called *Pla de Buïts*, our proposal was selected.¹⁵

Despite the fact that we did not have a budget available, from the very beginning the project gained a lot of attention, particularly from architects: a lot of them subscribed for the meetings, which were mostly about how to practically build the building to develop our programme. The relationship with the city council was good, until the property of the designated area for the realisation of the project changed from the city council to MACBA. The museum had already planned to extend the building occupying the area we were using. On the one hand, this fact gave us a lot of freedom for experimentation, because we were aware that the time frame of the project was three years, but on the other hand, the city council used the project as a propaganda tool for the coming elections. They put a lot of pressure on us to be successful because they had awarded us.

AS: *In a sense, it was successful regarding numbers of participation and collaboration among citizens, tourists, and everyone who helped in the construction with some organisations engaged and private companies that donated materials. But still, there is a contradiction, misuse or instrumentalisation within the terms of use and involvement of the communities and the council. How would you define this dichotomy?*

VM: It does not make sense to build a structure in the middle of Barcelona, where there are so many buildings to refurbish. We could have enrolled in a volunteer programme to just refurbish those empty buildings, for instance. With *BioBui(L)t* we wanted to create a building we could use as a tool for testing another way for creating value by sharing our skills and creativity. We used the building as an excuse for learning from each other in order to create real goods that could be used to sustain the group who built the project and that could function as a model for other people. The fact that the project is embedded in the city is great for many reasons, in particular for its visibility, for the value of the land and for its location.¹⁶

The main problem I have now with the *Pla de Buïts* grant is that it enforces a neo-liberal approach to the city: offering public land to an NGO or a non-profit organisation is the same as privatising the public space. The fact that no budget was offered to the project is the reason we won! Otherwise, the same old associations would have been the winners.¹⁷

GM: *Initiating an art project in the public space implies usership (Wright 2013:66) from both the community that inhabits that space, but also from temporary inhabitants, like tourists for instance. In all of the four projects we analysed, some side effects occurred and the artists could not predict or avoid them. Going back to your project Rubén, would you ever have guessed that tourists could destroy it?*

RS: No, never. I hoped it would have lasted more. However, I think that the fact the project survived for three days was already a success, not a failure. At that time, I hoped the council would have taken it as a suggestion to install some more public toilets or to ameliorate the service. It did not happen, and when the project was destroyed I just cleaned it up. And now it's gone.

The presence of public toilets can be interpreted as a signal denoting how the public space could potentially be problematic.

Plus, I think that the process of gentrification works along these terms: the city council abandons a neighbourhood, which is already particularly difficult, and then it says: 'Ok, there are several problems, hence let's encourage the opening of some fancy cafés so poor people will go away'. The danger of creating art projects which provide solutions is always present. In the end, who is going to use and appropriate them? Thinking about the project now, I would be much more explicit about the intentions, I would try to be more didactic and explain my aim better.

Conclusion

When we invited the artists to discuss their projects, we wanted to understand the reasons of what we thought was a failure.

To us, the fact that one user took over Núria's project using it to exploit and threaten his collaborators, that tourists destroyed Rubén's toilet just after three days, and that Valentina decided to leave the project after its implementation underlines the fragility and the danger of being an initiator instead of an author, leaving it open to other people's agendas, determined to see each project fail. Furthermore, we were keen to understand how an artist deals with it.

However, during the conversation, all of them explained how these events did not determine a failure, but rather a side effect or a misuse of the work. Precisely because the projects are included in the archive and they are representing what Arte Útil means, they imply that art only as a proposal is not enough (Bruguera 2016:316). Artists demonstrated to be ready to take all the risks to realise what Tania Bruguera defines as a *feasible utopia* (Bruguera 2016:316). These side effects are an inherent part of what could be considered as the 'art coefficient' (Duchamp 1957:139). We can affirm that all the projects described above operate in another territory, which is different from the one of the art. Güell, Santiago and Maini, operated in an extraterritorial reciprocity (Wright 2014:29) leaving their own territory for another. They opened a space for other subjects to use, which became extremely desirable for practitioners belonging to other fields.

As Barthes suggested, every project based on the activation of the public sphere implies the combination of multiple individual interpretations and decisions, those of the participants or even the institutions involved, and it can transform it into something else (Barthes 1968: 1). The artist or initiator cannot control the whole process, but she or he has the responsibility to acknowledge it.

