

‘Curatela’:

Towards an
Unhurried Politics
of Attention in Post-
representational
Curating

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Submission for a practice-led PhD
Royal College of Art, London, 2022

The work presented in this thesis is my own but, undoubtedly, emerges from thinking and dissenting with others, and for that I am grateful.



Signed
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Date
31 March 2022

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This research follows the MHRA style guide.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the importance of landing in these pages, encouraged by a desire to recuperate the joy of learning despite being part of a knowledge society whose attention economy suffocated me, and despite the conservative positivism of a teaching milieu increasingly monetised and bureaucratised. This reality did not exempt me from seeking affirmative, generative and purposeful methodologies from which to edit these knowledges and create a new space for myself in which to rehearse new ideas towards modes of instituting with care. On the contrary, the frenzied attention economy drove me to investigate alternative approaches, how to instigate moments in which knowledge is experienced and shared collectively.

Since 2016, this support structure has been provided by the Royal College of Art and the generous funding of the Botín Foundation, which covered my fees and salary during the MPhil period between 2016-2018, before the PhD. These two years allowed me to embrace an unhurried politics of attention towards knowledge production and to muddle through the Spanish institutional narratives in an attempt to self-reflect on a profession that is not fully institutionalised by the museum or academia, and that seemed to offer possibilities, rights and cultural legacies to address the alternative instituting practices that I thought were worth exploring. I am immensely grateful to my supervisors Dr Grant Watson and Professor Victoria Walsh for giving me their hands and pulling me out of the mud so many times: their knowledge, patience, and willingness to think with me, expand and problematise ideas, has transformed this research into what it is today. I have learnt from them to continue to invest in the potential of a practice that can enable learning through changes in perception and, for this reason, education should not be taken for granted.

In this sense, I am also grateful to have been able to learn by teaching and curating alongside the CCA and the 4Cs From Conflict to Conviviality teams and their cohort of amazing students, partners and audiences, and to have found the strength to continue working, researching, writing and editing collaboratively in the catastrophic times of Brexit, Covid-19 and a war – events that continue to flood me with sadness. I hope I have said in these pages something that contributes to the rehearsing of a politics of attention, curiosity and care to ease the pain this mediated and mediatized world generates. In my view, the curatorial could undoubtedly contribute to paving the way for kindness.

I would not have found the strength to continue with this research without the invaluable support of those who made *Concreta* possible throughout the years: Nuria Enguita, Pep Benlloch, Ester Pegueroles and Jaume Marco, and all those who are part of the extended family of a project which turns ten this year, including Rafael Barber, Milene Trindade, Pablo Lafuente, Teresa Lanceta, Laurence Rassel, Mar Villaespesa, Pedro G. Romero, Alba Colomo, Cine por venir, Lorenzo Sandoval, Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, Chantal Stehwien, among many others.

Thank you to my parents Modesta and Abel, my brother Abel and my partner Roberto, also to my amazing family and friends for their unconditional love, support and belief, without whom this work would not have been possible. Each of you has impacted my thinking and made this journey more enjoyable. Special thanks to all the artists, practitioners, contributors and audiences I have worked with as an editor, curator and director, because your work has inspired and encouraged my research and continues to do so. This is just a temporary stop, an interval on a longer road that we will cross again in our defence of togetherness.

Abstract

'Curatela': Towards an Unhurried Politics of Attention in Post-Representational Curating sets out to examine curating as a practice of embodied criticism, mobilising affects, and how to define the cultural institution as an instigator of a new social contract in the expanded field of contemporary cultural activity. Through a curatorial approach, 'situated knowledge' is examined as a relational condition and a speculative ethics, only able to operate under the paradoxical processes that render the multitude of relations, making visible and tangible the histories we think with, dissent within and think for. The post-francoist Spanish context serves as the framework of this practice-led investigation; and 'Editing', 'Storytelling' and 'Caring' are the three chapters putting to work experiences with history.

'Editing (Thinking with)' is set in Spain during the *indignados* movement in 2011 in order to problematise the crisis of representation and criticality and to claim the need of an unhurried politics of attention, an argument that stems from *Concreta*, a Spanish-language journal I co-founded in 2012 in the heat of the anti-austerity movements. 'Storytelling (Dissenting within)' steps back to the 1990s to explore the increasing mediation and professionalisation of a cultural activity invested in diluting the boundaries between authors, participants and audiences, and the convergence of an asynchronous institutional critique that paradoxically neglects what it advocated at first. Drawing on previous chapters, 'Caring (Thinking for)' discusses how to address care as a constituent part of a feminist practice, set in a framework of interdependence, but also alongside the processes of civil mediation. It proposes to embed the production of knowledge and exhibition making in worldly experiences, in order to make transparent how the way we think with others leads us to hold multiple ends of sometimes divergent positions.

Mining the often-strained relations between labour, cultural workers and institutional activism, this investigation ultimately argues that the practice of curating can contribute to learning from past experiences and claim, a '*curatela*', a sensitive middle ground to shape a set of common practices where the desire to interact with one another defines the set of conditions from which to collectively operate.

1: Foreword. ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’

Empty spaces and clear visions are bad fictions for thinking.
—Donna Haraway¹

The Crisis of Representation and Criticality

In her essay ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’ (2014), philosopher and educator Marina Garcés reflects on how we have been told that we have run out of blank pages, that is, that there are no futures ahead.² No longer the possibility to write and ‘write us’ anew as a society. Spaces of creation have been saturated and their distinctiveness blurred – hence the apparent finite horizon to our ability to freely imagine another world.

Her essay, which introduces the crisis of representation and criticality that emerged in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, when escalating inequalities of neoliberalism were coming to a head and the chorus ‘they don’t represent us’ was heard across the globe, was first published in the journal that I co-founded in Spain, *Concreta*. This paradigm shift arising out of specific episodes of contemporary protest (the 15M *indignados* [outraged] movement in Spain, but also the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street), is where I situate the beginning of a research project that deals with the practice of curating and the curatorial through the lens of ‘editing’, ‘storytelling’ and ‘caring’. These three terms structure the central chapters of this dissertation: its methodology, historical framework and case studies. In these pages, ‘the curatorial’ refers to the staging of an event as rehearsed and acknowledged within the field of curating since the 2010s.³

As a point of departure, ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’ relays an anecdote offering a powerful image, which this thesis – building from an understanding of *Concreta* as research method – uses as a metaphor to generate new knowledge. Garcés discusses an encounter with an art professor, who explained to her how students today no longer start their representations from scratch – from the white page of their notebook or screens – but instead base their projects on the possibilities offered by the video-editing menu. They start right from the middle. They start *in medias res*. How do we deal with what saturates the space of our action

¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 174.

² Marina Garcés, ‘La rebelión de los intervalos’ [The Rebellion of the Intervals], *Concreta*, 04 (2014), pp. 10–15. [translation mine].

³ On ‘the curatorial’ see Maria Lind, ed., *Performing the Curatorial: With and Beyond Art* (Berlin: Lukas & Sternberg, 2012); Beatrice von Bismarck, ed., *Cultures of the Curatorial* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012); Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), among others.

and our imagination? Do we need to invoke the power of the blank page as a common ground from which to rebuild our creative and political freedom?

In a nutshell, the anecdote Garcés recounts reveals that we are increasingly imprisoned in a mediated world that prevents us from critically imagining other possible futures. But who are *we*, after all? And wait, who are you? When I think of subjectivity formation – building us/them – I always struggle to delineate a distinction. I often go back to Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003),⁴ in which she recuperates Virginia Woolf’s enquiry while in Spain during the Civil War and asks: ‘how are *we* to prevent war?’ In *Women Who Make a Fuss* (2014), Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret state that ‘to protect the culture and intellectual freedom’ was Woolf’s commitment to this task.⁵ Indeed, addressing the ‘we’ could be understood as a way of politicising life thinking, Garcés said in *Zehar* years ago – a periodical that inspired the emergence of *Concreta*, in which collaborative practices dealing with representation take a stance.⁶ Yet, this melancholic idea of envisioning different social horizons as if they were a ‘blank page’, in other words, as if they were a *tabula rasa* or an empty canvas with no preconditions or determinants, is both alluring and problematic.

It is both alluring and problematic because the page has neither relief nor shadows. It has an imaginary coordinate axis that situates what is to be done, what is to be said, what is to be built. The blank page is the immediate space for artistic, political and social creativity, but also the abstract space inseparable from its forms of commercial exploitation. Paradoxically, writing is the modern mythical practice of producing text and producing society as text, Garcés exhorts. She recuperates Michel de Certeau’s approach to writing as a myth of modernity that, rather than be restored, needs to be overcome.⁷ In her view, modernity could be understood as a scriptural project dealing with the redefinition of the past because, traditionally, the blank page institutes a place of domination of the subject-writer, enacting an imaginary freedom.

Yet, here I am writing, while acknowledging that language mediates me, you, (most of) us all. I am writing, while trying to honour an ethics of relationality beyond the vicious circle of discourse formation as a place of domination. Because, as Rosi Braidotti argues, language is a structure, a code, a system of meaning that precedes us and will be there right after us, so negotiating with writing is a must.⁸ And because these places of domination change rapidly, understanding the conditions of these changes could be a means of addressing the problem of emancipation that these women ‘who make a fuss’ highlight.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

⁵ Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret, ed., *Women Who Make a Fuss: The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014).

⁶ Marina Garcés, ‘La experiencia del nosotros’ [The Experience of the We] in Miren Eraso, ‘La escuela abierta’ [Open School], *Zehar*, 60–61 (2017), pp. 48–49 [translation mine].

⁷ Michel de Certeau in Garcés, ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’.

⁸ Rosi Braidotti, ‘Thinking as a Nomadic Subject’, <<https://www.ici-berlin.org/event/620/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

The aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 changed the rules of the game, and at the time we said to ourselves: *Now*, we had to take it from *here*. Thus, not only addressing who *we* are, but situating when *now* is, where *here* is, constitute the task of critical theory. Ever since, I felt the need to grasp and account for the fleeting present – that is fleeting not only because time passes and destabilises us, but because technologies of mediation change and being able to respond is part of the curatorial task. Everything mutates. Old habits of practice and thought are being recomposed in contradictory non-linear ways. Indeed, this is our contemporary condition.

But this is also not news. From Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) to Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), among many others before and after, including Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1961), these authors understood that the *conditions* of our historicity are not self-evident, and a whole universe opens up when it comes to subject positions. Subject positions are constructed by discourses, and discourses also produce a place for subjects from which they can make sense of these conditions, represent themselves and encourage change.⁹ In turn, advanced capitalism further fragments society and creates difference. But, as Donna Haraway says, differences could be both playful and pillars of a world-historical system of domination. In this sense, epistemology is about knowing the 'difference between different differences'.¹⁰

This condition also means being aware of the 'the indignity of speaking for others' as Foucault called it.¹¹ Gilles Deleuze eloquently expressed this idea while conversing about the relationship between theory and practice with Foucault back in the 1970s. Deleuze suggested that we failed to appreciate the theoretical fact that only those directly concerned can speak in a practical way on their own behalf. This is also the conclusion Sontag reaches in her essay about others' pain¹² – a position that remains valid for many, but that it is simultaneously highly contested. Certainly, who is allowed to speak for others, to speak on their behalf? 'Think we must', said Virginia Woolf. 'Think we must *with care*', added Laurence Rassel in a recent contribution to *Concreta* that inspired my research.¹³ Like politics, art is made and practised in the struggle for the space of daily existence, in the same way that the battle for life implies recognising and defending that the right to space is also the right to invent the world.

For this reason, this thesis argues that thinking beyond the blank page as a place of authority of the subject-writer forces us to unlearn seeing the world as a *tabula rasa*, and to relearn to look at its reliefs, incompleteness and togetherness. It forces us to think about what happens after representation and spills beyond the blank page, because, as Haraway suggests in the passage quoted in my epigraph, 'empty spaces and clear visions are bad fictions for

⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Where is the subject?', in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* (Milton Keynes: Open University), pp. 31–56.

¹⁰ Haraway cited in Braidotti, 'Thinking as a Nomadic Subject'.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, 'Intellectuals and power: A conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze', *L'Arc*, 49 (1972), pp. 3–10.

¹² Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

¹³ Laurence Rassel, 'La tormenta perfecta' [The Perfect Storm], *Concreta*, 09 (2017) [translation mine].

thinking'.¹⁴ As such she proposes the term *muddle* (Old Dutch for muddying the waters) to trouble the trope of visual clarity, and the *cat's cradle* game to negotiate collective authorship. There are no coordinates for representation, action or distanced consciousness, as the blank page traditionally promised. On the contrary, there is an entanglement of implicated bodies dealing with mediation instead. Therefore, muddling through the world entails – as this research and the curatorial argue – embracing the blurred page from a practice of embodied criticism.

It matters '*what worlds world worlds*', as Haraway says.¹⁵ But perhaps even more, it matters *how words world worlds*. So, drawing on the 'rebellion of the intervals', the anecdote of the professor revealing an impetus of the medium as a method, we can deduce that, in order to cope with the saturation of our spaces of creation, the modern aesthetics of representation have moved towards an aesthetics and politics of attention. In other words, the idea of the medium as a method exposes what Stengers argues: 'there can be no relevant ecology without a correlate ethology'.¹⁶ Or, as María Puig de la Bellacasa adds, certainly 'nothing comes without its worlds'.¹⁷ Text and context are intrinsically interwoven. Thus, the act of editing *Concreta* provides this dissertation with the textual fabric that allows for intertextual intimacies and forms of citation. This is a methodological approach that has taught me how to slow down my body to be able discern within the density of the muddle.

For Garcés, 'the frontality of the gaze is dethroned, and the power of the vision is transformed. The frontality opens to its periphery. The vision is thus discovered in a situation, surrounded and exposed'.¹⁸ Therefore, the question that arises is not *what* the best representation is for the best action, but rather what to attend to and *how* to sustain attention. Where coordinates lose their definition and vision becomes peripheral, I do not always attend to what I need to see: 'Perhaps it is necessary to turn the head, or the whole body. Or perhaps we should even attend to what we will never be able to see or represent ourselves at all'.¹⁹

The question of attention opens up a paradoxically active and passive reciprocity: you have to pay attention to what in turn asks to be attended to. You have to be willing. You must be curious. Therefore, with a scriptural matrix rather than attempt a constructive action, it is necessary to develop a new, or possibly very old, behaviour. Before asking what to do and how to deal with reality, we should ask how we treat one another. Only by rehearsing radical hospitality to begin with, can we address this paradox of representation and criticality that the curatorial faces when it comes to dealing with an institution trapped by history-making and discursive action, my research argues.

¹⁴ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Isabelle Stengers, 'Introductory Notes on An Ecology of Practices', *Cultural Studies Review*, 11 (2005), pp. 183–96.

¹⁷ María Puig de la Bellacasa, 'Nothing comes without its world: thinking with care', *Sociological Review*, May (2012).

¹⁸ Garcés, 'The Rebellion of the Intervals'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

This is a paradox that reveals how the dispute over language takes place in this representational field. The increasing injustices of various economic crises make visible and connect precarity and vulnerability to the historical predicaments of social reproduction.²⁰ As a result, narratives of resistance align with the demand for recognition, including that of the Western museum of the twentieth century and its difficulties in confronting modernity – the grand narratives of history and its violence. Yet, I refer to ‘possibly very old behaviour’ – how we treat one another – because the feminist theory of politics of location has taught me to speak from where I am. But how to ‘situate’ oneself within the moving grounds of mediation?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty criticised the geometrical limitations of the blank page in favour of an understanding of space as being *of* the body and not as what the body is in.²¹ Henri Lefebvre then took up this redefinition to analyse the social interrelations of production and spatial justice.²² Building from these two theorists, Garcés argues that the perception of intervals within a space that is never empty puts our entire body into play. She writes, ‘our body is scorned, absorbed, shattered by the image. Or rather, omitted. It is not a political rebellion [...] it is an elemental and global uprising.’²³ So, if we return to the idea that we are entangled in perpetual unfinished proximity, how do we achieve ‘critical distance’ without blank pages as a matrix of subjectivity? Can the practice of curating and the curatorial contribute to rehearsing a practice of embodied criticism?

Because of the changing subjectivities of the contemporary moment in which we live, in which the discourse of ‘bodies’ have gained traction, this thesis argues for a new possibility of perception and distance production. In this perspective, ‘distance’ is not the fiction of absolute emancipation of a subject-writer surveying the world from an authorial pulpit – nor from the notebook, camera or digital screen, like in the professor’s anecdote. The rebellion of this kind of distance is, citing Lefebvre, the condition to ‘produce the space of the human species as a collective work, the planet space as a social support of a transformed, open daily life to the multiple possibilities’.²⁴

It is about creating a way around the idea that to be ‘critical’ means challenging the negative conditions of the present, precisely because sustaining the project of life implies reconnecting to the sources of affirmation, to the potential or what we – whoever *we* are – are capable of becoming. In other words, it is having the right to a place, to claim an elastic proximity from which to shape an ethics that illuminates the fleeting conditions of these spaces, such as the one that emerged from the squares that were occupied in different cities across the world in 2011 and the years that followed.

²⁰ Marina Vishmidt, ‘Cuerpos en el espacio. En los extremos de la vulnerabilidad’ [Bodies in Space. On the Extremes of Vulnerability], *Concreta*, 17 (2021).

²¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty cited in Garcés, ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’.

²² Henri Lefebvre cited in Garcés, ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Squares are always in city centres and are central to the political discourse of their time. Yet, squares are not always square – their contours frame a temporary place for bodies in transit. What if we think of the blank page as if it were a square? As if it had a plane or contour to be traversed?

Post-representing the World?

Under this premise, in the heat of the anti-austerity *indignados* movement in Spain in 2011, Garcés and her colleagues of Espai en blanc – a Catalan collective rooted in the anarchist tradition, committed to critical and experimental thinking – launched *Els Pressentiments*.²⁵ Meaning gut feeling, their radical position lay in producing a series of single sheets, which, instead of acting as a blank page, operated as if they were squares, that is, as if they were the starting point for a ‘post-representation’ of the world. Rather than ‘recording’ devices, these single sheets turn into ‘social’ projectors. For this reason, this circuitry is not merely representational. It is political in content and form. It is relational and social.²⁶ It is ‘post-representational’ because the sheets became articulated as visual and temporal intervals, along with other sheets, reconfiguring the texture of the aggressions and the power dynamics of the world we live in.

Undeniably, the financial disaster of 2008 unleashed an institutional crisis of legitimacy around the globe in the form of occupy movements and demonstrations. In Spain, it also meant an apparent disruption with the so-called Regime of 78, the constitutional referendum that led to democracy. The passing of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1975 opened a window of opportunity for social change, but Francoist elites managed to run the transition process, so residues of many pre-democratic realities remained. For instance, in the economic sphere, the model characterised by a weak structure of production embedded in a milieu of clientelism was left unreformed.

In brief, the Regime of 78 unfolded in two distinct stages. The PSOE [Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party] governed in a context of crisis from 1982 until 1995, suffering the last throes of the labour troubles. From 1995 until 2004 the conservative PP [People’s Party] governed amid an economic boom. Formerly known as People’s Alliance, the party had been founded in 1976 as an alliance of post-Francoist proto-parties, led by a minister who had been part of the dictatorship, Manuel Fraga. For three decades, PSOE and PP defined a bipartisan hegemony that lasted until precisely the movements of the squares emerged. In the resulting general malaise, the *indignados* saw a transformative and progressive opportunity from which to edit the story and change the rules of the game.

Thus, the moment of emergence and the development of activities of *Els Pressentiments* form an unfinished mosaic that has been evolved with the challenges of its own time, from 2011 until today. They are not offering a direct possibility, nor a menu of possibilities. They are

²⁵ *Els Pressentiments* <<http://elpressentiment.net>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁶ Hito Steyerl, ‘Politics of Representation’, <<http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics-of-post-representation/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

not a means to an end, a solution or a method. They are a *spasm* whose unplanned rhythm of unfolding paradoxically accompanies the contingency of attending to and addressing the concrete realities of the world.

Concreta emerged in the same year, 2011, with the same core conviction that the production of distance and criticality was one of the challenges of our contemporary condition. *Concreta* was born ‘from a shared desire and an absence’.²⁷ The desire to construct a platform from which to contribute to the contemporary thinking of art production, and to do so from a precise place, Valencia in Spain, a context marked by the systematic disappearance of cultural infrastructure dedicated to the visual arts, a consequence of conservative policies and years of corruption. This local situation of cultural crisis came on top of the financial collapse brought on by advanced capitalism, which resonated across the globe, and pointed to the need for a paradigm shift on many levels, not only macroeconomic ones but also, and above all, micropolitical, portending a dark future for culture and the arts.²⁸

At the time, I had just graduated with a degree in Fine Arts and, right after, obtained a Master’s in Photography at a publicly funded university. Thus, thinking about the ability to imagine, that is to say, thinking about representation, would accompany me ever since. Despite the economic situation, I was a privileged student – I was lucky enough to be awarded a grant to get work experience at Afterall, a publishing research organisation in London that a professor recommended. Within this context, I briefly met my colleague, *Concreta*’s co-founder Nuria Enguita. She was UNIA arteypensamiento’s representative in the editorial team – one of Afterall’s partners at the time. Nuria is part of the second generation of self-taught curators that I describe in the ‘Field of Knowledge’ section of this thesis that follows this introduction. She learnt the practice of curating in the 1990s at IVAM in Valencia, where she worked as a conservator, and at the Tàpies Foundation in Barcelona, where she was responsible for the programme between 1998 and 2008. Together, we co-founded *Concreta* in 2011 with the invaluable support of Pep Benlloch, Ester Pegueroles, Jaume Marco, Milene Trindade, Rafael Barber and many others who understood this publication as a letter we were sending to our extended family and friends.²⁹

Yet, before setting the project in motion, I moved to Chicago for a placement at the Museum of Contemporary Photography-MoCP at Columbia College to work in the Collection and Archival Department. Trained as an artist and as a photography scholar, working as editor, educator or archivist, among other roles, my transdisciplinary profile fitted well in the in-betweenness – a position that I later came to understand requires a certain performativity. At the time, moving from one role to another was my daily practice. Ever since, I have performed the role of artist, lecturer, writer, researcher, and across them all, editor.

²⁷ Nuria Enguita, ‘Editorial’, *Concreta*, 00 (2012) [translation mine].

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Philosopher Nicolás Sánchez Durà described *Concreta* as a ‘letter’ in a conversation during the presentation of the pilot issue of *Concreta* in 2012 in Sala La Muralla, Valencia.

Editing was a self-imposed act that attempted to navigate the paradoxical arena I found on my return to Valencia, where mediation and what I understood as transdisciplinary research production were not welcomed at the time. As a result, I had to choose a way forward, and this thesis offers an opportunity to acknowledge the discomfort emerging from this continuous translocation as a nomadic subject. My experience of making books and spending hours and hours within a vault full of photographs, to later practice what is often referred to as ‘post-representational curating’, led me to see the best course of action in setting up *Concreta*. After all, performing the archive, curating as organising, and turning towards ‘the educational’³⁰ are the activities that define ‘post-representation’ in the field of curating.³¹ What comes after the exhibition, but also what determines its preconditions, is what mobilises my thinking.

As a team, we wanted to delve into other theoretical modes, manifestations or forms of montage that seemed fundamental to us for thinking about our contemporary condition – a condition that had to do with the concepts of editing, serialisation and copying and that, ultimately, revolved around the practice of curating and the curatorial. However, at the very beginning, we were not referring to these terms as such. Neither in theory nor in practice, criticality was still aligned with traditional ideas of art criticism. In my view, criticality was not aligned with artistic value or the art market either. I was aware of the fact that aesthetic judgement had already been challenged in the wake of conceptual and post-conceptual art.

In short, *Concreta* shared the diagnosis of the present time as introduced in Garcés’s ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’; that is, a representational paradox that challenges the possibility to ‘write us’ anew as a society, that tests the art of discernment, that contests our attention. In my view, theoretical endeavours had taken on a more inventive dimension beyond traditional forms of critique. What I missed at the time were the possibilities of addressing criticality through the lens of distance production and the curatorial – a post-representational understanding of the practice of curating that had faced some challenges of mediation similar to those presented in the anecdote of the professor.

As the ‘Field of Knowledge’ section explains, the curatorial is an approach that has been overlooked within the Spanish context, which was legitimately more preoccupied catching up with history after four decades of autocracy. This thesis takes the opportunity to address the knowledges of critique and explores its conditions and curatorial potentials.³² Because, regardless of the perversity and vulgarity of our times, I resist the sadness of the soul that makes us feel that ‘there are no futures ahead’.³³ Being aware of the perils of what Lauren Berlant called ‘cruel optimism’, I also resist the fantasies of the good life with regards to

³⁰ Irit Rogoff, ‘Turning’, *e-flux journal*, 00 (2008).

³¹ Nora Sternfeld, Luisa Ziaja, ‘What Comes After the Show? On Post- Representational Curating.’ *oncurating.org* 14 (2012).

³² Irit Rogoff, ‘From Criticism to Critique to Criticality’, *Transversal Texts Blog* (2003) <<https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

³³ Garcés, ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’.

social reproduction, precarity, contingency and crisis.³⁴ ‘The pessimism of the intellect, the optimism of the will’, Antonio Gramsci called it, and so did Stuart Hall.³⁵

For this reason, this thesis introduces a particular slice of embodied criticism that aligns with the rebellion of the intervals and the relational ontology of ‘becoming with’, that is, a mode of collaboration, assemblage and being together. In my eyes, embodiment is an invitation to desire for *concrete* engagement with material transformations.

Concreta’s etymology, *con crescere*, means to grow by accumulation, and to be made up of aggregates from other parts. *Concretise* means ‘to combine several things to form a unity’. *Concreta* also proposes to get closer, and meanwhile tries to situate and understand its own disorder, creating and discerning associations and relations. The journal facilitates the materiality and weaves the textual fabric that this dissertation takes as a methodological point of departure.

The double meaning of ‘milieu’ (as a middle or medium and as a context or habitat) stresses the fact that there is no practice independent of its environments. Thus, in this dissertation, *Concreta* embraces the nuanced tension as both medium and context.³⁶ By doing so, it goes beyond its pages – traversing them as if they were squares for bodies in transit – and proposes a new understanding of the curatorial.

All in all, this thesis is grounded in connections, acknowledging that ‘becoming is always becoming *with* – in a *contact zone* where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake’.³⁷

Towards an Unhurried Politics of Attention

Garcés’s ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’ calls for a poetic uprising. The essay starts by sharing a common diagnosis of modernity as a ‘crisis of representation’, that is, as a shift that disrupts any form of representation of reality in space and time. Instead of accepting the impossibility of ‘writing us’ as a society, it embraces the idea of the never empty blank page as a vehicle to displace attention and re-appropriation as a method to think about the possibility of an embodied criticism of institutional disenchantment. Ultimately, it addresses the paradox that emerges from the exercise of not knowing what to hold on to and accepts the inevitable challenge of a perpetual disequilibrium in the field of representation and criticality.

³⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

³⁵ ‘I am a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will’ wrote Antonio Gramsci in 1929. See, Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison, volume 1* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 299. See Stuart Hall in conversation with Zoe Williams, ‘The Saturday interview: Stuart Hall’, *The Guardian* (2012) <<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/feb/11/saturday-interview-stuart-hall> [accessed 20 March 2022].

³⁶ Stengers, ‘Introductory Notes on An Ecology of Practices’.

³⁷ Emphasis added, Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 244.

Incorporating these ideas, this practice-led exploration operates as a fabric of bodily intervals intertwined in space and time. It goes from the never-empty blank page to the blurred white cube and from the editorial to the curatorial to ‘put to work experiences with [recent Spanish] history’,³⁸ as Walter Benjamin puts it. In this spirit, instead of accepting the ‘long-standing reflection that curating is a practice without any form of institutional anchoring’, this research embraces curating as an instituting practice of unlearning exercises and criticality.³⁹

This study claims that the practice of curating is precisely a means of challenging the displacement of a politics of representation towards a politics of attention. The reciprocity of caring for what asks to be cared for takes place in precarious times and renders visible this displacement. These are times in which the allocation of resources defines an overabundance of (mis)information that undermines public health.⁴⁰ While cognitive capitalism continues to appropriate and monetise research production, the arts and humanities have suffered massive cuts and education is required to be as profitable as other technologies of mediation and transformation.

Mining the sometimes-strained relations between labour, cultural work and institutional activism, this exploration considers how recent Spanish histories treated one another in their eagerness to create a democratic institutional arena. This research proposes to ‘situate knowledge’ – a feminist understanding of care as Haraway suggests, and that Puig de la Bellacasa further expands on in *Concreta* – as a constituent part of a praxis within a framework of interdependence among the moving grounds of the contemporary condition.⁴¹

Puig de la Bellacasa’s essay, ‘Thinking with Care’, unfolds an intimate reading of Haraway’s relational ontology as a way of exploring how technologies of mediation contribute to relations of care in moving worlds.⁴² Her understanding of the term ‘situated knowledges’ as fundamentally conditional, and necessarily mediated, allow this dissertation to incorporate ‘my’ social and contextual advantages into the research process.⁴³ Drawing on the ‘Thinking with Care’ concept, I introduce the thesis’s methodological approach (thinking with), present its historical framework (dissenting within), and outline a practice-led case study (thinking for).

In the end, I argue that the practice of curating can operate as a matter of care, that is, as a ‘speculative ethics’ as introduced by these feminist authors, which advances balance but not symmetry. In other words, as a practice that can help us learn from past experiences and

³⁸ Walter Benjamin cited in Peter Osborne, *Concreta*, 06 (2015), p. 47.

³⁹ Jean-Paul Martinon, *Curating as Ethics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2020), p. VII.

⁴⁰ The World Health Organisation coined the term *infodemic* to describe the excess of information, including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak such the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁴¹ María Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Pensar con cuidado’ [Thinking with Care], *Concreta*, 09 (2017), pp. 26–47 [translation mine].

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Donna Haraway, ‘Situated knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, 14, no. 3 (1988).

claim what Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers calls a sensitive ‘middle ground’,⁴⁴ a space for negotiation that I propose to call *curatela*.

I propose ‘the *curatela*’ as a model of sorts, as an elastic maquette that emerges as an exercise of institutional imagination and as an opportunity to release an unfamiliar word into the world; as an opportunity to delineate responsibilities, shame, hopes and resistance towards an unhurried politics of attention in curating contemporary art. ‘The *curatela*’ is an interval from which to shape and sediment a set of common practises, where the desire to interact with one another defines the set of conditions from which to operate collectively.

Meaning curatorship in English and editing in Italian, ‘the *curatela*’ neither represents nor replaces but builds trust instead. Moreover, despite being in the dictionary, it is a term that has never been used within the Spanish language art spheres, which lacks a proper vocabulary that gives context to this field of knowledge. However, in legal terms, the *curatela* is a mode of institutional protection and exceptional intervention grounded in an understanding of becoming with means to take care of one another.

The *curatela* (curatorship) is not the same as the *tutela* (conservatorship). While those practising conservatorship have little agency themselves, those who practise curatorship have agency, but do require another being to embrace a form of sociability. The *curatela* is also grounded in connections, understanding that the process of becoming always takes place in a contact zone.

In this sense, ‘the *curatela*’ proposal should not be understood as a ‘method or truth’. Feminism has already taught us that creativity is lost when addressed as a mere epistemological theory.⁴⁵ Instead I propose it as an engaging elastic maquette in the sense that the artist Alejandra Riera rehearses it, that is, in its double meaning.⁴⁶ On the one hand, as a working ‘model’ that provides breathing space for embodied action, including that of the audience. On the other hand, as a mock-up or prototype, which offers practical, alternative routes towards action. Such a maquette not only sets out to address the social conditions external to art, as suggested by Garcés, but also points to the margins where art’s problematic social conditions are to be experienced and brought into the process of transformation.

Ultimately, being practice-led means that my investigation is concerned with the process of curating and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for the field. This dissertation constitutes an ‘archive’ of research in practice, which means the practical elements informing this writing have been curated in parallel with the development of this investigation.

⁴⁴ Isabelle Stengers, ‘Don’t Shock Common Sense!’ in Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq, ed., *Reset Modernity!* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 426–32.

⁴⁵ Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Pensar con cuidado’.

⁴⁶ Alejandra Riera, *maquetas-sin-cualidad* [maquettes-without-quality] (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2005) [translation mine].

Some of the threads woven into these pages were rehearsals put to the test in exhibitionary projects, including ‘It is Your Turn’ (EACC, 2018–19), ‘Across the Sand’ (Azkuna Zentroa, Bilbao, Artium, Vitoria, and CentroCentro, Madrid, 2019–20) and ‘Myths Of The Near Future’ (TEA–Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, 2019–20), among other performative lectures and written materials, a list of which follows the ‘Field of Knowledge’ section.⁴⁷ Consequently, these projects have woven a very special narrative, leading to the publication of a series of essays in various books – which explains the variety of writing styles across this thesis.

As a result of embracing the ‘not knowing’ inherent to any practice-led research committed to avoiding illustration as a curatorial strategy, a particular writing density has emerged. As the following section ‘Situating the Research’ describes, this thick and multi-layered analysis of the process of positioning the theory and practice of curating is deliberate and aligns with *Concreta*’s etymology. Like *con crescere*, this writing has also grown by accumulation and troubled the trope of visual clarity by embracing the muddle. In the same way that Garcés problematises the blank page, Haraway challenges visual clarity, clear visions and empty spaces, and so does this research – it practises what it teaches.

After all, weaving a complex narrative about a process of researching has not only allowed me to create an ‘archive’ to position myself as a practitioner, reconstructing the memories of a common and situated past, but, following Jacques Derrida’s influential thesis, to identify the responsibilities and promises of the future that have shaped the *curatela*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Two of these essays are presented in this thesis in an edited format, which address two of these projects: ‘Across the Sand’ and ‘Myths of the Near Future’. The first is included in ‘Performing the Archive in “Across The Sand”’ in the ‘Editing (Thinking with) chapter (pp. 74–83), and the second, in ““Having a Wonderful Time”, after Representation’ (pp. 127–41) in the ‘Caring (Thinking for)’ chapter. In addition, the essays ‘Mind the Gap. Fissures and Prospects of an Impossible Consensus. Archiving in Spain’s Contemporary Arena’ and ‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of “The Potosí Principle”’, published in 2020 and 2022 respectively, have also nurtured this research, particularly the central chapter ‘Storytelling (Dissenting within)’.⁴⁷ See ‘A Map of Assemblage’, p. 58.

⁴⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).



El Presentiment N. 76. This presentiment introduces a wordplay with the term CAP, which in Catalan can mean four different things: head, no one, get in and primary care centre. The sentence translates into: No one gets it into their heads that we don't have a primary care centre. After a year of struggle, CAP Raval Nord Digne Platform, the primary care centre of the Raval neighbourhood in Barcelona will move to the Capella de la Misericòrdia, which was handed over to MACBA in 2013. As a replacement, MACBA is going to build a new space that will be inaugurated in the near future. Photo: Freddy Davies.

2: Situating the Research

Overview

During my ten years as an editor and later curator and researcher, I have encountered many challenges related to the practice of curating, with regards to how historical narratives were selected and presented in the exhibition space in the Spanish cultural arena. However, instead of accepting this scarcity as a fixed reality, I propose to look at it as an opportunity to learn from recent histories through the lens of the present. Consequently, this thesis challenges the displacement of a politics of representation towards a politics of attention, in which caring for those who care themselves, occurs in precarious times.

In what follows, I present a series of proposals that have profoundly affected the way the practice of curating has been formed, deformed and transformed, and that constitute the ‘Field of Knowledge’ in which my research is situated. They operate as a brief story of the practice, an intellectual effort and an elaborate venture in, to borrow Clifford Geertz’s notion, ‘thick description’, that is, an ethnographical explanatory endeavour. Geertz describes the practice of thick description as a way of providing not just behaviours, but also context and meaning, including voices, feelings and actions.⁴⁹ As a result, these proposals are a recollection of many voices that have undertaken a similar task and that align with my interpretation of, and familiarity with, the field of knowledge.

The experiences of co-founding a research organisation and launching the periodical *Concreta* the same year *Els Pressentiments* emerged in the heat of the anti-austerity movement in 2011, and the years that followed, have been instrumental in addressing the crisis of representation and criticality that defines the contemporary moment this thesis tackles. In this context, *Concreta* is situated as a publishing platform that operates as a toolbox and research method. Thus, as defined in the pages to come, my methodological approach is grounded in the personal-theoretical, in other words, the feminist and queer practice of *autotheory*, which bridges theory and practice, the personal and the political.

As Lauren Fournier explains, autotheory is a way of ‘processing tensions in the understanding of theory and autobiography, knowledge and the body, community and the self, rhetoric and practice’.⁵⁰ Autotheoretical work fuses self-reflection and self-representation, through embodied practices, discourses, and frameworks. However, the act of writing about one’s own experiences is oftentimes interpreted as narcissistic or comparatively

⁴⁹ Clifford Geertz, ‘The Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture’, in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 311–23. Along with Claude Lévi-Strauss and influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein and Max Weber, among others, the method of descriptive ethnography proposes an antidote to overly technocratic, mechanistic means of understanding cultures, organisations and historical settings.

⁵⁰ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2021), p. 270.

lesser, particularly in academic contexts. Yet, popularised in Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2013) and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), in my eyes, in recent years autotheory sheds light on care in facilitating access. Particularly, autotheory makes possible the bringing of everyday life to theoretical endeavours.

However, instead of gesturing towards the somatic and acknowledging Foucault's well-known predicament that yes, we are bodies, but 'we don't want to be governed like that', I engage with a feminist genealogy that opens up an alternative route, which is situated nevertheless in the conditions of its own context from which the argument emerges. In this regard, this research embraces and challenges a semiotic concept of *culture*, namely, as interwoven systems of construable signs.⁵¹ As Geertz also defends, culture also grows by accumulation – it is not something to which social events, institutions, or processes can be attributed. Culture is a *context*, something within which they can be intelligibly and thickly described, acknowledging that which I already indicated. Certainly, language mediates us all. Hence the need for editing, storytelling and caring for those who themselves care, guard, heal, in order to activate collaborative processes not so much (or only) as public policies, but as a capacity for self-governance.

This research has been supported by a Botín Foundation grant for Curatorial Studies, which supports critical study and up-and-coming practices within the context of Spain, where, until 2017, a year after I joined the Royal College of Art, no post-graduate educational programme on the subject was on offer.⁵² As a result, my knowledge of curating is informed by the Anglo-European museums and contemporary art institutions I have worked for, visited and experienced. However, my working knowledge is primarily infused with the Spanish and Latin-American narratives presented here and from which this thesis draws its reflection. These narratives are interwoven to provide a framework from in which to situate the research questions.

Nevertheless, the Spanish language does not offer semantic tools to refer to curatorship. Therefore, the brief account in the coming pages aims to address this linguistic shortage and to anchor, as a point of departure, 'the *curatela*' as a tool to contribute to and advance research production in curating in Spain. In the same way that the Spanish dictionary does not define this field of knowledge and practice, the government and its administration does not consider curating a professional activity.

This struggle for recognition means that museums very rarely include curators in their permanent organograms, mainly conservators have access through public examination. The Spanish equivalent of HMRC only recognises those 'experts in organising congresses, assemblies and the like' as a freelance activity.⁵³ These histories have provided an original

⁵¹ Geertz, 'The Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture'.

⁵² This Master's Degree in Curatorial Studies emerges from the Museo Universitario Universidad de Navarra. It is the first university offering an official, yet private post-graduate programme in the practice of curating <<https://www.unav.edu/en/web/master-in-curatorial-studies>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

⁵³ To be able to perform these tasks one needs to register oneself under the Epigraph 854.

lens from which to nurture the practice of curating contemporary art in Spain, where the crisis of representation concerning its methods, strength, and scope runs in parallel with that of a nation ready to catch up with history.

Yet, unlike curating in other geographies, curatorial knowledge that has emerged in Spain has encountered challenges in the processes of self-definition that I argue are valuable for a greater field of expertise, which is increasingly defined by post-representation and post-criticality. These include the definition of the post-Francoist ‘democratic museum’ defined by their ‘interventionist structures’⁵⁴ and a colonial legacy on the ‘margin of a modernity that is not ending up exhausted but no longer offers us a place to visit, neither in space nor in time’.⁵⁵

These are transitional historical processes whose ghosts have come back to life to remind us how representational paradoxes are constantly being redescribed. My task in this thesis is to reflect on inventive institutional practices from which we can learn to face the urgencies of our present. In this process, feminist knowledge about collaboration, participation and matters of care, which I have learnt and rehearsed *with* and *from* others, have contributed to situating these narratives and making visible feminist forms of historicisation that challenge patriarchal methods, while offering alternative routes to deal with the contemporary moment.

Chapter Synopsis

In ‘Thinking with Care’, Puig de la Bellacasa invites the reader to develop an understanding of care as a speculative ethics, beyond the moral and the epistemological. Drawing on Haraway’s much-cited term, ‘situated knowledges’, she addresses how not only relations involve care, but how ‘care is relational per se’.⁵⁶ For these authors, ‘knowledge’ is never universal, but rather contains different perspectives that can change in time and context. In their views, only by negotiating the different positions and perceptions, knowledge becomes possible.

Therefore, this is a paradox of representation and criticality related to the practice of curating and the curatorial because it also reveals how knowledge is fundamentally conditional and necessarily mediated. Injustices make visible and connect precarity and vulnerability to social reproduction. Hence my argument towards the need to articulate an unhurried politics of attention and discernment – a space for negotiation that makes visible and tangible lived realities, and that I propose to call ‘the *curatela*’.

⁵⁴ In the most complete publication in the history of Spanish museums, María Bolaños describes that, with the 1978 Constitution, Spain is alienated in an interventionist tradition – the same as applies in France, Italy, Portugal and Belgium – which assumes broad obligations in the adoption of a public nature at all levels of state administration. Unlike the Republican Constitution of 1931, the Regime of 1978 also introduced the novelty of granting culture a specific autonomy separate from the educational field. See María Bolaños, *Historia de los museos en España* [History of Museums in Spain] (Gijón: TREA, 2008), p. 434 [translation mine].

⁵⁵ Garcés, ‘La rebelión de los intervalos’.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Puig de la Bellacasa advances her position about the situatedness of knowledge by proposing three active verbs: thinking with, dissenting within and thinking for. Inspired by her, these are the curatorial positions that I embrace through the lens of editing (thinking with), storytelling (dissenting within) and caring (thinking for). As such, these three chapters introduce the methodological approach, the historical framework and a practice-led case study.⁵⁷ This approach, through the lens of the practice of curating and the curatorial, continues throughout the subsequent chapters, as I write from the various subject positions of editor, curator, researcher, facilitator, public, colleague and friend.

Editing (Thinking with)

Through a detailed analysis of Hyginus's mythical fabulation about Cura (the personification of care, concern and dedication) and of *Concreta* (the publishing platform that I co-founded), in this chapter I dive into autotheory and situate my own understanding of care and dedication. I reflect on the philosophy of curating and the curatorial by 'thinking with' as a methodological framework, through the lens of editing.

This chapter addresses the process of historicisation and collaboration inherent to practices that challenge representational regimes after the emergence of conceptual art. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's approach to history and Donna Haraway's ideas on collectivity, the chapter engages with what defines these regimes: the relational, hypertextual and distributive nature of art. Here I introduce the challenges of the blank page as empty canvas, within the post-conceptual relational condition, which confronted aesthetic judgement and modified traditional forms of critique after artists, leaning into conceptualism, realised there is no such thing as the autonomy of art. By doing so, I question what the process of documentation 'becoming art' has to tell us about the practice of curating and the social space of presentation.

Continuously considering what kind of questioning the curatorial enables us to produce, which cannot surface on paper alone, I reflect on two projects: 'Across the Sand', an exhibition I curated in three episodes, and 'A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces', a performative lecture, both having taken place in 2019–20 in Spain and Germany, respectively. I also reflect on the authorial role of the editor-as-curator.

'Across the Sand' attempted to 'perform the archive' by drawing on research into post-representational curatorial practices, addressing the afterlife of two magazines from 1989, *Zehar* ['across' in Basque] and *Arena* ['sand' in Spanish], whose editors-as-curators (Mar Villaespesa and Miren Eraso) proposed a concrete and situated way of understanding mediation in post-Francoist Spain. 'A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces' in turn recuperated the definition of *publication* as 'making public' and exchanged the idea of the *exhibition* as a narrative machine for that of the *publication* as an 'expanded book'. The transcript introduces a set of questions revolving around the idea of editing as a bodily archival experience.

⁵⁷ Puig de la Bellacasa, 'Pensar con cuidado'.

Building on these examples and embracing their feminist underpinnings, this chapter reveals ‘the *curatela*’ – an epistemology or even ethics that muddles through the conditions of engagement as well as the untimely. In the end, this set of projects signposts towards an ecology that bridges theory and practice while critically engaging with modalities of epistemic investigation capable of expanding the curatorial field of activity by means of editing.

Key words: ethics, cura, care, dedication, citation, thinking with, medium, post-conceptual condition, relationality, post-representational curating

Storytelling (Dissenting within)

This chapter introduces the historical framework. Considering the so-called ‘democratic museum’ to ‘new institutionalism’, I stress that for a discipline that does not directly fit a neat division of theory and practice, curating requires storytelling in the same way politics does. Providing unity and offering the illusion of staging the fragments of the world, storytelling has been part of the musealisation and touristification of our societies.

However, this rhetorical mode of representation is in crisis. I argue that this diagnosis of the contemporary condition as a negation of any form of representing reality gives continuity to the various paradoxes of representation and legitimacy involved in the construction of the social and new canonical formations. In a context of saturated discursive devices, these canonical formations generate excess – which can be seen as another type of surplus value.

Drawing on my discussion with Chantal Mouffe at the symposium ‘Mobilising Affects: Populism and the Future of Democratic Politics in Spain’ (2019), I reflect on the museum as a space for *agonistic pluralism* within the so-called ‘affective turn’. Mouffe defends the formation of a counter-hegemony emerging from a re-articulation of already existing institutions. However, other post-Marxists such as Antoni Negri and Michael Hardt claim that democracy cannot be conceived of in terms of sovereign authority. By analysing the contradictions that the museums face, I argue that the Spanish institutional arena provides a multi-layered and complex context to look at the paradox to go beyond the discursive.

