

Roundtable

Society and artists

The following is the roundtable on Society and Artists, which took place in Arteleku on 23 March 1997 last with representatives from Spanish associations of artists. The event involved **Xanti Eraso (XE)**, **Florenci Guntín (FG)**, **Begoña Hernández (BH)**, **Poldi Langer (PL)** and **Marcelo Expósito (ME)**.

This text was previously published in Zehar 36, 1998.

Xanti Eraso:

The mirage brought about in the artist collective in the 1980s by the omnipresence of the market and public institutions gave rise to a false hope for standardisation. It seemed that the relationship between artists and civil society involved the integration of both parties. How is that relationship actually seen?

Florenci Guntín

The overheating of the economy in the 1980s led to high levels of surplus and black-market money. The art market attracted the surplus and purchases and prices increased, creating an artificial situation that coincided with the appearance of cultural policies that had not existed until then. In turn, the international trends that were supported by important projection operations gave rise to local versions. These three factors, market, politics and fashion, created a mirage that disappeared with the first symptoms of the economic crisis on the one hand and with the questioning of policies for support for art on the other. Then, the market revealed its real face, or rather its lack of viability.

Begoña Hernández:

During those years, there was a need for going out to the world, becoming modern and spending on culture, in the most clichéd meaning of the term. As far as the standardisation of the sector is concerned, I do not think it can happen because there is no status: the artist has not been aware of belonging to a fabric that could be an industry or a very specific sector. Therefore, integration in the commercial structure remained at the service of interests that were far removed from the possible interests of artists, beyond purely individual interest.

Poldi Langer:

In this society, which is highly specialised and structured on the power of money, there is a discredit of the utopian ideal and artists have become more practical and sceptical. In response to that individualism, artists need to join together to contribute to the development

of the individual as a creative being that is independent from power. And the associations of artists can favour the creation of new cultural dynamics, which appear from the base, from creators.

Marcelo Expósito:

I think that the criticism of the 1980s must be radicalised in that standardisation was not so much a mirage, but rather the market never existed in the institution of art: there was no regularisation of labour relations, no fiscal control of the circulation of assets, no regulation of the conditions under which the market was to develop... For example, the labour situation of artists was one of survival, almost in pre-industrial conditions of savage capitalism: literally, working on a job-by-job basis, etc. Furthermore, it was always understood that it was more legitimate to aspire to become a professional in the area of mediation, from criticism to cultural management. As a result, the poor conditions have been naturalised to the point where there has been a general abandonment of intervening in them and the work carried out by the associations will clash with that abandonment of intervention and of a far-reaching transformation of the system.

FG: Furthermore, there was one particularly perverse circumstance, since those who had access to the international stage were not artists who had struggled in the 1960s and 70s, but rather a few young artists. And that operation could only be completed with artists whose production was controlled, whose supply and demand could be controlled. We were unable to criticise that situation regarding the market, as Marcelo has pointed out, and cultural policy. And without that preliminary step, there is no negotiation of status possible, no review of policies, no capacity for influence to change those situations.

ME: It is important to remember that the labour relations that were in place in the 1980s between young artists and galleries were and continue to be much worse than the worst

possible contract of employment than after they have been solved on a social scale. Besides our incapacity for intervention, this shows that no intervention is possible in the market or the art institution in global terms as far as the public cultural institutions are concerned, as well as other institutions that govern general economic and social dynamics.

XE: The idea of establishing a relationship between art and citizens has always been a constant part of the discourse of some artists. The mechanisms for carrying it out, as well as the results, have been very varied. The role played by the so-called civil society has been relegated below that of the institutions that have dominated the structure of contemporary art. Have these structures (museum, school, centre and gallery, etc.) taken art away from society? Have they created an organisational and functional superstructure that is far removed from reality or should we consider the possibility of finding mechanisms that return to citizens the right that has been taken from them?

ME: I think it is correct to consider museums, schools, centres and galleries, etc. as structures because art is a builder characterised by the existence of a number of mediations. And mediations adopt forms whose content is specifically ideological. When the structures that mediate in the art system are presented as a natural, objective and transparent road for the artist's relationship and that of his/her work with the public, they are implanting a very dishonest image that darkens the artist's need for intervening in that system.

