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FUTURE ARCHIVE



Future Archive is a project initiated by Manuela Zechner in 2005. I started to contribute to its development at the beginning of 2008 when she joined the Micropolitics Research Group of which I am also part.

Methodologies that work with and through futurity have been developing since the mid Sixties, until becoming in recent times a distinct field of studies named futures studies, popular within American and Anglophone academic contexts. Usually this approach makes use of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques to help decision makers in developing proposals for action in different scenarios of change. The notion of «probability» plays a key role in such envisioning techniques, while the futurists and their clients often concentrate on the predictability of certain «trends» within society.

However, Future Archive proposes to work with the temporality of the future in a slightly different way. It does not wish to provide a context for strategy development. Participants are instead asked to engage in a number of interviews/conversations from the standpoint of the future, and from that temporality they are then invited to think back about their present, narrated as if it were a remembered past. In this way, a critical distance is introduced between the narrating subject and his or her immediate lived conditions; the fictional backcasting makes possible a phenomenological reconfiguration of the now. There is still a projection of desire, but one that is forced to seek for its expression in the present possibilities rather than in those which could come. Despite its name, Future Archive is much more about altering perceptions of the present than hypothesising about what lies ahead of us.

In this sense, rather than providing a planning tool for thinking strategically about the future, the Future Archive project could be best described as an «analyser» device, a term borrowed from another body of thought, called institutional analysis, also developed in the Sixties (indeed a time when many micropolitical strategies were first experimented with).

Institutional analysis bears a shared paternity among a cluster of French intellectuals who were in contact with each other, however without ever becoming a coherent school of thought. Such origins include the works of Guattari, Oury, Lapassade and Lourau, among others. Institutional analysis describes an approach to research rather than a methodology or a coherent philosophy. It developed from a need for changing some of the main social institutions that traversed the lives of those who developed its main issues, including psychiatric care clinics, schools, the political party and more broadly the institution of academic social sciences, within which many practitioners found their investigations to be inscribed and for whom different knowledges are produced. From which position is this analysis coming and for what purposes does it serve were the starting questions of this approach. The predicament of institutional analysis is that it wants to facilitate all implicated subjects within a given institutional context (including those carrying out the analysis) to develop an awareness of the devices and mechanisms that organise their communal experience and limit the range of plausible actions, knowledge and behaviours in each context. Following from the theories of Sartre, Lourau and Castoriadis, it conceives the institution dialectically, or composed of two distinct moments: the «instituted», that is, all the practices and assumptions that have fallen into habits, routine, and thus go unscrutinised and unquestioned, and thus it strives to maintain itself through time; and the «instituent», or that which alters, modifies and inserts new energies within each organisational formation. Each institution emerges from the simultaneous interplay of these two moments, with the prevalence of one or the other vector determining the vitality and the productive possibilities of each context. It would be too simple however to understand the dialectic between the instituted and the instituting as bad versus good. The instituted is the institutional dimension that gives continuity to experience and provides a stable set of reference points through which subjectivation

can occur; while the instituting is that which declines the institution into a process, makes it possible for the virtual to ooze into perception and for actions to respond to new situations. The key for institutional analysis is thus not to exit from or oppose institutions, but to become aware of the elements of blockage and potentiality within the institution, in order to emancipate its subjects from the condition of being governed objects of power.

The «analyser» is one of the concept-tools of institutional analysis in its work with groups and organisations (institutional analysis always works «with» and not «about» or «for» a certain constituent group). It describes an event that, almost like an embodied anecdote, is able to reveal how an institutional system works. This can be a spontaneous occurrence or a constructed intervention designed to probe an underlying dynamic within a group, organisation or institution, and it is in this sense, rather than a futures studies consultancy, that the tool of Future Archive was deployed in its collaboration with Intermediæ.

Another key aspect of the institutional analysis approach is that it asks the persons facilitating the process of analysis to account for their own implication and position within the process.

In this case, therefore, it must be said that Intermediæ invited Future Archive as part of a larger archiving process of their own organisation, a process that the organisation regarded as an opportunity for training and reflection around the meaning and purposes of archiving. The desire for archiving in turn contained different sets of preoccupation: the desire to distil some core principles and practices that could condense the plurality of activities of the organisation in a more clearly grasped identity; a fascination with exploring the possibilities for knowledge transmission and storage offered by new technologies; a wish for assessing the organisation's relevance within the different interpretative communities it inhabits, also in the light of a precarious sense of the modalities and possibili-

ties to continue to exist in the future¹. From our perspective, the offer to work with Intermediæ came after a project in La Havana, Cuba, where we worked with the neighbourhood surrounding the arts centre who had invited us, but without implicating the arts centre in the process, so the proposal to use Future Archive in a process of institutional analysis was also something we saluted as an opportunity to reflect on our own involvement within the policies of the arts centres amongst which we move.

More specifically, the request of Intermediæ, which was preliminarily articulated through a skype conversation between the curatorial team and ourselves, was to help them reconsider what could be the role of public cultural institutions in the future along three main axes of concern.