Benjamin’s ‘The Storyteller’ and Haraway’s *Story Telling for Earthly Survival* operate as means to address the institutional disenchantment that emerges from the difficulty of creating what Isabelle Stengers calls an ‘ecology of practices’. These are means to address an institutional disillusionment capable of constructing a *milieu* as a surrounding or habitat, yet neglecting the *milieu* as medium, mediation, mediator. Therefore, in this chapter I suggest how a shift from one definition of *milieu* to another – from habitat to medium – opens up the potential to ‘situate knowledge’ and balance negotiation processes among politics, research and the arts. Ultimately, this shift contributes to expanding the conditions of engagement of ‘the *curatela*’ by means of storytelling.

Key words: politics, museum, musealisation, democratisation, dissenting within, mediator, contemporary condition, affective turn, post-representational politics

Caring (Thinking for)

Building on previous positions of ‘thinking with’ and ‘dissenting within’, this chapter centres around a photography biennial I directed, ‘Myths of the Near Future’, in the Canary Islands. I argue that ‘thinking for’ contributes to the practice of curating and the curatorial by acknowledging the connection between theoretical insights and collective practical politics as a mode of performative life thinking – understanding that thinking requires modes of presentation and mediation. I establish a relationship between the idea of a desert island (presented as a *tabula rasa*) and that of the blank page (introduced in ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’) to situate the discussion about criticality within the tradition of site-specificity, colonialism and tourism.

‘Myths of the Near Future’ approached the question of representation in a semiotic sense – because signifier and signified are entangled. The biennial attempted to generate a ‘theoretical’ framework in its etymological sense, that is, *theory* as something to be done, speculated, contemplated. In addressing the emergence of frameworks from which to confront otherness, I ultimately argue that the ontologies of curating and photography provide us with a unique lens from which to advance my argument concerning post-representation.

This chapter stresses how the ontology of photography and that of curating are not that different when it comes to tackling the ‘democratisation’ of the art experience. Both practices frame an encounter in the contact zone and aspire to generate an imprint in the process of becoming. The aspirational imprint of the biennial had to do with the possibility of initiating a conversation about how to ‘institute with care’ to advance a museum that could be understood as an ‘ecosystem’. I argue that curating is a bodily practice of creating signification and the act of keeping a problem alive between audience and work, with the energy of retaining a curious sense of fun. Curiosity is about *care* and demands our attention: our natural rhythm is intervened in, slowing down our bodies. Attention forces us to imagine, consult and face consequences that put our ways of being in the world at stake. Attention requires knowing how to resist the temptation to judge, it requires proposing new questions in order to think together towards a radical intimacy.

In this sense, this chapter tests ‘the *curatela*’ as an exercise of institutional imagination beyond disciplinary knowledge, and addresses the perils of canonisation. I present an unhurried politics of attention that attempts to address everyone’s abilities and needs to make sure they are provided for and balanced, that resources are distributed, and that the interdependence between human and more-than-human beings that compose them – workers, audiences and art – is acknowledged.

Key words: aesthetics, image, photography, touristification, thinking for, post-representational aesthetics, instituting with care, museum as ecosystem, ecology, radical intimacy

Field of Knowledge

Brief History of the Practice

The following section, ‘Field of Knowledge’, introduces a brief story of the practice of curating and the curatorial within Spain. It outlines the critical contexts from the perspective of several overlapping bodies of literature that account for the practice of curating and the curatorial. It also suggests the intervals, gaps and opportunities that this thesis speaks to. Building on this theoretical basis, this chapter emerges from *Concreta* – with a framing that allows for a personal, critical proximity, and to inhabit the paradox of representation and criticality presented in ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’. This is a paradox that reveals how the ‘they don’t represent us’ chorus heard across the globe resonates with the institutional difficulties in confronting modernity – the grand narratives of history and its violence, which cultural institutions have also traversed since the emergence of what came to be referred to as Institutional Critique in the late 1960s. During this period, artists began to create art in response to the institutions that bought and exhibited their work. At the time, the art institution was perceived as a place of ‘cultural confinement’ and, as a result, something to attack aesthetically, politically and theoretically.

Making Art Public: Between Dissatisfaction and Mobilisation

Within North American Anglo-centric academia, the foundations of curating began to surface between the rise of socio-political dissatisfaction (the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, and anti-war protests) and the establishment of neoliberal imaginaries. These movements coincided with the emergence of the globalised curator, taking place between the 1960s and the 1990s. As the following pages outline, the range of exhibition spaces multiplied in the 1960s. An exhibitionary system was consolidated, which in turn led to the so-called Institutional Critique.⁵⁸ This artistic approach revisited the radical promise of the European Enlightenment by confronting the institution of art with the claim that it was not sufficiently committed to the pursuit of publicness that had brought it into being in the first place.⁵⁹

However, Francoist Spain did not have the opportunity to engage with the curatorial bloom and the criticality of the period in the same way as its neighbouring countries. As presented in the ‘Across the Sand’ project – my first case study, detailed in the ‘Editing (Thinking with)’ chapter, in which the ‘Performing the Archive in “Across the Sand”’ essay is included –,⁶⁰ Spain entered this increasingly global narrative after the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, when the so-called ‘democratic museum’ emerged, and the first art fair, Arco Madrid, was inaugurated in 1982. The rise of social democracy embraced the idea of ‘progress’ by importing foreign institutional models. As previously noted, ‘Across the Sand’ precisely addressed the afterlife of two magazines from 1989, *Arena* and *Zehar*, whose editors-as-

⁵⁸ For an overview, see Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional critique: An Anthology of artists’ writings* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2011), p. 3.

⁵⁹ See Michel Foucault, ‘What is the Enlightenment?’, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed., Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 32–50.

⁶⁰ See footnote 47.

curators anticipated a feminist way of understanding mediation. The overlooked practices of these two women, Villaespesa and Eraso, allowed me to gain invaluable insights as I wrote these pages.

During the Franco Regime, the museography of the 1960s (i.e., Prado Museum) known as ‘developmentalism’ mainly focused on the service sector and the ‘tourist gaze’,⁶¹ although some alternative and counter-hegemonic practices also emerged. ‘Los Encuentros de Pamplona’ in 1972, in Navarra, was the most radical and representative gathering for experimentation, with more than 300 transdisciplinary participants. Some were on their summer route towards Documenta 5 and the 36th Venice Biennale.⁶² In a very specific context, of the last years of a dictatorship and nascent nationalism, the ‘Encuentros’ prematurely staged the representational crisis, or rather dilemmas facing both art and the political. On the one hand, they staged the dilemma of a politics of artistic rupture built from a conceptual stance attempting to ‘overcome’ aesthetic judgement; on the other hand, that of a revolutionary and partisan stance as a result of fascism. Ultimately, art was not an end here but a means towards social transformation. As I also detailed in the ‘Editing (Thinking with)’ chapter, conceptual art’s elucidation of these dilemmas anticipated the curatorial bloom these two women witnessed first-hand.

After 1968, the years when there was a certain way of thinking correctly, a certain style of political discourse and ethics of the intellectual,⁶³ anyone could argue that ‘everything was political’ and many indeed thought ‘everything was art’. This conundrum, which already set the basis for the crisis of representation and criticality that my research tackles, erupted abruptly and in an untimely way, in ‘Los Encuentros de Pamplona’. It may constitute the most important art event held in Spain to date: it was the first time that ‘the public’ was the theme, which modified what ‘public art’ meant. Not by chance was ‘the private’ starting to be perceived as an exteriority, as an intimate space that was suddenly opened up to the public. Consequently, ideas revolving around ‘everyday life’, such as those of Lefebvre and Merleau-Ponty, presented at the beginning of this thesis, were transformed into objects of study.

As a result, artists could no longer stand before the public or nature without problematising their position. They were prompted to develop strategies to act from the present time and to do so from the immanence of the body, place, speech and writing, of the city and its means. One of the strategies to do so, I argue, was certainly curating, although it was not named as such just yet.

⁶¹ Eugenia Afínoguénova, ‘Invitados y clientes: el turismo desarrollista en el Museo del Prado’ [Guests and Clients: Developmentalist Tourism at the Prado Museum], *Concreta*, 10 (2017), pp. 4–15 [translation mine].

⁶² José Díaz Cuyás, *Encuentros de Pamplona 1972: Fin de fiesta del arte experimental* [Pamplona Encounters 1972: End of Experimental Art Festival] (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía–MNCARS, 2009) [translation mine].

⁶³ Michel Foucault, ‘Preface’, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1983).

Ultimately, two practices that were addressing *limits* converge here, which are very relevant for the research at hand. These are medial and performative: medial because they embrace the materiality of the milieu as medium; performative because they encompass the surrounding or habitat for the act of the event.⁶⁴ After all, ecology and ethology are interwoven, playing an instrumental role in ‘the *curatela*’ this research puts forward as a specific feminist mode of practice.⁶⁵

Institutional Critique and The Social Turn

As already indicated, curators had a moment of emergence in the 1960s that coincided with the visibility of their role as mediators. At the time, there was a reordering of the value system of art in which the curator’s choices and logic were considered a form of ‘self-presentation’ becoming visible. Curators gradually acquired an authorial voice, and consequently certain accusations of narcissism arose when artists were perceived as comparatively lesser.⁶⁶ It also coincided with the feminist movement that was emerging throughout the world – a movement which, in the context of Spain, was tensioned between those who defended that women should be considered a class and create a feminist party, and those who decided that the priority was not anti-patriarchy but rather anti-Francoism.⁶⁷

Yet, this authorial positioning led to greater experimentation in the years that followed, including the realisation of a-historical exhibitions. However, these were strongly criticised because they created constellations from different places and times without historical contextualisation.⁶⁸ These included projects such as Documenta 7 (1982), ‘A-Historische Klanken’ (1988), ‘Magiciens de la Terre’ (1989) and ‘Mining the Museum’ (1992), among others. These positions show a discursive provision for curatorial activity as a mode of subjective storytelling. Later, many of these transhistorical interpretations were seen as generative, moving the discussion beyond the Western confines. Drawing on the previous section, the ‘Storytelling (Dissenting Within)’ chapter broaden this historical stance.

Additionally, the opposition to late capitalism and the criticism of the art market had a strong presence in the 1980s. In those years, the impact of post-structuralism made possible the continuation of Institutional Critique, which led to an intense questioning of the museum as an ideological apparatus.⁶⁹ This discursive approach was also present in the desire for political protest and social transformation, which continued to be visible in artistic practices

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

⁶⁵ Since, at the time, different currents of feminism and models of femininity were also in the process of transformation. These were moving from a national Catholic feminism towards a more complex and radicalised stance. This process took place as a consequence of the Madrid Pact of 1953, the Hispano-American Agreement, the subsequent Plans of Development after the Cold War and the opening to the markets, consumer society and tourism. See Mar Villaespesa, ed., *Desacuerdos*, 7 (Granada, Barcelona, Madrid, Sevilla: Centro José Guerrero, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Barcelona-MACBA, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía-MNCARS, UNIA artepensamiento, 2012), p. 13.

⁶⁶ Olga Fernández López, *Exposiciones y comisariado: Relatos cruzados* [Exhibitions and Curating. Interwoven Stories] (Madrid: Cátedra, 2020) [translation mine].

⁶⁷ Mar Villaespesa, ed., *Desacuerdos*, 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ See John C. Welchman, *Institutional Critique and After* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006).

and exhibitions of an urban, alternative, countercultural or dissident nature, generating what Claire Bishop would later call the ‘social turn’.⁷⁰

In Spain, these curatorial debates did not take place until later; access to information about them was possible thanks to translations of critical texts and the appearance of a new generation of critics, thinkers and art historians, many of them trained in North American and European universities, which had favoured an unprecedented exchange among various practices. It was precisely in the 1980s when a series of cultural workers, including Vicente Todolí, Manuel Borja-Villel, Rosa Martínez and one of the editors-as-curators presented in ‘Across the Sand’, Mar Villaespesa herself, the first generation of (trained) Spanish curators, travelled to New York and witnessed these discussions first-hand. Each of them engaged with different institutional structures and narratives on their return. Todolí started as ‘conservator’ at the IVAM museum in Valencia in 1985; Martínez became director of the Barcelona Biennial and coordinator of Barcelona’s participation in the Mediterranean Biennials held in Bologna, Salonika, Marseille and Tipasa between 1988 and 1992; Villaespesa edited *Arena* magazine from 1989 and engaged with BNV Producciones, a self-organised cultural platform; and Borja-Villel directed the Tàpies Foundation from 1990. At the time, other programmes focusing on theoretical and artistic support for art production emerged, among which were Arteleku in San Sebastián, which was active between 1987 and 2014.

From a desire of engaging with these inherited realms, ‘Across the Sand’ set off a fictional journey from South to North – from Andalusia to the Basque Country, the birthplaces of *Arena* and *Zehar* respectively. *Zehar* was Arteleku’s publication.

The Democratic Museum in Spain

The same year in which Franco passed away and the ‘democratic museum’ was created, the Centre Pompidou was inaugurated. These events of such a different nature, taking place in 1975, shared a feeling of hope and enthusiasm, a new way of understanding culture – and openness to society, internationalisation and, for different reasons, a break with the classical idea of the museum. As María Bolaños thoroughly explains in her history of museums in Spain, a timid alignment with their European colleagues began, and a modern and urban vision materialised in a country that was far behind this ‘progress’.⁷¹

The first Ministry of Culture was created in 1977, a year before the Constitution was enacted, and the previously mentioned Regime of 1978. After the dictator’s death, Spain paid particular attention to the benefits that culture could bring and situated it in a tradition akin to that of France, Portugal, Italy and Belgium, all of which were known for influencing, manipulating or over controlling their cultural infrastructures. Yet, the transition towards a decentralised political system was one of the main achievements of the new democratic system in Spain. Since 1978 Spain has been a decentralised unitary state, comprised of seventeen autonomous communities and two autonomous cities. Each community has its own

⁷⁰ Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’, *Artforum* (2006), pp. 178–83.

⁷¹ Bolaños, *Historia de los museos en España*.

set of powers, with those holding stronger nationalist stances (i.e., Basque Country, Catalonia and Valencian Community) having more influence. This type of devolution has been called asymmetrical, akin to a ‘federation without federalism’.⁷²

Unfortunately, the construction of new cultural infrastructure and museums was not accompanied by either educational programmes or trained staff responsible for implementing policies and procedures that relate to the caring for collections, archives and libraries, which led to several museums lacking both tools and educated personnel.⁷³ Since the early days, museum workers in Spain have been civil servants. Since no academic degrees in museology were on offer, the process of getting examined and hired was neither based on museum knowledge nor on the histories this brief section outlines.

The lack of expertise was remediated by offering a state-taught short course and increasingly hiring self-employed, temporary workers and art historians. Added to this was the subordination of women held back from positions of responsibility. In the same way that politicians found discretionary ways of directly appointing trustworthy staff, since the 1990s, museum directors increasingly hired independent curators, conservators, scholars and advisors and created a para-structure for knowledge production and (national) history-making. This bifurcation – of which I too am a part – has resulted in growing institutional malaise, as the conditions that were embraced unchallenged in the late 1970s have produced different formations, behaviours and organisational structures.

By proposing ‘the *curatela*’, this research acknowledges the malaise as an interval, as a possibility for institutional imagination emerging from the specificity of the Spanish context, while at the same time engaging with feminist practices and knowledge that have nurtured my editorial and curatorial understanding of these practices. As Puig de la Bellacasa writes, ‘care is omnipresent, even through the effects of its absence. Like a longing emanating from the troubles of neglect, it passes within, across, throughout things. Its lack undoes, it allows unravelling. [Yet] care remains ambivalent in significance and ontology.’⁷⁴

‘The *curatela*’ explores this ambiguity by muddling through the Spanish institutional arena and its various paradigmatic conditions that define artistic practices. The curatorial projects from which it emerges, such as ‘Across the Sand’, initiate a dialogue with other practitioners who engage with the inherited enthusiasms and the subsequent disengagement.

‘A System of Positive Echoes’

After Franco’s death, Spain experienced a promising moment. The need for the museum revealed itself as collectively felt and demanded. Despite being highly questioned (its quality

⁷² Xavier Arbós Marín, ‘The Federal Option and Constitutional Management of Diversity in Spain’, in *The Ways of Federalism in Western Countries and the Horizons of Territorial Autonomy in Spain* (Volume 2), ed., Alberto López-Eguren and Leire Escajedo San Epifanio (Berlin and New York: Springer, 2013) [epub version], p. 375.

⁷³ The Historical Heritage Law was created in 1985, and consequently the Museum Board and the Spanish Museum System were shaped as well.

⁷⁴ Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 1.

and solidity, but not its existence), the young Spanish democracy entered a new cultural cycle. This was a society eager for cosmopolitanism, knowledge of artistic trends and international critical theories. Until then, access was granted only clandestinely. However, its achievements would be uneven in pace and intensity. Ideas circulating through the international artistic community penetrated the most culturally informed in a confluence of efforts to encourage public powers and individual or collective initiatives. A rise of the level of cultural aspirations took place through the access to art through the media, the establishment of publishing organisations, the development of thoughtful cultural magazines but with limited funding and uncertain future, the emergence of a new generation of Spanish artists of outstanding quality and/or eagerness to travel abroad, which would become a regular habit of professional and urban middle classes. The culmination of all this enthusiasm, what Eraso called ‘a system of positive echoes’,⁷⁵ could be seen to be symbolised by the arrival of *Guernica*, in Madrid in 1981, achieved after arduous negotiations with MoMA. It was a minor episode but of significant symbolic effect, as it represented the end of the war and offered remediation, a sentiment felt in the immediate post-Franco years.⁷⁶

After Franco: The Private Impulse, the Public Stance and the Art Market

Private initiative was a decisive element in the access to art during the agony of Francoism and in the years of the transition. Foundations such as Juan March, La Caixa and Miró were clear examples of this impulse.⁷⁷ In the post-Franco years, the Ministry of Culture also programmed exhibitions in the Palacio de Cristal and Palacio de Velázquez in the Parque del Retiro and the National Library and the Museo de Arte Moderno-MEAC in Madrid.⁷⁸ Of uneven value, their content was oriented in three directions: national exhibitions of Spanish or international artists; presentations of its creators abroad, with a view to international acknowledgement; and itinerant productions in various Spanish cities. The most controversial state operation took place in 1988 when a contract with Baron H.H. Thyssen was made public. It was considered an unjustifiably expensive purchase, made more scandalous by the secretive nature of the use of public funds. With this purchase, however, the holdings of the state painting collections experienced a timely increase.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Miren Eraso and Carme Ortiz, ‘Editar en un sistema de ecos positivos’ [Editing in a System of Positive Echoes], *Sobre*, No. 1 (2015) [translation mine].

⁷⁶ Bolaños, *Historia de los museos en España*.

⁷⁷ The three developed private collections. Juan March acquired Spanish art from Fernando Zóbel and Amos Cahan, adding more than 1,600 works that were exhibited in its provincial headquarters, the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca and the Museum of Contemporary Spanish Art in Mallorca. La Caixa’s collection ranged from Richter to David Salle, and from Beuys to the promotion of young Spanish creators. And, finally, the Miró was an unprecedented case built from the personal donation of the artist (75,000 drawings). The collection was further enriched by friends of the painter including Alexander Calder’s *Mercury Fountain*, created for the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition.

⁷⁸ This initial programme allowed the recovery of forgotten historical figures and showed anthological exhibitions, from Pablo Picasso to Ramon Gaya. It was consolidated under Carmen Jiménez – Head of the National Exhibition Centre-NCE – between 1983 and 1989.

⁷⁹ Thyssen’s acquisition on the one hand compensated for the absence of German and Dutch Renaissance art from the Prado Museum. On the other, the modern collection filled the gaps with Impressionist, German Expressionist or Russian avant-garde works and post-WWII art. The presentation of this agreement took place in 1996, almost a decade after the signature, and was further expanded in 1999.

This situation affected the art market, which at the time was lacking in information and disconnected from the international arena. The creation of the Arco Fair in Madrid in 1982 was down to the personal commitment of the Sevillian gallery owner Juana de Aizpuru. The idea was not so much to achieve financial gain as to ‘create a good atmosphere’ and move on from strictly local collecting. Artists, art critics and gallery owners could learn about foreign trends, such as the Italian trans-avant-garde, German neo-expressionism, and neo-conceptualism. However, the fair’s beginnings were difficult due to the absence of a modern art market.

In the end, Arco ended up promoting commercialisation and resulted in a rise in transactions, even more beginning in 1985, when, under the protection of the favourable economic situation, there was a buying euphoria that reached its height at the end of the decade. This boom was soon displaced by the commercial decline of the 1990s, highlighting the artificiality of the previous period. Within this climate of a massive influx of visitors to exhibitions and other related factors, ministerial officials determined the need for a large national contemporary art centre and to initiate a policy of expansion of smaller centres.

The relevance of Juana de Aizpuru but also María Corral, Soledad Lorenzo and Helga de Alvear, to name a few, installed an idea that would emerge in newspapers and other media that women would run the ‘art world’ at the time. However, I also learnt the practices of these cultural workers did not translate into equality or institutional visibility.⁸⁰

New Institutional Order in Spain

The decision to endow Spanish culture with a large contemporary art centre was finally taken in 1980, and it was agreed that the General Hospital for Men in Madrid would be recommissioned as the setting.⁸¹ At the time, one of the aspects already consolidated by international museology was a new museum architectural discourse. Consisting of almost immaterial works, sometimes limited to pure, luminous field, conceptual and minimalist artistic practices had drawn attention to the qualities of the physical space. Drawing on previous experiences such as ‘Los Encuentros de Pamplona’, conceptual and minimalist artistic practices radically enhanced the importance of the conditions of presentation for understanding the work of art by the public, a substantial value in a period concerned with questions of aesthetic reception and, consequently, mediation, with work not functioning as an autonomous object but rather establishing spatial relationships with the specificity of the site. The exhibition ‘Minimal Art from the Panza Collection’, exhibited in the Reina Sofia in 1988, was an example that would demonstrate this.

⁸⁰ See report no. 3 and 6, *Mujeres en las Artes Visuales* [Women in Visual Arts] <[http:// www.mav.org.es](http://www.mav.org.es)> [accessed 20 March 2022].

⁸¹ As Bolaños explains, the property fulfilled many of the conditions demanded of the museum architecture internationally, including the rise of interest in reusing historical buildings (e.g., CAPC Bordeaux, Musée d’Orsay, Hallen für Neue Kunst, Dia Beacon). Bolaños, *Historia de los museos en España*.

The inauguration of the first phase of the Reina Sofia museum happened in 1986 and was presented as the NCE centre for temporary exhibitions. However, the first director was not appointed until 1988: Tomás Llorens, a critic and promoter of the Valencian Institute of Modern Art-IVAM, who was decidedly guided by the universalist spirit that had been increasingly animating Spanish cultural activity since the advent of democracy.⁸² In 1989 the building underwent a refurbishment to expand the exhibition space. A year later, it was constituted as a national museum, supplanting the functions previously exercised by the Museo de Arte Moderno-MEAC. To form its permanent collection, a commission made up of influential collectors was appointed in 1987, setting a budget for purchases for the first time in the history of contemporary Spanish art. The criteria for collection were intended to offer a historiographic vision of the twentieth century, simultaneously trying to avoid any nationalist approach and reaffirming the importance of an international perspective.⁸³

The museum would eventually exhibit its permanent collection in 1992. Referred to as a ‘a collection of collections’ of around 11,000 artworks, no more than 370 were displayed. As Bolaños indicates, the museum had everything it shouldn’t have and lacked the important: nothing related to symbolism or modernism, no Central European Expressionism, little representation of Dadaism, significant surrealist absences, and a poor presence of the great American or European artists of the post-war period or the movements of the 1960s, including Pop and Conceptual art. This gave rise to a controversy, which evidenced the pitfall of forming a collection covering a century that was almost over, and in which time was passing and speculations in the art market made truly desirable works – of the Spanish avant-garde of the beginning of the century, for example – wholly unaffordable. The most reasonable option was to forego filling in the gaps and focus on purchases by more recent artists, or even using temporary exhibitions as compensatory policy. This issue would become an endemic problem for the establishment: the dramatic representational weight carried by the Reina Sofía as the first nerve centre of a national collection came with the obligation to endorse the place occupied by Spain in the history of twentieth-century art.

After establishing the Reina Sofía, the founding of new public foundations followed one after the other. Under more or less precarious conditions, combined they tried to normalise the presence of contemporary art in the provinces, where some distinguished themselves by the reuse of old industrial buildings.⁸⁴ The more unconventional programmes focused on

⁸² The political leaders and other representatives belonged to a generation that had lived through the long years of fascism. Censorship and scarcity of information had been experienced as cultural impoverishment. The three exhibitions with which the museum was inaugurated tried to outline principles about the cosmopolitan aspirations. For instance, ‘References and Identities’, which paired great foreign and Spanish names – such as Tàpies and Twombly, Saura and Baselitz, Chillida and Serra – can be said to show the relative level of collaboration with foreign critics and curators. *Ibid.*

⁸³ Given that the collection was yet to be established, the release of substantial funds for acquisitions was immediately required, although the need to raise private funds was noted – similar to foreign practices, which were also increasingly prone to a mixed model of financing – as well as offer new tax incentives to companies in terms of collecting. *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Examples are the floodable cultural centre that Navarro Baldeweg set up in the Hydraulic Museum of the Molinos del Río Segura (Murcia), which opened to the public in 1989; others were the starting point for ambitious projects, such as a contemporary art centre in Las Atarazanas in Seville in 1991, a space that would

theoretical reflection and support for the creation and research of contemporary art, in line with the needs of artists and this research. Among them were Arteleku in San Sebastián since 1987; Espai Poble Nou, in Barcelona, an exciting avant-garde exhibition centre, which would later close down; the Tàpies Foundation created by Antoni Tàpies in 1984, directed by Borja-Villel from 1990 to 1998; and the BNV Producciones, a self-organised project launched in 1988, propelled by Joaquín Vázquez and Miguel Benlloch in collaboration with Villaespesa.

Together with the Reina Sofía, the other national institution established in that period was the IVAM in Valencia. Proposed in 1986 and inaugurated in 1989, the museum had considerable impact. It constituted a regional landmark since it was one of the first initiatives adopted by an autonomous community in a Mediterranean, peripheral town. The IVAM was conceived as a multi-purpose art centre and was equipped with a specialised archive and library. It was divided into two buildings: one a new, discreetly functional plant, and the other a former convent in the El Carme neighbourhood. The liveliness shown in its early years was very stimulating. Particularly, under the direction of Llorens, Carmen Alborch and José Francisco Yvars and the influential contribution of its Chief Conservator, Todolí. The enthusiasm manifested itself in the recovery of international artists unknown to the Spanish public (e.g., Kurt Schwitters, Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson, Cildo Meireles and August Strindberg). Yet, the closure of the former convent in 2002 was interpreted as an act of political intervention, generating a wave of protests in a city considered the Spanish capital of contemporary art of the 1990s.

The 1990s was also marked by the founding of an informal network of museum infrastructures aimed at contemporary art with a regional emphasis, the objective of which was to present the artistic production of the autonomous communities. Still, the representational paradox was very present: there was an ambitious dialectic between identity and universality that, with different rhythms and unequal fortune, all the participating institutions tried to preserve. Thus, museums were emerging in the Canary Islands, such as the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno-CAM in Las Palmas (1989), under the direction of a post-war Canarian sculptor and co-founder of El Paso Group, Martín Chirino, who guided the programme towards an idea of tricontinentality. In Seville, the Andalusian Centre for Contemporary Art-CAAC was opened in 1990, and since 1997 situated in the monumental convent of La Cartuja, with a collection that symbolically started from a post-war avant-garde Andalusian group, Equipo 57. In Catalonia, the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona-MACBA, a project initiated in 1987 and inaugurated in 1995, was particularly interesting since Borja-Villel started his directorship in 1998, after overseeing the Tàpies Foundation and before his time at the Reina Sofía. In Santiago de Compostela, the Galician Centre for Contemporary Art-CGAC has been trying to channel and strengthen the creative vitality of the Galician modernity of the 1980s since 1993. Finally, the Extremadura and

become the headquarters of the Biennial of Contemporary Art. Others specialised in the relationship between art and new technologies such as the National Museum of Electrography, in Cuenca, conceived by the German artist Wolf Vostell, one of the fathers of happenings and founder of Fluxus, contracted in Malpartida (Cáceres), where he opened a personal museum in 1976. *Ibid.*

Ibero-American Museum of Contemporary Art-MEIAC, located in the old prison of Badajoz, was inaugurated in 1994.

There was also the Espai d'art Contemporani-EACC, presented in my hometown, Castellón, which was established in 1999 and where, years later (2018) I would curate the 'Te toca a ti' show. The exhibition proposal took as point of departure the notions of *situated practice* and *storytelling* in an exhibition whose title translates into 'It's Your Turn' but also 'It Touches You'. It was developed from a personal reflection about the institution in which I saw contemporary art in the 1990s for the first time in my life and revolved around the idea of *negotiation* as the negation of leisure (*neg otsia*, etymologically). In my eyes, negotiation is an urgent matter for the curatorial endeavour. The fact that the etymology emphasises the idea that the act of negotiating is aligned with the impossibility of leisure, struck me as paradoxical. As the 'Editing (Thinking with)' chapter presents, in 'A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces' essay, 'It's Your Turn' also addressed the notion of *reciprocity* and *correspondence* from an inseparable understanding of theory and practice by putting forward an exploration about participation within an institution without direction.⁸⁵ Both 'Across the Sand' and 'It's Your Turn' opened in institutions with no directors due to political intervention – hence the need to rehearse new methodologies and to negotiate a curatorial stance.

Learning Curating and the Curator (As) Something Else

The new contemporary biennials, particularly those of the second half of the twentieth century, made visible that a great variety of artistic scenes existed beyond the West, since they emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War and aligned with the processes of modernisation and decolonisation that characterised the period. Meanwhile, they also became the contexts in which critical reflections on these legacies were curatorially formulated and consolidated, being the São Paulo Biennial the most prominent example. In the wake of these events, controversial exhibitions such as 'Primitivism' at MoMA (1984), 'Magiciens de la Terre' (1989) at the Centre Pompidou, 'Lotte or Transformation of the Object' (1990) at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, and 'Cocido y Crudo' [The Cooked and the Raw] (1994) at the Reina Sofía, were examples of the subsequent growing awareness towards the Global South. Curated by Clémentine Deliss, 'Lotte or Transformation of the Object' would not only aim to destabilise the 'the western observer', but to also claim a notion of practice that encouraged the creation of sociability as an embodied form of knowledge production, whose materiality was as important as its emergency and investigative discursive capacity – an important idea for my research.⁸⁶ In 1996, Deliss would create *Metronome*, an alternative art publishing project that could be defined as a collective work or research method with no fixed editorial team or location. The new conditions of mobility defined its core.

⁸⁵ The show, which was reviewed by art-agenda, included the work of Teresa Lanceta, Adelita Husni-Bey, Alex Reynolds, Moyra Davey, Luca Frei, Céline Condorelli, and Ludovica Carbotta, among others. Mariana Canepa, 'Te toca a ti', *art-agenda* (2018) <<https://www.art-agenda.com/criticism/250328/te-toca-a-ti>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

⁸⁶ Vallés Vilchez, 'Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of The Potosí Principle'.

In the heat of this expansion, the first contemporary curatorial education programmes were inaugurated in Grenoble, New York, London and Amsterdam between 1987 and 1994.⁸⁷ In the 1990s, a renewed authorial impulse was visible in many debates. Consequently, a new demand for institutional independence responded to a new generation of curators operating in a context of a global economy and exhibition-making. In addition, site-specific commissions and the urban and territorial dimensions of a growing number of curatorial projects significantly expanded and new types of collaborative and processual artistic practices, as well as new debates around the practice of curating were taking shape.

In France, this transition was approached from a sociological perspective, with a focus on describing the processes of institutional professionalisation of the curator and the changes in their cultural functions, technical training and representative features.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, in the Anglo and Central European spheres, particular emphasis was placed on promoting a narrative that focused on overcoming the focus on exhibition-making. This is what has often been referred to as the disarticulation of art criticism. This model, characterised by links with a formalist art history and collaboration with the systems of production and reproduction of value and power, would give way to a kind of curatorial practice whose core focus was on transforming exhibitions into a critical space. Museum studies, traditionally known as museology, became increasingly separated from curatorial research, which, ultimately, did not propose to overcome exhibition-making, but rather what was known as art criticism. Curatorial research in turn started to reflect on contemporaneity while embodying criticality, where embodied criticism is a fundamental underpinning to my own research proposal.

The first generation of Spanish curators were aware of these discussions. Both Todolí and Borja-Villel were Fulbright scholars in the 1980s. While the former studied at Yale, the University of New York, and ultimately specialised in curating at the Whitney Museum, the latter finished a PhD at the Graduate Center of the University of New York and studied with Douglas Crimp and Rosalind Krauss, among others. Martínez enrolled on the Advanced Management Programme in Barcelona, which was developed in collaboration with the Graduate School of Public Administration of the New York University. Villaespesa worked as a correspondent for various art magazines and, although she only short-coursed ‘art criticism’ at the New York University and the Art Institute of Chicago, was trained in museums (the Whitney or MoMA) and alternative spaces (Artists Space, Franklin Furnace, The Kitchen and The Alternative Museum). Exhibitions by Martha Rosler or Group Material that presented research, discussion and collective creation, and evidenced the relationships between art and the socio-political and economic contexts were very important to Villaespesa, as she writes in *Concreta* (2015).⁸⁹ The encounter with feminist and curatorial literature had a similar effect. *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (1976) by Lucy Lippard and *Inside the White Cube* (1976/1984) by Brian O’Doherty allowed her to further understand the contextual nature of the practice of curating. While Todolí and Borja-

⁸⁷ Fernández López, *Exposiciones y comisariado: Relatos cruzados*, p. 227.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Fernando López García, Mar Villaespesa and Tamara Díaz Bringas, ‘Alianzas afectivas, efectos de excepción’ [Affective alliances, exception effects] *Concreta*, 06 (2015).

Villel had well-known careers, Villaespesa adopted a peripheral and collaborative role in developing the practice, which my 'Across the Sand' highlights.

This process of embodiment and self-reflexivity (the first-person narrative and the emphasis on individual experience), and the leading role given to some curators, which also served to establish genealogies, contributed to the reinvigoration of the curator's authorial status. The use of the first person, 'I', also led to the appearance of the verb 'to curate', which until then did not really exist in English, while the function of cultural criticism led to a double emphasis on the discursive aspects of curating. All this became manifest in an emphasis on elaborative self-referential narratives and an interest in positioning oneself, being considered an agent of discursive production. Among the debates disseminated in specialised English language publications and periodicals, a certain instability can be glimpsed in the characterisation of the figure of the contemporary curator. The variety of tasks attributed to their practice often ended up in a game of analogies with other professions, where the legitimising strategies of their position became linked to those of different fields of activity.

As a result, the persistent recourse to the 'curator as' arose, the characterisation completed differently depending on the work or attitudinal similarities that were to be highlighted, including musician, producer and psychoanalyst, among others. In this thesis it is the term 'editor-as-curator' that I reflect upon. These comparisons indicate that the definition of what being a curator entails does not depend so much on what they are but on what they do. Their work is determined by experiences and knowledge developed through a series of practical and intellectual aspects. As the 'Storytelling (Dissenting within)' chapter presents, these are not only organisational spatial skills, but also critical discourse production.

The anxiety between a necessarily professional definition and a desired creative indefiniteness runs through the texts and papers of the 1990s. This amorphous flexibility ended up generating a certain self-reflexive anxiety in the first decade of the 2000s – an anxiety that I would argue did not develop in Spain since the professionalisation of the role, as understood in other Anglo-European countries, simply didn't occur. There were different ways of curating based on the redistribution of authorship, collectivity and mediation. The Spanish context of the 1990s and early 2000s therefore offers some exciting case studies, including the programmes at The Tàpies Foundation, Arteleku and UNIA arteypensamiento, some of which this research tackles.

Defining a Semantic Field: Curating, the Curatorial and Curationism

Since the end of the twentieth century, the vocabulary in the English language associated with curating has expanded and acquired different meanings. In the shift from noun to verb, 'to curate' was introduced to distinguish it from exhibition-making in order to open up a discursive space. The idea of the curatorial is a way of distinguishing oneself from curating and the professional practice of working with display platforms that operate within the realm of the representational. Maria Lind states that,

at its best, the curatorial is a viral presence that strives to create friction and push new ideas, whether from curators or artists, educators or editors. This proposition demands that we continue to renegotiate the conventions of curating [...] the curatorial is a qualitative concept, just like the political in Mouffe.⁹⁰

In Irit Rogoff's view, the curatorial would be a series of knowledges that already exists, but by temporarily converging produce an 'event of knowledge'. This event is not configured as a place of individual enunciation but as a construction that generates a specific sociability. Arenas such as theory, philosophy or history benefit from the modes of curatorial assemblage.⁹¹

In *Affective Communities* (2006), Leela Gandhi presents the 'politics of the event' as the revolutionary or epistemic ability to instantiate 'the new'. Building on a formative movement of departure or disobedience, the event announces itself. Gandhi reminds us of what Alain Badiou argues: the event is a break from that which already exists (i.e., Law, Truth or Criteria). 'This action invariably begins as an initial moment of rebellious no-saying',⁹² which resonates with that of the intervals as spasms. Its irreverence places the event, *el pressentiment*, in a position of radical inclusiveness that I argue is constitutive of the subject matter. This inclusive dimension can be understood as participatory, collaborative or communal, and also characterises the proposals of the curatorial as presented by Paul Martinon,

The curatorial is a jailbreak from pre-existing frames, a gift enabling one to see the world differently, a strategy for inventing new points of departure, a practice of creating allegiances against social ills, a way of caring for humanity, a process of renewing one's own subjectivity, a tactical move for reinventing life, a sensual practice of creating signification, a political tool outside of politics, a procedure to maintain a community together, a conspiracy against policies, the act of keeping a question alive, the energy of retaining a sense of fun, the device that helps to revisit history, the measures to create affects, the work of revealing ghosts, a plan to remain out-of-joint with time, an evolving method of keeping bodies and objects together, a sharing of understanding, an invitation for reflexivity, a choreographic mode of operation, a way of fighting against corporate culture, etc.⁹³

Many of the curators who began their careers in the 1990s and who knew that 'a curator who cannot speak English is no curator'⁹⁴ reached institutional positions in the following decade,

⁹⁰ Maria Lind, 'Active Cultures. On the Curatorial', *Artforum* (October 2009), p. 103.

⁹¹ Irit Rogoff, 'The Expanded Field', in Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, pp. 44–45.

⁹² Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities. Anticolonial thought, fin-de-siècle radicalism, and the politics of friendship* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 183.

⁹³ Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, p. 4.

⁹⁴ What, How & for Whom (WHW), 'What do you want to know', in Paul O'Neill, Mick Watson and Lucy Steeds, ed., *The curatorial Conundrum: What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press), p. 141.

including the first generation of Spanish practitioners, and began to introduce experimental situations within them. This institutionalisation helped to consolidate the new discourses around the curatorial. Post-graduate study programmes on contemporary curating also contributed to this epistemic drift that ultimately generated the notion of exhibitions as a model of innovative practice-based research in which self-reflexivity and conviviality play a fundamental role. Although not acknowledged as such, the expanded notion of the curatorial defined above could in Spain be seen in projects such as UNIA arteypensamiento in Seville, Arteleku in San Sebastián, and in recent years, Bulegoa Z/B in Bilbao. UNIA was a collaborative and inter-institutional project that Villaespesa co-founded. In addition, former Ministry of Culture Adviser Manuela Villa was trained at the Curatorial/Knowledge Department at Goldsmiths, University of London. Other practitioners involved include curator and editor Aimar Arriola.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of ideas on contemporary curating, Steven Rosenbaum and David Balzer introduced the term ‘curationism’ to describe the acceleration of a total curatorial impulse that had taken place in extra-artistic fields, such as the Internet-based content curator. The appropriation of this vocabulary in other areas created symbolic and economic value in cognitive capitalism, which contrasts sharply with the self-reflexive critical stance of the curatorial – which paradoxically is ultimately also nurtured by an attention economy.

In the Spanish language, there are two terms for curator, *comisaria* and *curadora*, which are foregrounded depending on the context. The former, *comisaria*, is the primary use in areas under the influence of France and Spain, owing to the origin associated with the administrative system (*commissaire*, which translates into ‘police officer’). The latter, *curadora*, is in use in English-speaking countries and in Latin America for the English and Latin root (curator, carer). However, the dictionary does not include any proper noun that encompasses the definition of a discipline that is context oriented. *Comisariado* is, according to the Real Academia Española-RAE, ‘the work of the person with the power and capacity to exercise in any businesses’. At the same time, it defines *curaduría* as the ‘post of the curator’. Yet, *curatela* in the legal system covers the conjunction of curator-tutor. The term has to do with the degree of independence of a ward under protection: a *curatela* ‘assists, neither representing nor replacing’.

The only two words related to curating with their own entries in the official dictionary are *comisario* (curator) and *comisariar* (the verb curating). However, in the listings of their possible meanings, the practices of art and exhibition-making are relegated to the bottom. A contribution of this thesis is the speculative theoretical proposal of *curatela* as a term to encompass the curatorial discussion globally within the post-representational paradox and the legal caring structure that most infrastructures fail to provide.

The Performative, Relational and Discursive Turns

The development of process-based projects reached a moment of culmination linked to what would become known as relational aesthetics. The alliance between new artistic practices and

curatorial ones began at least ten years before its institutionalisation in Nicolas Bourriaud's book, *Relational Aesthetics*, published in 1998. Like in Spain, a programme of cultural decentralisation was launched in France in the 1980s. It included the inauguration of new centres for contemporary art. A central city in this process was Grenoble, where the *École du Magasin* was founded in 1987, generating one of the first scenes to revisit American conceptual art, and put forward durational, immaterial and performative practices. Likewise, there was a concentration of events in Central and Nordic European countries in the 1990s, such as the Berlin Biennale and the nomadic Manifesta, and the development of experimental exhibitions in various medium-sized art centres. This approach resulted in a significant flourishing of the European scene that brought together many of the best-known proposals of the next two decades, including the curatorial work of Maria Lind, Maria Hlavajová and Catherine David, among others.

The emphasis on the discursive nature of these exhibitions resulted in a gradual interference between these and various learning and knowledge formats. The separation between an exhibition and its public programme became increasingly blurred. The Documentas of the turn of the century are prime examples. The first one curated by a woman, Catherine David, Documenta X proposed '100 Days, 100 Guests' (1997), a daily programme of theoretical debates on globalisation, something akin to the 1989 Havana Biennial. From that moment onwards, David would play an influential role in the Spanish curatorial arena, collaborating with institutions such as Tàpies Foundation and Arteleku.⁹⁵

In Documenta 11 (2002), four discussion platforms in the form of symposia and seminars in various cities worldwide preceded the exhibition in Kassel. Subsequently, Documenta 12 assumed the question of education as one of its three programme strands ('What Is to Be Done (Education)?') and introduced critical pedagogies in its processes, especially in working with local audiences. *Zehar* contributed to this edition by focusing on 'Education (The Local Institution)'. As editor Miren Eraso writes, and the following chapter unpacks, 'this exceptional characteristic enabled us to tackle education, first by analysing the activities carried out at Arteleku, and then by transferring these experiences to *Zehar*. We have called this publishing experience, "The Open School"'. This issue of *Zehar* included the work of Irit Rogoff, Ariella Azoulay, Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt and Marina Garcés, among others.⁹⁶

In addition to the expansion of the educational dimension of the exhibitions, the progressive interweaving of artistic projects within a school format – what would later be labelled as the 'educational turn' occurred. Projects in question aspired to generate knowledge through

⁹⁵ Curated by Catherine David, *Contemporary Arab Representations* (2002) was a project that included seminars, publications, performances and presentations of works by visual artists, architects, writers and poets with the aim of encouraging production, circulation and exchange between different cultural centres of the Arab world and the rest of the world. The project was produced by Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona, directed by Nuria Enguita between 1998 and 2008, in association with Witte de With, Rotterdam; UNIA arteypensamiento, Seville; Arteleku, San Sebastián, and Akademie Scholss Solitude, Stuttgart.

⁹⁶ Miren Eraso, Editorial: 'The Open School', *Zehar*, 60/61 (2007).

< <https://artxibo.arteleku.net/en/islandora/object/arteleku%3A256> > [accessed 20 March 2022].

collaborative practices. These formats advocated an exchange of positions between curatorial and educational mediation.

Exhibition Histories and The Educational

The crisis of representation outlined earlier, revealed the need to develop a new historical taxonomy that paid attention to contextual issues beyond traditional systems of classifying artistic movements and artworks. These emerging historiographies have offered new entry points for re-thinking the challenges of curating as a practice. They have mainly spread in the following threads.

Firstly, they have become embedded in the field through series of printed matter, such as the Exhibition Histories series produced by Afterall at Central Saint Martin's College in London, which was developed during my placement in 2009. Another example is the journal *The Exhibitionist* (2009), the various publications on the history of biennials such as *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History* (2008), and a more recent example '100 Years of Now' and *The Temporality of Curatorial Research* (2018) on an expanded curatorial project at HKW in Berlin. In Spanish, the most significant efforts include *El arte del siglo XX y sus exposiciones* (1997) by Anna Maria Guasch, *Exposiciones y comisariado. Relatos cruzados* (2020) by Olga Fernández López, and *El ensayo de la exposición* (2016–22), to be published by *Concreta* and co-produced along with Azkuna Zentroa and Bulegoa Z/B.