The tour of Avalancha Collective pointed out that the Raval itself exemplified throughout its history a continuous process of politically driven transformations and artistic interventions that affected, included and excluded communities and inhabitants. In many cases, the time factor played a significant role in redefining all these artistic interventions, where different subjects adapted and re-purposed them, building multiple layers of usership as a *self-regulated mode of engagement and operation* (Wright 2014: 68), recovering the sense of use crumbling its bond with consuming (Harvey 2013: 4).

Taking the risks to situate their practice in the extraterritorial reciprocity, the artists opened the possibility for collaboration, transforming the idea of 'space' in 'time' of cooperation and intervention. As Stephen Wright affirms, they opened up *the time of common*, yet heterogeneous purpose, which is precisely the way in which Arte Útil operates, evidencing and assuming all the risks implicated, and dealing with side effects to become more effective.

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Notes

- 1 - Avalancha is a collective founded by Elena Blesa Cábez, Cloe Masotta Lijtmaer, Víctor Ramírez Tur and Sergi Casero in 2013 and based in Barcelona (Spain).
- 2 - Avalancha "carnavalized" the chapter 3 of *La guía secreta de Barcelona/The secret guide to Barcelona* (Josep Maria Carandel, 1974), into a collection of critical stories that affected the district during the last 40 years. Using the support as a series of visual, literary and artistic references, they reviewed the visual heritage related to the Raval, facing the changes of this iconic place. Avalancha (2016), *Capitol 3*, <http://capitol3.tumblr.com> Accessed 15 September 2016.

- 3 - **GATCPAC** (Grup d'arquitectes i Tècnics Catalans or Catalan Technicians and Architects Group, 1928-1939). Together with Le Corbusier, they designed the *Plan Macià*, an attempt to clean, physically and morally, the effects of the industrialisation in the Raval. Based on a functional distribution of the city, they proposed to demolish the whole area to build a new and modern Barcelona, erasing any trace of its history. The plan was truncated by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Ealham, C. (2005), *Class, Culture and Conflict in Barcelona, 1898-1937*, New York: Routledge, 81.
- 4 - Sculptures of Joan Miro, Fernando Botero, Roy Lichtenstein, Javier Mariscal, Frank Gehry and Claes Oldenbourg among others were commissioned or acquired as part of a long term *Public Art plan* for the 1992 Olympics. From Wikipedia: Public art in Barcelona, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_art_in_Barcelona#1992_Olympics. Accessed 18 September 2016.
- 5 - Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs and Nathalie de Vries
- 6 - <http://www.macba.cat/en/exhibitions-fabrications/1/exhibition-archive/calendar> Accessed 15 September 2016
- 7 - Motto of the Center for Alternative Technology (Arte Útil n.260): *failure is the compost of success' type, because that's why we did things: to see if they would work, because nobody anywhere was doing that and still don't*. Pat Borer, co-founder, in Allan Shepherd, *Voices from a disused quarry: an oral history of the Centre for Alternative Technology*, Wales: CAT, 2015 or National Library of Wales, catalogue reference CAT/6/1.
- 8 - Hangar is a centre for art research and production located in Barcelona, offering support to artists during the different steps of the art production process.
- 9 - <http://www.nuriaguell.net>
- 10 - Hangar is a centre for art research and production located in Barcelona, offering support to artists during the different steps of the art production process.
- 11 - 'The Interpreted City: Ruben Santiago', 1 October - 28 November 2010, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain.
- 12 - BaM (BioArquitectura Mediterranea) is a non-profit association located in Barcelona that promotes the development of sustainability and good practices in architecture and urbanism.
- 13 - The other associations involved in the project are SiteSize, Olab, Lab's and Meridiano 70 y medio.
- 14 - CCCB is the acronym for Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona.
- 15 - Pla de Buïts Urbans amb Implicació Territorial i Social (Plan for empty plots with territorial and social involvement). The grant is aimed to revitalise wastelands of the city of Barcelona, through public interest activities on a temporary basis, driven by public or private non-profit or NGO organisations, promoting the involvement of civil society in the regeneration and revitalisation of urban fabric. BioBui(L)t Txema was granted in the first edition, in 2013, among 12 projects that got the use and management of an empty plot in the city until the end of 2016.
- 16 - BioBui(L)t Txema is located in Plaça de Angeles, between the MACBA and the Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona (CCCB).
- 17 - In December 2014, Valentina Maini decided to leave the project and she stepped down from her position as president of BaM because of divergent ideas on how to shape the future of the activities related to BioBui(L)t.