The first concerned a certain uneasiness about the ways in which the organisation is currently perceived, as it is situated within a large cultural citadel within a predominantly migrant and low income neighbourhood. The second revolved around the wish to reflect on the future legacy of Intermediæ as an organisation that wants to reflect permanently on the meaning of cultural institutions today but struggles to reconcile the different requests and expectations that traverse them; and finally the third preoccupation had to do with the modalities of engaging in different collaborations and address the future sustainability of their networks.

The participants in the project were identified directly by Intermediæ, following our suggestion to do a mapping of their different current interlocutors. Three main groups were identified as users; current and past collaborators and people from other Madrid-based cultural organisations.

We conducted twenty one sessions, those with the staff of Intermediæ were group conversations, and the other participants were invited to individual sessions to fit their schedule. In the end, a final workshop was held with both staff and participants. Sessions were recorded and have become part of the Future Archive web repository.

An installation was also present in the space of the Matadero. It was a simple unit which included a computer connected with the Future Archive website, and a stack of take-away leaflets with the «recipe» of how to conduct a future interview for different purposes.

During our own conversations, we asked participants to travel to 2020, and to begin by remembering the events of 2009 from there. The choice of such a near future was perceived as frustrating by some participants who hoped to be able to travel further in time. However, it also meant that conversations focused less on the endless variable of deep transformations and revolutions to come, which meant a mitigation of two common derivations of future casting —absolute utopia (a world where conflicts and problems have all been resolved, thus a paralysing scenario which contains the seed of totalising morality) and absolute dystopia (the world of total war, planetary collapse and brutalisation of society that is the fertile ground for convenient cynicism)— to concentrate more on the smaller changes that could occur in the span of ten years. Furthermore, 2020 is a time when the majority of participants could still imagine themselves to be alive and professionally active, which meant that the dimension of personal responsibility and situatedness became a prominent element in the process.

This is not the space for narrating the overall content and tone of the interviews. Instead, in what follows I would like to roughly sketch a few issues that surfaced during conversations as particularly contested and polyvocal terrains. For this reason, I hope it will be possible to excuse a certain amount of generalisation that occurs in the quest for a register that could allow for further reflections and conversations to take place elsewhere.

INSTITUTION

The world «institution» is polysemic and highly ambivalent one. Often this term conjures up a series of negative associations with bureaucratic procedures, governmental bodies and standardised regulations. However, for the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in the absence of instinct, men create institutions because they need an ambit or a context for their actions. Whatever we do pertains to a specific institution, in the sense of being inserted within a cluster of signifying functions that divide up the sensible in any given social configuration. Institutions thus describe the *processes of satisfaction*, the kinds of relations, procedures and contents that can go together, and those that cannot. From this perspective, institutions should not be reduced or confused with organisations, which instead embody and actualise the predicaments of the institution. By contrast, «organisation» is a term that comes from a military context, and it presupposes the division of tasks and functions in discreet means and operations, able to function in coordination for reaching a shared goal, not dissimilarly from the organs of a body (which in fact share the same etymon with the organisation).

Following from this approach then, arts centres and other kinds of public venues dedicated to contemporary creation are not institutions, but organisations that actualise and make possible, through their activity, the predicaments of a number of institutions. There is the one of the State, which uses them as an instance of governance. There is that of the «public sphere» that is proper to civic society (despite the state re-codification of its functions) and there is the site of the political. There is that of «culture», a deeply ambivalent one. And then there is the institution of art. There are questions that beg urgent and plural answers. How is the relationship conceived between the tendencies that are satisfied through institutions, and that between the institution and its organizational composition; and how to comprehend and work within those situations when the politics of the institutional compound or contradict the politics

expressed by its organisational form, or when they both cease to satisfy the tendencies which had once explained their formation.

ARTISTS

In professions where the majority of the work is carried out under the vestiges of virtuosity (see Virno's *Grammar of the Multitudes* for a full account of this term), that is, without objective parameters of evaluation against which to measure success, the relationships between agents assume a prevalent weight in transactions. The relationship between the cultural organisation and the artists it hosts or produces is paradigmatic in this sense. Two imaginaries seem particularly relevant at present when thinking about the declinations of such relationships. One inclination is for art organizations to imagine artists as one of the weak categories in the name of which it is worth struggling for. This struggle is configured as a dimension of care, where cultural workers act as midwives between the potentiality of a work and the fulfilment of this potential in the best way possible. The organisation assumes in this configuration a parental posture which oscillates between scolding and nurturing gestures. The «enemies» in this fantasmatic projection are all those who do not possess sufficient sensitivity to the projects produced, either because they have different sets of values (economic or aesthetic) or because they do not have the patience to truly engage or care, or yet again are plainly not fit for an artistic experience. At the same time, the artist is also to be protected from her or his own characteristics and helped, with force if needed, to best develop the work.

Alternative to this proto-familial modality, there is the business one, feeding itself off the rich vocabulary of economic transactions. One of the common paradoxical configurations in this case is that it allocates to artists the externalisation of some of the institutional functions. For instance, it may happen that artists invited

for a residency develop a project together with certain groups, networks or citizens that are based in the locality of the hosting organisation. Often, the relationships and knowledges created through the creative project do not find a way to implicate the actual staff of the arts centre itself, so that at the end of each project cycle, the relationships and knowledges produced in the process go away with the nomadic practitioners. This dynamic reveals an inversion of the concepts of relationship and encounter, whereby the artists create relationships within a temporality of encounter and vice versa, cultural institutions imagined as relationships in a series of mediated encounters.