Secondly, the embedding of some of these series into educational programmes such as Afterall's Mres Art: Exhibition Studies, a master's degree focusing on the debates about modern and contemporary art in exhibitions and public presentations of art from 1955 to today. These programmes have entered the sea of degrees related to curating, including the one in which my research is positioned, which is characterised by its focus on and encouragement of experimentation. As mentioned before, the first post-graduate programme on the practice of curating in Spain was created in 2017 in Navarra within a university founded and still managed by Opus Dei, a controversial religious organisation.⁹⁷

Thirdly, understanding has spread by means of reconstructions of iconic exhibitions such as 'The Family of Man' (1955/1994) at Clervaux Castle in Luxembourg, 'This is Tomorrow' (1956/2010) at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, 'When Attitudes Become Form' (1969/2013) at the Fondazione Prada in Venice,⁹⁸ or 'Growth and Form' (1951/2014) in Tate Modern and Reina Sofia – an exhibition curated by my supervisor Victoria Walsh on Richard Hamilton's inspirational show. The aforementioned 'Los Encuentros de Pamplona' (1972/2009), curated by José Díaz Cuyás at the Reina Sofia in Madrid, is one of the rare cases of re-staging such an important event that was the most extensive and significant international avant-garde art festival held in Spain. Of course, knowledge has also spread by means of the reconstruction of artworks, including Gordon Matta-Clark's 'Reality Properties:

⁹⁷ See Opus Dei <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opus_Dei#Controversias> [accessed 20 March 2022].

⁹⁸ Mela Dávila, "'When Attitude Became Form' y la máquina del tiempo. Sobre la posibilidad (o no) de reproducir arte' ['When Attitudes Became Form' and the time machine. On the Possibility (or not) to Reproduce Art], *Concreta*, 02 (2013), pp. 118–25 [translation mine].

Fake Estates' (IVAM, 1992) and Lygia Clark's 'A casa'é o corpo' (Fundació Tàpies, 1997) to name a few pioneering examples within the Spanish arena.

Ultimately, a new thread of celebrating – male – curatorial figures and their trajectories has emerged, providing a new line to the entanglement. Worth mentioning are 'Seth Siegelraub. Beyond Conceptual Art' at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2016; the touring exhibition 'Harald Szeemann: Museum of Obsessions', initiated by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, which was accompanied by the reconstruction of the 1974 exhibition 'Grandfather: A Pioneer Like Us', in ICA in Los Angeles in 2018; and the project 'Ties, Tales, and Traces', dedicated to independent curator Frank Wagner (1958-2016) at KW Berlin. In this regard, there is no record of a similar exercise within the Spanish borders, which makes me wonder whether one has to pass away to be celebrated. By engaging with the curatorial and editorial practices of Villaespesa, but also Eraso – who sadly passed away in 2009 – 'Across the Sand' also participates in this discussion.

The Post-representational Paradox

The intention of some curators to go 'beyond the discursive' and produce events 'beyond art' to enhance transdisciplinary knowledge production has been referred to as post-representational in the last decade. Scholars such as Nora Sternfeld and Luisa Ziaja have pointed at three possible ways of developing post-representational curating: performing the archive, curating as organising, and turning towards the educational.⁹⁹

Also defined as the 'educational turn', the curatorial increasingly influences the ways in which museums name their staff and departments – where mediation and public programming replace the role of the coordinator. This turn follows others, including the 'social turn' and the collaborative, performative and research turns. It also continues the 'crisis of representation'¹⁰⁰ that followed the various waves of Institutional Critique that challenged museums' canonical narratives as well as normative ideas of gender, sexuality, race and nation.¹⁰¹ Since the 2000s, Western institutions have reoriented this crisis of representation towards discussions around issues such as site-specificity, globalisation and urban environments,¹⁰² and in more recent years, feminism, colonialism, climate change and Black Lives Matter. Since the global Occupy and *indignados* movements, institutional disenchantment has permeated other spheres, including political theory.

Inspired by these counter-hegemonic practices, Sternfeld has recently proposed to look at curation and education through the lens of Gramsci's notion of *hegemony* – an approach that I argue has already been tested in Spain, providing an original contribution to curatorial knowledge:

⁹⁹ Nora Sternfeld, Luisa Ziaja, 'What Comes After the Show? On Post-Representational Curating'.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh, *Post-critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the art museum* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Welchman, *Institutional Critique and After*.

For if we consider (with Gramsci) education and culture to be contested, then curation and art education can be understood as forms of action which struggle to create either by reproducing the existing power structures or by interrogating them. If we then put ourselves to the task of searching for form of curation and education as critical, emancipatory practices, then they have one and the same function when it comes to the theory of hegemony (which happens to be exactly the same as art and philosophy): they are organic intellectual activities that challenge hegemony.¹⁰³

In this regard, the Spanish regimes of representation are multilayered and complex, particularly concerning Gramsci's idea of hegemony, which has permeated politics, art and social change for more than two decades now. The so-called Essex School of discourse analysis, founded by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, two post-Marxists disillusioned with the success of Thatcherism, the gradual dissolution of the Soviet bloc, the mutation of work and the emergence of identity politics and consumerism, tried to reinterpret Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Whereas Gramsci approach the notion of hegemony as a way to describe how the state and ruling capitalist class use cultural institutions to maintain power, the Essex School addresses this 'manufacturing of consent' as a means to create a counter-power.

Laclau and Mouffe dealt with the space for discourse by putting forward Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In their view, collective identity is inherently defined by the rhetoric of representation in which operations of substitution take place. Identity does not pre-exist its representation. In their view, subjects are constructed in a multiplicity of positions, whose subjectivities are always temporary forms of fixation. Subjects are not endless and ever changing but forms of identification which, at a given moment, are temporary fixed through nodal points. The hegemonic struggle consists in disarticulating these nodal points in order to reconstruct them in a different way.

This paradigmatic formulation can be seen in their publication *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) and subsequent contributions of the two thinkers.¹⁰⁴ The approach and theoretical traditions influencing their thought (mainly Saussurean linguistics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and deconstruction) provided the point of departure to create a graduate programme on discourse analysis at the University of Essex. Developing Gramsci's notion of the opposition between common sense and good sense, they argued that 'new social movements exist in multiple forms which may be shaped through hegemonic struggle to progressive or reactionary end'.¹⁰⁵ As the 'Storytelling (Dissenting within)' chapter shows, this formulation also influenced the 'new institutionalism' and 'radical museology' that

¹⁰³ Nora Sternfeld, 'Inside the Post-Representative Museum', in *Contemporary Curating and Museum Education*, ed., Carmen Mörch, Angeli Sachs and Thomas Sieber (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), p. 176.

¹⁰⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

¹⁰⁵ Steve Jones, *Antonio Gramsci* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 130.

emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in Spain, as described by Claire Bishop.¹⁰⁶

Apart from Sternfeld, Hito Steyerl offers another instrumental definition of the post-representational paradox that comes, precisely, from the field of photography, which this thesis argues condenses the contradictory nature of ‘the contemporary’ as described in the ‘Caring (Thinking for)’ chapter presenting the ‘Myth of the Near Future’ photography biennial. I argue that the contemporary is a temporality resisting logics of newness, where re-appropriation and recycling are more important.¹⁰⁷ There is a parallel understanding between analogue/digital photography and the modern/contemporary moments regarding the indexical nature of representation. Similar to how the contemporary overlaps speeds, rhythms and times, the sensor of the smart phone digital camera no longer ‘draws with light’ what is before you, the photographer, but ‘looks through the pictures you have already made, or those that are networked to you and tries to match faces and shapes.’¹⁰⁸ In short: it creates the picture based on earlier pictures, on your/its memory. It does not only know what you saw, but also what you might like to see based on your previous choices. Like in the anecdote of the art professor at the beginning of this thesis, in which students based their projects on the possibilities offered by the video editing menu, present and past are combined.

Current politics deals with representation in a similar fashion. Politicians clean the ‘noise’ and create a proportional ‘image’. Jacques Rancière, however, suggests there is no such thing as noise, ‘it is all speech’.¹⁰⁹ Yet, what is at stake is the possibility of listening. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, he argues that the question that precedes the struggle for recognition is a political question: who has the power to decide what counts as voice, and what is mere noise?¹¹⁰ This condition can be described as opacity, although, in thinking with Haraway, I will return to the muddle. How can we deal with everything that reveals itself as a surface? This is where Lacanian psychoanalysis enters the discussion at the Essex School.

The critical space to which the post-representational curator aspires is subject to the all-encompassing structural capacity of neoliberalism and the attention economy. Curators and neoliberal structures share the desire to produce immaterial process-based knowledge and sociability. Added to this contradiction is neoliberalism inevitable participation in the global growth of biennials, new museums, macro-exhibitions or curated fairs; in short, it appears in the same model of production that it intends to question. Alexander Alberro, for instance, has pointed out the contradictory effects caused by Siegelau’s curatorial practices, which reinforced the introduction of dematerialised art in the market. Ultimately, the appeal to the performative and the cognitive could contribute to the strengthening of neoliberal logic.

¹⁰⁶ Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology or, What’s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (London: Koenig Books, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Emphasis added, von Schubert, Olga: *‘100 Years of Now’ and The Temporality of Curatorial Research*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ Hito Steyerl, ‘Politics of Representation’.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004).

Desires, politics and affects shape this medial condition. In this regard, to address time management, different forms of knowledge could be combined, unfamiliar economies could be drawn, paradigms and categories could be questioned, and sensual and affective discursive undercurrents could be explored, my research argues.

New Institutionalism: Redefining Modernity?

The crisis of representation and the various advancements of the processual nature of exhibitions, which became places of social mediation, were related to a more complex question about the institutional models of post-war Europe and the new geopolitical arena. After the so-called ‘end of history’ in 1989, the increasing privatisation of the public sphere and the processes of gentrification and spectacularisation of culture took some scholars, such as Jonas Ekeberg, to introduce the term ‘new institutionalism’.¹¹¹

For Ekeberg, the various waves of Institutional Critique led to the institutionalisation of criticality. Consequently, in his view, new institutional practices should adopt the methods artists and their small institutions rehearse in terms of flexibility temporality. Some medium-sized centres in Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Germany began to create fewer exhibition-oriented spaces and more research and communal based ones; a process largely led by women curators. At the beginning of the 2010s, the institutional practices undertaken in Western spheres such as Casco Projects (Utrecht), curators such as Charles Esche at the Rooseum (Malmö), Maria Lind at the Kunstverein München, and Maria Hlvajova at BAK (also Utrecht) were important examples of this transformation. Although Ekeberg mentioned the initiatives carried out by MACBA (with Borja-Villel and Jorge Ribalta),¹¹² according to Fernández, Ekeberg did not consider the crucial differences between the countries of northern and southern Europe, differences that this research acknowledges and explores in the following chapters.

In the Spanish sphere, the phenomenon opened the institutions to activists and movements intending to impact the public sphere – the periodical *Desacuerdos* [Disagreements] published by Centro José Guerrero, MACBA, Reina Sofia and UNIA arteypensamiento between 2004 and 2014, collected these experiences. *Desacuerdos* was a collaborative effort between institutions, which set out to track cultural practices, models and counter-models that do not correspond to the dominant structures, policies and practices imposed in Spain since its Transition.¹¹³ In addition, MACBA’s Independent Studies Programme (PEI) inaugurated in 2006. PEI self-defined itself as a ‘tool for learning and Institutional Critique’ played a key role in this discussion. The project emerged as a consequence of the museum’s experimental public programme.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Jonas Ekeberg, ed., *New Institutionalism Verkested#1* (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art, 2003).

¹¹² See Independent Studies Programme, MACBA: <<https://www.macba.cat/en/independent-studies-programme/2023-2024-edition/programme>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

¹¹³ Villaespesa, *Desacuerdos*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Fernández, *Exposiciones y comisariado: Relatos cruzados*, p. 246.

The new institutions reaffirmed their questions about governance during the 2008 financial crisis, which made visible the conflicts around democratic representation and a new globalised political urgency in their exhibitions and general discourse.¹¹⁵ With the emergence of these social movements, some institutions began to redefine the curatorial forms with which they operated. The frameworks for participation in public spaces were determined beyond the attributions assigned to experts. These frictions were visible in Documenta 13 and the 7th Berlin Biennale. While the former had a camp out in front of the Fridericianum, the exhibition's main exhibition venue, the latter included activists from Occupy Museums.¹¹⁶ One of the slogans that arose in the tense discussions with its curators was: 'You can't curate a movement'. This example indicates the difficulties of opening the curatorial to horizontal decision-making processes.

Parallel to this discussion, many Western institutions began to revisit the notion of *modernity* by acknowledging museums' difficulties in dealing with the grand narratives of history and its violence. If modernity could not be overcome, exhibitions such as 'Defining Modernity' (Getty Center, 2007), 'In the Desert of Modernity' (HKW, Berlin, 2008), 'Altermodern' (Tate Triennial, London, 2009), 'Modernologies. Contemporary artists investigating modernity and modernism' (MACBA, Barcelona, 2009), 'Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic' (Tate Liverpool, 2010) or 'Multiple Modernities 1905–1975' (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2013) aimed to re-evaluate, with varying and questionable success, the term through the lens of post-colonial theory, ethnology and urban planning. To gain momentum towards and into the future, museums would bring the term modernity back into the curatorial realm. They would address their representative paradoxes as national and ideological entities and offer new possibilities for reading around the great utopian project linked to well-being, equality and progress. But they would do it without forgetting the processes of oppression and colonial control of which the museum was often part. As we witnessed, the fragmentation of the grand historical narratives of the late twentieth-century would not lead to the so-called 'end of history' after the fall of communism and the emergence of world markets, but to a new interest in representing the past, alongside criticism of national narratives and the institutions that shaped their ideologies. The fragmentation of the grand narratives has also propelled the important and widespread project of investigating non-western modernisms.

Institutional Critique, which traditionally operated outside the Western museum, would be institutionalised from within, becoming a method of spatial and political criticism and a mechanism of discursive control. However, the debate that institutions are social support structures would settle because they are recognised as regulating both memory and forgetfulness. Therefore, they are scenarios of a kind of civil imagination. The question of what importance society attributes to the fact that museums regulate memory and forgetfulness would give rise, as Rachel Mader writes, to axiomatic debates.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ See Occupy Museums <<https://www.occupymuseums.org>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

¹¹⁷ Rachel Mader, 'How to move in/an institution', *OnCurating*, Issue 21 (2013), pp. 35–45.

Richard Sennett would remind us that, in the global contexts in which we live, introducing more flexibility to institutional structures could threaten a population that is already walking on quicksand.¹¹⁸ As Paulo Virno expresses, the loss of stable relationships and the deregulation and financialisation of communities would require strengthening institutions without forgetting that they also operate as centres generating exclusions.¹¹⁹ As already mentioned, these issues enter into dialogue with aspects of political theory, such as the concept of hegemony, and serve to think about the possibilities of critical action and agency within the institutions that respond to the neoliberal paradigm. Terms like ‘radical’ or ‘progressive’ have been used to point towards an institutional future whose programming would incorporate experimentation and political commitment in their discursive proposals.

However, doing so carries the paradox that Sennett and Virno had already anticipated. The so-called radical or progressive museums, the ‘museums of the commons’, are mainly directed by white men who, despite their good intentions, find it difficult to escape from the overwhelming and legitimising force of individual careers and the impulse of the event economy. Ultimately, they fail to change the rules of the game, often reducing it to mere rhetoric. They struggle to become that ‘radically democratic space for free-form discussion on how things could be otherwise’, of that ‘place of democracy and eternal antagonism’¹²⁰ between art and society, in which one should ask: if today’s artistic production is the heritage of tomorrow, shouldn’t the museum have the redistribution of wealth among its objectives?

Self-organised Structures

The relationship between self-organised structures and the curatorial relate to notions such as ‘independent’, ‘non-profit’, or ‘artist-run spaces’. All these forms of addressing self-management point to the conditions by which various groups, collectives and platforms have emerged since the 1960s in the context of art, and sometimes in parallel to others interwoven with the multiple waves of Institutional Critique. When it comes to understanding the choice of self-organisation in the curatorial, sharing and collaboration are essential. Common interest defines their assemblage.

Conversely, the logics that sustain these forms of often precarious production emerge in parallel to institutional structures, both public and private. Yet, they understand that the institution is a concatenation of habits, possibilities and ethics and the power to put them into operation. Self-organised organisations are, consequently, attentive to the conditions of their immediate contexts and define different tactics, methods and curatorial expressions in the long term. The practice of struggle against the organisation of labour, against time and the presuppositions that sustain the dogmas and division of labour are fundamental: productivity, legality, identity and mental and material support structures. As is the case of this research, and of *Concreta* as a self-organised non-profit structure, they aim to protect art and its productive processes from all those interferences originating from a cultural model

¹¹⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹¹⁹ Mader, ‘How to move in/an institution’.

¹²⁰ Charles Esche cited in Mader, ‘How to move in/an institution’.

increasingly caught up in neoliberal dynamics. Yet they (we) try by dodging these growing difficulties.

Leire Vergara recently explained how Group Material, Oda Projesi and Erreakzioa-Reacción, which arose as projects that started from a collaboration between artists, are examples of these approaches to art production. Independent structures such as WHW, TEOR/ética and TIER in the international context, or, in the Spanish milieu, Bulegoa Z/B themselves, the aforementioned BNV Producciones share an interest in processes of articulation and collective experiences that emerge through dialogue with the practice of curating in alternative organisational models that challenge the dominant institutional forms.¹²¹

Translocated and para-institutional platforms from the South of Europe and the Global South, including Immigrant Movement International, Lugar a dudas, Raw Material Company, Campo Adentro and Ruangrupa act in this scene, incorporating their locally developed processes on an international scale, generating a necessary dialectic between the global and the local. From various anchoring points, these organisations and collectives will include what is called ‘the periphery’ in the centre and provide situated knowledge that counteracts a certain indeterminacy of international discourse.

¹²¹ Leire Vergara, ‘El comisariado frente, sobre, para, con, por o desde el contexto’, [Curating Before, On, For, With, From the Context], UOC-Online (2021) <<http://arts-practiques-curatorials.recursos.uoc.edu/comissariat-context/es/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

Opportunities

Why should our bodies end at the skin?

—Donna Haraway¹²²

The skin, however, does have holes for letting in and out our souls.

—Ursula K. Le Guin¹²³

The ‘disinterested’ curatorial and critical positions that have attempted to complicate relational notions of community and participation and overcome a certain duality have increasingly been challenged by the ‘affective turn’ in contemporary art theory and practice. Like other turns that academic fields have undergone in the past, such as the ones mentioned in the ‘Field of Knowledge’ section, this focus on affect extends some of the most productive research. The focus on the body advanced in feminist theory and the exploration of emotions conducted by queer theory are the two primary precursors opening new paths for knowledge production and novel possibilities for politics.¹²⁴

The relationship between media and the production of affect has been recently explained and updated from multiple positions. From Rosi Braidotti to Jane Bennett, passing through Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, Lauren Berlant, Marina Vishmidt, Paul B. Preciado, Khanyisile Mbongwa, among many others including Rassel, Puig de la Bellacasa or Mouffe, authors and practitioners operating intersectionally in diverse fields, have outlined a more embodied understanding of the experience of being in cultural institutions such as the art school, the academy or the museum and framed it in terms of subject production.

‘Affect’ as an embodied force influencing the mind comes from Aristotle, who thought that pleasure and pain shift our condition and our judgement. In *The Ethics* (1677), Baruch Spinoza already ‘considered human actions and desires in exactly the same manner, as though [he was] concerned with lines, planes and solids’.¹²⁵ If affections are defined as perceptions or representations, affects are therefore what emanates out of them.

For this reason, many media theories defended that affect is produced through mimesis, an argument that has also been used as an explanation of music’s ability to produce emotions

¹²² Donna Haraway, ‘A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the 1980s’, in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 220.

¹²³ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Skin* (2008), see <<https://www.ursulakleuin.com/poetry>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

¹²⁴ Michael Hardt, ‘Foreword: What affects are good for?’, in Patricia Ticineto and Jean Halley, ed., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). This publication explores the conceptualisation of affect that draws on tracing the line of thought as explored by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari back to Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson.

¹²⁵ Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics* (London: Penguin, 1996 [1677]).

and passions. As a photography scholar and a former musician myself, these ideas have allowed me to embrace, challenge and nurture the conversation about representation and the curatorial.

The fact that affects refer equally to the body and the mind, to reason and passion, defies simplistic understandings of mediation because they have the ability to have an effect on the networks of the world around us, but also on our bodies. The commoning space opened up by this field of knowledge undoubtedly involves negotiation, reciprocity and movement because it relates to the reconfiguration of social relations based on the responsibilities we all have to each other and our environs. As pointed out at the beginning of this thesis, I argue that the frontality of the gaze is displaced and shifted to the margins. The power of vision is transformed because it is discovered, surrounded and exposed.

As a result, this thesis argues that the opportunity that arises is not what the best representation is for each action, but what to attend to and how to sustain attention beyond a persistent focus on the ocular. ‘Perhaps it is necessary to turn the head, or the whole body’ we said. ‘Or perhaps we should even attend to what we will never be able to see or represent ourselves at all’.¹²⁶ Beyond representation, attention opens up a surprisingly active and passive field of exchange: you must take care of what in turn asks to be cared for.

Yet, care creates networks that don’t have a priori form, which is the reason why they require attention. Becoming an *attentive* witness of others’ passions, doubts, dreams and fears is what Stengers defines as ‘common sense’.¹²⁷ Mouffe also explains ‘common sense’ as an accepted interpretation of, for example, liberty and equality, at a given moment in time. This is something that she borrows from both Gramsci and Lacan: the understanding of ‘the subject as not being something which is an essence already, existing independently from its inscription into social relations as it is, for instance, in much socialist theory or in liberalism’.¹²⁸ Thus, in my eyes, our attention is the combined expression of both fragility and strength. Fragility and strength are the pillars from which to challenge these bodily entanglements of a world that is taking shape out of networks, types of linkage and ways of displacement.

From this literature review, I propose to move from what I have summarised above to what has emerged as my central research questions. How to address care as a constituent part of a praxis set in a framework of interdependence, alongside the processes of civil mediation towards the commons within the contemporary condition? Who cares for those who care? What if we think of ‘the *curatela*’ through editing, storytelling and caring and to increase public attention and policy awareness regarding the need for regenerating open and democratic structures?

¹²⁶ Garcés, ‘La rebelión de los intervalos’.

¹²⁷ Stengers, ‘Don’t Shock Common Sense!’.

¹²⁸ Martin Bosman and Leilia Barre, ‘An Interview with Chantal Mouffe, College International de Philosophie, Paris, France’, *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, Volume 3 (1994), pp. 98–99.

‘When care is removed, we can perceive the effects of carelessness’, writes Puig de la Bellacasa.¹²⁹ Consequently, the practice of curating and the curatorial have also adhered to an ethical question that goes hand in hand with the processes of negotiation between cultural agents, their power relations and discourse formations. These processes increase an awareness of the responsibility of others. For this reason, a methodology of muddling, instead of one of filling gaps, allows me to address the paradoxes that this ethical question entails within the entanglement of the very same system that generates value. Value is, in turn, one of the hardest concepts to tackle. Often immaterial and expressed in the form of a system that changes rapidly, influencing hearts and minds, value defies easy definitions. Trade, commerce, daily interactions are based on a value system difficult to explain.¹³⁰

This is one of the reasons why ‘The Potosí Principle: How Shall We Sing the Song of the Lord in an Alien Land’ exhibition, curated by artists Andreas Siekmann, Alice Creischer, philosopher Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz and Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, in 2010 and 2011, is a recurring influence on my research. This is a radical curatorial proposal that has made a dent in my thinking and to which I return to analyse concepts that appear in this dissertation, since it was a project addressing not only the crisis of representation, but also the relationships between trade, art transfers and economic structures through the lens of colonialism. As I described in the ‘Foreword’, this research has led to the publication of a series of essays in various books, one of which is ‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of The Potosí Principle’.¹³¹

With dozens of artists and three institutions in Madrid, Berlin and La Paz, ‘The Potosí Principle’ is also a project dealing with communal spaces, social reproduction and curatorial knowledge. The project would advocate displacing the ‘origin’ of modernity, traditionally located in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to Potosí in the sixteenth century. This inversion would serve to rethink the production and circulation of images then (Baroque paintings) and now (contemporary art). In other words, territorial exploitation, the art world and its flirtations with the global market in the form of a ‘pattern’ – in Spanish *principio* means both beginning and principle – would face the mirror of Marx and his original accumulation of capital at the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid, and with a conservative government at the head of the State, the PP [People’s Party]. Yet, this was a route that had its limitations.¹³²

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, cultural producers in general and curators in particular have been preoccupied with the question of where support comes from. Their *experiences* not only ‘have fallen in *value*’, as Walter Benjamin would put it in ‘The Storyteller’, but have been framed by two crises in which conflict and conviviality have

¹²⁹ Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Pensar con cuidado’.

¹³⁰ Maaïke Lauwaert & Francien van Westrenen, ed., *Facing Value. Radical Perspectives from the Arts* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017).

¹³¹ Vallés Vélchez, ‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of The Potosí Principle’ (Berlin: Koenig Books, 2022).

¹³² Ibid.

defined the paradoxical, moving grounds of mediation. This situation, which has been overshadowing the cultural sector for more than a decade now, has to do with the increasingly institutional disenchantment that the neoliberal austerity policies generate. Within the case of Spain, this is highly visible because institutions very rarely include curators in their organograms. In(ter)dependent curators find themselves in the middle of caring for artists and artworks and, at best, fighting to provide a non-bureaucratic and non-precarious milieu to those involved in the project.¹³³

Today, curatorial research turns the exhibition into a research space and asks what kind of questioning the practice of curating enables us to produce, suggesting answers which cannot surface on paper alone.¹³⁴ While research in the exhibition space is not innovative per se, research does not merely consist of presenting results but produces an argument or advances a proposition in the exhibition space. In the spirit of the latter, this thesis argues that the practice of curating can procure a set of conditions from which to make visible and tangible precise lived realities for the coming generations who, like mine, have inherited the opacities of a fragile emerging field of knowledge.

In *Reset Modernity!* Bruno Latour explains that when England and France began to extend some of their administrations to America, colonisers realised it was impossible to include the Native American nations. For over a century they had to build what Richard White called ‘middle ground’: a precarious series of diplomatic encounters where everything was renegotiated. In this sense, these middle grounds demonstrated that nothing could be taken for granted. However, once the First Nations’ lands were seized, the testing ground vanished, creating the ‘other’.¹³⁵

In this sense, as a means to build encounters, I argue that curatorial research could help us negotiate the movement under our feet, which characterises the slippery grounds of mediation instead of the solid grounds of epistemology. In my eyes, curatorial practices could help us learn from past experiences and claim this sensitive ‘middle ground’: an arena for knowledge production, that is, a space from which to shape and sediment a set of common practices where the desire to interact with one another defines the conditions from which to operate collectively. ‘How’ we care rather than the intention or disposition to be caring is what this practice-led research proposes to displace an understanding of value as exchange towards use and drive. Too much caring can be consuming. Hence the need of new patterns, *principios* or maquettes to address our semiotic technologies of mediation.

To imagine the future, we do not necessarily need to create a traceable global perspective or lineal historiography; Peter Osborne, among others, already explained to us that the utopian spirit of ‘the contemporary’ is a fictitious global unity because it functions as if the ‘unity of

¹³³ Helena Reckitt, ‘Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction’, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, Bristol, 5:1 (2016), pp. 6–30.

¹³⁴ VVAA, *Contemporary Research Intensive* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), p. 53.

¹³⁵ Bruno Latour, ‘In Search of a Diplomatic Middle Ground’, in Latour and Leclercq, ed., *Reset Modernity!*, p. 405.

human history' had been reached.¹³⁶ Rather, to embed knowledge production in worldly experiences is to make them transparent. That is, to situate knowledge and build from a place – not every place, but a situated place – while recognising that the way we think with others leads us to hold multiple ends of sometimes divergent positions, messing with pre-existing categories including those inherited.

To problematise these pre-existing categories, this thesis explores a methodology emerging from a desire to engage with these inherited worlds; and to do so by adding layers, rather than by analytical disarticulation – to re-describe, and therefore edit, something so that it becomes thicker than it may at first seem. In doing so, it aims to build into what anthropologist Geertz terms 'thick description'. Latour and Haraway's terminology give the layering a political meaning by paying attention to details and question: 'have I re-assembled enough?'¹³⁷ Isn't this what the practice at hand ultimately does?

¹³⁶ Peter Osborne, 'To Each Present Its Own Prehistory', in Paul Goodwin, Pamela Sepúlveda, and Victoria Walsh, ed., *Transfigurations. Curatorial and Artistic Research in an Age of Migration* (London: Royal College of Art, 2012), pp. 25–27.

¹³⁷ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (New York: Oxford University Press, New York, 2005), p.136.

A Map of Assemblage

Being practice-led means that this thesis leads to new insights that have effective implications for the field of curating and the curatorial. This research constitutes an ‘archive’ of practical elements that have been curated in parallel with the development of this dissertation and that have emerged from my experience of editing and curating *Concreta*. For this reason, each chapter emerges from the specificity of its pages: whether they are from the magazine, from the series of artist’s books or from *Concreta*’s research publications. Together, these proposals have woven a special fabric.

Thus, the writing of this dissertation has been developed in a similar way to the act of weaving, in which the imagination is activated, but only when the rug is finished can the final image be seen. These are the threads that have been weaving the central chapters defining this project’s method, context and outcome.

In order of appearance, the essay, the periodical, the publication, the exhibition, the performative lecture and the biennial are the formats nurturing these pages. All of them have been enumerated at the end of the ‘Foreword’, and further presented in this section situating the research. For the sake of clarity, here is a map of assemblage.

Chapter Editing (Thinking with)

The first chapter introduces the methodological approach. What this section proposes is to understand the tensions between theory and autobiography. This is how autotheoretical work embraces self-reflection and the crisis of representation through the lens of editing and ‘thinking with’ others. Intertextual intimacies and forms of citation define a methodology that moves from the editorial (blank page) to the curatorial (white cube), creating a dense research archive.

The following projects allow the research to be situated within an overlooked feminist genealogy in post-Francoist Spain. Including voices, feelings and actions, they thickly describe the context and meaning from which the *curatela* emerges, while offering a series of post-representational curatorial examples.

- ***Concreta Journal***, 2011. Issues 1 (on displacement), 6 (on exhibition making) and 9 (on thinking with care).
Kew words: relational, hypertextual and distributive nature of art / thinking-with others
- **‘Across the Sand’**. Archival display at Azkuna Zentroa, Bilbao and Artium, Vitoria, 2019–20 and exhibition at CentroCentro, Madrid, 2020.
Kew words: Post-representational curating / The afterlife of two feminist magazines

- **‘A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces’**. Performative lecture at TIER, 2019.
Kew words: Editing as a bodily archival experience / curating as an event
- **‘It’s Your Turn’**. Exhibition curated at EACC, 2018.
Kew words: Negotiation as the negation of leisure / understanding the middle ground

Storytelling (Dissenting within)

The second chapter introduces the historical context in the wake of post-conceptual art. What this section proposes is to understand the tensions between rhetoric and practice, the infinite production of meaning. This is how autotheoretical work embraces self-reflection and the crisis of representation through the lens of storytelling and ‘dissenting within’ recent Spanish histories. Whereas the first chapter addresses the *milieu* as medium, mediation, mediator, the second chapter presents the *milieu* as surrounding or habitat in order to situate knowledge within the expanded field of the curatorial.

Giving continuity to the ‘Field of Knowledge’ section and situating it within the moment when the 15M *indignados* movement and *Concreta* emerged, the following projects allow the research to address the institutional disillusionment of the period and the political ability of curating to negotiate the conditions of making art public and dealing with dissent.

- ***Concreta’s Artist Book*, 2012.**
Kew words: 15M *indignados* movement: ‘they don’t represent us’ / *Els Pressentiments*
- **‘Mind the Gap. Fissures and Prospects of an Impossible Consensus. Archiving in Spain’s contemporary arena’**. Peer-reviewed paper published in *photographies*, 13:1, 2020.
Kew words: Antagonism and agonism / affective turn
- **‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of the Potosí Principle’**. Essay published in Creischer/Siekmann, *The Potosí Principle Archive*, Berlin: Koenig Books, 2022.
Kew words: Crisis of representation / Curating dissent

Caring (Thinking for)

The third chapter present the case study encompassing the research questions this dissertation tackles. What this section proposes is to acknowledge the connection between theoretical insights and collective practical politics as a mode of performative life thinking. This is how autotheoretical work embraces self-reflection and representation through the lens of caring and ‘thinking for’.

Drawing on intertextual intimacies and forms of citation, as well as an understanding of *milieu* as surrounding or habitat, but also as medium and mediation, the biennial that I

directed allowed the research to advance my argument about post-representational curating. The fact that the ontology of photography and that of curating similarly tackle the ‘democratisation’ of the art experience is what this chapter presents. Photography and curating frame an encounter and aspire to be memorable. The possibility of initiating a conversation about how to ‘institute with care’, to advance a museum that could be understood as an ‘ecosystem’ is what this curatorial project put forward.

- ***Concreta’s Research Books on Art and Tourism*, 2017.**

Kew words: Canary Islands / site-specificity, colonialism and tourism

- **‘Myths of the Near Future’.** Photography Biennial at TEA–Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, 2019–20.

Kew words: Instituting with care / Curating and photography: imprint in the process of becoming



Moyra Davey, *Quema los diarios* (Valencia: Concreta, 2021), p. 7. *Quema los diarios* [Burn the Diaries] starts with 'Blankness': Jean Genet's story of his life. Davey explains how his 'narrative differs in his various retellings, swayed by discrepancies of memory and the desire for an ever more perfect story. An editor has scrupulously corrected and reordered everything in endnotes, so that we have both versions: Genet freely spins his tales, and we possess the true record'.

3: Editing (Thinking with)

Cura and *Concreta*. Benjamin's *whirlpool* and Haraway's *muddle*

Cura Grows by Accumulation

According to Hyginus's fable, the goddess Cura was crossing a river, and as she made her way discovered a lump of clay from which she shaped a humanoid figure. While Cura was engrossed in her task, Jupiter (the father of the gods and of man) appeared on the scene. Cura asked him to give the figure a spirit and to bring it to life. Jupiter agreed to her wish, but not without a price. After giving life to the inert body, he demanded it be named after him. The two ended up in a heated argument because Cura was unwilling to forego the naming of her creation. Then Tellus, also known as Terra (goddess of the Earth), made an appearance and asked them to let her baptise the figure, as it was her clay that had enabled its existence in the first place. In the end, Saturn (the god of agriculture and the harvest) acted as judge and resolved the conflict by returning the spirit to Jupiter and the body to Terra after its death, while Cura would take on the task of caring for it as long as it was alive. Finally, because the figure had been brought forth from soil, humus, it would be called Homo, a human being.

Philosopher Stefan Nowotny recuperates this mythical fabulation, whose central character is the allegorical personification of care, concern and dedication, from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) to reflect on the philosophy of curating – that is, the curatorial.¹³⁸

In thinking with Hans Blumenberg, Nowotny speculates why Hyginus would not explain why Cura crossed the river, instead of moulding her figure on the riverside, where she was initially located.¹³⁹ Why omit the importance and intention of the interval, that is, the crossing? He asks us readers. Blumenberg suggests that one possibility could be based on an early gnostic myth for which a moment of self-mirroring is necessarily inscribed in the very act of creation. According to this, Cura would need to first see herself and then shape a creature 'in her own image'. However, the act of mimesis could be interpreted as either narcissistic or inferior in her time. Another possibility could be that Hyginus wanted his protagonist Cura to replace Prometheus, the god of fire; yet as Cura's capacity for creation was dependent on a model or representation and therefore could be understood as relatively 'less', the ancient authors of the fable preferred to keep silent about this dependency.

¹³⁸ A fabulation that I also presented within the framework of a course in Curatorial Practice at Tabacalera in Madrid in 2018, for which a handbook was published and that I further expanded in an essay titled 'The Affective Temperance of Curation by Curating' (2019) in which I reflect on the possibilities of 'the *curatela*'. See Laura Vallés Vélchez, 'La templa afectiva de comisariar comisariando', *Concreta*, 13 (2019). English version, 'The Affective Temperance of Curation by Curating', in *Concreta Online* <<http://editorialconcreta.org/Online->> [accessed 20 March 2022].

¹³⁹ Hans Blumenberg, *Die Sorge geht über den Fluss* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987) referenced in Stefan Nowotny, 'The Curator Crosses a River: A Fabulation', in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed., Jean-Paul Martinon (London: Bloomsbury 2013), pp. 59–64.

An element of interest can certainly be considered precisely in the way these interpretations highlight the relative humility of Cura in her double inferiority in relation to her predecessors: the vigorous if self-indulgent Prometheus, and the beautiful if self-engrossed Narcissus. Beyond the ambivalent if not vicious circle of representation and creation, Nowotny questions the following, and this chapter widens his queries: what if we took Hyginus's silence, his gap, about the crossing as an invitation to deploy our own imaginative capacities and either edit or re-narrate the unaccounted-for part of the story? What if we took advantage of that omission and disengaged the fable from the representational regime and the idea of origin? What if we freed our understanding of Cura's fable from the grammar of inferiority and sadness, and saw dependence and conviviality, as powerful and beautiful? What if we did so by relating this fable to Cura's descendants known as curators?

Indeed, the acts of addressing the imaginative capacity to edit and re-narrate unaccounted for parts of the story; disengaging from representation and the idea of origin (like in the blank page and the *tabula rasa*) and embracing dependence and conviviality within the practice of curating and 'the curatorial' are fundamental to approach 'the *curatela*'.

As a professional category, the curator emerged about a century after Hyginus's fable, around the year 100 CE. Back then, the curator's convoluted responsibilities were oriented towards the good of the public and the commonweal. Yet, power relations and the will to preserve them were in place. In contrast, the task of modern curators was for a long time confined to an apparently much easier concern: the taking care of things, artefacts and objects with extraordinary value to human knowledge. Although the custodial responsibilities of the curators were well-defined, the impossibility of ignoring the paradoxical processes of valorisation, legitimation and significance involved in the production of History, led to a wider discussion about matters of economic and political relations that were caught up in uncaring practices of violence and fetishisation.

Are we, then, to consider curators not only as descendants of Cura, Nowotny asks, but also as her modern manifestations? Crossing rivers and even oceans? Producing out of what is out there and drawing upon existing images of 'homo' and upon what is conceived of as imagination? And yet still perhaps dependent on a moment of self-reflection that is better kept out of the stories told, as it could bear witness either to the confines of the curatorial or to the somehow inadequate traces of the hedonism inscribed in it?

As I wrote in 'Murmur in the White Cube', an essay published in *Concreta* 06 (2015) addressing the practice of exhibition making, in an attempt to reflect on the notion of *familiarity* that emerges from the body of work of Egyptian artist Iman Issa, the notion of *mimesis* is not understood as an imitation or copy of an original. On the contrary, *mimesis* could be described as a re-presentation of the praxis of human actions that are presented as

future possibilities, which is a useful way to think of this representational paradox.¹⁴⁰ Born in Cairo, Issa trained as a political scientist and philosopher, and specialised in photography. In thinking with her, I learnt how a display is ‘understood as a dialoguing space containing a series of elements that goes beyond the production of forms, a place, a light, a ceiling, a floor, a distance between elements, an absence, a possible presence, a continuous murmur that activates the communicative potential of the exhibition space’.¹⁴¹

In this sense, mimesis, as rehearsed in her work, must be understood as a procedure, as a continuous doing and knowing, as an opening. For Aristotle, mimetic representation resists comparison with the referent, resists any kind of simplification. In his essay ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’ (1933), Walter Benjamin wrote that ‘nature produces similarities’, although he went on to add that ‘the highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s’.¹⁴² According to Benjamin, even though the human being develops a primitive language able to mimic things, situations and persons in a kind of magical correspondence with the world, this mimetic faculty, strengthened in childhood through play and other activities, gradually diminishes and is transformed into a series of exchanges increasingly removed from the senses.

Aby Warburg sustains the same idea in a similar fashion. The shared history of peoples and cultures starts out as ritual, develops into art and ends up in technology; there is a progressive evolution towards the rational and a greater separation from the experiential. One could already see pointers towards these ideas in ‘A Lecture on the Serpent Ritual’ (1939), in which Warburg recalls his experience with the Pueblo Indians who use magic and snake symbols to summon rain, among other actions associated with superstition. In *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), Michael Taussig also wrote about the potential of the mimetic faculty to ‘craft a vision of nature that was neither the alienated subject of modern science nor the passively malleable medium of late twentieth-century social constructivism.’¹⁴³ Building on Benjamin, Roger Caillois and Theodor W. Adorno, among others, Taussig saw a way out of a technofetishised milieu through the mimetic faculty. Overall, in my eyes, mimesis – but also repetition, reproduction, recreation, appropriation and, indeed, editing – ultimately leads to multiple manifestations, not of the same, but of the negotiation, collection and capacities of circulation.

I returned to Iman Issa’s work and words recently, when I found myself translating Moyra Davey’s *Burn the Diaries* (2014) for *Concreta*’s artist’s book series, while also editing her film scripts and transforming them into publications for Artium museum. The act of translating women I admire is an activity that I undertake every summer, since I had the opportunity of inhabiting Haraway’s words and worlds presented in the biopic *Story Telling*

¹⁴⁰ Laura Vallés Vílchez, ‘Un murmullo en el cubo blanco’, *Concreta*, 06 (2015). English version, ‘Murmur in the White Cube’, in *Concreta Online* <<http://editorialconcreta.org/-Online->> [accessed 20 March 2022].

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993).

for *Earthly Survival* (2016). Davey have been making photographs, videos and publications attuned to the overlooked, relational poetic details of everyday life and Haraway have been contemplating the interactions of human and many kinds of critters, especially those called domestic. I translated Fabrizio Terranova's film for the launch of *Concreta 09* (2017), which was dedicated to the 'thinking with care' concept and was co-edited by Laurence Rassel, Nuria Enguita and myself. This issue, which signposts to topics elaborated on in this thesis, included a conversation with Haraway as well as the work of Puig de la Bellacasa and Stengers.¹⁴⁴

In a sense, Haraway and Davey have nurtured this annual summertime practice that had broadened my understanding of editing as an embodied act of listening and caring.¹⁴⁵ 'There is comfort in repetition', Davey reads out loud in one of her films, in which I also encountered Issa's words cited within:

Watching Moyra Davey's film [*Les Goddesses*] I had the feeling that I was confronted with more than just the work of an artist, a photographer, or a woman reflecting on her life and profession. Her often repeated 'I' didn't come across as the 'I' of a therapeutic self-portrait, or the timid and humble 'I' of a self-reflexive gesture. Davey's 'I' felt more desperate, more like a last resort. Perhaps she has known for quite some time that this voice is one of the few, if not only, with which it is still possible to speak.¹⁴⁶

After Issa, Davey goes on and states she is still trying to parse the 'desperate I of last resort', which is why, 'it felt to her like the only viable one. Perhaps it's because it signals a risk is being taken.' Echoing the words of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Davey explains, 'the more honestly you put yourself into the story, the more that story will concern others as well.'

Davey's photograph illustrating this chapter gives continuity to *Els Pressentiments* and shows a page with no content. *Burn the Diaries* begins with some reflections on precisely the idea of the blank page. She writes that 'the white of the paper is an artifice that's replaced the translucency of parchment and the ochre surface of clay tablets; but the ochre and the translucency and the whiteness may all possess more reality than the signs that mar them'.¹⁴⁷ Paper is not simply a medium or support 'discarded' by the mind avidly seeking a story, 'the paper is eloquent, in and of itself', Davey's friend, Alison Strayer, writes in response.¹⁴⁸ Yet Davey struggles with 'the dross of the diary, the compulsion to scribble, *the delusion that we*

¹⁴⁴ Rassel, 'La tormenta perfecta'.

¹⁴⁵ I have also translated the work of Adelita Husni-Bey and Ludovica Carbotto: 'After the Finish Line' (2015) and 'Monowe: A Conversation' (2018), respectively. These works were part of the 'It's Your Turn' exhibition at EACC.

¹⁴⁶ Iman Issa cited in Moyra Davey, *Hemlock Forest* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium, 2020).

¹⁴⁷ Jean Genet cited in Moyra Davey, *Burn the Diaries* (New York: Dancing Foxes Press, 2014), p. 7 [translation mine].

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 38.

can hold on to time. The inversion of this neurosis is the anxiety of being read, the fear of wounding, and, just as strong, the dread of being unmasked'.¹⁴⁹

Returning to the crossing of Cura, and in thinking with Davey and Issa, Blumenberg seems to think that something is off, a 'narcissism of care'.¹⁵⁰ But what is it that's wrong? Is it a narcissism that for some reason must be disassociated from the story, or at least disguised through a captivating narrative? Should something else have taken place that had nothing to do with a reflected image and modelling of a mirroring experience while crossing the river? The hesitation that revolves around the narcissism of care that these authors highlight, relates to a moment of suspension in inhabiting the middle, the gap of the river. As Nowotny continues to explain:

It is as if Cura's movement from one riverside to the other had to come to a halt in the very middle of the river: but only to be drawn into another kind of movement unhinging the components of the initial one in order to make them investigable, interrogable, questionable, newly discernible and criticisable, but also perhaps newly mistakable, re-composable, even re-inventible. It is probably a shared experience that suspending an activity one had been tied to can involve a serious and not easily compensated disengagement from a whole set of hitherto existing motivations and purposes, from the values and meanings that have so far been tightly concatenated with that activity. Hence, what we might imagine to open up in the interruption of Cura's journey is not simply a new set of orientations, a new imaginary, but rather a new field of possible explorations into both the objects and the potentialities of disengagement: the uses and disputed status of pictoriality, the materiality at hand and on the ground, creativity and the ways it is enabled or absolutised, contingency and animation, ordering of high and low and their horizontalisation, the (re- and de-) configurations of the human, and the non-human and the humus, the debates about the origins and properties of common names, the fragile commonality of those involved, concerned, making claims, etc.¹⁵¹

Ultimately, what this fabulation proposes is not a new set of knowledges or practices that replace Cura's old responsibilities, but rather a new epistemology, praxeology,¹⁵² or even ethics that muddle through the 'conditions of engagement as such the "untimely" opening of

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 16 [emphasis mine].