Furthermore, it is also dishonest for the mediators who do not agree with the way things are because it implicitly invites them to relinquish the possibility of intervening in the structures that have been treated as objects. Consequently, we are speaking about a political and also imaginary matter. I think we need specific political alliances

between the individuals working in different areas and we are decided to intervening in the configuration of the forms of mediation between the production of art and its public, a public which also needs to be built up.

BH: I think there is a serious problem in contemporary art: citizens are not aware of the mechanisms, they are not familiar with them, they have not been explained to them... That separation between the artist and the people on the street is, in my opinion, absolute. In recent years, there has been a change in this country and it is very difficult to explain to citizens what is happening in the different areas of contemporary art and set up some kind of dialogue. With regard to whether or not the structures encourage this distance, it seems that people with know-how are necessary in the right place to encourage discourses that gain greater presence in the media, since current presence is scarce and illegible. I don't know if it is because the artist thinks that he/she doesn't have to make that effort or because the effort is not made by the structures; whatever the case, nobody explains to citizens what contemporary art is.

PL: Faced with this situation of manipulated culture that is directed from the economic power, we as artists should be self-critical. We are in an easy, individualist situation with an absolute lack of commitment. That is where the role of the associations of artists comes in: without limiting themselves to being mere unions, they should act as a connection between society and the art world.

FG: The mediators have not fulfilled their functions; the education system has not incorporated contemporary art; the media in general are not interested in the art world except when they comment on record prices in auctions or the number of visitors to the macro-exhibitions; contemporary art museums are very recent and they are being asked to recompose a historical void. We have already spoken about the galleries. All

that is left is the critics, who, except for a few good and heroic examples, have sunk in the waters of their rhetoric. In addition, I think that the concept of autonomy in art is running out. We are possibly witnessing the start of the post-autonomy era in which artists incorporate a concern for the social reception of their work and assume a certain amount of self-criticism as to how they have reached the final consequences of said autonomy.

XE: In my opinion, there are a number of handicaps that have to do with the fact that the institution of contemporary art is occupied by authoritarian personalities who are high-handed, personalist and elitist; it is not a democratic structure. The different human relations (between gallery owners or museums and citizens) are based on a vertical, corrupt structure. Furthermore, our distribution channels have not been socialised and individuals are not given sufficient access to information. We operate like a caste with high priests, like a road of initiation... I accept the responsibility and self-criticism insofar as this undemocratic structure has given rise to unacceptable hierarchical relations. There, the associations of artists should play a fundamental role when establishing new rules of the game to make art socially dignified. It is clear that there is a need for basic standards in uses and customs because it is true that there is a certain amount of subjection.

ME: But it is also necessary to overcome artists' refusal to intervene in those structures. There is a need for generating an awareness that leads to a collective influence on those areas of mediation. It is a matter of creating, starting with what there is, a specific alternative public sphere for art in which there are relations (interpersonal, exchange and intergroup) that are agreed, that come from debates, from conflict and from antagonism. And if the fear of conflict is completely installed in this country, in art it reaches irritating extremes.

XE: Of course, power has organised a structure of art in such a way that you have to be very

careful about what you do. This has led to a fragmentation of artists' energy and it has minimised the transforming effect of creative energies.

ME: I also think that there is a problem with the accumulation of symbolic capital. Although some sectors have accumulated and maintained their symbolic capital over the last decades, the art sector has lost it completely. We need to ask ourselves why that symbolic capital has been lost, since it makes a certain practice socially legitimate, and what effects it has had on the loss of a public. I am not asking for that absolutely legitimacy that consists of taking part in talks, but it is true that those who work in the peripheral sectors of the film world, for example, are benefiting from the symbolic capital accumulated by the central film sector. As a result, there is a regulation that enables the production of films with public subsidies, with a certain level of normality, films that attract less public than many exhibitions and works by artists. So it is not simply a matter of quantifying the public and economic profitability, but rather of social legitimacy.

BH: The thing is that they have achieved a presence because, at one time or another, they have managed to organise the sector in such a way that they have an overwhelming presence and can afford to make productions for nothing that are not even premiered. But we are speaking of an industry that generates a lot of money in this country.

XE: They are institutions that have been made much more permeable and, after democratising their organisational structures, they have approached citizens successfully. Metaphorically speaking, the institution of contemporary art is not very Republican; it is very monarchical. Not very Republican in the sense that it has not been returned to the *res publica*, to the forum. I think there is a lot of aristocracy in our world and that we need to consider a democracy.

