

CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY ART PROJECTS FOR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DYNAMIZATION

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(Workshop: Challenges of community art. Han University of Applied Sciences.

Nijmegen.17-18 january 2013)

I would like to present this paper as if I'd made a journey. A journey to a subject and a place that is impossible to see and understand in all its complexity. That's why I present this paper with some polaroid photographs. As a selection, these images, both static and fixed will be part of the narrative I would like to share with you. A narrative about culture, art and people in such a difficult economic time. But a very good opportunity to experience new ways, new forms of understanding and creating new cultural projects in a rural area of Catalonia (Spain). So, let's begin the journey:



1. The first image I present, refers to the way in which a concrete model of understanding culture has been developed in our country since the 80s. A culture created on the basis of cultural democratization (where the problem was accessing culture) instead of cultural democracy (where the importance is on people that produce culture). For several years, big investments in theatres, libraries, museums, have been made to increase the cultural demand, to give everybody access to culture. Places like "El Liceu" began to be accessible to all publics and not only the bourgeois society (the town hall gave money to democratize it). So, very nice buildings by famous architects have functioned

as a metaphor as a way of constructing culture, where the cultural productions have been conceived as merchandise and the people as consumers.

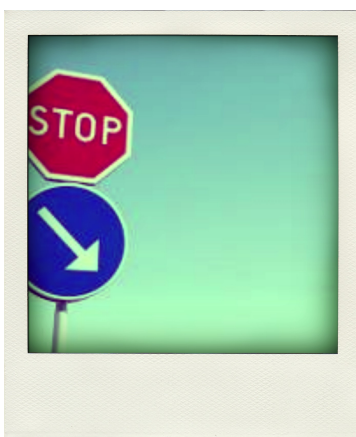
Furthermore the city of Barcelona and Catalonia had an important tradition in associative movements and neighbourhood associations that have reclaimed public services in districts and villages. But since the 90s, some civic centres that were funded by associative movements or neighbourhoods, started to be managed by private firms, subcontracted by the Town Hall. Neighborhood implication as an active movement, became participation in activities that were organised in these places. The centres have been transformed into settings for consuming activities, instead of being living places where local people can develop cultural projects.

With this narrative, the reflection I would like to present is the importance of opening new ways of thinking about culture. In Catalonia, the idea of democratization has moved into the terrain of artists and culturists where public funding was supporting culture until two years ago. And now we find that there is no national or public funding, and so, a lot of cultural producers feel that they cannot fund their activities. People are going abroad, some companies ended their activities and some are searching for ways to create culture and finance their activities. For us, a new period is beginning where we can experiment and reinvent. It is the end of waiting.



to foment social integration. But little reflection is given to community, the role of the artist, and the methodologies used. With this kind of practices, we find a significant difference between practices carried out by social educators or by artists. We still have the debate of educator or artist.

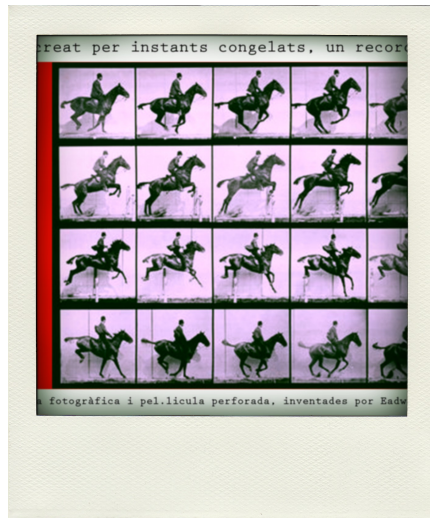
But the matter I want to highlight here is that when we talk about community art projects, we usually look at the British context¹ where we find documented bibliography and practices (even though we know that there are interesting projects in other contexts like France, Finland, etc.). But we cannot forget that we have a particular aspect that we can offer as a country; a specific way of working with culture in community projects. It is the way popular culture has been built in a republican period as an educational tool. During this time culture was embraced as something everyone can enjoy and was not purely an elitist pastime. This developed a mentality where culture crossed social borders and environments, and this led to workers forming culture associations like choirs, etc. And we cannot forget this role that culture had in the republican period where it was considered one of the pillars of the new society they wanted to construct. But nowadays we still understand culture as a divided entity between popular culture developed on the streets and the culture of artists in museums and galleries.



The third image refers to the several reforms that we are experiencing in education from a government that considers arts as a distraction. There is a big gap in teacher training in the arts and considerable insecurity about creating artistic projects in schools.

Pupils still do not have contact with the arts. And our curriculum is based on semiotic language. Every time arts are further away from the pupils, and they do not have the opportunity to experience with other languages in formal education.

¹ In the seventies and eighties we focused on French references to create cultural initiatives that combined popular culture and artistic creation.



The fourth image expresses the structure that we have been creating during these years. A structure that we feel is not valid now, but that we still do not know how to reinvent. It is a grid-based structure that forces every professional to work only in their own section. We have difficulties in creating real collaborative practices. We have been focusing only on one piece of the landscape. The imaginary of arts is very confined and we need to invent new ways of understanding artistic practices and roles of the artist.

For a couple of years I've been conducting several art projects with all kinds of people in several contexts but more recently with retired people in rural areas. We've been learning together and conducting several projects using photography and video. But I felt that new ways of conducting projects were needed, projects that take into account both the social aspect and the personal.

During those years of practice I have realised that as an artist I planned projects from the project point of view, where from the outset everything was already designed and organised. The problem was trying to find how people can participate in it.

On the other hand, most community art projects in our country are focused on social issues using any group and public places. What happens if we consider community art projects from the point of view of individuals and their feelings?



In this way, the idea of creating an experiment has emerged. As I said before, new ways of developing culture are needed. Ways of reinventing roles, investments, participations, collaborations. Searching for ways to create actions with people, at no cost. And not thinking about projects anymore, but thinking about experiences and experiments, where as an artist, with the people, I research ways, forms and implications. The idea is to turn around the normal function of a project, to return to the people their narratives, significances and feelings, without much planning. But still following some rules like attitude, position, and place. As a gardener, planting seeds to create new energy and enthusiasm, that begins with listening to our stories, travelling from past, to present and future. And this reflection in my practice has taken shape in an old abandoned school, in a rural area that the mayor decided to lend for this experiment.

Thinking of the role of the artist as a creator of circumstances (referring to Deligny when talking about educators), the experiment began four months ago with just the location and a video camera. As the neighbours were walking passed they shared stories with us, and in turn, their feelings and emotions were stirred. This is only the beginning because as people started to talk about their experiences, the site became visible again and people began to connect to the place that they knew a long time ago as a child. It is an opportunity to construct something by the people for the people, recovering sensitivity through everybody's stories. And that begins with being in a place and listening.



the present. Restoring culture as a living element in our society, that gives new meaning to us, our places and our relationships.

The journey has just begun and I don't know where it will lead us. I feel very responsible about reinventing new cultural paths that connect integrated views about culture from the past and