¹⁵⁰ Nowotny, 'The Curator Crosses a River: A Fabulation'.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² 'Individual human beings... do not simply "move", as do unmotivated atoms or molecules; they act, that is, they have goals, and they make choices of means to attain their goals. They order their values or ends in a hierarchy according to whether they attribute greater or lesser importance to them; and they have what they believe is technological knowledge to achieve their goals. All this action must also take place through time and in a certain space. It is on this basic and evident axiom of human action that the entire structure of praxeological economic theory is built. We do not know, and may never know with certainty, the ultimate equation that will explain all electromagnetic and gravitational phenomena; but we do know that people act to achieve goals. Murray N. Rothbard, 'Praxeology as the Method of the Social Sciences', in *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 31.

new temporalities'.¹⁵³ Like 'the *curatela*', which neither represents nor replaces, but rather attempts to build trust, Hyginus' fable offers the possibility of honouring an ethics of relationality beyond the vicious circle of discourse formation as a place of domination. In other words, the re-telling of the story allows us to embrace editing as a means of negotiation – an important concept in my research, in that it deals with the possibility of making visible and tangible precise lived realities of a fragile emerging field of knowledge that is curating.

In thinking of these new temporalities and leaving room for future non-linear narratives, Nowotny finishes his essay borrowing Benjamin's approach to *history* which 'cannot be sought in the riverbed of a process of development' but in 'that of a whirlpool. In such a whirlpool earlier and later events – the prehistory and post-history of an event, or better, of a status – swirl around it.'¹⁵⁴ As described in the 'Field of Knowledge' section, the contemporary condition could also be understood through the lens of non-linear temporalities where past and future are intertwined – leading to the post-representational paradox.¹⁵⁵ Because of how the contemporary overlaps speeds, rhythms and times, the smart phone camera does not only know what you saw but also what you might like to see. It looks through the photographs you have already made, or those that are networked to you, and 'edits' a non-linear history of its own based on your previous choices.¹⁵⁶ Like in the anecdote of the art professor at the beginning of this dissertation, in which students based their projects on the possibilities offered by the video editing menu, present and past are simultaneously combined.

All in all, we don't know whether Cura had a boat or a raft when crossing the river, nor do we know how deep water was agitated... What we know is she may muddle through the current... but, after Haraway, we also learned that 'muddle' teams with company, invites tentacular thinking and incites curiosity.¹⁵⁷ What if Cura managed to cross the river because while in the water she looked attentively at her representation and managed to go beyond her image? What if she discovered a series of critters underneath who helped her stay with the muddy trouble and make it to the other side? What if this 'team-building in motion' made Cura define what an ecology of practices and caring might mean? What if Cura realised that in 'staying with the trouble' of this adventure, she was already interdependent before the soil, the humus, the human being?

'Human as humus has potential, if we could chop and shred human as Homo, the detumescing project of a self-making and planet-destroying CEO', Haraway writes. 'Imagine a conference not on the Future of the Humanities in the Capitalist Restructuring University, but instead on the Power of the Humusities for a Habitable Multispecies Muddle!'¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Diary from August 7, 1931, to the DaMy Death', in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*, ed., Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone and others (London: Belknap Press, 2005), pp. 501–06.

¹⁵⁵ See 'The Post-representation Paradox', p. 41.

¹⁵⁶ Hito Steyerl, 'Politics of Representation'.

¹⁵⁷ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

What both Benjamin's *whirlpool* and Haraway's *muddle* have in common is that they describe a centripetal force that drags everything in, all the way down. In both circular movements – one invoking history and the other collectivity – the discursive surface act as a reparative provocation that allows new knowledge to be situated. This force also allows me to deploy my imaginative capacity to edit the unaccounted part of the story and relate it to curators and 'the *curatela*' as a response to the curatorial understanding of an up-and-coming practice.

In light of the long-lasting criticism of self-reflective work as apparently narcissistic, especially when it is made by women and people of colour, autotheory emerges in the form of minor stories, as a methodological approach grounded in the personal-theoretical.¹⁵⁹ The work of these women, with whom I think with, thanks to my editorial practice at *Concreta*, allows me to rehearse this ethnographic explanatory endeavour to situate myself within the post-representational. What they all share is a desire for self-reflection through the means of editing, storytelling and caring for image production and the poetics of representation.

As Fournier indicates, the history of feminism is, in a sense, a history of autotheory, one that actively seeks to bridge theory and practice, one that is not a memoir but performative life-thinking where, ultimately, as Grant Watson argues, and as this thesis subscribes to, 'how we behave' has to do with how 'poetics emerge from the interstices of words, collectively written and spoken in relation to the long practice and daily work, of cultivating the *bios* as the material for art'.¹⁶⁰

***Concreta* Means Con Crescere**

In this chapter, I draw on my own experience of co-founding a publishing organisation called *Concreta* which, like Cura's figure, also grows by accumulation. This is an autotheorist practice that has allowed me to develop an understanding of citation as community formation and communion in feminist contexts. Intertextual intimacy describes a methodology of reading and editing, of writing and translating, and, ultimately, a procedure of making new work beyond the surface of paper alone.

Following Nowotny's imaginative provocation, this chapter re-narrates my own crossing of *Concreta*'s river since its inception in 2011 until 2021. It disengages from the representational regime in favour of an understanding of mimesis as a mode of attentive doing and knowing. Ultimately, this chapter embraces dependence and conviviality against the grammar of inferiority in order to shed new light on the practice of curating and 'the *curatela*', through the means of editing, and towards an unhurried politics of attention.

¹⁵⁹ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2020).

¹⁶⁰ Grant Watson, *How We Behave* (Amsterdam: If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, 2014).

Thus, this thesis aims to propose a transdisciplinary research model understood in its double meaning as defined by artist Alejandra Riera; that is, as a methodology that leaves room for action, and as an unfinished maquette providing accessibility to said action. This proposal does not only propose to address the social conditions that surround art, but to pay attention to the limits or contours where these conditions occur and allow social transformation to happen.

In a similar fashion, autotheory operates as a transdisciplinary means to move between the worlds of contemporary art, literature and academia, in spaces where practice and research, writing and making, self-reflection and philosophical study often meet, while problematising what constitutes new knowledge. This is a question driven by other movements beyond ecofeminism, including decolonial studies and the interpretive theory of culture known as ‘thick description’. Thick description recognises that certain things escape representation, such as an involuntary twitch or a communicative wink. Their purpose and intention are unphotographable because intention can only be mediated, partially photographed. Despite its complex indexical nature, photography’s relationship with truth has shifted since its invention. The political and technological changes that have taken place since the crisis of visibility ushered in by a fully digital post-9/11 world allow for an understanding of the unphotographable – what is not fully knowable or certain –, to be seen as something unfixable and that requires a certain performativity. After all, photography allows us not only to capture what is before us, but also to transform it and to transform us.¹⁶¹ In this sense, thick description produces layers of meaning to consequently interpret and perform, let’s say, the *Power of the Humanities for a Habitable Multispecies Muddle!*

In Spain, the 2008 economic catastrophe unleashed a legitimacy crisis of the aforementioned ‘Regime of ’78’ that was instituted after the transition to democracy. As already noted, the passing of the dictator in 1975 opened a window of opportunity for social change, though Francoist elites managed to run the process in such a manner that many continuities remained. These continuities include, as the ‘Foreword’ outlines, the weak economic structure of production embedded in a milieu of clientelism. The political class was generally discontent and corruption scandals spread to the monarchy, the parties, the unions and even the cultural institutions – with the IVAM in Valencia one of the most notable cases.¹⁶²

The 15-M *indignados* movement, which emerged on 15 May 2011, gave these corrupted practices which led to a general malaise, a transformative and progressive voice. The chorus ‘they don’t represent us’ was heard across the globe in the heat of the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the many other demonstrations in North Africa, Iran, Greece, Portugal and

¹⁶¹ Gwen Allen, ‘The Unphotographable’, *Artforum*, May (2013).

¹⁶² Consuelo Císcar, Director from 2004 until 2014 and a militant follower of the conservative party known as PP [People’s Party], was involved in a network of money laundering and charged with an alleged crime of prevarication, embezzlement and falsification of documents. Eventually Císcar was acquitted, even though the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor asked for six years in prison. Ferrán Bono, ‘La Audiencia de Valencia absuelve a la exdirectora del IVAM Consuelo Císcar por la compra de obras de Gerardo Rueda’ [The Audiencia de Valencia acquits the former director of IVAM Consuelo Císcar for the purchase of works by Gerardo Rueda], *El País*, 17 Dec 2021 [translation mine].

Iceland. At the same time, the squares that were occupied in different cities of the world did not fit a single image – they were unphotographable as well. There is not one image that captures the way they happened. What was singular was how these movements produced another spatiality and another temporality.

The common-sensical critique to the economic ‘austericide’ led to mass scepticism of the accords that had guaranteed the hegemony of Spain’s economic and political elites for three decades. Yet, despite this, neither the political parties nor the cultural and social movements managed to transform the indignation into a tool for institutional change until the formation of a new party, Podemos, which changed the rules of the game three years later, in 2014.

The 15-M *indignados* movement went from the event – a direct response to the general decline of the great recession and the resulting social malaise – towards different forms of organisational consolidation that allowed the movement to be positioned as an influential counter-power, able to turn the course of austerity policies and impoverishment of life. There were discussions about the ways in which these processes were going to be constituted, a process that ended up being a complex and non-linear exercise, marked by strong intuition and ongoing trial and error that, although mutated, continues until today.

By mobilising affects, the movement offered another tool for collective thinking. The task at hand was considered urgent as it was the transition towards a phase of consolidation and expansion, understanding that in this transit neither more nor less was at stake than the possibility of imagining a concrete horizon of dignity and true democracy in our societies, like in Cura’s fabulation. ‘To create is to resist. To resist is to create’, (re-)claimed the *indignados* protestors, thinking with Stéphane Hessel. These were the two sentences with which this French public intellectual closed his 2010 pamphlet, ‘Indignez-Vous’ [Time for Outrage], a booklet that sold 4,5 million copies and inspired youth uprisings from Spain to Greece. It was an invitation to look after the artistic and political manifestations that the social movement generated. It was also an invitation to imagine the constituent power that the occupiers mobilised. The mobilisations involved a series of actions, ranging from the use of the Internet and communicative virtuosity to the ability to propose new views on the crisis and illuminate unimaginable programmatic horizons within the framework of institutional practices. The mobilisations also proposed the creation of territorial counter-powers, capable of winning concrete victories through the proliferation of stories, slogans, images, desires capable of re-establishing a magical connection between politics, culture and civil society.

Right from its outset, *Concreta* was thought of as a space from which to desaturate the blurred page and decode identities and representations from a practice of embodied criticism. Encompassing *Els Pressentiments*, our Catalan friends from the collective project Espai en blanc presented in ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’, we aimed to think beyond the subject-for-the subject and unlearn to see the world as a *tabula rasa*, in favour of incompleteness and togetherness.

In this regard, *Concreta*'s riverbanks are in the end situated between a global recession and a pandemic and, in crossing between them and looking at its reflection, I confront the narcissism of care and the paradox of representation. In short, I address the grammar of inferiority and the mimetic faculty from my own experience of inhabiting others' words and worlds and make them my own. A contradiction that runs in parallel to the ever-changing attention economy of social and mass media and that requires storytelling – as the next chapter outlines – if we are to address lived experiences and situate knowledge.

We spent a year discussing and defining what *Concreta* could look like and address and how it could be self-organised. We chose paper and web formats to elaborate a proposal that arose from the Valencian community and a trans-generational group of people from educational, institutional, unionist and artistic backgrounds. Yet, *Concreta* did not circumscribe itself to its geographical confines. The specific aim of the publication was to help elaborate a theoretical frame for research into the image – inside and outside academia – with a special focus on the photographic image and art history, yet grounded in all the disciplines of knowledge that understand the image as a place of friction and anxiety, as a structure of meaning and a dialectical force field.

As presented in the previous section, the name of the journal, *Concreta*, refers to images that mediate between what is visible and what is said, between experience and discourse, between memory and context. The verb *concretise* means 'to combine several things to form a unity'.¹⁶³ *Concreta* refers to what is real and can be perceived with the senses. *Concreta* names what is expressed precisely or specifically and is the noun that designates real beings, or beings that can be represented as such. Like the whirlpool and the muddle, *Concreta* often goes all the way down. Faced with antonyms such as sketching, idealising, dreaming or generalising, *Concreta* proposes to get closer, and meanwhile tries to situate and understand its own disorder, establishing and discovering connections and relations, re-looking at certain images to go beyond 'what has already been written, what has already been done, or what already exists and, consequently, giving it the power to project other shadows.'¹⁶⁴ As a periodical dedicated to theory production, I argue that *Concreta* has not only the capacity, but also the responsibility to approach things differently.

CONCRETA in Futura font also refers to concrete poetry, the work of language converted into an image/thought where its materiality unfolds poetically in space, and where the form and content act as a 'fictitious unity' that could be lived as a whole – akin to the 'contemporary', if we invoke Osborne's definition; to the curatorial and 'the *curatela*', if we think with Cura. As the following section explains, it was a movement responding to abstraction, naming it otherwise.

Concreta presented the notion of 'editing' as the set of dilemmas and decisions taken when creating a fiction, when reviewing a historical fact or when bringing images and documents

¹⁶³ Enguita, 'Editorial'.

¹⁶⁴ Garcés, 'La rebelión de los intervalos'.

together, that is, as a way of positioning and breaking with the linear forms of the narrative. Editing as an image construction technique, but also as an instrument for analysing the mechanisms that define, add value, order, classify, reproduce and distribute images to create contemporary discourse. As the art historian Carl Einstein already wrote in the 1930s, images ‘work’, they are not an end of a process or a fossil, but the continuous restlessness of the process in action.¹⁶⁵

In our view – the view of the editors – images display a set of unstable, reversible and dialectical relationships. We understand them as crossroads of functions, as temporary presences, and instead of objects they put in motion processes. Several contemporary theorists, including Mieke Bal and W.T.J. Mitchell, have pointed out that the ‘image acts as a meeting place, but also as a space of translation’, between language and vision.¹⁶⁶ A theory about the image would then constitute ‘a curious hybrid, a discourse made up of aesthetics and other branches of philosophy, in addition to literary criticism, linguistics, the social and natural sciences, psychology, history, political thought and religion.’¹⁶⁷

In addition, concrete poetry establishes a parallel with the various techniques of visual montage that emerged in Europe in the era of the avant-garde by filmmakers such as Sergei M. Eisenstein or artists such as John Heartfield or Hannah Höch. Both manifestations, concrete poetry and photomontage, constitute forms of social protest, weapons of commitment. Unlike its etymology, which ironically resonates with that of capitalism, *Concreta* did not grow through wealth accumulation, but by creating a fragile yet self-sufficient independent organisation. The three financial legs supporting the project were sales and subscriptions, advertisements – primarily from galleries and museums – and after three years, a grant from the Ministry of Culture for periodical cultural production.

As this exciting although precarious project did not offer a means to make a living, I decided to move back to London, to continue the learning process and look for a job. The only professional endeavour I found in my hometown was as a coordinator of an art centre, a place where I was ‘hired’ twice – as a fake guard and as a production manager, but in both cases a victim of false (self-)employment. The political inability to understand and update organisational structures is part of the systemic problem most cultural institutions have. Upon my arrival in London, I happily joined the V&A bookstore team, so I continued being surrounded by books and singing along with David Bowie ‘ch-ch-changes ... time may change me, but I can’t trace time!’ in this pivotal exhibition, while making my own publications in my own time.

This study is, most likely, the consequence of my own resistance to futurity and an engagement with research as artistic and curatorial practice. Until I applied for a grant in Curatorial Studies and joined the RCA three years later, many lessons were learned from this

¹⁶⁵ Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque (1931-32)* (Paris: Éditions des Chroniques du Jour, 1934), p. 34.

¹⁶⁶ Mieke Bal, *Conceptos viajeros en las humanidades: Una guía de viaje* [Traveling Concepts in the Humanities: A Travel Guide] (Murcia: Cendeac, 2009), p. 81 [translation mine].

¹⁶⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Teoría de la imagen* (Madrid: AKAL- Estudios Visuales, 2009), p. 193 [translation mine].

simultaneous experience as a Southern European translocated migrant editing a Spanish speaking project from afar, some of which informed this research.

Editor-as-Curator. Hypertextuality and the Destruction of the Author

Concretely, A Conceptual Paradox

Concreta increasingly shaped into an open-ended, intuitive and meticulous archive rooted as much in scholarly research and sober reflection as in gut-based feminist understanding and critical happenstance to which I constantly return as a toolbox. So far, we have published 19 issues and 16 books, commissioned tens of new web and paper-based works, and curated public programmes in collaboration with other institutions in various physical and virtual locations and languages. Meanwhile, it has consolidated its self-organisational strategy. Here, I reflect upon those moments that have constituted a halt in the river – an interval disrupting, shaping and nurturing my daily practice and my immersion in the gap.

In taking a position, my autotheorist work makes space for exchange between subjective experience, critical reflection and contextualised consideration. As a writer, my first contribution to the journal was in the first issue in Spring 2013, for which I also wrote the Foreword.¹⁶⁸ This writing was published two years before my reflection on Issa's work and one year before Garcés's essay. The first issue of *Concreta* 01 (2013) contained a number of materials reflecting on the idea of 'displacement', understood not only as a transfer, movement and oscillation, but also as an aesthetic and political positioning within contemporary art practice that explores territory as a shared place for commonality, dialogue and conflict, as well as a means for searching through different times, places and affects. As I wrote at the time:

As a set of ideas, experiences, and stories, *Concreta* opens up the possibility of carrying out a literary exercise that is not linear in time or space. Not considering itself a news/reviews magazine, the publication allows different paths to be traced at different rhythms and in between writings, generating a movement of ideas that takes shape from the intervals emerging from the development of the content itself. From the territory to the body, and from the word to the image, *Concreta* is conceived as a journey in itself.¹⁶⁹

In this sense, I share a 'conceptual intimacy' with the perils Nowotny highlights.¹⁷⁰ Mostly, if we curators are to be considered the modern manifestations of Cura, crossing rivers and even oceans, producing out of what is out there and drawing upon existing images of homo and

¹⁶⁸ Laura Vallés Vilchez, 'Desplazamientos y desalojos' [Displacement and Evictions], *Concreta*, 01 (2013) [translation mine].

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Clémentine Deliss, *The metronome or backwards translation*, Nos. 4–6 (1999).

upon what is conceived of as imagination. Yet, challenging that moment of self-reflection that is meant to be kept out of storytelling because, as we noted, it could bear witness either to the confines of the curatorial or to the somehow inadequate traces of the hedonism inscribed in it.¹⁷¹

Well, let's see if we find those lines and traces with the help of the practitioners who problematise the very notion of milieu, particularly in its first meaning as a habitat or 'medium'. In the next chapter, 'Storytelling (Dissenting within)', milieu as a social environment will allow the research to further explore what Stengers calls an 'ecology of practices'.

Within the framework of the first *Concreta*, Jean-François Chevrier introduced the notion of 'territorial intimacy' as an experience of social space that does not have to do with the domestic versus public, but with a place from which new subjectivity emerges.¹⁷² The author claimed the need for a 'poetic economy' in documentary thinking – an idea to which I will come back in the 'Caring (Thinking for)' chapter, as it was rooted in the 'Myths Of the Near Future' biennial project. Yet, for the sake of the present chapter, I will focus on the lessons learned from two essays that have informed my current autotheoretical work of the subject at hand, that is, editing in relation to curating. Experiences and knowledges emerging from these practices allow me to process particular questions and ideas, both personal and philosophical, weaving a life textile in which the self and life become material, and through which to explore and to test and position different arguments against different forms of evidencing, whether anecdotal, political, social, art historical, literary and popular.¹⁷³

On the one hand, I will look at the philologist and poet Esteban Pujals' article 'Lo suizo y los sucio: La poesía concreta en perspectiva' [The Swiss and the Dirty: Concrete Poetry in Perspective] (2013).¹⁷⁴ This essay addresses the trans-linguistic, nomadic and international framework of visual poetry of the 1950s and their printed matter, including the magazine/group *Noigandres*. On the other hand, I will reflect upon my own essay 'Aspen: the magazine in a box (1965–1971)' (2013) and the conceptual art of the 1960s. The former argued that concrete poetry put forward a pre-semiotic conception of language and thinking that allowed me to understand artists' emancipatory aspirations to access a fuller reality. The latter helped me tackle the representational within the networks that it is embedded into, which led to the post-representational paradox and the curatorial.

These essays provided another approach to the practice of curating because they also revealed what 'situated knowledges' anticipated – how knowledge, information and familiarity are

¹⁷¹ Nowotny, 'The Curator Crosses a River: A Fabulation'.

¹⁷² Jean-François Chevrier, 'Íntimidad territorial y espacio público' [Territorial Intimacy and Public Space], *Concreta*, 01 (2013), pp. 4–21 [translation mine].

¹⁷³ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*.

¹⁷⁴ Esteban Pujals, 'Lo suizo y los sucio: La poesía concreta en perspectiva' [The Swiss and the Dirty: Concrete Poetry in Perspective], *Concreta*, 01 (2013) [translation mine].

fundamentally conditional and necessarily mediated. These are lessons that ultimately address some of the questions the prologue raises.

How do we deal with what saturates the space of our action and our imagination? Do we need to invoke the power of the blank page as a common ground from which to rebuild our creative and political freedom? If we are entangled in perpetual unfinished proximity without blank pages as a matrix of subjectivity, how do we achieve critical distance? Can the practice of curating and the curatorial contribute to this accomplishment yet to come? Towards an unhurried politics of attention? Towards an embodied criticism?¹⁷⁵

Concrete Poetry / *Noigandres*

In the Spanish and Portuguese speaking worlds, *concrete* has meant at different times a range of different things – baroque and neo-baroque, art’s ability to condense images and language or form. However, what concrete and conceptual art shared apart from the intrinsic paradox that I am about to present, was a negotiation with displacement, movement and circulation that has informed this research.

In the 1950s, the encounters, exhibitions and printed matter created by concrete poets also referred to a trans-linguistic and nomadic context. Concrete poetry constituted a movement of ideas and materials that was disseminated internationally with great efficiency. Its internationalism, however, was paradoxically achieved through military technology for communications developed during the World War II years. This circulation allowed the simultaneous development of concrete poetry in Brazil and Europe. The movement extended north towards Mexico and the United States and was complemented by the post-colonial influences of the period.

After Mallarmé’s ‘Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hazard’ [A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance], first published in the magazine *Cosmopolis* (1897), critique of representation followed certain poetic manifestations of cubism, cubofuturism and Soviet constructivism in the 1910s and 1920s. Drawing on these experiences, and to some extent encompassing subsequent contemporary proposals for communication theory, the writings of Marshall McLuhan and structural linguistics, projects such as the Brazilian magazine *Noigrandes* and Öyvind Fahlström’s manifesto were simultaneously presented in 1953: ‘KNEAD the material of language: that is what will justify a label such as concrete’. As Pujals explains, this movement was accompanied, often in the work of the poets themselves, by a parallel investigation into the sonic materiality of the verbal medium. Fahlström was one of the figures whose articulation were vital to this discussion. In his view, repetition was intimately connected to the body’s own cadences, allowing us to recognise something we

¹⁷⁵ See ‘Foreword. “The Rebellion of the Intervals”’, p. 9.

already know. He thought that rhythm was music's most elemental, physically immediate and tangible medium.¹⁷⁶

Noigandres is a Provençal word of unknown meaning that appears in *Canto XX* by Ezra Pound and suggests the *opacity* and *interpretability* of tradition. The very name of the magazine already presented an interest in reflecting on the Anglo-American modern poetics. The members of the group – which artists such as Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica were part of – saw themselves in a genealogy that included James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, authors who had created modes of writing that aimed at enhancing the materiality of language.

The adoption of the adjective 'concrete' expresses the relationship between the intentions of the poets of the 1950s and those of earlier artists who had centred their work on the notion of a non-mimetic, autonomous and self-reflective plasticity. Paradoxically, the value of autonomy was constitutive of the new self-sufficient identity of painting, and after Alfred Barr, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, a sign of painting's parasitic indebtedness to other disciplines such as music. Kandinsky's trans-medial body of work represented this reality.¹⁷⁷

Throughout 1954 and 1955, the poets of the *Noigandres* group produced their first concrete poems while developing a network with other poets, musicians and artists who shared aspects of their perspective on writing. These relationships made possible the 'Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta', which was inaugurated in São Paulo in 1956 and which travelled to Rio de Janeiro, where it was exhibited in 1957. The exhibition included paintings, poems expanded in poster and sculpture format, with reproductions of the works in issue 20 of the magazine *AD: arquitetura e decoração*, which served as the catalogue of the exhibition. The exhibition was reviewed in the national press, and the controversy it provoked led to an invitation to specific poets to collaborate in the Sunday supplement of the *Jornal do Brasil*. For just over a year, the members of the *Noigandres* group were able to not only publish their poetic projects in a national platform, but also place it within the international context of the avant-garde plastic, literary and musical proposals that they themselves curated. They were able to construct genealogies and elaborate an eclectic assemblage of aesthetic, poetic, cybernetic and communication theory and semiotics that was transmitted directly to the readers of the journal.

By reducing and fragmenting their typographic material, the concrete poets aspired to make the materiality of the text perceptible as a written texture paradoxically free of codes, in which author and reader could meet 'beyond' – or rather more 'here', insofar as this visuality was conceived as present, immediate, directly accessible – of practice and learning. By way of spacing, dispersing, re-arranging, crossing out, superimposing their sentences, words and

¹⁷⁶ Öyvind Fahlström, 'Hipy Papy Bthhithdth Thuthda Bthuthdy: A Manifesto for Concrete Poetry' (1953), in Antonio Sergio Bessa, ed., *Mary Ellen Solt: Toward a Theory of Concrete Poetry*, *OEI*, no. 51 (2010), p. 258.

¹⁷⁷ Caught in the logic of autonomy and convinced that they were approaching the essential specificity of writing, the concrete poets proceeded to emulate painting in perfectly analogous terms to those that had presided over the emulation of music by poets and painters in the period 1885–1925.

letters, poets neutralised the linguistic code and opened up a visual space for reading that escaped normative mediation. With these notions of writing and editing that resonate with the earlier mentioned debate revolving around representation and mimesis, they enacted a return to poetry as an open environment of spontaneous communication.

Yet, it was eventually the publication of *De la grammatologie* [Of Grammatology] (1967) by Jacques Derrida that dismantled the possibility of the autonomy of the written medium, conceived by concrete poets as the opening up of an aesthetic space of visual fruition.¹⁷⁸ Derrida analysed the concept of *sign*, which for Ferdinand de Saussure had the two separate components of sound and meaning, the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’. For De Saussure, language and writing were two distinct systems of signs, with the second existing with the sole purpose of representing the first.

In contrast, for Derrida written symbols were legitimate signifiers on their own and they should not be considered as secondary to oral speech. After Derrida, the ‘neutrality’ of the material and visible dimension of writing – the presence of graphic form to which concrete poets sacrificed verbatim – turned out to be as illusory as the immediate presence of abstract painting itself. Instead of constituting the realm of immediate perceptibility governed by the positive values of adequacy and similarity, visuality revealed itself as a terrain of semiotic difference, of absence and mediation.

In *Women in Concrete Poetry; 1959–1979*, however, Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre write that ‘the tension of word things in space-time’ defined *Noigrandes*. Yet they remind that women in this field were usually overlooked because they disengaged themselves from the task of making prescriptive pronouncements. ‘Instead, they focused on multiplying the possibilities opened up by attending to language’s materiality, and on challenging the very constructs that support the binaries divorcing a poem’s physical properties from its more subjective ones’.¹⁷⁹

In Pujals’s view, it is only after the destruction of the linearity identified with the negative qualities associated with the tradition of writing, and the habit of reading, that it will be possible to exercise a properly creative or liberated practice of writing in the visual order that was inaugurated. Insofar as it represents the aspiration of its authors to transcend a semiotic medium to access another, conceived as not complying with a code, concrete poetry constitutes a movement in writing similar to that which took place in art towards abstraction. The peculiar nature of linguistic materials, together with the fact that movement developed precisely during the peak years of structuralism, determined the brief chronology of concrete poetry itself, since most of their authors had evolved towards other poetics.

Although concrete poetry has come to institute an apparently classical or timeless style by some of its practitioners, it constitutes a point of transition between two understandings of

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* [Of Grammatology] (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

¹⁷⁹ Alex Balgiu and Mónica de la Torre, *Women in Concrete Poetry; 1959–1979* (New York: Primary Information, 2020), p. 12.

language with regards to mediation and curation. Between these two areas – that of ‘readability’, perceived confusingly as oppressive, and that of ‘visibility’, considered as fetishist and emancipatory – as noted, concrete poetry constitutes the artistic expression of a pre-semiotic conception of language and thought that aspires to directly access and embody a fuller reality. As in ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’, the never empty blank page functions as vehicle to displace attention and as a method to think about the possibility of an embodied criticism, giving pointers towards the paradox that emerges in the field of representation and criticality. In this sense, the word-image question would be particularly important to women because, as Mirella Bentivoglio writes within the context of the Venice Biennale of 1978, for which she curated ‘Materialization of Language’, the first exhibition in the Biennale ever to be devoted to women artists,

they’ve been rendered immaterial (dare I say dematerialized) by the ‘abstract sublimity’ of their public image, paralleled by their public absence; privately confined to daily, exclusive contact with the material world, women are now using every fiber of their beings to oppose a world render unreal (dare I say ‘derealized’) by repetitive mechanisms.¹⁸⁰

Conceptual and Minimal Art / *Aspen*

The decade of the 1960s, however, witnessed a cultural paradigm shift that paved the way for a new context in which what would come to be known as post-modernism could flourish. Though the stylistic features of post-modernism did not generally become manifest in all their plurality until the 1980s, it was in the 1960s when new ways of understanding the world began to emerge in all forms, through which a new visual order was inaugurated. There was no longer any talk of a unique discourse or a linear history. Rather it was a question of trying to dismantle the hegemonic ideas constructed from positions of power and replacing them with plural conceptions based on the idea that there is no such thing as an axiomatic truth, but instead a wide panoply of relative cultural constructs, which were dependent on their context – pointing towards the practice of curating and the curatorial.

Drawing on previous ‘concrete experiences’, some artists in this period employed language as a key visual device: members of Fluxus, or artists later identified with pop art, conceptual art or minimalism were examples. These were some of the movements that used concrete experiences as a tool to question their surrounding environs, because, ultimately, it was the milieu-as-a-medium what was at stake as we came to understand later.

Aspen ‘the magazine in a box’ came into being against this backdrop, in December 1965. Phyllis Johnson, the publisher of the magazine, was a regular visitor to Aspen, Colorado, a city which had become the mecca for skiing in the USA after World War II, and a frequent watering hole for intellectuals and academics. During the 15th annual International Design Conference – IDCA held at the Aspen Institute, in which creatives and entrepreneurs engaged

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

in a collective rethinking of configurations of the new world, Johnson conceived her own personal vision of the magazine which she would put into practice.

Aspen was not to be a run-of-the-mill journal. On the contrary, as the editor explained in the letter opening the first issue, ‘in calling it a “magazine”, we are harking back to the original meaning of the word as “a storehouse, a cache, a ship laden with stores”. That’s what we want each issue to be.’¹⁸¹ The word ‘magazine’ etymologically comes from the French *magasin*, the Italian *magazzino*, or the Arabic ‘makhazin’, which in turn gave rise to the Spanish *almacén* or warehouse.

Aspen was a magazine in a box. Every issue was a totally new experience conceived by a guest designer and/or editor who would develop their personal vision for the contents. A particular issue might contain posters, flip books, postcards, flexi-disc records, kites, newspapers, puzzles, letters, and even super-8 films. The subscriber to *Aspen* never knew exactly when to expect the magazine, nor what to expect inside it. Initially it was to be published every two months, but it ended up being released at random intervals. They were also spasms (as *Els Pressentiments* currently are) with a total of ten issues in the period spanning 1965 and 1971.

Aspen challenged the viewer: there was no linear structure, nor did it follow any set order. The magazine user was free to start wherever they liked and, to do so, they had to interact with the object by opening it and then spread out, fold, assemble, smell or listen to countless elements and items. The publication embraced advertising as a medium and appropriated everyday object with the goal of popularising the very notion of art. Reading the magazine was a multi-sensorial experience. It operated in fact like a collage of contents, not far removed from the theoretical stance adopted by Marshall McLuhan with regards to the mass media to which Johnson dedicated an issue of the magazine, after a tentative approach to the initial idea in previous issues and the radical changed the ‘Fab Issue’ Andy Warhol created: a kind of time capsule for a movement at this moment of upheaval. *Aspen* No. 4 included an advance from McLuhan’s celebrated book *The Medium is the Massage* published just a few months afterwards, as well as a piece by John Cage called *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*, containing a mosaic of ideas by the artist.

In his essay *S/Z* (1970), Roland Barthes developed the idea of *hypertextuality* and argued that he imagined a ‘text composed by blocks of words (or images), linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, node, network, web, and path’.¹⁸² Implicit in the idea of hypertext is the notion of fragmented, composed, and linked text. To a certain extent, it expands the multiple experience, bringing us closer to how nowadays one reads digital interfaces like tablets or smartphones. Like in concrete poems, the articulation and arrangement of digital media

¹⁸¹ Phyllis Johnson, ‘*Aspen: the magazine in a box*’ (1965).

¹⁸² Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2002 [1970]).

reveal a semantic motivation after the destruction of linearity associated with the tradition of writing and the habit of reading.

In the double issue of *Aspen* Nos. 5+6 (1967), published three years before *S/Z*, Barthes already proposed the displacement of representation towards attention by thinking about the elimination of author-God, as a modernist individual and coherent voice to be idolised. Instead, Barthes would favour a second type of author capable of dissolving into a sea of quotations, relations and entanglements. With this double issue, for which O'Doherty commissioned the aforementioned text by Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (called 'The Destruction of the Author' at the time), but also 'The Aesthetics of Silence' by Susan Sontag and 'Style and the Representation of Historical Time' by George Kubler, the idea of the box as a multi-sensorial and hypertextual time capsule reached a level of complexity that it would not be matched in the remaining issues.

One of the reasons for this was the dwindling funding, and from the following issue there were no advertisements inside the magazine. Artist Brian O'Doherty was responsible for putting together and designing the content, an editorial project he edited and curated over the course of a year. In it, he consciously developed the first conceptual exhibition within a cardboard container – laying the foundations of his forthcoming series of articles and subsequent book: *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*.¹⁸³ This little museum, indirectly dedicated to Mallarmé, included works that signalled a transition from minimalism to conceptual art.

One of the theses developed by Barthes and Foucault with regards to the death of the author argued for the independence of the spectator in relation to the work, allowing language to articulate itself through its multifarious interpretations. *Aspen* became an art object that spoke about art itself. Even though Johnson came from mass media and the daily press, and despite it change in direction, 'the magazine in a box' ended up being an example of the pluralistic language of the moment. Yet, an evident change in public mood took place at the same time as Johnson developed her personal concept of the magazine. As she said in the editorial for the first issue, her primary goal was to return to 'all the civilised pleasures of modern living, based on the Greek idea of the "whole man".'¹⁸⁴ In a process similar to what happened with the idealist proposals of the hippie movement against the Vietnam war, *Aspen* was shown to be a naïve and utopian creative approach to the diffusion of artistic expressions, quickly swallowed up by the mass media on which the magazine itself had heaped flattering praise, increasingly frenetic in its functioning, removed from thoughtful reflection and centred on capital.

¹⁸³ The articles were published in *Artforum* 1976 and collected into a book in 1984. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1984 [1976]).

¹⁸⁴ Johnson, 'Aspen: the magazine in a box'.

The Afterlife of Representation

Arguably, present day curatorial discourse is heavily indebted to conceptual art. The processes of ‘demystification’ that artists in close collaboration with curators generated in the late 1960s, such as *Aspen* Nos. 5+6 (1967) reveals, established a shift in the conditions of art production that is often referred to as the ‘linguistic turn’. Conceptual art’s demystification of ‘the hidden structures of the art world’, including the role of the museum, the role of the collector, and the influence of the exhibition space on the production of artworks, anticipated a ‘curatorial turn’ within the practice and discourse of art in the early 1990s.

This turning point is not only evidenced by the recent development of the practice of exhibition-making into a more discursive and professional discipline, institutionalised in educational and training programmes, but also by the large amount of critical and scholarly literature produced – particularly in the English language – on the methods, theories, and histories of contemporary exhibition-making, including this thesis. But, as already noted, the same can’t be said of the context of Spain. While the study of and writing on exhibitions and curating has come to dominate the general art discourse since the 1990s, it has also forced the academic discipline of art history to broaden its scope. In this sense, instead of accepting this scarcity as a fixed reality, *Concreta* proposes to look at it as an opportunity to learn from recent histories.

‘For years people have been concerned with what goes on inside the frame. Maybe there’s something going on outside,’ Lucy R. Lippard writes, in thinking with Robert Barry, in *Concreta* 06 (2015).¹⁸⁵ From the desire to overflow the blank page comes the approach to the notion of exhibition, its contexts and possible assemblages. Not only is Issa’s understanding of what a display might mean included in this issue of the magazine paying attention to the afterlife of representation – as presented at the beginning of this chapter –, but so is Lippard’s founding principles of curatorial practice from the late 1960s. *Concreta* 06 includes a conversation with *Arena*’s editor, Villaespesa, who laid the foundations of what would later become ‘Across the Sand’, the exhibition display the following section presents. At different rhythms, these practitioners questioned, diverted and reconsidered the institutional framework over and over again.

In ‘The Archive as Life After Life’, Peter Osborne points out precisely how, in recent decades the emphasis has shifted from objects to the experiences of the public and less attention has been given to the progressive dismantling of the notion of collection, archive and document. Between experiences and their processes of documentation, the ironic historical achievement of conceptual art was to demonstrate the inherent requirement of aesthetics as a necessary, but radically insufficient component of the work of art. As Osborne states it was a repetition of Duchamp: a repetition of the necessary erosion of ‘aesthetic indifference’.¹⁸⁶ Conceptual art demonstrates how aesthetics is part of the ontological

¹⁸⁵ Lucy Lippard, ‘Comisariar siguiendo los números’ *Concreta*, 06 (2015).

¹⁸⁶ Peter Osborne, ‘El archivo como vida después de la vida’ [The Archive as Life After Life], *Concreta*, 06 (2015), p. 47. The English version of this essay, ‘The Afterlife of the Archive’, was published three years later in *Dialectics of taste and non-taste* London: Routledge, 2018).

specificity of art yet fails to explain it. The aesthetic concept confuses the necessary appearance of art with the foundation of its autonomous, and therefore infinite production of meaning – something that is historically ‘relational’ rather than a given, in an aesthetic sense. All in all, its infinite proliferation of forms of artistic materials, and its inclusion of both preparatory and documentary materials in the conception of the work of art, conceptual art has demonstrated the radically ‘distributive’ character of the unity of the work. In other words, each work is distributed through a space-time totality – potentially infinite but conceptually defined – while in practice each work is finite and situated.

This is a learning outcome that stresses the connection between the distributive nature of an artwork and its conceptual situatedness related to the crisis of representation and criticality this research tackles. The concept of art only acquires its unity in retrospect, therefore this unity ‘is not abstract’, but rather *concrete*, it ‘presupposes concrete analyses, not as evidence or examples, but as its own condition’.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, I argue that conceptual art pointed towards a post-representational turn. After representation, the radical emptiness of aesthetics itself operates as an ontological support, because it acquires its meaning always in a *relational* and *contextual* way, whatever the form of its materiality. The radical emptiness of aesthetics itself forces us experiment with the mechanisms that bridge experiences, archives and processes of documentation. The radical emptiness of aesthetics itself forces the act of mediation.

It is not by chance that the last quarter of the twentieth century marked the emergence of ‘the body’ as a key heuristic in cultural theory and philosophy.¹⁸⁸ As ‘The Rebellion of the Intervals’ explores, the terminology of ‘bodies’ has in recent years gained traction in activist discourses and everyday forms of cultural speech.¹⁸⁹ Yet aren’t these the preoccupations of ‘the *curatela*’ inherited? If, as Garcés points out, the question of attention opens up a paradoxically active and passive field of reciprocity – you must take care of what in turn asks to be cared for, can we negotiate the set of conditions that define and defy the alienation and the agency of the audience?

As Chantal Goergel explains in her essay ‘The Museum as Metaphor’, the marriage between the museum, exhibition-making and the press – as well as the department store – comes to light in the industrial times of the nineteenth century, during which they intertwine and operate as capitalist machines of ‘symbolic appropriation’.¹⁹⁰ Aligning with this argument, here I trace the paradoxical and ethical question that becomes apparent from an up-and-coming cultural economy that combines value systems and systems of thinking, with particular attention to interaction, feedback effects and affects. De Certeau makes the case for the micro-resistance of ordinary people facing the socio-political order. He thinks that a

¹⁸⁷ Adorno referenced in Osborne, ‘El archivo como vida después de la vida’.

¹⁸⁸ Marina Vishmidt, ‘Cuerpos en el espacio. En los extremos de la vulnerabilidad’.

¹⁸⁹ As Vishmidt explains this is a terminology that speaks, primarily in the English language, ‘of bodies as subjects (“we are/there are bodies”) rather than as objects (“we/they have bodies”)’. Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Chantal Goergel, ‘The Museum as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France’, in *Museum Culture*, ed., Irit Rogoff and Daniel J. Sherman (London: Routledge, 2004).

consumer is not only a passive and alienated being, as Marxism would have it, but rather someone who can act the same way a reader does in front of a book – in an active manner faced with the manufactured, or the order of an exhibition, and modify its semiotic functions.¹⁹¹

Undeniably, the dynamics between exhibition and documentation of art have led to experimental practices in both the artistic and museological fields. The post-conceptual ontology of contemporary art has thus developed not only through the critical weight and dissemination of new artistic practices, but also through changes in the social space of their presentation, such as the museum, which also aspires to engage and create audience agency. Yet, the museum's constitutive categories – from the collection and its conservation to documentation, classification and curation – have been put into question, along with the relations between them – leading towards an institutional crisis. The causes of this process have been political, economic and technological, and the stories of *Noigrandres* and *Aspen* are a clear example of their combined effects, which have been structural in character. Much of the literature that has discussed the changes has tended to focus on the changing role of the curator and the growing importance of the temporary exhibition, relative to the display of collections and printed matter within the recently inaugurated post-representational realm.

The conventional distinction between the collection, on the one hand, and the document and archive on the other, has been progressively broken down – a process that consequently has implications for art practices and their public presentation. Boris Groys, for instance, has proposed that we are witnessing an epochal shift from artwork to art documentation in the age of biopolitics, in which the proliferation of the documentation of art events produces a new kind of bio-art, which makes such documentation literally live.¹⁹² Under that scenario, the artwork disappears: the work of the installation of documentation is no longer to make art, but the reverse: the art of making living things out of artificial ones.

Yet, insofar as art institutions continue to exist, in their specific distinctiveness from other kinds of cultural spaces, what is presented within them 'lives' there (rather than being interned) only through their ongoing production and critical instantiation of that specific difference, however ironic, dialectical or purely differential the difference may be. The question is thus not how does documentation come alive, bio-politically, in the museum. But arguably, what does the 'becoming art' of documentation tell us about the historical ontology of the artwork, and its relations to the practices of editing, storytelling and caring in particular.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ José Díaz Cuyás and Dean MacCannell, 'Arte, turismo y autenticidad', *Concreta*, 10 (2018) [translation mine].

¹⁹² Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation', in *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2008).

¹⁹³ Osborne, 'El archivo como vida después de la vida'.

In *Concreta* 06 (2015), Villaespesa expresses her position insofar as her understanding of the hidden structures of the art world as lived in the 1990s remains, to a certain extent, the same within the current post-representational turn:

We did not have a political programme, but we did have a political attitude of continuing trying to effect change. Collaboration didn't begin from a working and hierarchical relationship, but from the horizontal coexistence of affects (which are hatched in the recognition of resistance) and effects (which are sought with the projects for the mobilisation of thought and the public sphere we inhabit). This affect-effect game sums up my trajectory [and relationship with BNV Producciones] — a double direction similar to the one that links curating and production without hierarchies. Yet, despite the years that have passed, it is still not understood, especially by the institutions and due, I think, to certain immobility. Today the institutions do have the infrastructure to carry out production, so it makes sense not to outsource it. But then, we return to the same point: it is not just about solving technical issues, but about other types of frameworks, which have to do with the notion of agency.¹⁹⁴

Unceasingly asking what kind of questioning the curatorial enables us to generate beyond the blank page, the following section introduces two projects, both having taken place in 2019–20 in Spain and Germany, respectively, as I wrote these pages. The first project is 'Across the Sand', an exhibition I curated in three episodes and that takes the ideas presented in the previous pages into several cultural institutions in Spain. The second project is 'A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces' a performative lecture that gives continuity to 'It's Your Turn'—the exhibition I curated at EACC, responding to my first experience with contemporary art in the 1990s.¹⁹⁵ 'Across the Sand' attempted to 'perform the archive' by drawing on research into post-representational curatorial practices, addressing the afterlife of two magazines from 1989, whose editors-as-curators, Villaespesa and Eraso, proposed a specific way of understanding mediation. 'A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces' recuperates the definition of publication as 'making public' and introduces a set of questions revolving around the idea of editing as an archival bodily experience.

The formats of the next two, and final, sections vary in style and content. While 'Performing the Archive in "Across the Sand"' is an essay that was published in the first issue of Artium's new museum periodical *AMA*,¹⁹⁶ 'A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces' includes a transcript of the recorded performative lecture on the day.

¹⁹⁴ Fernando López García, Mar Villaespesa and Tamara Díaz Bringas, 'Alianzas afectivas, efectos de excepción'.

¹⁹⁵ See 'New Institutional Order', p. 38.

¹⁹⁶ Laura Vallés Vilchez, 'Across the Sand', *AMA*, 00 (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Artium, 2021).

Editing Spaces Beyond the Mirror. How Words World Worlds

Performing the Archive in ‘Across the Sand’

I.