FG: I am not sure that the structure of the art market will ever be standardised in this

country. Furthermore, there are new channels for the encounter between art and its public, at an embryonic stage: the Internet, of course, certain television channels... But all those new communication and information systems are nothing without content and, therefore, that gives rise to an important market. That will change the artist's status and his/her way of marketing or distributing, and the associations must reflect on that. Here, there is an issue of particular importance: copyright, where we might find better conditions in the future than on the traditional art market.

ME: There is one thing clear and that is that we need a counter-language and we need to move away from certain clichés. One of the issues that needs to be discussed in this general debate we are having is the idea that the public sphere of art does not exist and, as part of that, the mediators do not fulfil their function, which is why there are no cultural policies, etc. I think that the public sphere of art does exist, but its dominant official form is representative and aristocratic and it is used by the hegemonic groups of power in that sector to stage their own power; it is sustained by specific mythology (the autonomy of art, the individualist artist, mediators as paternalist protectors, etc.). I also think that mediators have fulfilled their function, but a very specific function: the main criticism of this country nourishes, sustains and reproduces that specific mythology of a public sphere that maintains the representation of the power of certain elites. The other aspect of its function is to deploy an activity that systematically takes away the legitimacy of art understood as social practice and as an active form of political intervention in a broad sense.

XE: The experience of the Catalan association of artists is an example of this. But it is important not to create fiction: first of all, we must reach a consensus among the associations, which, with a radical democratisation of the organisation, makes it possible to create a forum of tension. And, together with those democratic association experiences, we need

to create new spaces, new languages, even a new cartography of personal collaborations and institutions, expelling the aristocratic class and enabling democratic forms.

FC: Yes, if we consider strategies or tactics, the mediator that is the easiest target is the institution; after that, the others start to worry. Indeed, there are mediators who disappear and other new mediators appear. The artist must be one step ahead of that; those new mediators need to be characterised, we need to see who controls them... To start the game in better conditions than with the previous mediators.

XE: Do you think the artist should continue to be submitted to the directives laid down by the structure of art? Shouldn't the institutions consider their relations with the creators and start new forms of development and interaction to strengthen the autonomy of art? Accordingly, can the associations of artists play an important role in the configuration of a new framework of relations?

PL: We are speaking about mediators, but I think we need to speak about the institutions, which have to reconsider and open up the field of the design of cultural programmes to artists, asking the associations of artists to collaborate and help control the cultural policy.

ME: I get the impression that this situation of malaise brought about by the crisis, inoperativeness, classism and, in general, the dynamics of exclusion of this official public sphere, which is representative and aristocratic, has basically led to two replies in our country: the generation of an alternative sector that is still weak, but which on a symbolic scale is starting to be very important; and the individualist reply.

In my opinion, the alternative sector is dealing with the new situation from the dichotomy of state/civil society owing to

dissatisfaction with the dominant way in which the official public sphere works. But, in my opinion, dealing with the new situation from that dialectic is dishonest because establishing oneself as a radical otherness with regard to the structures of the state, based on a mystified conception of the autonomy of civil society, ultimately leads to the current tendency to an absence of social protection owing to the dismantling of the welfare state.

I think that, no matter how radical it is, the individualist reply consists of the mere projection of the autonomous, protected figure of the artist when giving a purely arbitrary reply to the dominant cultural policies.

In view of these two positions, I would say yes to the generation of certain alternative and democratic dynamics, but on a new scenario that should not be based on the reductionist dichotomy of state/civil society. An alternative public sphere of art that should be sustained on and, at the same time produce, a collective, pluralised identity. The *alternative civil society* to which I aspire could become a diffuse fabric based on the hegemony of this idea: an artist is not an artist essentially, the artist's identity is not constructed, like any other, in a political framework; in my opinion, that public sphere should be alternative and radically democratic.

XE: In view of that dichotomy of state/civil society, I very much like the idea of co-responsibility, a fundamentally political idea that connects with the citizen's capacity for intervening in the decision-taking process.

BH: My idea is simple: some artists, as a collective, try to deal with the gaps between them and other collectives. But I do not believe the idea of the artist having to undergo confrontation in order to establish his/her configuration. The artist makes an ideological option together with others to collectively deal with a number of problems which, in my opinion, correspond to the collective. As there is no regulation whatsoever, we need to fight for a standard that helps regulate the sector; to that,

we need to learn how to work as a collective and consider which is the model, from among all those that are possible, under which we want to operate because the biggest problem facing the artist collective is the lack of debate.