USERS

While the declination of publics as a plural and heterogeneous entity is more and more commonly found in the discourse of cultural institutions, this seems to be more the fruit of the penetration of marketing techniques and lingo within the field than a deep mutation of the conception of relationships and responsibilities. The notion of «stakeholders», however useful it may be to move away from the ghost of a monolithic, mass «audience», calls for a differentiation of the offer into parallel and discreet entities (hence the education programme alongside the expert talks next to the gift shop juxtaposed with the curriculum for local partnerships and so on...) rather than for a reflection on the transversal function of the cultural institution. The use of pre-existing categorisations imported from policy planning and social sciences often replicate, rather than challenge, existing social divisions. Many arts centres are placing much concern and care in the process of finding the right communication strategy for their activities. This is often understood as a communication tactic through mediatic presence, consolidation of the brand, appearance in local and specialised press, interactive online opportunities. Informal communication



↑ Future Archive, Intermediae, 2009.

strategies which work through proximity and sustained dialogues are often conceived as the specialised task of education officers. The mute demands of the missed users repeatedly represent a moment of stuttering in the self-narration of cultural organisations, one that calls for many more conversations around the institution congruence with its democratic mandates.

PARTICIPATION

Much has already been written about this notion, so central in contemporary politics and arts. Here it is worth briefly recalling that the discourse around participation calls for three interlocked dimensions: its modality; its relevance and its progression.

The reflection upon modality focuses upon the aesthetics, the mechanisms and the formats of participation itself. The relevance has to be assessed through the meaning that each instance of participation assumes for the subjects (both proponents and invitees) implicated in the experience itself. Dmitry Vilensky provocatively summed up this problem in the affirmation: "Many people greatly enjoy reading, viewing films, and visiting museums. There is nothing wrong with this. What is wrong is that in our society only a tiny minority is capable of creating something from their experience of reading books, watching films, and visiting museums."

Finally, the breath of progression assesses the temporality, understood as duration and repeatability, and the threshold of the participatory process, differentiating between the moment of the «stepping in», the first contact, the trial interaction, the curious wondering within the spaces for contemporary creation, and the process of «stepping up» in which participation becomes more complex, involves more responsibilities and awakens greater expectations of devolution of power.

Participation is also a common predicament not only of external engagement, but also

as a mechanism of internal governance. It is a well known fact that in post-Fordist organisation of production, workers seem to struggle to emancipate themselves from a rhetoric of horizontality whereby the institution demands consensus and teamwork without questioning its constitutive differential powers. How could the institution make room for the possibility of conflict and radical disagreement to occur, without consigning this contemporary paradox to the solitude of individual strategies?

ENTERTAINMENT

One of the ways culture as a professionalized sphere defines itself is through negative differentiation from entertainment. This distinction is particularly important within discourses of legitimisation, to justify on the one hand the reception and spending of public funds; on the other to defend the relevance of the arts before the incommensurably more powerful mediatic apparatus. However this classic fault line intersects with other planes of power relations, configuring a composite field of tension. On the one hand, there is a state quest for legitimisation that has double necessity: on the one hand, it craves for highly spectacular aesthetics and large events that can function as secularised rituals of collective identification and celebration. On the other hand, but this is the other side of the same coin, it necessitates formats that can accommodate the sociality and taste of bourgeoisie intelligentsia, especially when culture is enveloped in the logic of urban «regeneration».

The perception of this pressure obviously elicits a response of resistance from cultural workers. However, when it is thought as a resistance to becoming entertainment, it means that many cultural workers run the risk of coagulating into equally problematic solipsisms.

«Entertainment versus quality» is a pair that can only culminate with two well known alternative impasse: to become an amusement park or to be very marginal.

One way to domesticate the monster could be to consider that the concept of «entertainment» per se has a neutral connotation, and thus it is improperly used in opposition to «what is new» or «what is complex». The root of the word simply indicates the act of delaying something, to protract a moment, to make something linger, to keep something as it is. This could open up the possibility to conceive the «as it is» not as a given, but precisely as a specific moment of encounter between what was and what could be. Entertainment indeed is an issue when it is used as a register of reiteration of status quo but it may constitute a different modality to think of the «new», to look for it elsewhere, or to conjure up signifying mechanisms able to traverse complexity in a simple (not simplified) manner, allowing for a different awareness of the «what is» to emerge.

We ruffled with many more issues during Future Archive in Madrid. But the ones above struck us as they are connecting Intermediæ with struggles and quests going on in other institutions of culture and art, with the hope that by 2020 we will be able to look back upon some of those with a quirky smile...

References

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Note

- 1 Intermediæ directly depends on the Área de Las Artes del Ayuntamiento de Madrid (Arts Area of Madrid City Council). Its juridical position is more akin to that of a special project of the City Council than of an institution in itself.