‘Across the Sand’ is a project that took the form of an exhibition, displayed in several episodes at Azkuna Zentroa (Bilbao), Museo Artium (Vitoria-Gasteiz), and CentroCentro (Madrid) between 2019 and 2020.¹⁹⁷ It was also presented as a workshop, exchange, text, disagreement, assemblage, action and confinement.¹⁹⁸

The project puts into dialogue two periodical publications founded in 1989: *Zehar* (‘across’ in Basque), the newsletter of the San Sebastian art centre Arteleku, and *Arena* (‘sand’ in Spanish), a magazine created in Seville and printed in Madrid. ‘Across the Sand’ also put in conversation Eraso and Villaespesa, the respective directors of *Zehar* and *Arena*. The trajectories of these two women, at different speeds and arising from different contexts, would become intertwined over the years, weaving a concrete and situated way of understanding mediation. Both are part of a story to be told that borrows from a specific political, socio-economic, and cultural context – what is widely termed ‘the second Spanish transition’ – which began with the socialist victory of 1982.¹⁹⁹ These two editors engage with the story of invisible practices in the incipient genealogies of curating and editing, of which ‘Across the Sand’ highlights the importance.

Embracing a feminist position, ‘Across the Sand’ advocates ‘a relational way of thinking [...] to think-with’, following Puig de la Bellacasa,²⁰⁰ to create ‘new patterns from previous multiplicities, intervening by *adding layers of meaning* rather than by the mere deconstruction of, or adaptation to, previous categories’.²⁰¹ This type of ‘thick description’, to borrow from Geertz, which sediments and rejects the seduction to dismantle networks and is disassociated from an attempt to re-articulate them, has as its starting point my experience as editor of the *Concreta* magazine.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ ‘Across the Sand’ was presented within the framework of the open call Komisario Berriak, whose objective is to facilitate the investigation of mediation projects that address the historical and narrative dimension of the curatorial.

¹⁹⁸ During the opening day in Bilbao, on 19 September 2019, the artist Inmaculada Salinas carried out a performative action entitled ‘Manifiesto Against the Chair # 1’, an intervention that was modified in each of the iterations of ‘Across the Sand’. Likewise, the con_text workshop entitled ‘Editing curating’ took place in collaboration with consonni, also in Bilbao, on 23–24 September 2019. The public programme of the third call in Madrid, frustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, took the form of a book. Laura Vallés Vélchez, *Across the Sand* (Madrid: CentroCentro, 2020), available online at <<https://www.centrocentro.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/A%20través%20de%20la%20arena.pdf>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

¹⁹⁹ The so-called ‘Spanish Transition’ is the political period that followed the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

²⁰⁰ Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Pensar con cuidado’.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Geertz, ‘The Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture’.

II.

Zehar and *Arena* were both first published in 1989, the year of the so-called ‘end of history’ and the fall of the Berlin Wall, in which it was claimed that history as a desire for recognition and ideological struggle had ended.²⁰³ While *Zehar* was published and reformulated for 22 years, until 2011, *Arena* only lasted that one intense year. The two magazines were founded at a time when different cultural infrastructures were beginning to be established in the Spanish state. They were born out of the tensions between the local and the global, from which a series of processes of institutionalisation of contemporary art had begun – as recounted among the pages of the two publications. Citing the title of Francisco Jarauta’s article in the first issue of *Zehar*, both pilot issues coincided with the same attempt to ‘Think the Period’.²⁰⁴

These initial processes of the institutionalisation of contemporary art were framed within the context of the second transition that began in 1982, a period characterised by a frantic race towards modernity that ultimately articulated a collective forgetfulness, lacking a reconciliation with its past. Cultural amnesia – attributable more to the imposition of a deliberate political strategy than to memory loss – obscured a whole series of practices that were not recognised within a culture of consensus.

A text written in 2004 and 2005, which would only come to light ten years later, identified the specific cultural amnesia of the 1980s. Written by *Zehar*’s Miren Eraso and Carme Ortiz, the editor of *Papers d’Art*, a publication of the Fundació Espais d’Art Contemporani de Girona, ‘Editing in a system of positive echoes’ carried out an analysis of the production of contemporary art magazines in the 1980s.²⁰⁵ Two years earlier, in 2002, Eraso and Ortiz co-edited ‘Thinking About Publishing’ with Mar Villaespesa;²⁰⁶ a special issue of *Zehar* dedicated to editing on the occasion of the re-opening of Arteleku that same year. The 2004–05 text paid special attention to *Arena* and its predecessors, *Figura*, and *Sur Exprés*. The two editors tried to prove the hypothesis on which much of the printed matter of those years would be based, including that which they produced themselves. According to Eraso and Ortiz, most of the critical production of this period would take place in a non-existent space, an artistic non-system that originated more in will of the editors than in reality, taking shape in a system of positive echoes – a euphemism that gave the paper its title.

III.

The exhibition ‘Across the Sand’ unfolded in a series of modules and wooden panels that rested on a warm carpet and set off a fictional journey from South to North – from Andalusia to the Basque Country, birthplaces of *Arena* and *Zehar* respectively – by the Agustín Parejo

²⁰³ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History’, *The National Interest* (Washington, D.C.: National Affairs, Inc., 1989).

²⁰⁴ Francisco Jarauta, ‘Pensar la época’, *Zehar*, 1 (1989) [translation mine].

²⁰⁵ Miren Eraso and Carme Ortiz, ‘Editar en un sistema de ecos positivos’..

²⁰⁶ Mar Villaespesa, Miren Eraso, and Carmen Ortiz, ‘Pensar la edición’, *Zehar*, 47–48 (2002).

School (APS) collective and its video-graphic proposal *Málaga Euskadi da* (1986). This work is a record of an urban intervention halfway between graffiti and agit-prop that, as poet María Salgado points out, ‘presents a challenge in content and language, a strangeness that would necessarily disturb the passer-by’.²⁰⁷

APS was a group of uncertain chronologies and member affiliations, whose ‘po-ethics of self-denial’²⁰⁸ had a significant presence in the pages of *Arena*; the facsimiles in the exhibition offered a good account of their impact. *Málaga Euskadi da* reflects on the then new autonomies of Spain – the title refers to the nationalist slogan ‘Nafarroa Euskadi da’ (Navarra is Euskadi), demanding the inclusion of Navarra within the Basque Autonomous Community in 1978 – and is, consequently, about language and identity politics. There is no doubt that this collective understood that the spectacle organised by advertising and mass media conglomerates would be the semiotic battlefield of bodies and messages in an increasingly homogenised social space. The public sphere was beginning to be mediated by the verbal and visual vocabularies that new, large-scale companies put into circulation with their marketing campaigns, not only to sell themselves and sell to us, but to evoke desires and traditions and, in turn, return myths and values. Spaces of cultural enunciation with a public service remit, including *Arena*, had to position themselves within this field. This move to situate was as Rogelio López Cuenca, one of its most active members, would say, ‘the only possible confrontation is in the field of representation, dramatising the rhetorical dissonance between the real and its image, obliquely, infiltrated in its fissures, to introduce the suppressed information in what Chomsky calls “the construction of consensus”’.²⁰⁹

In the opening article of *Arena*’s pilot issue, ‘The Dolphin and the Submarine’²¹⁰ – with which the exhibition also opened – Villaespesa builds on Benjamin’s essay, ‘The Storyteller’ (1936) to value the revolutionary potential of the practice of narrating. The authors highlight the need to rescue this discursive form of desire. If the art of storytelling the 1930s had been exhausted faced with the written press, the paradigm shift of the 1990s, brought about by the birth of the Internet in 1989, would have similar consequences. At the same time, this was a time when art was driven to merging with life – particularly in the realms of conceptual and performative art. Information, as a product of communication, would only be of interest when it was new. In contrast, narrative would be able to concentrate forces and be able to unfold and build memory. Villaespesa saw in this form of fiction a form of cultural criticism that would express the social relationships that underpin artistic production, cultural experience and mass media.

‘The Desert Grows’ would be the motto of the pilot issue of *Arena*, a publication that, in addition to being directed by Villaespesa, was co-edited by Kevin Power and José Luis

²⁰⁷ María Salgado, *El momento analítico. Poéticas Constructivistas en España desde 1964*. Doctoral Thesis (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2014) [translation mine].

²⁰⁸ Estaban Pujals, ‘Agustín Parejo School. The po-ethics of self-denial’, *Arena*, 3 (1989).

²⁰⁹ Rogelio López Cuenca cited in Pujals, ‘Agustín Parejo School. The po-ethics of self-denial’, p. 284.

²¹⁰ Mar Villaespesa, ‘The Dolphin and the Submarine’, *Arena*, 0 (1989).

Brea.²¹¹ A ‘desert’ as an unpopulated place, is certainly useless from the point of view of production and therefore an ideal place for confrontation and negotiation. It is a ‘modern space that refuses to cross over time’, and one that becomes a fictional setting for many of *Arena*’s artists.²¹² However, as the author reminds us,

the vision of the desert must not turn into neither a version of the landscape featured in a car advertisement, nor the paradise of self-complacency of the so-called art world. Alongside the desert as a metaphor and desired, however, there is another obligatory desert, which we are witnessing today: the obligatory desert of the Palestinians or Saharans. As opposed to the epidemic and mythical disease – which today is AIDS – confined in the obligatory desert of social exile. *Could we create a mythical-critical dimension with some kind of action, in the space of the desert, where we are and which we generate?*

Ángel González and his ‘Mud Storms’ would close this volume of *Arena*.²¹³ By returning us to the quicksand, APS would close this first episode both on the pages of the magazine and the exhibition display of ‘Across the Sand’. Saharan music by Paul Bowles, included as a vinyl insert in the pages of the pilot issue of *Arena*, would provide the audience with the soundtrack.

Throughout the 1980s, the Spanish territory was the scene of an exceptional situation. Against all odds, the Arco fair opened its doors in 1982 with the aim of encouraging incipient collecting in a desert environment. Tino Calabuig’s film, *ARCO82*, which documented the feeling of that first fair, testified to this in the second stage of ‘Across the Sand’. The fair opened with enthusiasm and did so several years before the Reina Sofía museum was inaugurated in 1986, the Valencian Institute of Culture (IVAM) in 1986, Arteleku in 1987, and the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (CAAM) in 1989.

This was a moment of the advent of social democracy, of a government with an ‘Absolute Majority Syndrome’ as Villaespesa describes it²¹⁴ – a period that ‘Across the Sand’ further re-presented within its exhibition. This moment also gave rise to the proliferation of art spaces, the consolidation of the figure of the curator, the emergence of informative publications associated with the new institutions, as well as the gradual disarticulation of art criticism as a social practice and generator of forms, frames and contexts. It was a redefinition of culture that would contradict the politics of care aimed at reinforcing culture’s role in a civil society, which has since then been reduced to the mystified image that cognitive capitalism was beginning to promote – revealing the increasingly profound networks between economy, affect and effect.

²¹¹ *Arena*’s organisational structure changed during the year. Although the three editors started the project co-directing the publication, Villaespesa would be situated as executive director in the third issue.

²¹² Villaespesa, ‘The Dolphin and the Submarine’.

²¹³ Ángel González, ‘Mud Storms’, *Arena*, 0 (1989).

²¹⁴ Mar Villaespesa, ‘Absolute Majority Syndrome’, *Arena*, 1 (1989).

Analytical and critical efforts such as those manifest within *Arena* magazine, would become a mirage. After a year of publishing articles that endorsed the critical work of the publication, harshly addressing the spectacular cultural activity surrounding them, the project had to overcome numerous obstacles – from private financing that sometimes put the independence of its content at risk to, eventually, ‘the disagreements caused by the desire for leadership of some of its members’.²¹⁵ The fact is that an incipient affective economy was here to stay, and the ethical positions around the uses and abuses of weak critical structures were not always shared.

The desert, as a metaphor for the negotiation of exchange values initiated by the frenzied access to modernity, would become a real scene of internal pitfalls. This was highlighted by the treatment of the project ‘Before and After the Enthusiasm 1972–1992’, curated by José Luis Brea at the Kunstrai art fair in Amsterdam. An impossible consensus among the editors on how to advertise this project – curated by one of them –, would end up deleting the ‘n’ from *Arena* (*Are a*) on a last cover in which readers would be told, thinking with the character of the International Situationist comic: ‘It seems that this organisation is in crisis! Some elements have been liquidated!’

The liquidation of the ‘n’ within the last issue of the magazine took place because Brea, the curator of the advertised project, secretly registered ‘*Arena*’ and denied the use of the brand after his colleagues published, within its pages, a fierce criticism questioning his representational ethics.

IV.

It should be taken into account that with the emergence of new regional museums and cultural spaces during those years, numerous magazines were founded with an informative intent rather than with a narrative (critical) stance. In addition to the 1989 inauguration of *Arena* and *Zehar*, that same year, *RS* would be launched by the Reina Sofia Museum, *Kalias* by IVAM, and a year later *Atlántica* by CAAM. Beyond institutional publications, *Ars video* in Gipuzkoa and *Balcón* would see the light as well. BNV Producciones, a production company created shortly after Spain’s entry into NATO in 1988 – under the care of Joaquín Vázquez and Miguel Benlloch – would also emerge from the heat of the first exhibitions and publications that Villaespesa curated after editing *Arena*, namely, ‘Sueño imperativo’ (1991) and ‘Plus Ultra’ (1992).

In the words of Fernando Savater, ‘The transition was considered finished and consolidated [...] a political, symbolic and aesthetic order by which the word, the gaze, the action... would from then on be administered and conveyed exclusively by the representational instances’.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Eraso and Ortiz, ‘Editar en un sistema de ecos positivos’.

²¹⁶ Joaquín Vázquez, ‘El Sueño Imperativo y Plus Ultra. Prácticas artísticas y tramas políticas en torno a 1992’ [The Imperative Dream and Plus Ultra. Artistic Practices and Political Plots circa 1992]. Lecture delivered within the context of ‘The papers of the exhibition (1987–1997)’, a project convened by Bulegoa Z/B in Azkuna Zentroa, Bilbao, 9–10 July 2019.

BNV's Vázquez recently described this period too; as had happened with APS and its *Málaga Euskadi da*, BNV would also refer with humour to the PNV, the Basque Nationalist Party.

Those were the years of the beginning of a type of spectacularisation of art and culture that has been maintained until the present, and when the institutional critique of the seventies seemed to have finally been taken over by the museum and the market. But also, in those years, artistic practices proposed new ways of understanding the relationship between art and politics, projects that Mar Villaespesa had the opportunity to witness first-hand [in her years in New York]. Simply put, Mar was a trained and informed person – something very exceptional at that time – and therefore capable of formulating a diagnosis of the situation of the ‘artistic community’ in a Spanish State ‘characterised by cultural dirigisme, the conquest of the international as a common project and the preeminence of the market’. Something that Villaespesa formulated in her well-known essay ‘Absolute Majority Syndrome’.²¹⁷

V.

Zehar's early years were primarily linked to the dissemination of activities carried out in Arteleku, a space for creation and undoubtedly a pioneer in the field, which faced this new order described by Vázquez. Funded by the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa, *Zehar* offered a very different public profile than *Arena*.

Zehar started out as a modest newsletter edited by Maya Aguiriano. It did so in citing the earlier mentioned text, ‘Think the Period’ (the essay with the same name published by Francisco Jarauta in the first issue) at a moment that ‘configures another time, that of plurivocity and polymorphism’.²¹⁸ The desert Jarauta described would be that of ‘modern reason’, ‘a citadel abandoned for not being habitable’.²¹⁹ In 1989, *Zehar* pointed towards a task for culture that would provide ‘a step from the language to the metaphor, to the aphorism, to the gesture... Only in this way can we accept the challenge of precariousness and provisional status, without feeling posthumous to our own time.’²²⁰

After this initial stage, in its successive phases *Zehar* would gradually modulate its enunciative tone. With the inclusion of Joxemari Iturralde, Francisco Javier San Martín and Adelina Moya in the editorial committee in 1992, the publication would complicate its structure with a transformation of both its format and content. This commitment would be strengthened with the arrival of Miren Eraso in 1995 in the role of director, having been head of the Arteleku's documentation centre since 1987.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Jarauta, ‘Pensar la época’.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

Eraso's first contribution to *Zehar* would be in dialogue with the curator of the last Documenta of the twentieth century, Catherine David. 'The strategy of non-place' would title an exchange in which, among other issues, art would be discussed as an ethical, aesthetic and social project.²²¹ At a time when so many exhibition spaces were not physically situated or bound, the curator explained, appealing to the institutional boom of the end of the century, and when architecture is at the service of financial speculation, her 'obsession' would be to 'work with the non-place', this mythical-critical desert from which to take a position, to act, and not succumb to the lethargy of complacency.²²²

That same year, Villaespesa curated 'Além de água', a project motivated by the debate around the possible construction of a dam in the Portuguese border region that sits along Spanish territory. This fact led him to build a 'travelling museum', involving a trip, on this occasion from Andalusia to Alentejo, which launched one of the first public art projects and which Miren and Santi Eraso,²²³ directors of *Zehar* and Arteleku respectively, decided to visit.²²⁴ In 1997, the curator herself defined it as follows in the pages of the San Sebastian publication:

The project would start from ideas that public art and before site-specific sculpture, fostered, such as ideas of specificity, expansion, participation, collectivity, relationship of the work with the audience and the environment, dialogue between the language of the work and the very language of the space where [a project] is located that did not differentiate the participation of Portuguese and Spanish artists because, despite the desire for globality, it contemplated the specific and the diverse.²²⁵

If the first issue of *Zehar* set out to 'Think the Period' at the turn of the 1990s,²²⁶ the edition that Eraso and Villaespesa co-edited with Carmen Ortiz at the beginning of the new millennium, in 2002, was a monograph with the purpose of 'Thinking About Publishing'. It was also intended to transform the magazine into a forum that questioned the function of art and creation. In presenting the issue, the editors described it as:

At a time when the concentration of the media is homogenizing and impoverishing the communicative space, we think that small publishing initiatives, which are experimenting with new formats and content, are influencing social and cultural relations in some way and are a reflection of the current social dynamism.²²⁷

²²¹ Miren Eraso and Catherine David, 'La estrategia del no lugar', *Zehar*, 19 (1995).

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Despite having the same last surname, they were not related.

²²⁴ The seed from which UNIA arteypensamiento would germinate was planted at this time: a project of the International University of Andalusia, coordinated by BNV Producciones, in collaboration with Arteleku, the Antoni Tàpies Foundation and the José Guerrero Centre, whose objective was to promote and activate debate and knowledge production.

²²⁵ Mar Villaespesa, 'Além de água', *Zehar*, 33 (1997), p. 16.

²²⁶ Jarauta, 'Pensar la época'.

²²⁷ Villaespesa, Eraso, and Ortiz, 'Pensar la edición'. For more information about the research workshop that was meant to be developed within the framework of UNIA arteypensamiento, see <http://ayp.unia.es/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=46&Itemid=39> [accessed 20 March 2022].

One of the questions that *Zehar* would ask its 25 contributors would be one that should be repeated here today, years later: ‘Who is your magazine aimed at?’

Catherine David signed the brief manifesto of the organisation ‘Resistencia/Creation’ with which the monographic issue was closed, alerting us to the fact that:

With the rapidity of widespread digitalization, the economy resemiotizes all aspects of life, colonizing vast spheres of culture, intelligence, emotion, time, space, and the body itself. Others insist on the predominance of language and symbols in today’s economy, making communication the heart of the production process [...] To what extent, within this context, could we think of certain practices (aesthetic, urban, social, political) as events that re-inaugurate subjective and sensitive processes? If, for example, we take the idea of Tarde about the capacity of art, fundamental for contemporary societies, to socialize its own sensations, making the difference between individuals communicate in a common sensibility, are we not going against the tide of the excessively one-sided narrative of the society of the spectacle, or even the society of control, reopening the way to other cartographies?²²⁸

VI.

The shared sensibility of difference that appears in ‘Thinking About Publishing’ and that is also present in ‘Além de água’, would manifest itself five years later, in 2007, with ‘The Open School’. Published within the framework of one of the Documenta 12 magazines, this issue of *Zehar* would mark the end of Eraso’s period in charge of the publication. It could be said that his work as editor of *Zehar* was framed by two Documenta exhibitions: from developing ‘The strategy of no place’ in the mid-1990s, to proposing mutual care tools in a double issue dedicated to education. In the wake of ‘Thinking About Publishing’, this forum for debate proposed to produce a multiplier effect based on the notion of *école mutuelle*: a pedagogical project that would activate collaboration and reciprocity between different people, appealing to the experience of the ‘we’. If, as Marina Garcés pointed out in this issue:

Thinking is thinking about ourselves. Tackling the problem of the world is to join it together. The world is what globalisation has stolen from us. He has placed it in front of us as a mirror of the impotence by which we are reduced to mere spectators, consumers, or victims. From this triple condition, criticism is neutralised in three sterilising forms of discourse: aesthetics (play of positions), moral (judgment) or psychological (well-being-discomfort). All three leave us in front of the world, in a depoliticised relationship with it. Politicising thought then is re-appropriating the world. What pedagogy can be more urgent today than this?²²⁹

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

²²⁹ Garcés, ‘The Experience of the Us’.

Garcés presented a project that uses the blank page, *Espai en blanc*, to make thinking exciting again, and for reality to be defined by what it does not know – and not by what it knows. ‘Across the Sand’ recognised that, like politics, art is made and practised in the struggle for the spaces of daily existence, in the same way that the struggle for life implies recognising and defending that the right to space is also the right to invent the world.

In the pages published in 2007, directions were pointed out and new trajectories were proposed that are surprising because of their continued validity in times of the current health crisis and mandatory deserts, in which spaces for socialisation urgently need to be re-politicised. In the magazine, fragments and quotes would present a feeling of time shared by an artistic community that wanted to leave behind the positive echoes in pursuit of resistance but was also looking towards hospitality and hybridisation as a speculative ethic and storytelling of ‘earthly survival’, as Donna Haraway would describe it today, in front of an antagonism to come.²³⁰

Rather than to fetishising and mythologising these publications and all those involved, my project’s purpose is to favour their reinterpretation, opening them up to other historical and narrative approaches that offer aspect that, when connected and conjugated become autonomous, unexpected and specific. In short, when these approaches engage with the past they feel the need to ‘reinvent it in some way by updating the meaning of these fragments, by relating them to contemporary experience and even projecting one’s perception of these fragments into a view of the future, a constructed yet unrealised future’.²³¹ It is this post-representational vision of ‘history’ shared by our companions, that of the *whirlpool* and of the *muddle*, that ‘Across the Sand’ has in turn also attempted to rehearse its exhibition throughout the project.

A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces

‘A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces’ took as a point of departure a series of editorial projects run by women – *Aspen*, *Metronome*, *Arena*, *Zehar*, *Concreta* – and proposed an exercise to rehearse a series of questions revolving around how ‘words world worlds’ from the shared experience of reading, editing and curating. It was also built from an understanding of editing as performative life thinking. The event was divided into two parts: the first one introduced the framework of this ongoing research, and the second put forward a series of interrogations of how these processes operate in space, in which audience members had to imagine and inhabit their own answers. A discussion about the envisioned environs took place after the performative lecture.

²³⁰ See Donna Haraway, ‘Earthly Survival’, available at <<https://earthlysurvival.org>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²³¹ See the roundup of citations summarising ‘Thinking About Publishing’ on the UNIA arteypensamiento website. The fragment included here is by Chantal Pontbriand, editor of *Parachute*, see <http://ayp.unia.es/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=46&Itemid=39>. Available in English in Villaespesa, Eraso and Ortiz, ‘Pensar la edición’, p. 78. [accessed 20 March 2022].

The context of this lecture was the ‘Editing Spaces’ programme of The Institute for Endotic Research-TIER in Berlin.²³² The organisation presented a transdisciplinary approach, bringing together art practices and writing inspired by the French literary Oulipo group whose members started to combine techniques from mathematics to create generative systems to facilitate the practice of writing in playful manners, following a set of rules, in the 1960s. Using these protocols, they were able to exercise the imagination and go beyond the self-imposed frame.

In Oulipo style, the combination of space and writing produces a quite interesting device. On the one hand, it produces a reading of the surroundings or milieu as a practice of exploring the unnoticed and the everyday life in a situated manner. It proposes an exercise of ‘microhistory’, full of the political potential of the intimate. On the other hand, it tightens space and its narration, reflecting on the conventions of how space is produced. Oulipo’s proposal is a machine to think about how protocols shape our lives and the constraints that give structure to social rituals. In that sense, Oulipo offers tools not only to understand but to produce institutions: these are none other than a set of rules with which we are compelled to play the game.

I found TIER’s invitation particularly interesting because it allowed me to continue thinking about the possibilities of ‘the *curatela*’ and it gave continuity to ‘Te toca a ti’ [It’s Your Turn], an exhibition and a series of events I curated at Espai d’Art Contemporani de Castellón, in Spain, between October 2018 and February 2019.

In a way, ‘Te toca a ti’ was like a return home. It was at EACC, at the threshold of the current century, that I first saw contemporary art. In the late 1990s, when the new art centre opened, at the same time as a slew of other museums all over Spain, I was also a guinea pig for the LOGSE, the education law which had finally replaced the old system dating back to Franco’s regime, and the artist Xavier Arenós was my first ‘drawing’ teacher at secondary school. With a set of a square and triangle in hand, Arenós urged us to visit this new experimental art centre that would open in the city. In those years I was still studying piano at the publicly funded Conservatory during my free time, though I was soon to drop it in favour of another art form when I enrolled in Fine Art at the School of Arts and Crafts. The two institutions, the Conservatory, and the School of Arts, shared the same building, right beside the recently opened EACC, so I can safely say that I spent a large part of my childhood and younger years going back and forth, ‘situated’ in this very block of the city.

Xavier Arenós was one of the artists exhibiting in ‘Contemporani@ 2001’ alongside Lluís Vives, Elisabet Merino & Francisco Sanmartín, as well as Bleda y Rosa, for whom I profess great admiration, although they were completely unknown to me then. I recall the mix of bewilderment and fascination that my teacher’s piece caused in me, faced with a kind of silent structure, an underground lair or hideaway removed from worldly noise, which had

²³² The Institute for Endotic Research, Editing Spaces Programme, Berlin, 19 August 2019, see <<http://theinstituteforendoticresearch.org/wp/august-12-laura-valles-a-rehearsal-to-the-test-editing-spaces-part-2/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

nothing to do with the drawings we used to do in the corridors at school or with the idea of art we had there. I remember thinking that I was missing out on something in those classes in which I used to pay a lot of attention: that there was an unbridgeable gap between what I ‘had’ to learn and what was happening ‘outside’ in the world.

Having said that, I understand that although they are interdependent, theory and practice do not always go hand in hand. There are many insistent attempts to separate critical thinking from doing, in philosophy as well as in science. Undoubtedly though, the gap between one and the other, the interval between theory and practice, sparked my curiosity and pushed me towards dedicating a whole life to meddling with them. We should bear in mind that, unlike museums that possess all kinds of collections and archives (their own or looted) as the ‘Field of Knowledge’ section indicates, art centres came into being as spaces for production and experimentation with art that takes place ‘here and now’.

The *here* of so many of us, millennials born after the baby boom, members of the so-called Generation Y, is generally felt as highly unstable in our pursuit of emancipation and resistance. I am considered a millennial, nevertheless I am part of the first generation of what are known as ‘digital immigrants’. Having grown up before the advent of the Internet, without mobile phones and socialising in public squares, we were educated by MTV and turned into ecologists and anarcho-feminists with Captain Planet, Pippi Longstocking and Sailor Moon. These shaped my contemporary condition. I created my first email account at the age of 18, when I moved from a small town to the Spanish capital to study a Fine Arts degree at the beginning of the new millennium and right after the 9/11 attack in 2001. A global capitalist interconnected and increasingly controlled reality rapidly exploded in our faces. As already mentioned, the unilateral way in which 9/11 was portrayed highlighted this new informational and representational era.

At the same time, the limits of the *now* in the era of simultaneity and of screens, in which we are governed by a relentless saturation of all kinds of stimuli, seems more and more like a ball of wool that has little to do with the straight line along which we believed the chronology of history used to run. ‘Te toca a ti’ presented the work of ten artists whose practices bear implicit the question of listening, of touch and correspondence. Like any act of editing and montage, this exhibition skirted around and embroidered histories that were constructed and rubbed up against each other in their bid to provoke a response, even though this could be a gesture or even silence. The proposal took as a point of departure the notion of situated practice and storytelling in an exhibition whose title translates into ‘It’s Your Turn’ but also ‘It Touches You’.

Like Oulipo, the title recalled childhood play in which roles and turns are exchanged and negotiated, creating new patterns of asymmetric repetition. First you, then me... Is it my turn next? Indeed, it was discursively built from a personal reflection on the institution in which I saw contemporary art in the 1990s for the first time in my life. As it occurred in ‘Across the Sand’ at CentroCentro, I inaugurated another exhibition in an institution without direction.

Still, it revolved around the idea of ‘negotiation’ as the negation of leisure (*neg otsia*, its etymology), and the paradoxical rhythms of contemporaneity to reach an agreement. In my eyes, negotiation is an urgent matter for the curatorial endeavour. The fact that the etymology emphasises the idea that the act of negotiating is aligned with the impossibility of leisure, struck me as paradoxical. The practice of numerous artists including Luca Frei, Céline Condorelli, Moyra Davey and Teresa Lanceta, among others, demonstrate I am not the only one who thinks that way. The reactivation of Simone Forti’s performance ‘See-saw’ (1961) by artist Luca Frei, in which two dancers (in the original), and three dancers (in Frei’s reworking), move up and down and negotiate their own positions, was instrumental in advancing my curatorial argument. In their intuitive movements, the dancers build trust while having fun.²³³ This is just one example of the ten proposals presented in ‘It’s Your Turn’. Thinking of the exhibition space as a place for negotiation, I wondered whether we were subordinating art practices to the logics of trade and global capital and removing ourselves from the intimacy of the community at play, from proximity, from the sense of touch. Or, on the contrary, whether we could re-signify the term ‘negotiation’ by questioning its intrinsic denial of recreation.

Indeed, when thinking about institution and exhibition-making, the learnings from Oulipo are innumerable. The exhibition can be understood as a group of textual constraints to be practised and edited, by reading and by writing. One of the meanings of the word *publication* is to make something public. If the relations between local and global are regarded as a text that can be read through contemporary art practices, a pertinent tactic would be to substitute the idea of exhibition with that of publication. This would mean understanding exhibitions as narrative machines, as expanded books that can also unfold a set of other possibilities such as cross-temporal approaches, choreography of bodies moving through the extensive idea of text and support structures. In this sense, ‘A Rehearsal to the Test’ was also an ‘exercise in style’ that responded to this premise and celebrated the surroundings as a practice of exploring the everyday life of a writer, an artist, an editor and a curator.

At TIER, I introduced my work at *Concreta* to present my understanding of the practice of editing, after my work experience at *Afterall*. I also introduced the research project ‘Across the Sand’ in which the editorial and the curatorial were fundamental in articulating a proposal based on *Arena* (1989) and *Zehar* (1989–2011) – yet to be exhibited at the time, therefore, in *medias res*. Ultimately, I acknowledged the curatorial work of Clémentine Deliss at *Metronome* (1996–2007) as well as two paradigmatic experiments, the earlier mentioned Brian O’Doherty’s *Aspen Nos. 5+6* (1967), that is, the first conceptual exhibition outside of a museum, and Spanish female artist Maruja Mallo’s two-year show within the pages of *Revista de Occidente* (1928), a very rare preface to the idea of the magazine as a storehouse and of the editor-as-curator that I exhibited as part of the public programme of *Concreta 13* (2015) at A10 in Valencia.

²³³ See Luca Frei’s re-enactment of the seminal performance by Simone Forti, ‘See-saw’ (1961), performed on 16 February 2019, see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtXcaGtCRic>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

I highlighted the fact that editing is a practice emerging from listening and a sort of invisibility that leads towards what Deliss calls ‘conceptual intimacy’ where words and worlds are inhabited – an unhurried politics of attention. This unhurried attention goes beyond ocular-centrism all the way down to our feet. As culture itself is understood within the ‘thick description’ method, this model adds layers and to therefore become thicker than it first seems. I re-told the story that for the five years I spent my summer translating the work of those women I admire, as well as the relationship between editing and curating this thesis describes.

When I put together the questionnaire that I am about to present, I was inspired by the Feldenkrais method that Jon Mikel Euba, an artist with whom I collaborated in ‘Across the Sand’ and *Concreta*, introduced to me. This somatic method was initiated by the Israeli engineer and physicist Moshe Feldenkrais and consists of connecting bodily movements with certain emotional and mental mechanisms. The essence of this method resides in the interaction between a series of coordinated movements developed by the person that practises it through attention and an embodied listening. As Yael Davids recently explained in a dialogue we periodically had during the pandemic times, ‘One is Always Plural’, published in *Concreta* 17 (2021), the Feldenkrais methods ‘addresses the very conditions of learning’.²³⁴

Moshe Feldenkrais was interested in movement and its relationship with the brain. He had a knee injury and found himself on an endless waiting list for the operation, so he started to learn about himself in order to handle his own pain, reflecting on how his body reacted to it. Moshe Feldenkrais believed that we cannot change, as human beings, we haven’t got the possibility of changing. Nevertheless, we can change our patterns of movement; these patterns of movement are patterns in our brain, so, if we change the patterns of movement, the patterns in our brain change as well, and then other things within us change along/with it.

In this sense, the Feldenkrais method does not encourage me, the practitioner, to do something better, since everything I do is already perfect, Davids says. One works with the brain and the brain rejects what feels uncomfortable, such as pain and effort, which the artist explained to me are interpreted in the brain as noise. Using micro-movements, the brain slowly takes care of the affliction. Ultimately, Feldenkrais implies looking at the body as an organisation. This understanding also addresses the idea that ‘one is always plural’ and that one ‘thinks with’ in a relational way that creates ‘new patterns from previous multiplicities’.²³⁵

Indeed, micro-movements were also my daily practice as a piano student. At the Conservatory I learned patterns of movement connecting bodily experiences with the brain. I always depended on sheet music until my professor forced me to learn songs by heart to perform in front of an audience. The first time I faced an assembly hall, I played a

²³⁴ Yael Davids and Laura Vallés Vílchez, ‘One is Always Plural’, *Concreta*, 17 (2021). See <<http://editorialconcreta.org/One-is-Always-Plural>> [accessed on 20 March 2022].

²³⁵ Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Pensar con cuidado’.

composition with a very difficult fragment I continuously struggled with during rehearsals. Luckily, when I got to that section in front of an audience, I got away with it... Yet, after the very same segment, carried away with excitement, I went blank all of a sudden – only a bar before finishing. I stopped and embodied a two-second silent interval with the noise of affliction, all the way down to later find comfort in repetition and taking the risky decision to play the difficult fragment over again, and trusting the idea that if one changes the pattern of movement, the pattern in our brain changes as well and one thing within us changes along with it.

I finished the song and the ovation of an audience that had suffered a twelve-year-old me in silence was a memorable corporeal experience. ‘Staying blank’ allowed me to embody the imaginative capacity to re-narrate an unaccounted-for part of a song. Ultimately, it allowed me to embrace dependence and empathy within a practice revolving around care and performative life thinking, through the lens of editing spaces.

Where coordinates lose their definition and vision becomes peripheral, I do not always attend to what I need to see. The question of attention opens up a paradoxically active and passive field of reciprocity. You have to pay attention to what in turn asks to be attended. More than constructive action, with a scriptural matrix, it is necessary to develop a new, or possibly very old, behaviour. Before asking what to do and how to deal with reality, we should ask how we treat one another. Only by rehearsing a radical hospitality to begin with, can we address this paradox of representation and criticality.²³⁶

Yet, the questionnaire that I am about to present emerges from a similar understanding of the body as a social structure. This is a body that finds pleasure in repetition the same way many practitioners presented in this chapter do. This is also a body that embraces the lesson learned as a child, that of mimesis as a faculty that strengthens in the early years through playing, also music and otherwise, and that gradually diminishes and is transformed into a series of exchanges increasingly removed from the senses.

Editing means understanding that storytelling often precedes writing. Anecdotes, experiences and reflections provides materiality to our voices. These are traces of the almost choreographic moves of fingers across a keyboard. As Gloria Anzaldúa defends, voices in the margins are sonorities on the border producing ruptures in dualistic thought. Faced with a reductionist expectation of what is expected of a body, the sound of a voice that fluctuates and modulates in response to social relations exceeds this hegemonic categorization.²³⁷

Two seconds in between questions filled the room with an embodied silence. In reading what follows, I would recommend you do it out loud, take a deep breath and enjoy your editing spaces.

²³⁶ See ‘Foreword. “The Rebellion of the Intervals”’, p. 12.

²³⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa cited in Laura Vallés Vilchez, ed., ‘Sonorities in the frontiers of the body’, *Concreta*, 17 (2021).

A REHEARSAL TO THE TEST TRANSCRIPT

THE INSTITUTE OF ENDOTIC RESEARCH, BERLIN, AUGUST 2019

- If I offer you the confidence of what Clémentine Deliss calls ‘conceptual intimacy’, of my current perceptions of editorial and curatorial research, which, as you have seen, are often sensitive, incoherent, speculative, unfinished, product-less. Would you regard this offer as daring or perhaps empty?
- Would you rather wait for a clear and concise proposition, let’s say, the description of a forthcoming project that you can easily recognise or that you can even picture in your mind and recreate?
- Can you actually do that with what doesn’t exist, beyond words, just yet?
- Do you write?
- Do you consider yourself a writer?
- Perhaps an artist, a curator, let’s say, a cultural worker?
- Why are you here?
- Where do you situate yourself when you write, whatever it is that you’re writing?
- Do you have natural light nearby?
- Maybe a window?
- What do you see from there, if at anything?
- Do you generate spatial patterns while working on a text?
- Do you move around the room, the house, perhaps you go outside for a walk around?
- A run?
- Go swimming?
- Does it help?
- How?
- Do you surround yourself with objects or images?
- If so, are they related to the topic of your work?
- Which ones are always there, by your side?
- Why is it so?
- Do you read out loud?
- Do you ask your computer to read for you, like this?
- [computer reading out loud] Do you ask your computer to read for you like this?
[LAUGHS]
- Do you change its voice, its gender to imagine somebody else is reading for you, like this?
- [computer reading out loud] Do you change its voice to imagine somebody else’s reading for you. [LAUGHS]
- What for?
- What about when editing?
- Do you edit your own texts?
- Do you send them to your colleagues?
- Do your friends send you theirs your way?

- How deep do you enter into these texts, if at all?
- Do you inhabit the words as if they were yours?
- For how long?
- Have you ever had what Chris Kraus calls a 'conceptual fuck'? Physical pleasure while reading others' work? [NERVOUS LAUGH]
- If so, do you remember when?
- Who was the author?
- Was she or he dead? Or is your friend?
- Do you suffer while editing, writing, creating? [LAUGHS]
- Does your body change through this process?
- What about your workspace? Does it suffer the process with you? How?
- Does your artistic curatorial-editorial production rely on the promise of finalisation?
- Can you envisage or picture the contours of your current investigations just yet?
- Is it clearly defined?
- Or is it vague and blurred, constantly transforming, becoming into something else?
- 'Empty spaces and clear visions are bad fictions for thinking' Haraway recently said. But what does that mean? That empty space and clear visions are bad fictions for thinking?
- How do you feel about the white page?
- How do you feel about the white cube?
- Are they really white?
- Do these empty spaces lead to clear visions?
- Do you consider them bad fictions for thinking?
- Donna Haraway writes that the notion of 'muddle' allows her to trouble the trope of visual clarity as the only sense and affect for mortal thinking. Muddles team with company, she asserts. For how long do you inhabit your own muddle, chaos, disorder, confusion, 'conceptual intimacy' before it turns into something else?
- Philosopher Marina Garcés calls this the 'rebellion of the interval'. She defines the blank page as a delimited space without relief or without a shadow. Meaning 'sand', *Arena's* radical premise was to invite their readers to cross the desert and picture the space of uncertainty, boundaries, and temporalities as the space for negotiation without reliefs or shadows either. Which one is yours? Where do you offer the confidence or conceptual intimacy of your ongoing research to others?
- Perhaps, when eating? Is the kitchen the space for the muddle being edited and transformed into your own recipe or method?
- What about if not?
- Michel de Certeau says that writing is the modern mythical practice of producing text and the society as text. He thinks that writing is the concrete activity that consists in constructing from a proper space, a text that has the power over the exteriority from which it is isolated. What do you think about this? How do the words world your worlds?
- Which texts did transform you? Do you have any in mind?
- If so, which one is it?

- Curator Anselm Franke thinks that a book needs to have a secret so you can come back to it, the same way that an exhibition has to be seductive in the promise of returning. Which secrets have held your attention? How worlds word your words?
- Do you end up translating your own muddle into visible and informative matter in a desire to communicate, for instance, social conditions?
- Or do you avoid decoding, deciphering, explaining the whole plot?
- *Arena's* editor and curator, Mar Villaespesa considers that art must not frame power but respond to the community problems as the only way of avoiding the most innocuous lyricism and mimicry. Do you agree?
- Do you care if your own point of departure from which to negotiate your conceptual intimacy leads your audience nowhere, they recognise at first sight?
- Do you think about them when you write, create, curate?
- Which faces do they have?
- If any, are they confrontational or assertive, or perhaps welcoming and affirmative?
- What would that mean?
- As a circular process of rearranging ingredients towards a shared recipe, which part of the created method to enjoy the most?
- The recognition of the contour? The form?
- The inhabiting uncertainty? The muddle?
- The translation into words and worlds?
- The space for editing?
- Maybe the sharing, the conviviality?
- Do you think these faces of a common research method should be assigned to a specific role, let's say the recognition of the contour corresponds to the artist? Or the inhabiting of uncertainty to the philosophers?
- Or do you consider this idea dated and old fashioned?
- How important is space to you?
- Do you respond to it when you make work?
- Does it move?
- Isabelle Stengers considers that while knowledge production always unfolds into a solid ground, diplomacy, and mediation – that is also curation and the editorial – have to get by on a moving one. Do you think your work is built on a quicksand?

[MUSIC SOUNDED AND A VERY LONG PAUSE FOLLOWED BEFORE
DISCUSSION]

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HOW ARE YOU?



Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, *The Painter on the Street*, Madrid, 1978.

4: Storytelling (Dissenting within)

Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant. [...] One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value.
—Walter Benjamin²³⁸

The Storyteller and The Devaluation of Experience

Romance de las plazas [Romance in public squares] (2013) is an artist's book created by Isaías Griñolo, made in collaboration with poets Antonio Orihuela and Isabel Pérez Montalbán, artist Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, BNV Producciones and Espai en Blanc. It was an 'insulting book' in the words of Griñolo, a 'libel' published by *Concreta* and the Fundació Antoni Tàpies on the occasion of the exhibition 'Against Tàpies' curated by Valentín Roma.²³⁹

The opening pages feature the second amendment in the Spanish Constitution since 1978, the modification of Article 135. The first amendment, introduced in 1992, had unanimous support from parliament and allowed European citizens to vote and run for office in Spanish municipal elections. The second was implemented surreptitiously in the summer of 2011 and lifted the 'principle' of budget stability into a constitutional mandate, and without prior public debate: from that moment onwards the payment of public debt – partly acquired by fraudulent practices – took priority over people's needs. Both amendments were made under pressure of the European Union.²⁴⁰

Isaías Griñolo's book is one of a range of artistic works responding to these events. It collects poems, images and conversations about the constitutional deadlock, the anti-austerity movement, and the *indignados* movement in Spain, which occupied public squares around the country in protest against the economic crisis that preceded these events. The publication reproduces a conversation with artist Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, in which he discussed his views about the 'principle of stability' as part of the *18 Photographs and 18 Stories* (2013) publication – a project by Bulegoa Z/B, the Basque collective introduced in the 'Field of

²³⁸ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller'.

²³⁹ Isaías Griñolo, *Romance de las plazas*.

²⁴⁰ According to a report released by the Bank of Spain in September 2016, the cost to Spanish taxpayers of restructuring the country's banking sector since 2009 has been €51.3 billion. Criminal activity was registered and denounced, as happened with the Bankia case. See 'Spain Bankia fraud trial for ex-IMF boss Rodrigo Rato', BBCNews, 26 September (2016), <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-37470509>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

Knowledge' section which, among other actions and narratives in response to such actions, re-presented Valcárcel's influential performance *The Painter on the Street* (1978).²⁴¹

Yet, the painter before a blank canvas, which this performance centres on, does not paint. This painter simply delivers a testimony of a lived experience that has fallen in value by the means of storytelling. This piece embraces the merging of art and life, an understanding of the practice of mediation that emerged after 'Los Encuentros de Pamplona' (1972),²⁴² and in which Valcárcel Medina was an instrumental character. These encounters were a harbinger of the artistic and cultural creation that would come to Spain after Franco's death.²⁴³ As previously described, these events in northern Spain staged the representational crisis, or rather, dilemmas facing both art and the political this thesis tackles through the lens of curating and the curatorial.

On the one hand, they encapsulated the dilemma of a politics of artistic rupture built from a conceptual stance attempting to 'overcome' aesthetic judgement. On the other hand, they indicated a revolutionary and partisan stance arising in reaction to fascism. Therefore, if in the previous chapter I consider the milieu as a medium, this chapter explores milieu as a social environment, not only by the means of 'thinking with' editing, but also of storytelling, 'dissenting within' the context of Spain. Because, ultimately, art was not an end here but a means towards social transformation,

and yet we knew that hatred against baseness also disfigures the face. Anger against injustice also makes the voice hoarse. Unfortunately, we who wanted to prepare *the way for kindness* could not be friendly. But you, when the times come when a man is man's friend, think of us with indulgence.²⁴⁴

But for Valcárcel Medina, the question of authorship still is the question of art, particularly so after the destruction of the ontological conception of the 'medium' described in the previous chapter. As an artist he is interested in the fact that the painter simply bears witness to the fact that one can act in the way this man performs, with an easel and a canvas. He makes the gesture that he is going to paint, but he doesn't. What matters for Valcárcel Medina is the understanding of what is necessary to do the work. In his view, art is not only a matter of fun, but of commitment.

Valcárcel Medina implies that commitment and authorship go hand in hand, that it is a matter of taking a stance. But the 'thick description' method – the twitch and wink example – taught us that certain things escape representation. Like with the painter, purpose and intention cannot be photographed. The painter's commitment becomes evident in him giving a

²⁴¹ Bulegoa Z/B with Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, *18 Pictures and 18 Stories* (Amsterdam: If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, 2013).

²⁴² See 'Making Art Public: Between Dissatisfaction and Mobilisation', p. 25.

²⁴³ Along with Luis de Pablo, José Luis Alexanco, Ignacio Gómez de Liaño and José Miguel de Prada Poole, among others, Valcárcel Medina was, one of the protagonists of Los Encuentros de Pamplona, an unexpected and premonitory one-week event.

²⁴⁴ Emphasis added, Antonio Orihuela, 'To future men' in Griñolo, *romance de las plazas*, p. 29.

testimony about the fact that he does not commit – leading towards the enactment of the post-representational paradox – a paradox that resonates with that of the practice at hand, curating and the curatorial, and that the following pages expand on. For Valcárcel Medina, the modification of Article 135 was a shameful move.

It is a rogue tactic, to put it lightly, and the problem is we're much too used to that. [...] The Constitution came into being at a time of general lucidity. That is a thing of the past and has been for some years now, and things hit rock bottom last year with this amendment – and I'm afraid they might do so repeatedly with other amendments we can now begin to guess at. In that regard, I strongly believe things are very much open to improvement – but please, let it not be these people who improve them for us; that is, let us first find our Fathers of the Nation, to use their language, and then let's make changes; but while there are no Fathers of the Nation in sight, let's leave the Constitution as it is – because it might not be much, but it's a marvel in comparison to what we had before it.²⁴⁵

Romance de las plazas reproduces Espai en Blanc's *El Pressentiment No.13* (2012), 'We Buy Your Gold', and a photograph of a flamenco performer known as Niño de Elche re-enacting the gut feeling or premonition that emerged in the aftermath of the economic crisis.²⁴⁶ Like in the performance of the painter who does not paint, this gold buyer does not buy gold either, but commits himself to the devaluation of experience and the gesture of dissent. This gold buyer invites you to sell either your gold or your life – in its entirety or in fragments – and invites you to get the cash needed to, regardless of the crises, make sure you still enjoy the vacation you deserve within a country that was transformed into a cheap destination. All in all, Griñolo's book, which is the first volume in a series of four and, apart from *Concreta*, is also included in the 'Potosi Principle – Archive' at HKW,²⁴⁷ narrates the lively consequences of disorder, celebrates collective dissent and acts as a form of resistance toward the governance of right-wing politics and storytelling.²⁴⁸

For many people, social movements responding to the economic crisis hitting the south of Europe brought winds of change. A decade after the *indignados* movement emerged, we know that the insurrection took new forms of civil organisation, such as the so-called *mareas*

²⁴⁵ Medina in Griñolo, *Romance de las plazas*, p. 19, translated in Bulegoa Z/B with Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, *18 Pictures and 18 Stories*, pp. 248–249.

²⁴⁶ This event took part in the 'Laboratory on Leviathan (stopping the train of history)' as part of the 'On Capital and Territory III' project, UNIA arteypensamiento (2012), see <<http://ayp.unia.es>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁴⁷ 'Potosi Principle – Archive' begins where the exhibition 'The Potosi Principle' (2010–11) ended, ten years later at HKW. See: <https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2021/potosi_prinzip_archiv/start.php> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁴⁸ *Concreta* published this experimental investigation into the acts of 'power' by means of promulgation, the construction of discourse and liturgy, as well as the means of the performative, poetic and semantic manifestations of popular cultural politics. The titles of the books are: *martinete de las calles* [martinet of the streets] (2015), *debla de la noche* [debla of the night] (2016), *pregón de las patrias* [proclamation of the homelands] (2021).

[waves] of citizens, and new political parties such as Podemos.²⁴⁹ This party has held municipal offices since 2015 and since 2019 has been part of the first government in coalition with PSOE in Spanish history. Yet, this achievement has not gone without internal opposition, as the following pages demonstrate. In addition, these winds of change also evidenced a renewed institutional crisis across many levels of the public sphere: a crisis that included the museum and had to do with the decreasing ability to rely on or increasing disenchantment with institutional ecologies of care. Information, communication, mobility and flexibility defined an increasingly networked and measurable society constantly transmuting qualities and quantities. And, as Bulegoa Z/B writes, in Spanish, *contar* means both count and recount. A story, *un cuento*, traces back to the Latin *computus* – numbering preceded storytelling.²⁵⁰

The mobilisations also revealed the emergence of new ways of storytelling, of narrating experiences differently. One of the reasons why these new organisations and political parties were heard and, in turn, elected, was that they told the story in their own way. However, to understand why the space for discourse acquired a different status, one must look at the surge of interest in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and their theories about hegemony, populism and radical democracy, which evolved alongside these social movements and the emergence of new technologies of mediation. For Laclau and Mouffe, all language is rhetorical, beyond the mere ornamentation added to its literal content. This includes all social and political discourses and their inherent metaphorical operations of substitution and re-presentation. For both authors, politics is about the assembly of the social through the means of rhetoric, antagonism and passion.²⁵¹

Building on the previous chapters, this section addresses the narrative leading to the upsurge of ‘the social’, in which activism, forms of participation and collectivity renewed their commitment, and the emergence of the curatorial as a methodology attempting to dilute the inherent metaphorical operations of substitution and re-presentation, that is, the boundaries of bodies assembling (authors, participants and audiences). Certainly, the curatorial is a methodology that ‘the *curatela*’ responds to from the specificity of the Spanish context. Yet, the curatorial also deals with a blurred scenario of increasing mediation, professionalisation and financialisation – facing continuous exercises of synthesis whose paradoxical consequences often lead to the celebration of specific names, something that initially goes against its intention.

If, in the 1930s, the art of storytelling Benjamin describes had been exhausted faced with the written press, as the passage in my epigraph illustrates, the paradigm shift of the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s would have similar consequences. Information, as a product of

²⁴⁹ *Mareas* was the term used to referred to the waves of citizens against the global markets that were formed in the aftermath of the *indignados* movement, which were organised by colours: *yellow* represented the public libraries, *blue* water as a common good, *white* public health, *green* public education, *brown* the environment, etc.

²⁵⁰ Bulegoa Z/B with Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, *18 Pictures and 18 Stories*, p. 348.

²⁵¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

communication, would only be relevant when new. In contrast, storytelling would contribute to regulate both memory and forgetfulness. Likewise, the popularisation of social media in the 2010s offered the illusion of instituting in a flat world and the *indignados* and Occupy movements took advantage of the occasion to rebel in the intervals and transverse the squares. It was a form of cultural criticism that would express social interaction that underpin cultural production and experience.

Rhetoric of Post-representation. Bodies on their Way for Kindness

In February 2019, I attended the conference ‘Mobilising Affects: Populism and the Future of Democratic Politics in Spain’ at the University of Cambridge.²⁵² The symposium confronted Spain’s political past, present and future. Bringing together a group of distinguished scholars working in Britain, Spain and the United States, the presentations focused on the eruption of the populist mobilisations from 2011 to the present by homing in on expressions of dissent and indignation and the emergence of new political parties such as Podemos.

The event aimed to engage with the so-called ‘affective turn’ in the social sciences and humanities, a recent paradigm shift related to how ongoing political, economic and cultural transformations were changing the realm of the social.²⁵³ The ‘affective turn’ informed criticism of subject identity, representation, and trauma as well as an increasing engagement with information and affect – or what is often referred to as affective economy. The conference also explored processes of joint articulation advanced by authors such as Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway.²⁵⁴ The new configuration of bodies, technologies and matter informed the shift in thinking from a psychoanalytic perspective and resonated with the new focus on materiality in post-conceptual practices and the ethics of relationality that ‘the *curatela*’ embraces.

In the same way Mouffe and Laclau, but also Žižek and Racière, among others, had to accept the transformation of discourse formation within the new technological paradigm, that is, the invention of Internet and its promises of ‘democratisation’ in the late 1980s, the financial crisis coincided with the popularisation of social media in the 2010s, thereby reframing the conversation about the technologies of mediation as machines of subjectivity formation.

From the social to the affective turn, these authors had to arm themselves with tools to understand the functioning of desire Lacan explained at the time, and that other thinkers such as Luce Irigaray problematised. In the mid 1990s, scholars turned their attention towards the ever-changing realm of the social and the notion of affect, that is, the ‘pre-individual bodily

²⁵² ‘Mobilizing Affects: Populism and the Future of Democratic Politics in Spain’, University of Cambridge, 22–23 February (2019) <<https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/27899/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁵³ Hardt, ‘Foreword’.

²⁵⁴ Margaret Motherwell, ‘Affect and discourse – What’s the problem? From affect as excess to affective/discursive practice’, *Subjectivity*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2013), pp. 349–68.

forces, linked to autonomic responses, which augment or diminish a body's capacity to act or engage with others'.²⁵⁵

Without a doubt, the 'affective turn' has proven to be crucial in the re-assembling and theorising of the social and the curatorial. However, approaches rooted in different traditions have led to a wide range of different responses. As previously described, the focus on the body advanced in feminist theory and the exploration of emotions conducted by queer theory have been the two primary precursors opening new paths for knowledge production and novel possibilities for politics.²⁵⁶

But *are* we bodies, or do we *have* bodies? In 'Bodies in Space. On the Ends of Vulnerability' published in Spanish in *Concreta* 17 (2021), along with the writings of Jon Mikel Euba and Yael Davids previously described, Marina Vishmidt explains how the last quarter of the twentieth century marked the emergence of the body as a key heuristic in much cultural theory and philosophy. In recent years, bodies have gained traction in activist discourses and everyday forms of speech and storytelling such as the ones at hand. Vishmidt questions the term as a basic unit that enumerates bodies and not humans, persons, people, individuals or subjects, and responds to the entrenched legacies of subject/object dualism as well as the colonial, racist and patriarchal epistemologies.²⁵⁷

Taking the Spanish paradigmatic context as a point of departure, and with political theorist Mouffe – with whom Podemos's co-founder and strategist Íñigo Errejón wrote the book *In The Name of the People* (2016) – as a keynote speaker of the conference at Cambridge, the various lectures examined the promise to inscribe a radical alternative within Spain's contemporary political order and analysed the threat posed by bodies assembling, populist discourse and counter-hegemonic expression in twentieth and twenty-first-century cultural output. In Mouffe and Errejón's view, the explosion of populist discourse in Spain has forever transformed our understanding of contemporary democratic societies everywhere.

Mouffe's paper 'Radical Politics: An Agonistic Approach' (2019), presented in Cambridge, called for a re-articulation of existing discourses and practices, and for a re-engagement with governmental institutional settings to re-inscribe the domain of the public in her defence 'for a left populism', which is also the title of one of her most recent theoretical propositions published in 2018.²⁵⁸ Drawing upon the violent connotations often linked to social movements, the re-emergence of what Mouffe defines as 'passions' occupied a central focus of the conference. Passions can be understood as a certain type of common affects, especially

²⁵⁵ Patricia Ticineto Clough, Jean Halley, *The Affective turn. Theorising the Social*.

²⁵⁶ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, ed., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Lauren Berlant: *Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

²⁵⁷ Vishmidt, 'Cuerpos en el espacio. En los extremos de la vulnerabilidad'.

²⁵⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018). NB: the term 'populism' is, as a matter of fact, a term that Podemos has not integrated into its narrative because of four decades of autocracy and the discredit of the left.

those that are mobilised in the political domain in the formation of identities and bodies assembling.

In Mouffe's view, neoliberal hegemony has come to an end almost a decade after the *indignados* movement at the squares, after having been unchallenged for years. Yet strategies towards addressing a radical democracy and the creation of a counter-hegemony have not led to an agreement among leftist circles. The ongoing shift to a consensus invoking 'bodies' as the locus of socio-political agency also emerges as a consequence of this dissent.

While other post-Marxists, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, claim that the democracy of the multitude cannot be conceived of as a sovereign authority anymore – that is, they ought to foster self-organisation and re-assemblage and, consequently, take power by 'becoming minor', following Deleuze and Guattari's line of thought²⁵⁹ – Mouffe defends the formation of a counter-hegemony emerging from a re-articulation of already-existing institutions. In her own words, this is 'the only way of converting resistance into political governance' – and therefore transforming privatisation policies and social services.²⁶⁰

This long-standing political discussion, which has been updated, takes us back to the crisis of representation of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the neoliberal shift took place and the capitalist-communist conflict turned into a universal liberal democracy, free of ideologies and therefore of antagonisms. It was the 'system of positive echoes' that Villaespesa and Eraso also described, in which consensual modernist approaches towards simplistic modes of mediating culture were in crisis, which gave rise to the post-modern condition.²⁶¹

These traditional systems of representation challenged normative ideas of gender, sexuality, race and nation. These systems also brought with them a tension with the nascent affective economy that combines value systems and systems of thinking with particular attention to interaction, feedback effects and affects.²⁶² While post-modernists such as Luc Ferry posited that rebellion became a method, criticism rhetoric and transgression ceremony, others, such as Fredric Jameson and John Roberts, linked these discursive struggles to the emergence of cognitive capitalism and therefore gave rhetorical rebels of the 1980s and 1990s the benefit of doubt.²⁶³

It also takes us back to the artistic debates around Institutional Critique and new institutionalism described in the 'Field of Knowledge' section. The 1970s and the present

²⁵⁹ 'Becoming minor' is, in Deleuze and Guattari's view, an ethical action beyond the concept of 'the people' when invoked by subordinate groups and those aligned with them. For them becoming minority is not related to 'molar' identities, nor is it a politics that seeks representation or recognition of such identities. Molar configurations mean infinite lines of becoming, of potentiality, of possibility. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2005 [1980]).

²⁶⁰ Mouffe, 'Radical Politics: An Agonistic Approach'.

²⁶¹ Villaespesa and Eraso referenced in 'Editing Spaces Beyond the Mirror. How Words World Worlds', p. 76.

²⁶² Maaïke Lauwaert and Francien van Westrenen, *Facing Value. Radical Perspectives from the Arts* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017).

²⁶³ See Dave Beech, 'Recovering Radicalism: Dave Beech on critical art after Postmodernism', *Art Monthly*, No. 323 (2009).

share the idea that the cultural institution is always mediated by ideological and economic interests. As Michel Foucault taught us, both the discourse and the devices around it are not powerful instruments that operate silently, but power itself. Conversely, the main difference between these two moments of Institutional Critique lies in the former being a critique from the inside and against the museum, and the latter – aligning with Mouffe’s thesis – assuming that ‘the institution is not only a problem, but also a possible solution’.²⁶⁴

In the Spanish institutional arena, however, only the latter took place after the emergence of the ‘democratic museum’ in the mid 1970s although, as the ‘Institutional Critique and the Social Turn’ section explains, some of the actors involved in the definition of ‘new institutionalism’ witnessed the development of Institutional Critique first-hand.²⁶⁵

There is no doubt that this debate and the terminological shift about ‘bodies’ is rooted in the legacies of dualistic thinking that the ‘affective turn’ aims to surpass, but also in the colonial, racist and patriarchal epistemologies recent years have attempted to further destabilise. In this scenario, cultural institutions, in their verticality and desire to provide certainty, are often dragged behind.

In Vishmidt’s view, this shift to invoking ‘bodies’ instead of people or subjects, responds to an emancipatory impulse that stemmed from radical campus politics, but that soon became a commonplace in grassroots political circles as well as art institutional spaces such as 2017’s Documenta.²⁶⁶ Yet, here I am embracing this conundrum with the intuition that the *indignados* experience and their subsequent incursion in institutional structures shed light to this debate around the political and the curatorial, that is to say, contributes to the crisis of representation and criticality this thesis embraces.

Combining identity and progressive politics together, this phenomenon has often been defined in biopolitical terms, that is, referring to the defence of living conditions and physical integrity beyond the Spanish milieu, whether movements to resist structural violence (Black Lives Matter, NiUnaMenos); movements for social reproduction and against the destruction of the social (Standing Rock); movements for the defence of migrants, etc.

Indeed, the consequences of globalisation continue to reveal that cognitive capitalism has not only extended to the domain of material production, but also to the mediation of immaterial information, that is, to the ‘linguistic reiteration of labour’, as Paul Virno has theorised it – from the language of labour to the labour of language as a *structuring* force.²⁶⁷ Yet, as

²⁶⁴ Simon Sheikh, ‘Notes on Institutional Critique’, EIPCP (2006), <<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/sheikh/en>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁶⁵ ‘Institutional Critique and the Social Turn’, p. 26.

²⁶⁶ ‘The Parliament of Bodies’, Documenta 14 (2017). See <<https://www.documenta14.de/en/public-programs/927/the-parliament-of-bodies>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁶⁷ Paulo Virno, *A grammar of the multitude* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004). The emerging antagonism between the living knowledge of labour and the dead knowledge of fixed capital would cause a crisis of value. Virno formulates this assumption as in the idea of post-Fordism, in which the general intellect does not coincide with fixed capital but manifests itself principally as a linguistic reiteration of living labour.

Vishmidt explains, Mouffe, Laclau and Rancière consider that ‘the political’ has no structural determinacy. This is an important shift that correlates with the field of knowledge this research situates itself in: the practice of curating and the curatorial which mirrors the paradoxes emerging from the entanglement of the political ‘as a qualitative concept’,²⁶⁸ as previously described by Maria Lind. In Vishmidt’s view, however, the political is ultimately understood as a contingency with no structural intention.

Still, would it be desirable when addressing the curatorial? Can we rethink the ethical and political foundations of the structures and economies of the space for discourse, where the rhetoric of post-representation and operations of substitution occur and come into view? What material and aesthetic conditions could emerge from the re-articulation of spaces of mediation such as the museum?

The Curatorial or the Antagonistic Nature of the Political

Mouffe delivered her paper in Cambridge by referring to the Catalan context, in which En Comú Podem – a Podemos alliance – jumped into the governmental institution in 2015, winning seats at City Hall in Barcelona, while other allies entered those of Madrid, Cádiz, and Valencia, to list a few.²⁶⁹ Indeed, these new organisations and parties told the story differently and, in turn, were heard and elected. Some people call it ‘populism’ and others ‘radical democracy’, some call it both.²⁷⁰ As a result, the wake of the Occupy and *indignados* movement has created a shift toward a post-hegemonic and post-representational political arena. Yet, Mouffe invoked an MP for En Comú Podem, Marcelo Expósito, to demonstrate her argument against Hardt and Negri’s positioning towards power relations and the common:

Marcelo Expósito recognised that for those like him coming from the extra-parliamentary left [followers of Antonio Negri, but also Paul Virno et al.], this jump into the institution was a clear break with many of the previous anti-representative convictions. There was a lot of rejection of all forms of political representation during the 15M *indignados* movement.²⁷¹

Mouffe made the case that the ‘heterogeneity of the multitude’ defended by extra-parliamentary left was not enough to reverse the political austerity that was violently imposed by the neoliberal management of the crisis. This heterogeneous multitude realised that it was necessary to get involved with the institution in order to transform it. The role of citizen counter-power was not enough. Resistance was not enough. Struggle, dissent and indignation

²⁶⁸ Maria Lind, ‘Active Cultures. On the Curatorial’, *Artforum* (October 2009), p. 103.

²⁶⁹ For those who are not familiarised with the Catalan conflict, Podemos’s stance defends the referendum although does not defend Independence.

²⁷⁰ The expression ‘radical democracy’ was articulated by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985). See Lasse Thomassen, ‘Hegemony, populism and democracy: Laclau and Mouffe today’, *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, No. 40 (2016), pp. 161–76.

²⁷¹ ‘Mobilizing Affects: Populism and the Future of Democratic Politics in Spain’, University of Cambridge, 22–23 February (2019), <<https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/27899/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

were needed to transform political governance in the search for the common as, I would argue in the following pages, both Podemos and the Reina Sofia museum attempt to rehearse.

Nevertheless, considering Mouffe's increasing influence on and participation in museum and university programmes in recent years, it came as a surprise that she did not refer to Expósito as an artist, which is what he has been for most of his life. One could have assumed a certain level of familiarity with the field of art, given that the conferences also addressed the museum as a governmental setting. Not only because Mouffe's theories have contributed to defining an understanding of the field of the curatorial as 'a qualitative concept, just like "the political"',²⁷² as previously described, but also, and above all, because she herself had been involved in the formation of a new institutionalism in Spain in the late 1990s, prior to the emergence of the curatorial as a field of knowledge in the mid 2000s. This was also before her being recognised in the political sphere after having co-authored a book with Podemos's co-founder, Errejón, in the mid 2010s.

It is worth stressing that whereas 'the political' is inherently antagonistic by nature, in Mouffe's view, 'politics' is that ensemble of practice and discourse seeking to establish a certain balance.²⁷³ As a result and in line with this argumentation, the curatorial has been defined as a practice dealing with antagonism – an either/or position this chapter continues to problematise.

For this reason, after introducing Expósito's position, I took the opportunity to ask Mouffe about her view on the role of the museum as a space for 'agonistic pluralism' – a term that was in the title of the conference and that she proposed after having defined 'antagonism' – but also about her take on her early implications within the Spanish cultural domain. I raised a particular instance that is rarely addressed in curatorial literature, despite her being influential beyond the Spanish geographies: namely that the current Reina Sofía museum director, Borja-Villel – MACBA's former director – was the first curator to invite Mouffe to give a lecture around the notion of 'antagonism' in Barcelona in 1999.

As I write in 'Mind the Gap. Fissures and Prospects of an Impossible Consensus', Mouffe gave her first lecture within the context of a museum at the time, introducing political theory within a cultural institutional setting. Titled 'For a Politics of Democratic Identity' (1999), the Belgian thinker returned to her influential book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to explore antagonism within 'the political' and mediation within 'politics'. As I argue in my paper, in order to return the conversation to the technologies of mediation, this inherent antagonistic nature of the political that Mouffe's argument highlights resonates with Žižek's notion of the 'parallax view' since both terms define irreducible incompatibilities.²⁷⁴

A 'parallax view' is a displacement of an object caused by a change in the observer's line of sight. In the field of photography, the motion of the parallax allows the viewer to see two

²⁷² Maria Lind, 'Active Cultures. On the Curatorial'.

²⁷³ Vallés Vílchez, 'Mind the Gap'.

²⁷⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2006).

simultaneous positions that cannot be seen at once. Žižek uses this idea to describe the Hegelian dialectic as the recognition of the intermission or gap between two positions. The author argues that Hegel does not overcome Kantian dualism but does rather the opposite: he asserts it as such. This coincides with Latour's thesis that the Hegelian dialectic expands the abyss between the poles of subject and object that aims to fill.²⁷⁵

Both Mouffe and Žižek defend dissent and opposition as inherent to communication and interaction – aligning with the curatorial definition, and akin to Haraway's proposal of 'staying with the trouble' towards an ethics of research in the humanities and beyond.²⁷⁶ Indeed, communication and interaction are intrinsic to mediation; they are key components of the 'affective turn'.²⁷⁷ That is to say that certain positionings and perspectives are not able to generate consensus and by default entail fissures. Every action, every frame, every edition requires choice, which could result in discrimination and thus exclusion. Didn't George Perec say that to think is to classify?²⁷⁸

Mouffe's influential notion of 'antagonism' gave rise to a homonymous exhibition at MACBA two years after Borja-Villel's invitation on the course of the new century. Her lecture was inserted as a text within the exhibition materials, positioned right after his curatorial essay. Many of the artists were representatives of the Institutional Critique movement and have bodies of work that, as I argue in 'Mind the Gap', rehearse the asymmetric nature of 'the political' that also defines Spanish artistic and institutional practices. This inadequate antagonism brings light to the narrative's intricacies and activates an affective response.²⁷⁹

In 2017, Chantal Mouffe returned to Spain to discuss the relationship between affect and politics within the context of the exhibition 'Pity and Terror: Picasso's Path to Guernica' at the Reina Sofia Museum. The invitation came from this very same director who, back in the 1990s, had asked Mouffe to introduce political theory within the context of the museum, precisely when the so-called 'social turn' was at its peak, globally, in the visual arts.

During this later visit to Madrid, Mouffe already supported the 'affective turn' that she would discuss years later in Cambridge, introducing her view on the relevance of individual emotions and collective affection to provoke change. Relying on *Guernica's* transcendence and widespread recognition in which artistic and political value are inextricably entangled, she proposed a theoretical transition from her definition of 'antagonism', inherent to 'the political', towards a more relational and hopeful form of addressing dissent that she calls 'agonistic pluralism', akin to 'politics'. This allows her to balance and place value on a sense

²⁷⁵ Daniel Miller, 'Materiality: An Introduction', in *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

²⁷⁶ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

²⁷⁷ Mouffe, 'Radical Politics: An Agonistic Approach'.

²⁷⁸ George Perec, *Pensar clasificar* [Think, Classify] (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1986).

²⁷⁹ . Pedro G. Romero, Marcel Broodthaers, Rogelio López Cuenca, Hans Haacke, Harun Farocki, Guerrilla Girls, Lygia Pape, Allan Sekula, and Jeff Wall contributed with their projects. See Vallés Vélchez, 'Mind the Gap'.

of hope for a better world – *the way for kindness* I previously described – that despite its conflicting nature Guernica’s horror scene still entails.

This relational shift towards hope without optimism is what ‘the *curatela*’ ultimately comprises. I argue that this agonistic shift towards politics as mediation allows knowledge to be situated while recognising that the way we think with others leads us to hold multiple ends of sometimes divergent positions, messing with pre-existing institutional structures. Ultimately, embracing politics as a means of negotiation, in search of a ‘middle ground’, which makes visible and tangible precise lived realities for the coming generations who, like mine, have inherited the opacities of a fragile emerging field of knowledge.

My question about the role of the museum as a space for ‘agonistic pluralism’ and about Mouffe’s positioning within curatorial debates, allowed me to continue to challenge this narrative. Somewhat amazed by my question, Mouffe eagerly responded by letting me know that it was through Expósito that she met Borja-Villel over twenty years ago. She explained to me that Expósito had interviewed her during Catherine David’s Documenta in 1997. After recognising the relevance of her influence in an incipient cultural institutionalism in Barcelona, to my surprise, Mouffe asked me whether I had read a recent book featuring a conversation between Expósito and the current Reina Sofía’s director, a particular autotheory exercise.²⁸⁰

The text, ‘A Conversation with Manuel Borja-Villel’, builds the institutional narrative created by the museum director on his journey from New York in the 1980s, where he witnessed the problematic negotiations around cultural institutions first-hand, to directing the Antoni Tàpies Foundation (1990–98), MACBA (1998–2008) in Barcelona, and, ultimately, the Reina Sofia museum (2008–present) in Madrid.

The latter appointment happened around the time of the 2008 economic catastrophe that unleashed a political and institutional legitimacy crisis, which I addressed in the previous chapters of this thesis. Institutions such as the Reina Sofía reiterated through their programming and their questioning of governance during this crisis the conflicts around democratic representation and a new globalised political urgency – towards the post-democratic and post-critical museum. This post-democratic and post-critical condition reveals that cultural institutions operate by democratic systems. Yet, their applications are progressively limited because decision making is in the hands of a small elite. This translates into a growing privatisation of resources.

The exhibition ‘The Potosí Principle: How Shall We Sing the Song of the Lord in an Alien Land’ (2010–11) was precisely one of Borja-Villel’s first ventures after having been appointed director of the museum, taking on the marriage between capital and religion, global economy and colonial production. ‘The Potosí Principle’ was also an exhibition dealing with

²⁸⁰ Part of the conversation had recently appeared in English in *Afterall*. ‘A conversation between Manuel Borja-Villel and Marcelo Expósito’, *Afterall*, No. 44, Autumn/Winter (2017).

the paradox of representation within the post-conceptual condition, a term that not only engages with the role of the museum, but also with an assembly of bodies dealing with the tensions between them and objects rendering a story visible, that is, *who* narrates and *how* storytelling itself manifests in the articulation between the elements that facilitate communication. As I explain in ‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of the Potosí Principle’, part of which informs this chapter here, it was an exhibition with dealt with every single meaning of the word representation:

as an act and effect of representing; as an image or idea that substitutes reality; as a group of people who represent a community; as a thing that represents another; as a category or social distinction; as a dramatic work featuring primarily religious themes; as the right of one person to take the place of another; as a concept in which an external or internal object is made present to consciousness; as a plea or proposition supported by reasons or documents addressed to a superior.²⁸¹

In short, representation was embraced here as a complex term that in its different long-term epistemological and methodological approaches, halfway between politics and semiotics, offers a difficult consensus, but which undoubtedly contributes to complicate the set of rules that defines the multiple. However, my argument here that it is not enough to shout, ‘Long live the multiple! The multiple must be done.’ We must engage with the question of ‘how?’²⁸²

‘The Potosí Principle’ unleashed such a trail of disagreements between the agents involved that was decided to render visible to the audiences in various ways: from the curatorial positions in the respective publications and the institutional confrontations whose loans were denied to their ultimate encounter in La Paz. A paradigmatic visibility of the conflict that does not usually manifest in other curatorial and institutional processes.²⁸³

While the exhibition in 2010 was a grand touring project with four curators including artists Andreas Siekmann, Alice Creischer, philosopher Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz and Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, the proposal at the HKW Berlin showed in 2021 is a smaller archive and a reading room that addresses the complexities and blind spots of their first iteration. Both counted dozens of collaborations, including the work of Expósito, Griñolo and López Cuenca (a member of Agustín Parejo School).

²⁸¹ Spanish Dictionary, *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua*, <<https://dle.rae.es/representación>> [accessed 20 March 2022], in Vallés Vilchez, ‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of The Potosí Principle’.

²⁸² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mil mesetas. Capitalismo y esquizofrenia* [A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia] (Valencia: Pre-textos, 2002 [1980]), p. 12, in *Ibid.*

²⁸³ “Why do paintings come and don't come” is one of the first reflections that the exhibition catalogue presents. Alice Creischer, Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz, Andreas Siekmann, *Principio Potosí* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía–MNCARS, 2010), p. 18.

This project has been a research tool for me because it has helped me understand what post-representational curating might mean, that is, the capacity of the practice to face the different crises of representation and mediation in the field of politics, aesthetics and semiotics by going beyond the discursive and enhancing trans-disciplinary knowledges. This ‘going beyond the discursive’ would include performing the archive, curating as organising, and turning towards the educational and the editorial. In my eyes, ‘The Potosí Principle’, which also anticipated the Occupy and *indignados* movements, embraces all this layering.

This exhibition offers a paradigmatic lens from which to negotiate the conventions and temporalities of curatorial practice with regard to the urgencies of our present. And it is precisely the ideas of arrival, mobility, and access, the ones the project tackles, and that make it interesting. The impossibility of agreeing on a single place of enunciation from which to create the discursive space was made visible. Each curator would speak from their own experience and traditions, which ultimately led to a debate around extraction and fetishisation of indigenous knowledges.

However, as I argue in ‘Outside Witness’, what both curatorial proposals would share was the suspicion of the museum as a powerful centralising force, whose bureaucratic and diplomatic dynamics would make the work process an even more complex scenario for negotiation. While Creischer, Siekmann and Hinderer Cruz mistrusted but accepted the institution, because it engaged with the most recent waves of Western institutional critique and new institutionalism, the other, formed by Aymara sociologists, eventually rejected its exhibition format and decided to publish the book and embrace a politics of refusal.

The fact that they ‘stayed with the trouble’ and made visible the disagreement – being both books proof of their dissent – manifests the antagonistic nature of the political that the curatorial embrace. There is no doubt that these different responses contribute to a dualistic history of representation, inclusion, integration or incorporation, appropriation or even co-optation that gives continuity to a genealogy of transhistorical exhibitions and colonial disencounters such as the ones presented in the ‘New Institutionalism: Redefining Modernity?’ section.²⁸⁴

Researchers María Iñigo and Olga Fernández think that to render visible the frameworks shaping exhibitions such as ‘The Potosí Principle’, it would be necessary to avoid considering elements rooted in other cultures from within our own prism; that is, we must be able to apprehend other historical perspectives, other methodologies, accepting that vision cannot be reduced just to our own gaze. This conclusion leads us to an inescapable interrogation: How to articulate an ‘ethics of the gaze’ that does not succumb to extractivist dynamics? At what point does that shared, attentive, and careful gaze transform the object of care into a fetish? This is one of the questions the following chapter tackles.

²⁸⁴ ‘New Institutionalism: Redefining Modernity?’, p. 43.

The Curatela or the Agonistic Take of Politics

This conundrum also represents a recurrent authorial struggle within the Spanish context, where social radicality and an emerging institutionalism acquired a paradigmatic dimension for the political specificity the country was immersed in after a dictatorship. As the ‘Across the Sand’ project highlights, the ‘social turn’ arrived prematurely to the peninsula where cultural workers learned by doing and, ultimately, generated a new institutional canon. This is because, as Lucy Lippard writes, ‘history always catches up with rebels’.²⁸⁵

The 1990s marked the beginning of an acceleration that swallowed all modes of cultural production. This at a time when, as Julia Bryan-Wilson points out, artists and critics already identified as ‘art workers’, a polemical redefinition of creative labour.²⁸⁶ The explosion of the art world and the institutions that gave it shelter aligned with the economic processes of a globalisation that saw a forward-looking escape route in the idea of progress. Borja-Villel observed the problematic debates around institutions. At the same time, other Spanish art critics and curators were living in New York at the time, including Villaespesa, Todolí and Estrella de Diego, among others. As Villaespesa indicates in her essay ‘Absolute Majority Syndrome’, previously described:

Art must not frame power but respond to community problems. This is the only way of avoiding the most innocuous lyricism and mimicry: double axis of the Spanish art problem as a global unity [...] Spanish art needs museums – which do not only mean physical spaces. This obviously entails being aware of the contradictions of the models we import – either Europeans or Americans. We need to consider that these models, in their own milieus, are continuously and critically put into question. In other words, to be able to confront this new institutional scenery, we need to understand the different phase of the Spanish cultural situation: while we demand museums, others already question them.²⁸⁷

With the same lessons around institutionalism that Villaespesa anticipated, Borja-Villel moved back from New York to Barcelona and started his directorship at the Tàpies Foundation. In taking a position within this new environment, Borja-Villel would later argue that Institutional Critique is perhaps one of the most institutional forms of practising criticality.²⁸⁸ In his view, the museum needs to claim political and poetical efficiency by looking for new structures of enquiry, applying a sort of ‘tentacular thinking’ that operates at various levels of the institution and modes of addressing a heterogeneous audience. Others from his generation contributed to different forms of institutionalism, an example of which could be seen in the artist-led curatorial work of Vicente Todolí, or the minor approach to

²⁸⁵ Lucy Lippard, ‘Comisariar siguiendo los números’.

<<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/curating-by-numbers>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁸⁶ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Los Angeles, Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2009).

²⁸⁷ Villaespesa, ‘Síndrome de mayoría absoluta’.

²⁸⁸ VV.AA., *Carta Journal* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía–MNCARS, 2010).

exhibition making and public programming of Villaespesa at UNIA Arteypensamiento. As these examples show, the institution itself is heterogeneous and permeable, chiming with Foucault's argument.

In the published conversation between Expósito and Borja-Villel that Mouffe and I discussed in Cambridge, the Reina Sofia Museum's director identified the following:

We seem to live in a post-historical and post-democratic time since any form of modern revolution seems impossible. The same occurs with the idea of an outsider intellectual or artistic avant-garde capable of freeing and guiding us toward a specific goal. [...] The intellectual tends to disappear in an entanglement of texts and hypertexts and the spectator is asked to complete the stories and make them their own. Therefore, the idea of having an author guiding the path seems unthinkable [...] There has never been a period less inclined for prophets than our own.²⁸⁹

This situating of prophets in relation to authors takes us back to Benjamin's short text on the storyteller quoted at the beginning, but also to Barthes's displacement of the 'Author-God' – a modernist individual and coherent voice to be idolised – in favour of a second type of author capable of dissolving into a sea of quotations, relations and entanglements. While artists started to scrutinise and collectively challenge the role of the museum in the first waves of Institutional Critique, the freelance curator-as-author was inaugurated in the discourse with the figure of Harald Szeemann during his iconic exhibition 'When Attitudes Become Form' (1969), leaving behind the role of the curator-as-custodian of the previous decades. Even if Szeemann's exhibitions were a more collaborative affair than their public presentation may have been represented in curatorial history, his staging of curating as an individual methodology would establish a new model of curator as both auteur and entrepreneur based on self-promotion.

Haraway, who has profoundly influenced my research since we worked together in 2016, but also Benjamin, highlight the thin line separating representation and empowerment from replacement – between the storyteller and the author. How does this struggle for recognition manifest in curatorial practices when this line is relentlessly redefined? Drawing a demarcation line seems impossible.

As noted, Haraway proposes the word muddle to trouble the trope of visual clarity and the cat's cradle game to underline the definition of collective authorship. Another approach to this could be Mouffe's conception of *visuality* as a kind of intensifier of social dissent. In her view, to operate in a plural and heterogeneous world we need to be capable of accepting conflict or, in Haraway's terms, stay with the trouble. However, as in 'The Potosí Principle', *how* to address and mediate dissent or the impossible consensus is another matter that this thesis aims to problematise.

²⁸⁹ Expósito and Borja-Villel, *Conversación con Manuel Borja-Villel*, pp. 290–91.

Taking this into account, this thesis proposes ‘the *curatela*’, which is a middle ground, an arena from which to negotiate entangled practices in the search for a redistribution of power and the desire for interaction with one another. Yet, as Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us, the resistance to conceptual enclosure is not without political purpose. Engaging with a fair account of many feminist discussions requires us to cut across fixed theoretical and academic divides. It is precisely feminism’s transversal nature and the redefinition of the division in the struggle for recognition that have the potential to muddle simplistic modes of mediating and divide the social, and therefore our lives and imaginaries.

In the end, if we live in a post-historical and post-democratic present, because as Borja-Villel points out ‘any form of revolution seems impossible’, the role of mediation is no longer related to canonical history but to nonconformist stories. In his book, Borja-Villel raised the issue of the role of the exhausted author – inside and outside the institution – before Podemos and En Comú Podem won the elections in Barcelona and Madrid in 2015, along with other cities. His interviewer, Expósito, along with other artists such as the feminist Agueda Bañón, entered the Catalan political party like Mouffe outlined in her talk. In addition, the Head of Education and Public Programmes at the Reina Sofía, Jesús Carrillo, left the museum to join Manuela Carmena’s team at Madrid’s City Hall. The Reina Sofía museum square continues to be the Podemos’s public assembly location.²⁹⁰

However, the recent emergence of the first far-right party in the country since the death of dictator Francisco Franco, VOX, re-calibrated the discussion. Podemos’s impossible consensus on how to address affects and care in the formation of a counter-hegemony has created what I call ‘a fuss and a fork’, that is, controversy and a subsequent split in their previously unified ideation of a future trajectory.

This ‘fussing and forking’ chimes with the cultural debates of the 1980s that Mouffe used to position her view against Hardt and Negri, a period in which, as Mouffe explains, feminism managed to transform the relationship towards masculinity without the help of the parties neither the State.²⁹¹ This new situation has re-directed the rhetoric, antagonism and passions back in time, into the past century. As a result, the discursive and affective re-assembling of Podemos suffered from an organisational fracture.

Due to disagreement, Podemos’s secretary for policy and strategy, Iñigo Errejón, was forced to leave the national structure he co-founded, and joined former judge Manuela Carmena’s

²⁹⁰ There are other examples: Manuela Villa, curator at Tabacalera, joined PSOE. Previous Reina Sofía’s director, José Guirao, was appointed Minister of Culture. Actor-Network Theory professor Manuel Castells was appointed Minister of Universities. There are other examples in the UK: for instance, editors and curators Caroline Woodley (Afterall) and Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt (salon3, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art in Helsinki, etc.) both joined the Labour Party. See also <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/spain-elections-madrid-goes-wild-for-podemos-leader-pablo-iglesias-but-spain-faces-period-of-uncertainty-a6782146.html>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁹¹ Martin Bosman and Leilia Barre, ‘An Interview with Chantal Mouffe, College International de Philosophie, Paris, France’

minor campaign for the autonomy of Madrid.²⁹² The party's leader, Pablo Iglesias – a mediator for some, a prophet for others – had a different strategy in mind to fight VOX's rise, whose plain and simple rhetoric had a profound effect on Spanish society. Errejón and Iglesias's impossible consensus towards building a counter-hegemony created controversy and dissent.

While Errejón defends transversal or relational approaches towards the construction of the common, relying on conviviality and green policies situating the notion of 'care' at the centre of the debate to reach those who, as he says, 'are not yet convinced',²⁹³ Iglesias puts forward a more representative antagonistic campaign in defence of 'the convinced' – the affiliates – showing exasperation towards the rest of the political spectrum beyond VOX. When Podemos was at their peak with 69 seats in 2016, the Socialist leader proposed forming a Portugal-style 'progressive coalition'. Whereas Errejón saw in this opportunity a possibility of change, Iglesias opposed such an alliance.²⁹⁴

This was among the primarily factors that led Podemos to lose 1.5 million votes in 2019 and to Iglesias's resignation in 2021, giving way to a new feminist independent figure, Yolanda Díaz, who is timidly following Errejón's and Carmena's transversal strategy. With her intention to move away from the left-right axis, the arrival of Díaz as Vice-President and future candidate revived this initial debate five years later, reclaiming the spirit of the *indignados* movement, while increasing the polarisation and popularity of VOX during the three years Podemos could have formed the first government of coalition of Spanish history. She did not want to join the left. What she wanted was for Spanish society

to be the protagonist of a process of essential transformation. Parties are a very small thing in our country, and they are an obstacle. I am here to change people's lives [...] They are simple tools, nothing more, and they have to act as simple tools. I am a simple tool; I am nothing important; the important thing is that Spanish society speaks. Let's open a great discussion.²⁹⁵

Within this turmoil, how can one address 'care' as a constituent part of a praxis in a framework of interdependence, but also in the processes of civil mediation towards 'the commons' within the contemporary condition? Since we already know that 'when care is

²⁹² Manuela Carmena was appointed Mayor of Madrid in 2015 but lost her position in 2019 with the emergence of the far-right VOX party. Carmena was independent and had no party affiliation. See <https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/05/27/inenglish/1558948413_735223.html> [accessed 20 March 2020].

²⁹³ 'Errejón defiende que Podemos debe dirigirse a todos los españoles' [Errejón defends Podemos should address all Spaniards] <https://elpais.com/politica/2016/11/29/actualidad/1480424996_107652.html> [accessed 20 March 2022].

²⁹⁴ Javier Martín del Barrio, F. Manetto, 'Socialist leader proposes forming Portugal-style 'progressive coalition', *El País* (2016) <https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2016/01/08/inenglish/1452243120_684315.html> [accessed 20 February 2022].

²⁹⁵ The new candidate Yolanda Díaz is trying to recover the votes the party lost, see <<https://digismak.com/yolanda-diaz-will-try-to-recover-the-million-and-a-half-voters-that-podemos-lost/>> [accessed 20 February 2022].

removed, we can perceive the effects of carelessness.²⁹⁶ Thus, the practice of curating, as within the practice of politics as mediation Mouffe describes, has adhered to an ethical question that goes hand in hand with the processes of negotiation between cultural agents and their power relations.

As I write in ‘Can the Museum Shape, Share or Serve?’, in a recent workshop on the transfer of critical studies to public programming held at Goldsmiths, Yaiza Hernández, who was responsible for MACBA’s public programmes a decade ago, spoke about how the democratic and critical premises that were once the foundations of a debate around public production are now unravelling.²⁹⁷ In her view, they are caught in the paradoxes of post-democratic institutions, namely those whose decision-making is increasingly limited and co-opted. As she argues, ‘the kind of critical claims that many of these institutions have repeatedly made, in practice, have been systematically betrayed.’²⁹⁸ Hernández criticised Claire Bishop’s statements in *Radical Museology: or, What’s Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (2010) and contrasted Bishop’s ideas of ‘radical education’ with an image of Borja-Villel launching ‘the first online degree of Fine Arts in the world’, in collaboration with the Open University of Catalonia.²⁹⁹

The programme’s transgression would be called into question for its similarities with the well-known liberal academic systems in the Anglosphere as spaces of legitimation, through which students as well as us, teachers and researchers, enter the (art) system, and where implementing alternatives that escape the logic of competitiveness and consumption is difficult. Hernández spoke of the uses and abuses of theory; not to cancel it – since its level of abstraction is what allows us to imagine things as they are not, and to imagine things otherwise is fundamental in the times we live in – but to reinforce the idea that theory follows the problem and not, as sometimes seems to be suggested, theory as solution. In this regard, ‘the *curatela*’ follows the problem this chapter describes and attempts to imagine a fragile practice that is inserted in the post-representational paradox otherwise.

The Hospitable Turn? Our Working Conditions, Your Experience Conditions

New institutionalism, anchored to Institutional Critique and to the desire for autonomy traditionally linked to the figure of the curator, and whose genealogies have run in parallel since the 1970s, is for me part of the contradiction in which so-called ‘progressive institutions’ are immersed in their authorial battles over discourse. The notion of ‘public programmes’ that appeared in the 1990s – precisely to expand the narrative logics developed in exhibitionary formats and to promote the idea of the public ‘sphere’ in a kind of *balance* of

²⁹⁶ Puig de la Bellacasa, ‘Thinking with Care’.

²⁹⁷ Yaiza Hernández, ‘From Critical Studies to Public Programming: Public Knowledge at the Post-Democratic Impasse’, paper presented at Goldsmiths University, 18 May (2018), cited in the section ‘Can the Museum Shape, Share, or Serve?’ in Vallés Vílchez, ‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of The Potosí Principle’.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Yaiza cited in Vallés Vílchez, ‘Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of The Potosí Principle’.

subjectivities – are those that generate the knowledge that finally form institutional experiences.

Ultimately, Hernández would regret the fact that those topics debated *as part* of the museum's activities did not reach the institutional machinery itself. They did not result in exercises of self-critique, but rather created a scenario in which cultural policies against precariousness induced an effect in the museum and its organisational charts, turning fellow museum and political activists into legitimisers in a way that sits at odds with their principles. It would not happen at the level of communication either – guides, brochures, tours are still anchored in a traditional history of art.

So is the task of the museum to shape, to share, to serve? What about care? In 'Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come', the head of public programmes at MACBA until very recently, Pablo Martínez, claims what many of us have been exposing for some time, within the platforms from which we operate.³⁰⁰ Namely, the possibility of rethinking the ethical and political foundations of the structures and economy of the museums, whose dynamics are based on permanent mobility, an economy of visibility and the logic of continuous growth.³⁰¹

In short, these are the same claims around the processes of legitimation and complicity that 'The Potosí Principle' appealed to in its critique of art systems. Instead of debating what social distancing measures will be implemented when reopening museums after the pandemic in which we are still immersed, we should ask what material and aesthetic conditions the museum should put forward. According to Martínez:

If museums want to play a key role in this restructuring, and make a commitment to climate justice, they have no choice but to give up their present mission and learn how to fail better [that is, following Jack Halberstam, betting on] a genuine form of existence that simply does not conform to the prevailing logics. An act of rebellion against the imposed norm. If we consider Halberstam's proposal from ecofeminist perspectives, this kind of dissidence would be enacted by dismissing any concept of well-being that is based on buying power, by spurning the accumulation of goods and by proposing ways of living that are more austere and therefore less harmful to the environment. In terms of museums, this approach would ideally lead to a model that pushes back against the overbearing logics of accumulation, productivity, value, property, novelty, and the constant pressure to sustain income from ticket sales, venue hire, and sponsorship. It would bring about a museum that is more internationalist than international, that supports the local without being provincial, and that refuses to keep adding to their already bloated rosters of international artists, star speakers, and low-paid workers. A museum that advocates simplicity, and that ditches all the conventional indicators that have, until now, been used as gauges of success. Because,

³⁰⁰ See the 'Museum as Ecosystem' in 'Caring (Thinking for)', p. 126.

³⁰¹ Pablo Martínez, 'Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come', Kunsthalle Wien (2020), <<https://kunsthallewien.at/en/pablo-martinez-fail-better-notes-for-a-museum-yet-to-come/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

as the Spanish ecofeminist Yayo Herrero has noted, all these indicators have helped shape a culture that is directly at odds with life itself.

These notes arose in the heat of declarations by Borja-Villel who, appealing to the current political and health crisis, stated that ‘the museum will have to provide care like a hospital, while still being critical’.³⁰² Such affirmations have troubled those feminist actors who understand their practices as ways to institute with care – before, during and after the pandemic. These practices defend the need to implement ‘situated knowledge’ and ‘stay with the trouble’ as part one of the few possible ways to counter the opacity of our institutions, in favour of their complexity and transparency towards a new social contract.

These are practices that, when troubling the trope of visual clarity, in the end embrace the muddle, the entanglement, the cat’s cradle game, and favour collective authorship. Perhaps for this reason, in fear of a new ‘hospitable turn’ Martínez would timidly clarify the words of the director of the Reina Sofía, reminding him of what Hernández was already demanding:

In this sense, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the museum will have to continue to provide care or that it must care for those who do the caring and improve the working conditions and status of educators, mediators, and all the staff who do outreach work. The task of caring is crucial in these times of ‘capitalist realism’, to echo the words of the cultural theorist Mark Fisher, given that suffering is not limited to the museum’s visitors, but extends to its workers. It is therefore necessary to review the extent to which the museum is also the root cause of this distress, given the forms of production it favours: the present model allows and in fact demands that cultural producers work on several different projects at the same time, all of which are paid at dubious rates, are extremely precarious, require the tireless and hurried efforts of many interconnected people, and are in a state of constant mobility.³⁰³

In a time when we are living in a perfect storm, in a suspended and muddled time in which the importance of caring for those who themselves care, guard, heal, becomes evident, a window of opportunity opens to activate healing and collaborative processes not so much (or only) as public policies, but as a capacity for self-governance and solidarity that shifts the institutional politics of representation towards an instituting politics of attention.

The current crisis allows us to radically instigate the creation of collective spaces, as social fabrics from within which to disagree, from which to enter and rehearse assembly propositions. This brings to the fore a debate that includes the privileged, yet paradoxical, potential to make visible and tangible lived realities, a discursive power that carries a contradiction that oftentimes displaces what in my view institutions should secure. In the same way that justice aims to achieve equality, museums must sustain the ability to stay with

³⁰² Expósito and Borja-Villel, ‘In Conversation’.

³⁰³ Martínez, ‘Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come’.

the trouble of difference, but they can operate under the premise of balance, not symmetry. Our working conditions are audiences' experiential conditions.

For the past two decades cultural producers have been preoccupied by questions around where care comes from, where the 'new structures of enquiry' defended by Borja-Villel were situated. This preoccupation has to do with the institutional dissatisfaction that the neoliberal austerity policies entailed, and thus with the appearance of the so-called new institutionalism, which claimed that the democracy of the multitude could no longer be conceived of in terms of a sovereign authority. This is significantly visible in the case of Spain, where institutions very rarely include curators in their organograms and the top-down structure re-enforces an authorial narrative – just as in the Left Populist defence of Podemos versus VOX, leading to a recent loss of 29 seats.

Perhaps that is why Mouffe did not want to comment on the party's struggle, in which her authorial companion Errejón, with whom she wrote the publication *In the Name of the People*, seemed to re-assemble his political narrative towards a minor, less prophetic approach. Errejón reconsidered his stance after realising that Carmena's ecologies of care found solutions to the housing crisis, pollution, public debt and corruption in less than four years, without rehearsing simplistic and antagonistic modes of mediating the debate in a search for an adversary. In my eyes, as Reckitt writes, in the cultural sphere, labour and care also call for a 'reallocation of curatorial and institutional priorities and resources.'³⁰⁴

All in all, affects and care enable me to theoretically and practically address the nature of a project that aims to muddle through the institutional arena in Spain since 1989, when *Arena* as well as other global affairs emerged, while arguing how dissent and storytelling are indispensable as a means of negotiating the contemporary condition in our search for a middle ground, that is, 'the *curatela*' as an arena from which to mediate reciprocal cultural practices in a deserted and precarious environment.

Ultimately, dealing with contemporary production as a situated practice could also mean balancing processes of negotiation among different fields of knowledge, including politics, research, the arts and others. Such negotiations could be read as acts of editing and storytelling, and each field of knowledge could be instrumental to the formation of the muddle. The composite and heterogeneous condition of human beings, as described around the allegorical personification of care, *Cura*, could be understood as the sum of affects and effects, as a figure inseparable from the world in which dualisms no longer have a place.

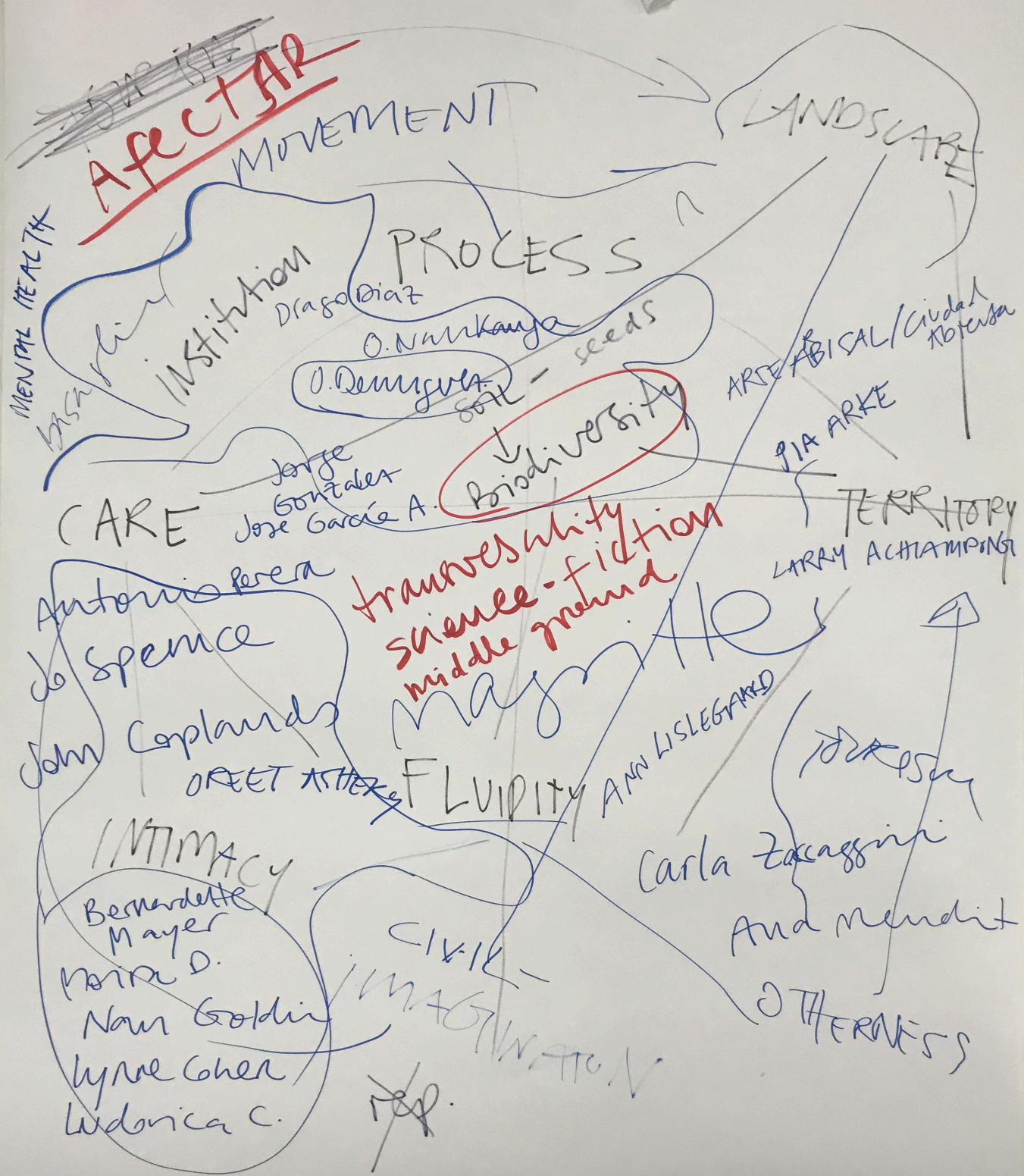
Processes of negotiation and mediation are able to leave room for the affective dimensions of knowledge, for invisible anxieties and hopes, or for the anticipation of lost futures, which this curatorial-editorial rehearsal puts to the test, aims to address. This happens when we engage with inherited worlds by adding layers, rather than solely analytical disarticulation. This

³⁰⁴ Helena Reckitt, 'Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction', *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2016), pp. 6–30.

approach aims to re-describe, and therefore re-edit, something so that it becomes thicker than it first seems, which means to muddle through all the historical layers, to muddle through the preceding lines. Only by doing so, can we continue to question whether the exhibition space could become a discursive space against disaffection, and instead an environment for care and negotiation.

Because bodies are often presented as sites where all politics begin, but where scrutiny is avoided. As in Cura's fabulation, a close look at the mirror could be perceived as that unaccounted part of the story, disengaging from representation and the idea of origin. Vulnerability, that is, exposure and exclusion, is now part of our daily experiences for so much of the global population, including the West.

Yet, the question of *how* and *why* bodies are produced and mediated is frequently omitted, and this weakness, separation and suffering are transformed into ethical positionings consequence of the effects of social antagonism. 'How' we care rather than the intention or disposition to be caring is what the following chapter embraces by the means of 'thinking *for*'.



'Myths of the Near Future' Biennial, TEA-Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, 2019-20.
 Curators' notes after our first visit as a team to the Canary Islands and the museum collection.

5: Caring (Thinking for)

A Desert Island. Against Tabula Rasa

Geographers say that there are only two types of islands. This ‘either/or’ claim is of great value to the imagination because it reminds me of a recurrent thought in recent years – that the division between art and science is a social construct. This modern and artificial division always invokes an image I first encountered a decade ago, when I looked at the ‘The Potosí Principle’ catalogue – a watercolour featuring the Marshal of Ayacucho in the process of watering both art and science as if they were plants.³⁰⁵ Meanwhile, his scissors await, ready to prevent their entanglement. According to Gilles Deleuze, this statement about the two types of islands adds another side to this modern premise, which is that science shapes mythology and, at the same time, as noted in the ‘Editing (Thinking with)’ chapter, mythology puts science to work with words the same way modernity does. As a result, many geographers consider the continental islands to be accidental, while seeing the oceanic ones as ‘original’. This differentiation demarcates that there is a point at which earth begins – the same place where water ends. With this division, a line is drawn.³⁰⁶

To think of an island is often to imagine it deserted. Like with the blank page discussion outlined at the beginning of this research, which tends to be thought of as a *tabula rasa* with no preconditions or determinants, such as Davey’s diary and Valcárcel’s canvas, with the desert island one could imagine oneself within the vision, walking across the sand. At a distance, it seems that on an island, resources are more complex to obtain and survival more costly to accomplish. However, there are plenty of examples that demonstrate precisely the opposite. Only if we forget that we live on an island – as I do, in England – can we inhabit it as if it were not geographically separate. But islands carry a dream on their own. Whether it is joyful or mysterious, imagining that we move away or escape and take shelter on them, in some way, this fantasy represents a new beginning. At the same time, there is a double movement that happens – one moves away, separating from the everyday, and arrives in another place and creates a new scenario. It is a kind of magnetic force, often centripetal (on occasions repelling), that makes the island a radical milieu. At least this is what I experienced in Tenerife, where the research project that I am about to unfold took place – the curation of the ‘Myths of the Near Future’ biennial, whose conceptualisation and annotation process illustrates this section.

Recognising the separation from a previous place, becomes visible through the manifestation of a linkage, yet imagining a new setting is often assumed as facing a blank slate. However, most often that is a false promise, one which assures that all the conditions that mark the separation as necessary will be remediated. In ‘Cohabitation: Against the tabula rasa and towards a new ethic for cities’, Adam Kaasa argues that ‘the resolution of a present anxiety or decline, or political issue can only, and only ever emerge if it starts from a fresh start:

³⁰⁵ Marshal of Ayacucho from The Potosí Principle, 2010.

³⁰⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2002).

erasure, rupture, new beginning, a blank slate'.³⁰⁷ In his view, this idea relates to what psychologists call 'splitting', that is, the difficulty to inhabit the contradictions of the world, or, in thinking with Haraway, the complexities of 'staying with the trouble'.

As Kaasa explains – and as the previous chapter demonstrates – the political effect of 'splitting' resonates with the long history of fascism and the rise of populist politics: it is the subversive potential that emerges from two incompatible views. These are two antagonistic stances that become visible when motion takes place – what Slavoj Žižek calls the 'parallax view', which I presented in the essay 'Mind the Gap' introduced in the previous chapter.³⁰⁸

Yet, unlike Cura's story outlined at the beginning of this thesis, I traverse the sand beyond the shore and reveal the importance and intention of crossing from side to side. I embrace Benjamin's *whirlpool* and Haraway's *muddle* – the centripetal force that drags everything in, all the way down. As noted, the chapter that precedes the previous one, in circular movements that invoke both history and collectivity, the discursive surfaces function as a reparative provocation that 'situates knowledge', which is the subject of this final chapter in relation to care. All in all, the idea of a desert island is subject to the conditions that make it possible as a story, as part of a narrative. It is an imaginary and mythological reality – neither authentic nor geographic.

This is how during my first stay on the beach of El Médano (Santa Cruz de Tenerife) in 2018, I first understood what Haraway says, that storytelling plays a fundamental role in 'earthly survival' and that we need to experiment and create new stories that rebel against hegemonic and divisive ways of thinking and living that do not contribute to matters of care. That we must rebel in the intervals because the clear horizon on which to freely imagine the 'myths of the near future' no longer exists. As curator Clémentine Deliss writes in *The Metabolic Museum* (2020), 'we can dare to articulate the possibility of confusion.'³⁰⁹

Mobility and the 'Lure of the Local'

I decided to take the small book by Gilles Deleuze entitled *Desert Islands*, whose argument supports the thinking behind these words, on a small trip. The cover, illustrated by the artist Jean-Jacques Lebel, shows a beach and its reflection, and in the middle of the original and mirrored image someone's body crosses the sand. It is metaphorically not the island that is separated from the mainland, but it is us, our bodies, who define the critical distance from a saturated world. A world in which the impetus in the interval, interstice, *milieu* – as medium and context – highlights that the modern aesthetics of representation and transformative action have moved to an aesthetics and politics of attention and mediation. In this intersection, the contemporary practice of curating and caring emerges.

³⁰⁷ Adam Kaasa, 'Cohabitation: Against the Tabula Rasa and Towards a New Urban Ethic', in *The Quito Papers and the New Urban Agenda*, ed. UN Habitat (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 78–83.

³⁰⁸ Vallés Vílchez, 'Mind the Gap'.

³⁰⁹ Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2020), p. 17.

In 2018 I had just finished editing *La gran experiencia. La comuna de Otto Muehl in La Gomera* [The Great Experience. Otto Muehl's commune in La Gomera] for *Concreta Textos* – which covered artist Ralph Kistler's research, with whom we began a series of books on art and tourism guest-edited by researcher José Díaz Cuyás. In the 1970s, Muehl, a Viennese Actionist artist, founded a commune in Austria with the intention of merging art and life, which went on to become one of the largest countercultural communities in twentieth-century Europe. At the beginning of the 1980s the group moderated its social-revolutionary ideology and went from an economy based on rural collectivism to turning to financial speculation. The discipline of scheduled work and the high profitability ended up contradicting the collectivist and hedonistic principles of the commune. In an attempt to revert to their origins, in 1987 they acquired a large isolated and abandoned farm that constituted one of the main agricultural holdings in La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands, called El Cabrito. Curator Harald Szeemann would collaborate belatedly but intensely in Otto Muehl's project – since he was meant to be in charge of the curatorial programme:

Of course, here in La Gomera, with the group in El Cabrito a social aspect is attached. I have always liked subjects like Monte Verità, about which I usually say: in principle, when I observe this juxtaposition of anarchists, life reformers, Freud's dissidents, and theosophists, I can verify through the medium of the exhibition, that they would be the ideal society, being what originally, they were not. They were individualists; each had his own doctrine of grace and with it attacked the rest. Basically, an integral work of art has never been able to exist since the artist was launched into society and then had to support himself, that is, he himself had to be God and create his own universe. Fundamentally he could only feel the desire to produce a comprehensive work of art, because the society that could have understood it did not yet exist. This is why attempts based on a model of society like the one here are extremely interesting.³¹⁰

This communal enclave has, since the inevitable dissolution of the project in 1990, been a tourist resort celebrating what Lucy Lippard called 'the lure of the local' – an exploration of the multiple sense of place.³¹¹ The Canarian period of the commune constituted the final stage of this era, where those emancipatory utopias of the 1960s that had fed by the great myths of modernity were overwhelmed by internal contradictions and, eventually, led to a tourist utopia.

The publication of *La gran experiencia* was preceded by *Concreta 10* (Autumn 2017), a volume that anticipated the desire to open a line of enquiry into art and tourism in the Global South, taking as its starting point the contradiction between the artistic experience and its traditional opposition to the tourist encounter. Once artists attempted to cease focusing on a

³¹⁰ 'El proyecto La Gomera: Una entrevista con Harald Szeemann' [La Gomera Project: An Interview with Harald Szeemann] in *Brus, Dokoupil, Muehl, Penck*, ed. VVAA (La Gomera: Atelier del Sur, 1989), p. 13 [translation mine].

³¹¹ Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

physical object to be contemplated in the 1960s, it had become challenging to continue to maintain the traditional hierarchical order between the authentic (art) and spurious (tourism) experience. However, as noted in the 'Editing (Thinking with)' chapter, overcoming form was only a false impression and therefore a constant and returning desire. The infinite proliferation of forms of artistic material and its forms of documentation demonstrated their radically distributive character. Yet, each work was conceptually defined, finite and situated.³¹²

In *The Tourist* (1976), Dean MacCannell writes that leisure activities reflect existing social structures. Tourist attractions are unintended reflections of the differentiations that allow the uprooted tourist to construct wholes from disparate experiences.³¹³ From this perspective, tourism is one of the most effective social and cultural ordering systems of modernity. In his contribution to *Concreta*, MacCannell expands his thesis on tourism as a search for authentic experiences, understanding authenticity as a rhetorical effect fuelled by the perception of the inauthenticity of our daily lives. Within this, a vanishing point opens up that resonates with the experience(s) of art that began in the 1960s and its parallel commercialisation in the popular culture of tourism. As Díaz Cuyás points out:

Museum and tourism are born at the same time, both are entrusted with a similar historical function: one, the impossible mission of gathering, ordering, and giving unity in the same setting to the dislocated fragments of the world – history, nature; the other, the equally impossible task of offering the illusion of unity through the spectacular staging of history and nature situated in locations discreetly set up for the traveller. The musealisation of the world and its tourism are part of the same process. The novelty is that today massification and commodification have saturated the discursive devices that kept them separate and have exposed that common root in all its crudeness.³¹⁴

My first visit to Santa Cruz de Tenerife was on the occasion of the presentation of both *La gran experiencia* and *Concreta* 10. Much of the sentiment presented by Deleuze accompanied me, although this reading was simultaneous, and its profound understanding informed my own work only later. In fact, this work was undertaken at the same time I put together 'Across the Sand', when I was developing the argument of the curatorial as a space of negotiation, taking the desert (non-site) presented in the printed matter at hand as a point of departure.

Historical Conditions

When one looks at the tricky map of Spain it is easy to forget La Gomera's location. The eight Canary Islands make up an archipelago located in the Atlantic Ocean, northwest of the African continent, close to Morocco and Western Sahara. In addition, it has the status of

³¹² Osborne, 'El archivo como vida después de la vida'.

³¹³ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

³¹⁴ José Díaz Cuyás, ed., *Concreta*, 10 (2017).

‘historical nationality’. This recurring recognition in Spanish politics is used to designate those autonomous communities that declare a collective, linguistic or cultural identity differentiated from the rest of the Spanish territory. The differentiation process started with the Constitution of 1978. Like in the earth/water metaphor, these regions declare their delineations, enjoying their own denomination: Andalusia, Aragon, Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Catalonia, Valencian Community, Galicia and Basque Country. However, nationality and nation are not synonymous, which is what the Constitutional Court ruled, rendering the 2006 Statute of Catalonia, in which it defined itself as a nation, legally baseless. In short, nationality is said to be a pre-existing reality that reinforces the peculiar historical-cultural character of a determined and territorially rooted idiosyncrasy. And in the case of the Canary Islands, it is certainly peculiar.

Investigating their history, we find that Greco-Roman mythology placed the islands in the Dark Ocean. Many historians agree that the first allusion to them is found in the works of Plutarch, although the most precise description appears in 74 CE, in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*. As far as we know, none of the Canary Islands were ever a deserted island; before the European conquest they were inhabited by aborigines, named ‘Guanches’ this demonym connects them ethnically and culturally with the Berbers of North Africa. Their re-discovery in the fourteenth century took place before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in America. Advances in navigation facilitated this fact, but it should not be forgotten that the first objective was to find Central Africa’s gold. The conquest of Lanzarote began in 1402, with Tenerife being the last to be defeated in 1496, after the Peace of Los Realejos. A cultural and human amalgam of Portuguese, Normans, North African Berbers, black slaves, Jews, Flemish and English defined the entanglements of centuries to come.

Prior to the birth of the Spanish democratic state in the mid-1970s, and especially before the arrival of tourism to the territory’s economy or the decolonisation of the African dominions, leftist-independence movements of pan-Africanist aspirations (MPACIAC) desiring to fight against the colonial occupation emerged. This trend towards independence, however, collided with the embrace of a European calling of the islands. In a contradictory turn, Morocco’s hegemonic claims made manifest in the Sahara War, as well as economic and subsequent democratic and autonomist normalisation, caused it to lose momentum.

Mass tourism has burst onto the islands as a new economic alternative since the 1960s, which continues today. The conceptual practices of those same years are, in part, a consequence of new forms of mobility and the circuits of movement of the twentieth century. Both the increase of aeroplane travel and the expansion of various highway systems contributed to the development of a series of artists’ networks and exhibition spaces, which, in turn, are linked to the historical movement of capital. Lanzarote, César Manrique’s ‘artwork-island’, is a clear example:

Executed for the most part in the late Franco period of the sixties and seventies, Lanzarote is conformed as a themed circuit, built by the native artist César Manrique and his team of collaborators to satisfy the tourist desire for authenticity, transcendent

art, and nature. Suddenly, visitors experience a *gaze disturbance*. They do not know for certain what it is they see or, rather, what it is that they clearly do not see. There is something missing but they do not know what it is. The lapse lasts only an instant, after which it takes the Manichean mechanisms to recapture the desire and calm the vision. Indeed, they say to themselves, what is absent is nothing other than the billboards on the side of the roads. And they are missing, they will later find out, because, at Manrique's request, the Council eradicated them: 'The fences', the artist would say, '*turn our landscape into a vulgar illustrated magazine*'.³¹⁵

Mobility is a very rich concept in terms of meaning, and artistic practices offer a unique perspective that contributes to understand our contemporary condition. The dialectic of mobility and place in the work of Richard Smithson, Nancy Holt, and the gallerist Virginia Dwan of the 1960s, for instance, or Francis Alÿs in the 1990s, to name just a few examples that have been put in dialogue with this Canarian example, illustrate the argument proposed by Osborne and further developed by James Meyer, which is that mobility is always historically specific and formally expressed. In Meyer's view, although technologies of travel are not reducible to capital and the so-called freedom of movement, they are absolutely imbricated in capitalism.

In his essay 'Functional Site' (1992), Meyer contrasts literal specificity as an art 'for' one place (e.g., Richard Serra) to the functionality of a vector site as an art that 'points' elsewhere (e.g., Robert Smithson).³¹⁶ However, Meyer realises that this either/or approach to the literal and authentic site versus the functional and metaphorical site is too binary. For critics, binaries can be very useful and many practitioners, including myself, learned comparative thinking from the writings of Roland Barthes. Through the rebellion of the intervals and the rhetoric of authenticity – and the time of mediation and the attention economy – we now know that it is more complex than turning the landscape into a vulgar illustrated magazine. As Meyer writes in *Concreta*, the 'literal' phenomenological site that people of his generation grew up with in the 1990s, inheritors of these early currents of the 1960s, proved inadequate to be understood as a network of sites.³¹⁷ In those years at the end of the twentieth century, the art world was also increasingly perceived, not only as a separate 'world' but also connected with many other worlds, including Spain.

Joseph Kosuth wrote 'The Artist as Anthropologist' (1975) and explored the relationship between art and anthropology.³¹⁸ Hal Foster, on the other hand, posed a question with his essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer?' (1995) precisely in order to critique those practices that, from the outside, worked 'with' the locals. In his opinion, these approaches activated a kind

³¹⁵ Mariano de Santa Ana, 'César Manrique: La obra de arte turístico total' [César Manrique: The Total Tourist Artwork], *Concreta*, 10 (2017) [translation mine].

³¹⁶ James Meyer, 'Functional Site', in Erika Suderburg, ed., *Space SITE Intervention. Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 23–37.

³¹⁷ James Meyer, 'Arte y lugar en la era de la movilidad' [Art and Place in the Wake of Mobility], *Concreta*, 10 (2017) [translation mine].

³¹⁸ Joseph Kosuth, 'The Artist as Anthropologist' (extract) in Stephen Johnstone, ed., *The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2008 [1975]), pp. 182–84.

of ethnographic otherness. Surprisingly enough, this debate is not very different from the one that Documenta 14's 'misery tourism' triggered in Athens (2017).³¹⁹ In 'A Crowd Facing the Crowd', Bonaventura Son Benjeng Ndjung explains in *Concreta*:

We reached out to so many people, but the further you reach out, the more people actually feel distanced from the process. The idea was not to come to Greece and create a Greek pavilion or do a survey show on Greek art, because Documenta is not meant to be a national show. It is not. We are interested in the history of Greece, and its entanglements to other places e.g., Germany, as well as the contemporary situation, the economic, the political, the social, and the psychopolitical discrepancies that are happening in Europe today, which are visible within that space of Athens. But again, as somebody who comes from Cameroon, as much as I respect Athens, I have to say Athens is also not the end of the world. To me, Athens became a mirror in which I could see the rest of the world, a reflection, a symptom of many things that have been happening in the world. Athens became a prism through which I could see the world; through which light could go and break into different levels. And I could see a lot of things happening in the world that were reflected in that space, which are resonances of colonial, capitalist, and neoliberal economic agendas. That is why in my very first article in *South* magazine, I wrote about the fact that there is an element of *déjà vu*, because a lot of the things that are happening in Athens today – especially the austerity measures imposed – happened to us in Cameroon, in Argentina, in México, and other places. The question is: how can we, as thinking bodies in our time, situate ourselves within Athens, acknowledge that, but also be able to go beyond that. So, and I repeat myself, Athens is very important; it might be the cradle of European civilisation, but we have to look further South.³²⁰

'Will art become increasingly homogeneous as a result of exploring global issues to the exclusion of local preoccupations?' Okwui Enwezor was asked in a conversation initiated on the occasion of the Paris triennial 'Intense Proximity' (2012).

This has been the impulse that has driven the critique of what we call global art: that it's a form of flattening out, a form of homogenisation and lack of distinction between practices, between projects, and so on. But each time this question comes up, it becomes apparent that the rhetoric and the reality are misaligned [the parallax view, returns, like in Ndjung's 'A Crowd Facing the Crowd']. Globalisation means many things to many people, and because we can't all quite agree on what precisely it represents, we cannot speak of homogeneity.³²¹

³¹⁹ Beatriz Herráez, 'Exploring the world in comfort', *Concreta*, 10 (2017), pp. 122–27.

³²⁰ Bonaventura Son Benjeng Ndjung and Lorenzo Sandoval, 'documenta 14 (Athens): A Crowd Facing the Crowd', *Concreta Online* (2018) <<http://editorialconcreta.org/documenta-14-Athens-A-Crowd-Facing>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

³²¹ 'Remembering Okwui Enwezor: Intense Proximity Triennial, a conversation with Rahma Khazam', *Flash Art*, 9 November 2015, <<https://flash---art.com/article/intense-proximity/>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

Fifty years after the Kosuth's text, what has primarily changed are the words we use in this discussion. Do we need different words to continue the conversation? Or is it the grammar that has to change? The flows of tourists for art, information, work and, of course, capital, give rise to a cultural exchange of global consumption that makes it difficult to imagine the events as merely artistic encounters, such as documentas, biennials and triennials – including the one I curated in Tenerife. They are not. According to Díaz Cuyás, the flows are structured in a very similar way to any tourist fair – as an organised and staged trajectory for the visitor.

Flows are increasingly complex and far-reaching. So, being a tourist cannot be separated from the position of the refugee, who does not travel for pleasure or refinement but out of desperate need. This constant and distracted mobility – and their migrant images – is perhaps the phenomenological condition of a gaze that displaces ocular-centrism. However, despite the fact that readings of the market are often simplistic, Marx's insistence on following the money's trail remains an essential approach to cultural production. From these approaches we can deduce that the historical conditions of mobility can be thought of as economical, or, on the contrary and perhaps more beneficially, can be explored poetically. 'Poetic economy', as defined by Jean-François Chevrier, creates links and tides, joining distant points, the conditions of an unnamed (public) space.³²²

Curating after the Global

To think about mobility today, we must address the issue of the division of social labour and organic solidarity, that is, the issue of growing inequality. We must address the representational crisis and, consequently, the emphasis on the symbolic. In turn, we have to think through the contradictions inherent in democratic progress and the recognition that all voices must be heard and that differences must be respected. When we think about the redistribution of wealth and the flow of capital from the wealthiest to those who produce it (by way of labour or service), as I write in 'The Dismantling of the Social Contract',³²³ it is worth taking into account what MacCannell points out in his conversation published in *Concreta*:

It is not the poor, but the rich, who will always be with us. If nobody is rich, poverty cannot exist, neither relative nor absolute. We have to help wealthy people understand that they will remain fabulously rich even if they only have twice the wealth of the rest of us, not a thousand times more. If we put aside the pretence of critical theory and see, with a well-tempered gaze, what is happening around us, it is clear that we are currently in the throes of a large-scale revolution.³²⁴

Economic injustice must be addressed as part of a much larger set of ideas and practices. All revolutionary activity today should be done with a caveat. As MacCannell reminds us: the great revolutions, breakaways or reformations did not have a script. Or, if they did, like

³²² Chevrier, 'Intimidación territorial y espacio público'.

³²³ Vallés Vélchez, 'Outside Witness. On the Historical Reception of The Potosí Principle'.

³²⁴ Dean MacCannell in Díaz Cuyaz, 'Arte, turismo y autenticidad'.

Calvin's or Luther's, when they were finally developed, the script was never followed. So, to address the urgencies of our present we have to face and muddle through the ecological, democratic and migratory crises. These are the three great circulations that we cannot ignore because, as Yayo Herrero highlights in the public programme we developed together in Tenerife, and that the following pages present, 'Museum as Ecosystem':

We are living in a moment in which we could say our economy, our politics and our culture have declared war on life. These are secretly developed against the material grounds that sustain human life. We even call them 'progress', and we acknowledge and think of ourselves as the 'knowledge society'. Meanwhile we don't take responsibility for the consequences of living completely oblivious to these material grounds that organise existence on earth. What do we, as feminists, care about? Or what is the core idea that enables us to try to think about and understand the world differently?³²⁵

In MacCannell's view, the most ineffective position that could be taken in the face of this enormous historical turn would be to eternally bemoan the failed workers' revolution. Or condemn art for having freed itself from life. Life can free itself from art, but never vice versa. No human group, not even the most primitive, has ever lived in anything that resembles objective reality. Once the world is represented and incorporated into human discourse, all subjects and objects are displaced and re-evaluated at the speed of light and sound. The only thing that remains of the real is that which cannot be fully assimilated symbolically – that is, very little. For better or for worse, being human means living a symbolically mediated fiction. This is our contemporary condition.

From the Editorial to the Curatorial

These were some of the lessons I learned while in Tenerife with *Concreta* when I heard about the possibility of submitting a proposal for the International Photography Festival Open Call. I decided to call some friends and create a team, including the collective Cine por Venir, Alba Colomo and Mette Kjærgaard Præst. Whereas with Cine por venir I had engaged in a long conversation and a shared publication about the migrant image and the rebellion of the intervals, with Alba and Mette I had exchanged numerous debates about new institutionalism, situated practice, accountability and care. Together we put forward a project titled 'Myths of the Near Future', inspired by a short story I discovered while editing *Souvenir, souvenir*, Fernando Estévez's book in the making, for a *Concreta Textos* series on this subject matter.³²⁶

I was also motivated by the possibility of rehearsing my own curatorial research in collaboration with other practitioners interested in engaging with similar matters. The desire was to contribute to generating a theoretical framework around the image – theoretical in its etymological sense, as an abstract speculative practice – to add to the recent curatorial turn of

³²⁵ Yayo Herrero, 'The Museum as Ecosystem. Growing Interdependencies', in Laura Vallés Vilchez, ed., *Myths of the Near Future* (Tenerife: TEA-Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, 2022), pp. 257–74.

³²⁶ Fernando Estévez, *Souvenir, souvenir* (Valencia: Concreta Textos, 2019).

the exhibition's last edition.³²⁷ Having trained as an artist working with the photographic medium, it was an extraordinary opportunity for myself to go from the never empty blank page to the white cube – from the editorial to the curatorial – and to experiment, within the exhibitionary format, these same debates that this thesis addresses. All in all, the semiotic ontology of photography and that of curating are not that different. Both frame an encounter in the contact zone and aspire to generate an imprint.

Organised by the Tenerife Island Council and the Isla de Tenerife Photography Centre, the Fotonoviembre festival takes, since its founding in 2008, place every other year at TEA–Tenerife Espacio de las Artes – a magnificent Herzog & de Meuron building inaugurated during the Lehman Brothers scandal. Yet, despite the economic struggles that surrounded its start, institutions are ultimately environments that are constantly built and reproduced. If we think of the 'Museum as an Ecosystem' in order to 'Institute with Care', as the public programme we put forward in our submission proposed: how can it guarantee that everyone's abilities and needs are both provided for and balanced, that resources are fairly distributed, and that the interdependence between human and more-than-human beings that compose them – workers, audiences and art – is acknowledged? 'Myths of the near Future' constituted a rehearsal to the test for this matter.

'Having a Wonderful Time', after Representation

A story

For some mysterious reason they were given seats in first class. Richard, fearful, took advantage of the free champagne and, before they knew it, they were already leaving England and flying over the Iberian Peninsula. They arrived in the Canary Islands after an amazing flight. Diana would write postcards to a friend and, on the front, mark with a cross the balcony on the twenty-seventh floor where they would be staying. 'It's an extraordinary place'. A place with any imaginable entertainment available at the push of a button next to the bed: Swedish massages, hairdresser, water-skiing... But, like any holiday break, 'the times of sand are running out'.³²⁸

'It really has been an amazing success', she wrote, 'heaven knows how they do it at the price, there's talk of a Spanish government subsidy'. To her surprise, her return flight to London was delayed. 'Apparently there's been some *muddle* at the Gatwick end'. Nevertheless Diana, who felt at home right away as if she were a local woman, shocked, told her friend how hordes of tourist buses arrived without stopping. 'Seeing them from the outside, as it were, it's all rather strange'. Meanwhile, they waited. Although the sky was full of aeroplanes, not one was for the couple. Hysterical laughter and hundreds of compatriots in the same boat. Suitcases in hand, they waited every morning, but the exit from paradise never arrived.

³²⁷ Gilberto Gonzalez, *Kenesis* (Tenerife: TEA-Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, 2021).

³²⁸ J.G. Ballard, *Myths of the Near Future* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

Three more weeks, two months, almost a year. Still no news and time passed like a dream. Meanwhile, Diana would sign up for theatre lessons. One day Richard rented a pedal boat to go up the coast. Apparently, they were starting to divide the island into tourist complexes or, according to him, ‘human reserves’. A sort of concentration camp for the unemployed, supervised by the governments of Western Europe together with the Spanish authorities, in order to confine them and thus prevent a revolution.

1985: July, August, September, October, November... 2019: March, April, June, August, October, November. Fotonoviembre (PhotoNovember). ‘Having a Wonderful Time’ is our story. A story that is part of J.G. Ballard’s *Myths of the Near Future* (1985): a publication that would give rise to our proposal as the first curatorial team originating from outside the Canarian context since the festival began in 1991.³²⁹ The first edition with a woman at the helm, a front onto which other women would soon align themselves in order to approach and caress the complex and urgent question of *representation* together. That is, *representation* in a semiotic sense; understanding that the signifier and signified (or container and content) are entangled, and together reveal and retell a particular vision of the world.

Little did we know then that behind our intention to address the premise of the biennial, a global pandemic would have swept the planet with the arrival of the new year, and that this would confine our myths to an earlier future than intended.

Situating the Curatorial

Our initial question in 2019 was how to approach the challenge of thinking not only about the images, but with, between, until, towards, for, by, according to them, in the framework that hosted us – TEA–Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, attached to the Centro de Fotografía Isla de Tenerife, and organised by the Island Council? How to situate our ideas and ourselves and let our bodies be affected by local learning, and to do so in just six months during which life would not stop? How could we avoid falling into the seductive temptation of difference and initiate a dialogue that rooted our knowledge from within a reciprocal commitment? How to navigate our condition of parachuting in and the fact that our gazes and bodies carried an economic and material correlation that embarrasses us in the same way tourism often does?

In *Souvenir, souvenir*, anthropologist Pablo Estévez writes that ‘tourism occurs in the encounter between tourists, natives, and objects. It is this encounter that defines the formation of a space. Here the invasion of possible analytical fields becomes an indispensable *insertion exercise*’.³³⁰ Isn’t that the mere description of our intervention? Isn’t it, also, the premise of the institutional invitation?

Aware that the economy as a public sphere is a place where values are disputed, we arrived in Santa Cruz in June 2019. I had travelled a few weeks earlier to begin the administrative tasks

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Pablo Estévez, ‘Todos idiotas, todos diferentes. La mirada (caleidoscópica) turística de Fernando Estévez’ [All Idiots, All Different. The (kaleidoscopic) Tourist Gaze of Fernando Estévez], in Estévez, *Souvenir, souvenir*, [translation mine].

assigned to me after landing the role of artistic director. It was my second visit to the island, as my editorial work as co-editor of *Concreta* had already taken me there before, which I suspect had to do with the appointment. The proposal featured a diverse and trustworthy team, because only in that way would it be possible to solve this extraordinary challenge from a distance and in a matter of weeks.

Whereas the nomadic collective Cine por venir offered the possibility of contributing to ways of thinking about the image-process (i.e., migrant image), as a generator of meaning that challenges other disciplines of knowledge, curator Alba Colomo proposed a focus on the urgencies of the present from an ecofeminist stance. Mette Kjærgaard Præst's proposal chimed with that, meaning that both Alba and Mette would appeal to the demands of trans-generational audiences and communities and, by extension, to the requirement of institutional accountability.

Together and in dialogue with TEA's team – its civil servants and external workers and, above all, its then new director, Gilberto González, whose challenge was to transform the institution into a body, an inhabited and habitable ecosystem – we could address the space of *representation* as a place from which to share worlds, obligations and remediations of and for our senses, governed by the means of our milieu. In other words, we could apply what theorist Ariella Azoulay calls 'civil imagination' to reflect on the political ontology of the medium that summoned us, photography, and to do so by the means of exhibition-making and public programming.³³¹

The semiotic ontology that Azoulay promotes is that of the political majority, which operates in public space and is in motion. It is an ontology linked to the way in which human beings exist – look, speak, act – with each other and with objects, while at the same time operating as referents of those same speech acts, of the gaze and of the actions of others. We wanted to establish this proposal as situated knowledge in the manner of Donna Haraway, to make visible and tangible the bonds that unite us and the act of borrowing stories of 'things' that become objects and, with care, become art. Ultimately, it is things (also careless ones), that produce new narratives, structures and times, transforming themselves and transforming us.

However, we realised that today's tourist is, like in the Ballard story that we learned from the Estévezes (Pablo, as well as Fernando), the post-colonial tourist who has gone from being a *flâneur* to a *choraster*, who not only looks but rather affects the ordering of the space they reach.³³² As Betsy Wearing and Stephen Wearing proposed in 'Refocussing the tourist experience: from the *flâneur* to the *choraster*' (1996) drawing on concepts from interactionist and post-structural feminist theories, the authors critique the male bias in the conceptualisation of the tourist as 'flâneur' and the tourist destination as 'image' for the tourist gaze.³³³ Instead they offer the concept of the tourist destination as 'chora', or

³³¹ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2012).

³³² Estévez, *Souvenir, souvenir*.

³³³ Betsy Wearing and Stephen Wearing, 'Refocussing the tourist experience: the flâneur and the choraster', *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 15 (1996).

interactive space, in which the tourist becomes a creative, interacting ‘choraster’, who takes home an experience which impacts on the self in some way. They suggest that such a feminised conceptualisation adds a second dimension to the one-dimensional perspective which predominates in sociological analyses of the tourist phenomenon.³³⁴

Touché. Thus, these atypical anthropologists remind us, ‘thinking with’ Antonio Benítez Rojo, in the same way that the plantation was not a mere economic activity but rather the regulatory and structured principle of local communities, now we ‘plant’ tourists.³³⁵ But not just any tourist, as the thoughtful tourist is already fully aware of the staging of a kind of authenticity. (A tricky authenticity that didn’t interest us, the curatorial team). The same staging that Diana falls into when, accommodated in her exception, she expresses that the tourist is no longer herself but all those who come later. ‘Seeing them from the outside’, we, ourselves, recalled, ‘it’s all rather strange.’

I knew that, in the same way that the museum and tourism have traditionally fulfilled similar illusory functions of ordering, so too do the desires for authentic life and the devices that convey them – cameras, mobiles, networks. Contributing to the conversation about the transformative capacity of the institution and denouncing those codes of *autonomy* and *authenticity* that only reproduce the institution itself, was part of the mission. Our ability to influence, intervene and research would define our response-ability to think of the museum and tourism as practices that are inserted in processes of social reproduction, that is, the set of processes by which, in an unequal community, there is a tendency to replicate status from one generation to the next.

A Learning Lesson

We wanted to insist on the idea that the relationships between knowledge and thinking demand care and affect towards how we care and therefore this was addressed on our first trip. Cine por venir and I had the opportunity to contribute to a seminar called ‘Autonomy! Automation!’ to rehearse proposals around what defines *criticality*, that is, in our view, the possibility of *distance*. We were at TEA that day because a concrete experience had brought us together, that of editing *Concreta* and thinking about and with images across the blank pages, or, as previously explained, the ‘rebellion of the intervals’. Why not embrace the contradiction that was our own intervention at TEA? How to challenge the paradox of representation, without rejecting the exhibition or falling into illustration?

‘If the cinema did not pretend that film could reach images, but for that it would be necessary to stop doing work, wanting a product. Perhaps only then would the cinema be able to achieve things as a process, as an event’ ... as a *matter of care*?³³⁶ Cine por venir read this quote from their essay in *Concreta* out loud on that day during which the local community, itself a participant in the seminar, lamented the excessive institutional protection and the lack

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ This expression refers to a wordplay in Spanish. See Estévez, *Souvenir, souvenir*.

³³⁶ Peter Pál Pelbart, ‘Por un arte de instaurar modos de existencia que no existen’ [Towards an art of instauring modes of existence that ‘do not exist’], *Concreta*, 04 (2014) [translation mine].

of its own discourse despite three decades of festival existence.³³⁷ The participating artists highlighted the difficulty they faced in dialoguing beyond the discipline and with unchallenged forms of display. They also highlighted the need to embrace a festival format that transcends its capacity for tourist attraction rooted in the enthusiasms of the 1990s – in that period full of promises of progress and growth in Spain.

Could our *future myth* reach the *event* as defined by Leela Gandhi, that is, as the revolutionary moment, or one with the epistemic ability to instantiate (the new)?³³⁸ With this question we approached our intervention. We wanted to inhabit the space and contribute to making it a more porous and contagious place, like its cafeteria and library already were, always overflowing. I invited artist Eva Fábregas to address this. Meanwhile, inside the museum remained oblivious to its thunderous silence. We thought that the indexical and semiotic nature of the image could shed some light on this medial condition: a contemporary condition in which the practice of curating – that great pending conversation in the plurinational territory – had much to contribute to, among other things, the question of authenticity. Perhaps this was one of the challenges we could face to engage in a genealogy of curatorial thinking yet to come, as the ‘Field of knowledge’ section outlined.

To imagine a decolonial curatorial practice as Denise Ferreira da Silva proposes, it is important to define the place where the action occurs, and as we were interested in highlighting, the ethical, political, and epistemic project that sustains various forms of discrimination (what we have previously addressed as social reproduction), instead of the socio-historical process of the region.³³⁹ This is something that the islanders have been researching and challenging for decades with so much rigour – Fernando Estévez has been my anchoring reference in this regard. His intersectional research invited me to offer continuity and engage with a curatorial practice that understands the exhibitionary as a valid and generative form of research.

With this lesson in my mind, we visited the island and entered the museum as a team. We walked through the submerged city that housed its collection. Collections plural, since TEA guards more than two thousand works from various deposits – including Los Bragales, COFF of photography, ACA, Óscar Domínguez, Collection of contemporary Canarian art – in which authors from various origins are inserted. They have participated in the cultural processes of experimentation and avant-garde artistic languages of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We arrived having done our homework and studied the museum’s collections virtually, but how could it be otherwise? Contact with the materials, first-hand experience and recognition of its galleries and its teams of professionals, offered other possibilities.

If we wanted to address the recently declared climate emergency in the Canary Islands, for example, we would try not to rely on shipment of work from distant geographies, a costly and

³³⁷ Sonia Martínez and Miguel Ángel Baixauli, ‘Cine por venir’, *Concreta*, 12 (2018).

³³⁸ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

³³⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2022).

polluting ritual.³⁴⁰ The collection would offer us a grammar from which to generate an open and post-representational narrative, to enter and interpret it, along with the production of new work. A dynamic that, for those of us who understand our labour as a fissure from which to distribute wealth, stimulated us.

We soon understood that managing a six-figure budget with slippery protocols – and often illogical logics for those who were not familiar with the Spanish public administration, and even for those who are – could only give rise to an exquisite corpse that, on the other hand, challenged us. If escaping from the *product* seemed an impossibility, we would embody an anthropomorphic outcome, of dubious origin: a collective drawing from a series that was housed in the collection. We decided to work from this choral proposal, this drawing whose (anonymous) authors would create an image that we would appropriate so as to establish a methodology of folds, and to assume the entrusted task.

As a result, the ‘Image’, ‘Body’, ‘Entanglement’ and ‘Now’ exhibitions and programmes, under the care of myself, Cine por venir, Mette and Alba respectively, would frame our open-ended interventions. From the promise or threat of what is presented as alien, ‘Myths of the Near Future’ would propose a re-evaluation, to think of the space of *representation* as a place from which to take the baton. It would be a collaborative exercise, where each curator would have their own space of assemblage in which to situate themselves, think and act, but also to disagree within. Can we, together, rehearse an (un)learning process, an intervention, a negotiation?

Staying with the Trouble

We had assigned ourselves the task of thinking about the images and photographs of the twenty-first century, and to do so within a specific tradition; a genealogy that begins at a time, the 1990s, in which the discipline of photography enjoyed recognition and institutions were beginning to be installed within the culture of their still young autonomous communities in the Spanish state. A task that, coming from different geographies (Nottingham, London, Valencia, and Stockholm) and learning processes (as filmmakers, artists, curators, and educators), not all of us within the team apprehended equally.

However, it seemed to me (and still does) that it matters how words *world* worlds and, if the desire was to reimagine and rehearse a situated curatorial practice, languages should accompany us. So how should we be named? We decided to be those who were ‘under the care’ of the programme – its images, materials and stories. We acknowledge it as such in the printed matter. Our exhibitions and programmes were not curated, facilitated, or mediated. ‘Image’, ‘Body’, ‘Entanglement’ and ‘Now’ were ‘a los cuidados de’ [under the care] of Alba, Mette, Cine por venir and I (in reverse order). Pointers referring to an interest in connecting the semiotic ontology of both curating and photography were purposely made.

³⁴⁰ There were only two bodies of work that were shipped to Tenerife: one by air and another by boat. These were Alham Shibli’s photographic series *Heimat* and Ludovica Carbotta’s sculpture *Monowe*. Both engaged with the construction and specificity of home / place. The rest of the proposals were created in Tenerife and / or included moving image.

Whereas being ‘curated’ operates, in Meyer’s terms, as a functional site pointing at a place, being ‘under the care of’ recuperates the literalness of the sites and situates within. Particularly when these ideas were infused by debates addressed in ‘The Museum as Ecosystem’ and ‘Instituting with Care’ public programmes.

Three decades and three directors after the festival’s inauguration, we were able to curate the so-called ‘Official Section’ and ‘Authors in Selection’, nomenclatures that as a team bothered us, but which nevertheless allowed us to establish a dialogue with the rest of the parallel activities and group exhibitions that would take place across the island. To de-hierarchise positions and offer better economic conditions to those involved, we incorporated those artists awarded with production grants in the so-called ‘official’ exhibition – an unpopular decision in the past, since the awarded artists were frequently exhibited outside the museum, in venues that often established a judgemental ranking system and hence a new canon.

Instead, the festival would try to propose a knot of relationships between social modes of existence, skills, practices and love stories. We would try to put forward a range of situated epistemological, semiotic, technical, political and material connections. We were aiming for the biennial to be a pedagogical exercise of ‘civil imagination’ of near futures we could not anticipate whatsoever – but also as a metaphor that displaced the protectionist, tutelary functions inherited from another tentative model explained in the ‘Field of Knowledge’ section³⁴¹ – a rehearsal to the test that I have called ‘*curatela*’. ‘The *curatela*’ neither represents nor replaces, but rather accompanies, cares for and expands capacities – it is a precarious balancing act; this is how the dictionary defines it, although not in the context of art.

This is the same dictionary presented in the ‘Defining a Semantic Field’ section at the beginning of this thesis, and that continues without collecting those words that we use to talk about the exhibitionary. According to the Real Academia Española, curator (*comisario*) is the role of the commissioner, that ‘person with the power to understand a business’. But we already know that business (*negocio*) wants to be the negation of leisure (*nec otium*), and this is not what we – all curators, all tourists – want.³⁴² What we want is to change the focus of attention and to negotiate the frameworks from which we, as a society, think and act.

We want to bring affective positions closer to the temperance that our practice requires. Because the practice of curating, or ‘the *curatela*’, operates between the firm grounds on which knowledge is established as the construction of a truth or epistemology, and the quicksand, the unreliable base for mediation. It entails an inescapable tactful condition in order to reach an agreement in times of disaffection; a diplomatic condition that Latour and Stengers call the ‘middle ground’.³⁴³ This interstitial role, however, has nothing to do with the so-called ‘third way’ of the past, but requires staying with the trouble and question the contradictions that surround and suffocate us. Negotiating policies of a remediating nature –

³⁴¹ See the ‘Democratic Museum’, p. 28.

³⁴² See the ‘A Rehearsal to the Test / Editing Spaces’, p. 84.

³⁴³ Stengers, ‘Don’t Shock Common Sense!’.

on precariousness and hospitality – beyond the well-intentioned rhetoric of the institution, is a must.

‘Thick Description’ and the Art of Paying Attention

Before arriving on the island, we learned from Pablo and Fernando Estévez that the *gaze* allowed us to reorder tourist dynamics, since it operates as a cultural practice that generates meaning. In his book *Souvenir, Souvenir*, Fernando writes that ‘this way of seeing corresponds to new forms of exhibition and exposure, forming a particular “regime of curiosity”’.³⁴⁴ What would our gaze be then? *Curiosity* is about care, trouble, cleanliness, or at least so says the dictionary. Curiosity demands our *attention*: our rhythm is intervened in, it slows down our bodies.

Curiosity and attention define what we call the ‘photographic eye’, which interests me because its very capacity to form an imprint resides in photography’s temporality. Photography is nothing more than a fleeting event of shutter and eyelid – whether it is a digital or analogue camera, the shutter fork that lets the light pass through at the moment of shooting (a shot that requires another presence), or the eyelid of the viewer who looks away from what was once an event.

From our interpretive research, we also learned a theory known as ‘thick description’; that there is an *unphotographable* difference, purpose, or intention between an involuntary twitch and a communicative wink. To understand the twitch as a wink involves understanding the web of significance in which the action of winking occurs. An ethnographic ‘thick’ description of a wink would convey what it meant in a particular context, as well as how it came to mean when the action emerged, as it occurs in the act of taking a photograph (in the moment the gaze and the shutter aligns to frame an image), in both the twitch and the wink an interruption takes place before the click.

Yet we need to bear in mind that whereas celluloid film is hit by photons that leave an imprint of an exposed image, digital sensors offer a speculative and interpretative approach towards both present and past. The same way in which our contemporaneity overlaps speeds, rhythms and time – similar to how the ‘thick description method produces sediment to consequently interpret and perform) – digital devices ‘do not only know what you saw but also what you might want to see based on your previous choices.’³⁴⁵ Pictures are created based on a *memorable* past, exceeding the frame we once grasped.

As presented in the previous chapter, current politics deals with representation in a similar fashion. Political actors aim to clean the *noise* and create a proportional *image*. Jacques Rancière, on the other hand, thinks there is no such thing as noise: ‘it is all speech’. Aesthetically, this condition could be described as *opacity*, although, in thinking with

³⁴⁴ Ibid.

³⁴⁵ Steyerl, ‘Politics of Representation’.

Haraway, I prefer to call it *muddle*. This is a term she proposes to trouble the trope of visual clarity and to remind us that ‘empty spaces and clear visions are bad fictions for thinking’.

Thus, our regime of critical curiosity, as defined by this post-representational paradox, would propose an unhurried politics of attention to muddle through what Stengers has already articulated, namely, ‘the coming barbarism’.³⁴⁶ Because for Stengers, relearning the art of paying attention has nothing to do with a kind of moral imperative, a prudence that we would have forgotten, but rather it has to do with those matters in which we are not permitted to get mixed up. We are not allowed within the muddle. Like in Ballard’s story, when he writes that ‘apparently there’s been some *muddle* at the Gatwick end’. Who has the right not to pay attention?³⁴⁷

Puig de la Bellacasa writes that inhabiting this paradox is also a way of resisting any form of reductionism; it is a constant questioning of the interdependent heterogeneities that make up an entity, a body, a world, (an image, a show?) which calls into question the limits in and of themselves. In ‘Myths of the Near Future’, the proposal itself forms an exquisite corpse to become entangled with both present and past. Our contribution to the long conversation about photography that Fotonoviembre has been proposing for three decades would therefore be post-representational, *in medias res*: from the middle of a problem that we had no intention of solving, the problem of the authority of this discipline. From the middle (photographic) and from the interval (the contact zone). Software artist Nicolas Malevé, for example, created a computer script that cycles through ImageNet – a vast dataset of 14,197,122 photographs – at a speed of 90 milliseconds per image to exhibit all of ImageNet’s images during the opening hours of the biennial. The script paused at random points to enable the viewer to ‘see’ some of the images and how they are categorised, thus raising questions about the relation of scale between the overwhelming quantities of images needed to train algorithms, and the human attention and labour required to annotate and categorise the images.

Placing ourselves in the middle of the event/encounter would mean working without an ideal horizon. Letting ourselves be caressed by the environment would mean understanding that our task was not to unravel local tangles, but the opposite: to muddle through them. In this sense, photography was not the subject but the means by which to define a curatorial, ecofeminist stance. The curatorial is a sensual practice of creating signification and the act of keeping a question alive in the contact zone between audience and work; the energy of retaining a sense of fun.³⁴⁸

The subtropical territory in which we inserted ourselves formed a diverse landscape, as complex as the language of our bodies, as complex as the relationship between disciplinary knowledge and contemporary art. At the ‘Instituting with Care’ event, Laurence Rassel

³⁴⁶ Isabelle Stengers, *In Castastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015).

³⁴⁷ For reasons like this, when Ballard introduces us to Richard as the curious and Diana as clueless, the writer was considered a misogynist, a feminist interpretative issue we also discussed in the exhibition.

³⁴⁸ Martinon, *The Curatorial*.

narrated the story of the Saint-Alban asylum, one of the mental hospitals that witnessed a lower number of deaths by starvation during World War II, since the patients had been working side by side with farmers and knew how to grow crops. Rassel reminded the audience that

Psychiatrist Francesc Tosquelles thought that to take care of people, the institution itself had to be as well taken care of, which does not mean to spoil it, but to understand it and acknowledge that everything affects everything. The way in which we are situated here, the cold in the room or the microphone's reverberation, creates the environment in which we are existing, and determines the kind of relationships that we can have with one another. Then, when we talk about taking care of the institution, we must provide care in all of its aspects and parts, from the management to the kitchen, which is a very important element. Everything matters in our mission as art workers.³⁴⁹

Caring, a Question of Discerning

'Paying attention' is not so much a skill as an art that is learned and cultivated. It does not refer to what is a priori worthy of being attended to, but rather what forces us to imagine, to consult, to face consequences that put our ways of being in the world at stake.

Attention requires knowing how to resist the temptation to judge; it requires proposing new questions to think together. 'When it comes to caring, suspending action, questioning an idea with its consequences, it is, indeed, a question of discerning', writes Stengers, that is, 'of evaluating without judging, without criteria that guarantee a judgement'.³⁵⁰ But we know how hard it is to live without ranking or qualifying. Puig de la Bellacasa and Haraway know this well too. 'You have to run away from criticising without doing anything', Rassel tells us, thinking with the authors.³⁵¹ Knowledge is spatial in all its forms; you have to think with your feet, where your legs are.

Susan Sontag already warned us about this in the 1970s, when she claimed that 'Photography [is] in Search of Itself' without realising that the challenge was, in contrast, to escape the overwhelming force of its canon.

Its role is to show that there are no fixed standards of evaluation, that there is no canonical tradition of work. Under the museum's attention, the very idea of a canonical tradition is exposed as redundant [...] New photographs change how we look at past photographs [...] The leading role now played by museums in forming and clarifying the nature of photographic taste seems to mark a new stage from which photography cannot turn back. Accompanying its tendentious respect for the profoundly banal is the museum's diffusion of a historicist view, one that inexorably

³⁴⁹ Laurence Rassel in Vallés Vilchez, ed., *Myths of the Near Future* (Tenerife: TEA–Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, 2022).

³⁵⁰ Isabelle Stengers, *In Castastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*.

³⁵¹ Rassel, 'La tormenta perfecta'.

promotes the entire history of photography. Small wonder that photography critics and photographers seem anxious. Underlying many of the recent defences of photography is the fear that photography is already a senile art, littered by spurious or dead movements.³⁵²

As previously mentioned, this *senile* feeling was one that the Canarian community echoed as soon as they had the chance. In that first discussion on autonomy and criticality, on the dangers of alienation in times of cognitive capitalism and affective economy, the participating artists highlighted the difficulty they faced in entering into dialogue beyond the discipline and with unchallenged forms of display. They also highlighted the need to embrace a festival format that transcended its capacity as a tourist attraction rooted in the enthusiasms of the 1990s – in that period full of promises of progress and growth.

Weaving Collective Nets

To think with care is to situate ourselves in the perfect storm that affects the world today, in order to reweave ties in the present – here and now, in this muddy land. To do so in a world that has become inherently problematic, in which nothing is simple anymore but which, in its hyper-connectivity full of migrating images, of process-images, is presented to us as a relational fiction on a planetary scale. This fiction defines a contemporary condition that we must problematise, because its crises do tear us apart: global warming, the collapse of biodiversity, silent springs, deep political antagonisms, culture wars, a raging Trumpism, now even without Trump...

For us, who landed in Tenerife thinking with all these women, many of whom we had collaborated with in the past, it was important to address our *intervention* – not so much to show that the coming decades would be crucial, but to take an explicitly ecofeminist stance. In other words, we did not arrive with the desire to capture that ‘decisive moment’ that Cartier-Bresson defended, or the *punctum*, for those who prefer to think with Barthes, but rather to provide a mobile frame that allows us to pause and stay with the trouble (Barthes’s *studium*, otherwise).

An analogy can be made to attending a debate: a speaker takes the floor, and it is only later that we realise their words have left an imprint, which has made us feel. In that interval, something changed, our attention broadened. Thus, all the artistic practices within ‘Myths of the Near Future’ have made us, the curatorial team, feel that a ‘poetic economy’ is possible and that the political persists underneath the poetic. The works and practices exhibited throughout the festival were (deliberately) situated at the crossroads between human and non-human beings, all of them social actants, as integral elements in the stories, starting with TEA’s collection of ‘collective drawings’ made in 1940 and 1941 by writers and artists belonging to the Surrealism movement, one of which became the biennial’s main image.

³⁵² Susan Sontag, ‘Photography in Search of Itself’, *The New York Review*, 20 January (1977).

The painters Max Ernst, Wilfredo Lam, André Masson and Oscar Domínguez were some of the protagonists of that shared adventure – that of the collective drawing as a communal practice – in which the game of chance acquired the category of authentic myths of a future time. Domínguez’s painting *Ceres* (1952), depicting the goddess of agriculture, grain crops, fertility and motherly relationships, was an anchoring point within the show that inspired the ‘Museum as Ecosystem’ programme curated by Alba Colomo. Yayo Herrero’s idea of ‘weaving collective nets’ was key as it addresses the importance and need for re-weaving those common threads from our day-to-day practices as if they were the collective drawings giving rise to the curatorial proposal. How can we intervene in the places where we work, or in the places in which we live to transform our common living conditions? Will these conditions adapt harmoniously with our surroundings?

Herrero addressed this matter in relation to the impossibility of living beyond nature’s limits and the importance of re-thinking our own lives as animals to regain co-dependency and interdependency as distinguishing characteristics of the human. As the association for the development of permaculture, Finca el Mato, explained at the event:

In today’s scenario, I conceive the edible forests and gardens as institutional transformation tools, as opportunities for artisanal reflection. A great chance, as Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos said, to create reciprocal learning contexts and moments. A manifestation of an ecology formed by wisdoms that are contextualised, anchored, rooted, situated and useful in a place and at a moment in which a significant dialogue between different kinds of wisdoms can be generated. We need to identify spaces of hope that promote these types of initiatives, a transition towards a landscape of resilience in a climate emergency context.

In this sense, an interesting approach to this idea was the commissioned proposal *Viviendo el día* by Belén Cerezo, whose body of work asked how would it be ‘to film with the body’? Is it possible to film as if we were caressing? Would it be possible to film like Clarice Lispector writes? Cerezo’s work took as its central motif a dog’s walk to generate a re-encounter with the world-life. The narratives of the Brazilian writer Lispector that suppose an affirmation of life were the starting point of this project.

Patricia Dominguez’s proposal, *Eyes of Plants*, also explored the practice of healing with roses and other mestizo rituals emerging in the contact zones between radically different cosmologies. Introduced to South America by European settlers, roses acquired magical power in the colonial imaginary through the legend of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who chose the rose as a symbol to manifest herself to Juan Diego, the first indigenous saint from the Americas.

Another example is *Paraislas* (1984) a painting from the collection developed by Juan José Gil, which remained faithful to an exploration of the significance, reach and meaning of the island condition. His series are attempted to expand the symbolic meaning of the islands

insofar as a reality that transcends a mere geographical framework and becomes pure teleology.

Towards a Radical Territorial Intimacy

In a liberal economy the advocates of productive rationality transform poetry into ornament. The autonomy that individualism defends has the purposes of growth and wealth, and any regulatory system results, from this perspective, from instincts of conquest and domination. In contrast, those who privilege the collective interest, the dominant tendency of Hegelian Marxism, accept that work is subjected to the production of value. However, *accumulation* not only has to do with abundance or prosperity, but as I pointed out earlier, it also refers to the distribution of resources and the balance between time dedicated to work and the time left for everything that is not necessarily labour. Revolving in the interval between these two positions are the many voices that were summoned in the festival, and whose approaches are closer to what Robert Filliou called a ‘poetic economy’, something that I have already addressed before, when I introduced the contradiction of negotiation as the negation of leisure in ‘It’s Your Turn’ (2018).³⁵³

A poetic economy does not fall within the genealogy of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, despite being a similar denunciation of instrumental rationality; it is closer to the anti-authoritarian proposals of Pierre Clastres, who imagined a principle of equivalence, ‘good for nothing – good for everything’, which undermines the productivist value system.³⁵⁴ Only assuming that our failures were also our victories, our exquisite corpse could cross the frontier of the specialisations that we had entrusted ourselves with and imagine a world of creation that is not subsumed by the logic of efficiency.

Things, objects and artworks showed a *now* that is dying instead of trying to resurrect a past. However, they showed a *now* with memory, a memorable present that understood the relationship beyond public/private dualisms, and that embraced the interactions between individuals, territorial communities and intimacies – an idea which nevertheless resonates with Marx’s approach to future societies.

In short, the proposals in TEA, Las Catalinas and the rest of the programmed spaces showed a diverse and inclusive world of creation, capable of problematising the speed with which institutions embrace the rhetoric of a self-proclaimed critical thought, without leaving space for poetics. With greater or lesser success, artistic practices were complicit in this process. With them we embarked on this journey that tried to articulate a radical *territorial intimacy*, as defined before an environment, a medium, a milieu that rather than reducing the enigmas of tangled bodies and their images, rebelled and exalted their postures, gestures, attitudes and movements.

³⁵³ Chevrier, ‘Íntimidad territorial y espacio público’.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

1985: July, August, September, October, November ... 2019: March, April, June, August, October, November. Fotonoviembre. ‘Having a Wonderful Time’ is our story. We did have a good, yet challenging time. We shared ideas, methodologies, and knowledge – intimacies and territories. We started with some people (and we continued with others) a great conversation that still accompanies us. Other discussions, however, were antagonised. An ecology of research and (un)learning practice defined an affective community, like in Ghandi, that as the following section presents, puts forward a powerful new model of the curatorial – one that finds in friendship a crucial resource for social reproduction and transnational, transdisciplinary collaboration.

As Teresa Cisneros told us, ‘the practice of inclusivity relies not only on knowledge but also on having a series of abilities’, and we offered ours.³⁵⁵ It was a memorable experience about matters of care – a word, *care*, that very soon after erupted in the public understanding, showing that caring for those who care was and *is* indeed an urgency of our present time. At the ‘Instituting with Care’ programme, the collective Entrar afuera explained that as activists, professionals, users or citizens, our position is that of outsiders. When we work at the university, in the art world, for the health service or as part of social movements, we notice a continuous motion, which is a crucial point of their discourse, but also that of the curatorial team. A transformative instituting practice cannot exist without first shifting the sense of ownership from a small, privileged group to the wider society: without asking uncomfortable questions about the loss of control, and in doing so, seeking to simultaneously move forward and to produce results. Entrar afuera wanted to highlight the three means by which the institution can produce social change: research, intervention, and incidence. We should think of these as production practices inserted into processes of social reproduction.

Entrar afuera, which translates into ‘entering outside’, addresses research as an activity that rejects, denounces, answers and experiments against the autonomy of knowledge, that is, the valorisation of knowledges produced by universities or museums, enclosing social codes and practices within a code that has been formulated out of the institution’s need to reproduce itself. One of the aims of this collective is to reflect on instituting practices and to create new ones, formed out of society and the institution itself, which are situated at the threshold of the other, potential present that we are currently building and inventing.³⁵⁶ As a curatorial method also infused with editorial thinking, ‘the *curatela*’ that this thesis proposes engages with this genealogy and provides a different lens to situate the practice of curating by means of editing, storytelling and caring.

³⁵⁵ Teresa Cisneros cited in Vallés Vílchez, ed., *Myths of the Near Future* (Tenerife: TEA–Tenerife Espacio de las Artes, 2022).

³⁵⁶ Ibid.



Alice Mortiaux, *Pieuvres. La fin d'un malentendu* [The end of a misunderstanding], *Concreta*, 09 (2017).

6: Conclusion

‘Curatela’ by Means of Editing, Storytelling and Caring

Even if this thesis takes a linear form for the sake of telling a comprehensive story, I have often introduced it to friends and colleagues as if it were an octopus, with two-thirds of its neurons found in the nerve cord of its arms, slowing down the possibility of discernment. An octopus’s arms have a variety of complicated interconnected reflex movements that persist even when they have no input from the brain. Like in Alice Mortiaux’s collage created for *Concreta* 09, ‘The End of a Misunderstanding’ is about to occur, with the conclusion of the movements of the preceding chapters.³⁵⁷

This project has attempted to make sense of the inputs received at different rhythms and with diverse densities over the past five years, even when the brain was allowing the fingers to think for themselves, because writing is thinking in action. This is precisely the kind of somatic reasoning this curatorial research has critically embraced, while reading out loud, asking the computer to read out loud for me, to provide a comfortable distance to alienate my own words. This project has also made an effort to see these pages off with sadness; pages that have been written amid a complex habitat, and which have attempted to rehearse a practice of embodied criticism with which I have often felt at odds.

‘Penser par le milieu’ is a phrase coined by Gilles Deleuze that Isabelle Stengers borrows to define an ‘ecology of practices’ and emphasise the double meaning of ‘milieu’ as a surrounding or habitat but also as a middle, and to explain why there can be no relevant ecology without a related ethology. As a result, she proposes an expanded notion of ‘the ecological’ to stress the fact that there is no identity of a practice independent of its environments.³⁵⁸ In a similar fashion, this thesis has embraced this idea of ‘penser par le milieu’ or ‘through the middle’ from the very beginning, looking at and rehearsing practices of mediation and representation from different curatorial positions that rebel in the intervals.

In the end, and as I will further argue in the pages to come, ‘the *curatela*’ that this research proposes is a maquette that emerges as an exercise of institutional imagination and as an opportunity to release a word, delineate responsibilities, shame, hopes and resistance towards an unhurried politics of attention in post-representational curatorial practices.

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To briefly summarise, this research started with a premise, a discomfort and a proposal.

³⁵⁷ Alice Mortiaux, ‘The End of an Understanding’, *Concreta*, 09 (2017).

³⁵⁸ Stengers, ‘Introductory Notes on An Ecology of Practices’.

The premise was to find my positioning within curatorial thinking, and to do so by acknowledging that such a flexible term, ‘curatorial’, was neither developed nor embraced within the Spanish contexts where I situated my practice when I joined the Royal College of Art in London in 2016. Paradoxically, I was privileged enough to do so with the support of the Botín Foundation – one of the very few private Spanish organisations that contributes to the formation and education of curators, not in Spain, but abroad.

However, this point of departure did not necessarily mean that the practice of curating was not being rehearsed within Spain – because curators, self-defined as such, did curate exhibitions and programmes, among other multi-format projects beyond the white cube – but rather that ‘curatorial thinking’ did not constitute a field of knowledge with identifiable contours in institutional and pedagogical environments. Would it be desirable for such contours to be acknowledged?

A clear manifestation of this struggle for recognition was, in my view, the lack of vocabulary and the need for new words to address what was yet not possible to achieve, delineate or grasp. In fact, the lack of vocabulary had, as a consequence, the diminishing of such practice, which in the end was not considered a professional position and was neither offered nor recognised within the public sphere as such.

Curators could only be self-identified in the private sector – they did not exist as public figures in museums’ organograms insofar as they were understood as guest storytellers and, therefore, alien to institutional structures. Therefore, most organisational charts were made up of civil servants with a training that did not necessarily address the reality of the contemporary cultural organisation, including that of the museum, whose neutral presumption and managerial stance left very little room for agency. In Stengers’s terms: the identity of the practice was not aligned with the environment.

As pointed out at the beginning of this thesis, it was only a year after I joined the Royal College of Art that the first post-graduate programme on the subject matter was created within the Spanish context. Whether this course would constitute a contribution to the field yet to be formulated is difficult to say, as well as the relevance of such a field, however the possibility of engaging with and exploring other pathways is certainly of value.

In addition, there was a certain discomfort, which had to do with the increasing awareness of the historical accounts and instituting practices that have been taking place since the creation of the so-called ‘democratic museum’ in Spain, as well as the organic and reproductive hierarchical labour structures that were formed to sustain these new (often experimental) cultural infrastructures.

This discomfort first developed after identifying what constitutes the paradox this research tackles – that many of the emancipatory artistic and institutional proclamations voiced after the death of Franco by those in charge of making art public did not result in the transformation of cultural organisations into accessible and popular milieus. In contrast, they

were caught in the rhetorical paradoxes of post-democratic and post-critical institutions, namely those whose decision-making abilities were progressively limited and co-opted. As indicated in the preceding pages, the kinds of critical claims that many of these institutions made were, in practice, systematically betrayed. Hence, civil society struggled to contribute to the formation of histories and stories beyond the canon and its existing technologies of mediation.

In the early stages of developing my thesis, I recognised a singular parallel narrative between the representational crisis of legitimacy that the financial disaster of 2008 unleashed and the political consequences of the *indignados* movement, which was transformed into a political party, and what was at the time called ‘new institutionalism’. This new political party, Podemos, created a hierarchical structure that, for many *indignados* including myself, contradicted the post-representational nature of the movement. Art and institutions played a key role in rethinking the crisis of democracy and, within this critical process, a window of opportunity arose; there was now space to overcome the binary opposites that sustain, in a very simplistic manner, the notion of ‘difference’ and the critique of who speaks and from where this speaking emerges.

Could the practice of curating and the curatorial provide a space of negotiation from which to make visible and tangible other lived realities? Why have those curators – who learned the practice of curating abroad four decades ago and who have contributed to the definition of the institutional milieu – not found a possibility of contributing to the process of democratisation of Spanish institutions in curatorial thinking and practice?

These trained curators knew the story, they knew about the many waves of Institutional Critique and the inevitable trajectory towards transdisciplinary knowledge. They knew that the so-called ‘end of history’ was only a fleeting dream, and that uncaring power structures would be reinforced by what Ernesto Laclau called the ‘rhetorical foundations of society’.³⁵⁹ Ultimately, they knew that there was no way out of mediation in the era of mobility and that addressing how to expand the margins of artistic research and production was an urgent matter if we were to collectively and creatively address the challenges of our present and heterogeneous time.

In the end, curatorial literature offered a new ethical lens from which to address my own sense of unease from an ecofeminist and editorial position. A practice-led proposal, emerging from the experience of editing the periodical *Concreta* and a series of artists’ books embracing art theory – but operating at the margins of academia – allowed me to put forward an experimental ‘plan without a plan’. In other words, this approach allowed me to define an unfamiliar research framework in which to inhabit and sustain the ‘not knowing’. From that indulgent, yet ‘muddled’ position, and developing from a particular issue of the magazine that focused on the notion of situated knowledge, I developed a practice-led proposal, which

³⁵⁹ Ernesto Laclau, ‘Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics’, in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 36–46.

aimed at mobilising the aforementioned politics of representation towards an unhurried politics of attention.

In this particular issue of this periodical, Haraway, Puig de la Bellacasa and Stengers were instrumental. Drawing on Haraway's relational ontology, where 'beings do not pre-exist their relating', Puig de la Bellacasa reminded us that 'nothing comes without its worlds', and so 'thinking with care', 'dissenting within' and 'thinking for' transform and disrupt knowledge production.³⁶⁰

But what is care? Is it affection? A moral obligation? Work? A burden? A joy? Puig de la Bellacasa herself asked these questions while editing a book, since released, titled *Matters of Care*. 'Is care perhaps a speculative gesture?' I also wondered after editing Stengers's text. Care means all these things and more, depending on who you ask. As it occurs with the notion of curating and the curatorial, the term was and still is ambivalent in significance and ontology. It has been researched for decades and with many different ethical, social, political, and cultural implications. In her book *Moral Boundaries* (1992), political theorist Joan Tronto wrote that care relates to 'everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web.'³⁶¹

But who does the 'maintaining' and the 'continuing' and the 'repairing' of 'our' worlds? Thinking about ourselves, whoever 'we' are – *we, rebellious mediators*, if we think with Marina Garcés – as weavers creating a life web is a beautiful metaphor.

In thinking with these women, I set out to explore the practice of curating contemporary art in institutional settings, beyond the binaries that have prevailed in the Spanish context under the influence of political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe. In my eyes, the fact that Mouffe's became notable in a museum environment in the 1990s, precisely when she was exploring the notion of 'antagonism', and years later was introduced in the new political party Podemos, when thinking around the notion of 'agonistic pluralism' was very thought-provoking. At the time, I was not fully aware that Mouffe's terminology also influenced how the curatorial was defined by curators like Maria Lind.³⁶² The mirroring effect between these two historical accounts, that of the antagonist and agonistic museographic position or approach, offered interesting methodological considerations for my research.

Ultimately, from the premise of finding a position, the discomfort of unaccountable historical practices and a practice-led rehearsal to propose a maquette for the curatorial specific to Spain, my research questions emerged. How to address care as a constituent part of a praxis set in a framework of interdependence, alongside the processes of civil mediation towards the

³⁶⁰ De la Bellacasa, 'Pensar con cuidado'.

³⁶¹ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 226.

³⁶² Lind, 'Active Cultures. On the Curatorial'.

commons within the contemporary condition? Who cares for those who care? What if we think of ‘the *curatela*’ through editing, storytelling and caring and to increase public attention and policy awareness regarding the need for regenerating open and democratic structures?

All in all, the affective and ethical dispositions involved in taking responsibility for others, such as *caring about* and being *under the care of*, need to be supported by material practices if we are to avoid precarious labour conditions. These supportive acts include the production of knowledge and making art public, and these acts are required to be mobilised by abstractions. Abstractions are needed, not to translate a higher truth, but to transform our own relations with one another and the world around us to get them to make us think, without falling into what Stengers calls the *ornière* – something akin to a furrow.

When you name something, you dig a furrow, and when you think within a furrow, ‘you go fast, you go far, but you always go in the direction marked by the furrow. You are trapped by the furrow’. That our thoughts dig a furrow is what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wanted to make us feel; and ‘this “make us feel” also means that it is possible to escape from this furrow.’³⁶³

The way I have related to my research questions has been influenced by Stengers’s invitation to suspend our reasoning and inhabit the ‘not knowing’, and to make me think ‘in a manner that prevents any transcendental reason – all the way down’.³⁶⁴ So, here I am concluding, yet caressing the surface.

In what follows, drawing on previous chapters, I define a position of ‘thinking with’ by the means of editing, as well as ‘dissenting within’ storytelling. Ultimately, I propose ‘thinking for’ caring instead of ‘thinking from’ a critique of a traditional epistemology of care – as the theory that defines and justifies legitimate grounds for knowledge. Because, as Puig de la Bellacasa states, ‘merely epistemological theory, a method, or a search for “truth”, misses the *originality* of this connection of theoretical insights and collective practical politics.’³⁶⁵

All in all, ‘editing’, ‘storytelling’ and ‘caring’ are the epistemic tools that contribute to the foundation of the ‘ecology of practices’ that this thesis puts forward, namely, ‘the *curatela*’.

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I decided to start the ‘Editing’ chapter by telling the stories of Cura, the personification of care, concern and dedication, and the organisation I co-founded ten years ago, *Concreta* as a methodological framework. These are two journeys tackling the process of historicisation and collaboration inherent to practices challenging representational regimes such as curating and

³⁶³ Isabelle Stengers, ‘Fervor y lucidez. Las obligaciones de la instauración’ [Fervour and Lucidity. The Obligations of Instauration], *Concreta Online* (2017) <<http://editorialconcreta.org/Fervor-y-lucidez-Las-obligaciones>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ De la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, p. 229.

the curatorial. I pay attention to Cura's crossing of the river and question the unaccounted part of the story, that is, the intention of the passage. I argue that the importance of this omission could relate to a moment of self-mirroring inscribed in the very act of creation which, in eyes of Nowotny, could be interpreted as narcissistic, judgemental or comparatively lesser.

Yet, the idea of representation and mediation that the fable introduces presents the core conundrum about representation and criticality this thesis tackles. What if we took advantage of that omission and disengaged the fable from the representational regime and the idea of origin? What if we freed our understanding of Cura's story from the grammar of inferiority and sadness, and saw dependence and conviviality as powerful and beautiful?

In my view, the hesitation around the intention of the journey relates to a moment of suspension while inhabiting the middle, the gap that is the river. Cura's descendants, known as curators, helped me unpack the argument against such oversight by proposing the figure of the curator not only as a descendant of Cura but also as her modern personification, crossing rivers and oceans and producing new knowledge from what is out there. Curators draw upon existing images of human beings, who are still dependent on a mirroring moment that is left out of the story as it bears witness either to the limits of the curatorial or the inadequate traces of hedonism inscribed in it.

The story evokes new conceptions and imaginations that I propose relate to Walter Benjamin's approach to history and Donna Haraway's approach to collectivity, by adopting their notions of *whirlpool* and *muddle*. What they have in common is that they describe a centripetal force that drags everything in, all the way down. But if we return to Stengers's warning, we need to be aware of this centripetal force because, perhaps,

there is nothing at the bottom of the whole, there is absolutely nothing that espies this, that does not owe its existence to a decision regarding a way of selecting, of giving importance to this instead of that other [...] No decision has the power to impose itself as legitimate, final, decisive. Nothing that exists has the power to transcend the adventure in which the way of giving importance to what has been decided repeats incessantly, the way in which a decision produces an inheritance, will have continuations.³⁶⁶

In both circular movements, that of the *whirlpool* and the *muddle*, the discursive surfaces as a reparative provocation that 'thinks with' and helps situate new knowledge.

As happens with Cura's creature, who grows by accumulation, *Concreta* also means *con crescere*. For this reason, I decided to propose autotheory as the methodological approach grounded in the personal-theoretical to shape my argument about the understanding of curating and the curatorial by means of editing. The historical criticism of self-reflexive work

³⁶⁶ Stengers, 'Fervor y lucidez. Las obligaciones de la instauración' [translation mine].

as supposedly narcissistic described in the fable resonates with that of feminist practice which, as artists Moyra Davey and Iman Issa argue, is ultimately a history of autotheory, attempting to bridge both theory and practice, not as a memoir, but as performative life-thinking. The ‘desperate I of last resort’ that signals a risk is being taken. But, which risk does this research tackle?

I decided to re-tell my own crossing of *Concreta*’s river, to disengage from the representational regime in favour of an understanding of mimesis as attentive doing and knowing. In my eyes, mimesis – but also repetition, reproduction, recreation, appropriation and, undoubtedly, editing and citation – could also lead to numerous manifestations, not of the same, but of the affective negotiation, collection and capacities of circulation as a process of feminist subjectivation. As a result, I decided to embrace dependence and conviviality against the grammar of inferiority that is inscribed in every learning process. Because mimesis is a faculty that strengthens in the early years, and that gradually diminishes and is transformed into a series of exchanges leading towards an authorial sense of belonging ultimately increasingly removed from sensorial experience.

Thus, as an exercise of institutional imagination built from our mimetic faculty, ‘the *curatela*’ provides breathing space for embodied action, understanding that the act of editing is a bodily archival experience. This maquette not only sets out to address the social conditions outside of art, but also points to its planes and contours as if they were squares to be traversed, as if they were *Els Pressentiments* where these conditions are experienced and brought into the process of transformation. These limits frame a temporary place for bodies in transit and embrace bodies as social structures. These limits also present these conditions of engagement that define an unhurried politics of attention. Ultimately, these contours address the ethics of a practice through the processual nature of editing, which, in line with Tronto’s approach to care, is ultimately to maintain, continue and repair our *words*.

For this reason, the chapter continues introducing how *Concreta* is made up of aggregated parts and refers to what is real and can be perceived with the senses; how it is applied to the *noun* that defines real beings, or beings that can be represented as such. *Concreta* proposes to situate and get closer, while establishing and discovering relations, referring to the work of language where its materiality unfolds poetically in space, and where form and content act as a ‘fictitious unity’ that could be lived as a whole, if we invoke Peter Osborne’s definition of the contemporary; or if we think with Cura and the curatorial. *Concreta* is just another way to refer to *abstraction*, naming it otherwise. As an intuitive archive rooted as much in scholarly research and sober reflection as in a gut-based feminist understanding and critical happenstance, *Concreta* is a toolbox to which it constantly returns. In this regard, *Concreta*’s riverbanks are ultimately situated in alignment with a global recession and a pandemic and, in sharing the crossing process, I confront the paradox of representation from my own experience of inhabiting others’ words and worlds and making them my own, beyond the surface of paper alone.

My intention to critically engage with the formation of an ‘ecology of practices’ that pays attention to the double meaning of *milieu*, as surrounding or habitat and as medium, brought me to focus on a series of publishing projects that have been produced within the context of *Concreta*. These periodicals have contributed to building an argument around the role of the editor-as-curator and the challenges of hypertextuality in terms of authorship, taking into account that ecology and ethology go hand in hand.

After I moved to England, the first issue of *Concreta* focused on the notion of *displacement*, which I described at the time as an aesthetic and political positioning within contemporary art practices that explores territory as a shared place for commonality, dialogue and conflict, as well as a means for searching through different times, places and affects.

The chapter ‘Editing (Thinking with)’ introduces two magazines, *Noigrandres* and *Aspen*, from the 1950s and 1960s, to present a period of developments towards autonomy and self-reflexivity from which the freelance curator emerged shortly after. *Noigrandres* defended that concrete poetry put forward a pre-semiotic conception of language and thinking, which allowed me to comprehend the transition between two moments of understanding language – from *readability* as oppressive, to *visibility* as fetishistic and emancipatory. *Aspen*, the multimedia magazine in a box, however, helped me to tackle the representational within the networks that it is embedded in, which as a result led to the post-representational paradox and the curatorial.

To a certain extent, *Aspen* contributed to gain access to a multiplicity of experiences – it challenged the viewer. There was no linear structure, nor did it follow any set order. Like in *Noigrandres*, the magazine’s articulation and arrangement reveal a semantic motivation after the destruction of linearity associated with the tradition of writing and the habit of reading. With *Aspen* 5+6, Brian O’Doherty consciously developed the first conceptual exhibition within a cardboard container. As a little ‘museum’, the *Aspen* issue focused on notions of *time*, *silence*, and *language*, and included Barthes’s essay, ‘The Death of the Author’, which I argue ‘digs a furrow’ in curatorial discourse and establishes a shift in the conditions of art production.

In its informality, conceptual art demonstrated the radically distributive character of the unity of the work. Each piece is distributed through a space-time totality of the potentially infinite, but at the same time each piece is conceptually defined, making it finite and situated. The second section of the chapter ‘Editing (Thinking with)’ argues that the post-conceptual ontology of contemporary art developed not only through the critical weight and exploration of new artistic practices, but also through changes in the social space of their presentation.

But if we are entangled in continuous proximity without blank pages as a matrix of subjectivity formation, how do we achieve critical distance? Can the practice of curating and the curatorial contribute to this achievement yet to come? Towards an unhurried politics of attention? Towards an embodied, somatic criticism? In relation to these questions and unceasingly asking what kind of enquiring the curatorial enables us to generate beyond the

blank page, I curated a series of projects including ‘Across the Sand’ and ‘Editing Spaces: A Rehearsal to the Test’.

In my view, ‘Across the Sand’ presented a complex national narrative from the perspective of editing and curating, with two women from different backgrounds, ‘weaving nets’ at different speeds and providing a concrete and situated way of understanding mediation. The project engaged with the story of invisible practices in the incipient genealogies of curating and editing, while avoiding displacement of the paradox of representation towards the performativity of the archive. Embracing a feminist position, this exhibitionary project attempted to advocate ‘a relational way of thinking [...] to think-with’, to create ‘new patterns from previous multiplicities’.³⁶⁷

This type of ‘thick description’, which sediments and rejects the temptation to dismantle networks and is disassociated from an attempt to re-articulate them, aims to engage with the narratives that were presented at the beginning of this thesis, on Cura’s creature and *Concreta*’s own accumulative nature, which ultimately reflects on the conditions of engagement as well as the performative nature of autotheory.

Rather than fetishise and mythologise these publications and those involved, ‘Across the Sand’ favoured their reinterpretation. In short, when these approaches engage with the past, they feel the need to reinvent it in some way by updating the meaning of these fragments and even projecting one’s perception of these fragments into a view of the future. It is with this vision of history – that of the *whirlpool* and of the *muddle* – shared by those involved in the project that ‘Across the Sand’ attempted to perform and rehearse throughout the project and its exhibition.

‘Editing Spaces: A Rehearsal to the Test’ took its point of departure in my work at *Concreta* to introduce this research as a kind of performative life thinking. I took TIER’s invitation to contribute to their programme as an opportunity to share an unfinished process in which the editorial and the curatorial were fundamental in articulating the multi-chapter proposal in different social spaces of presentation. TIER introduced a transdisciplinary approach, bringing together art practice and writing inspired by the French literary network Oulipo, whose members started to combine techniques from the field of mathematics to create generative systems, in order to facilitate the practice of writing in a playful manner by following a set of rules. Using these protocols, they were able to exercise the imagination and go beyond the traditional yet self-imposed framework.

In Oulipo, the combination of space and writing produces a reading of one’s surroundings as a practice of exploring the unnoticed and the everyday in a situated manner; as well, it tightens space and its narration, reflecting on the conventions of how space is produced. Oulipo’s proposal is a mechanism with which to think about how protocols shape our lives, and what the constraints are that give structure to social rituals. In that sense, Oulipo gave us

³⁶⁷ See ‘Editing Spaces Beyond the Mirror. How Words World Worlds’, p. 75.

tools not only to understand, but to produce institutions: these are none other than a set of rules that we are compelled to play the game with.

When thinking about institutions and exhibition-making, the lessons from this group are very valuable. The exhibition can be understood as a group of textual constraints to be practised and edited, by reading and by writing. 'Editing Spaces: A Rehearsal to the Test' was also an 'exercise in style' that responded to this premise and celebrated the *milieu*. It was a rehearsal that proposed to explore the everyday life of a writer, an artist, an editor and a curator by looking at the often unnoticed situatedness of cultural workers, who constantly negotiate the fictitious nature of the contemporary condition.

Building on the experience of spending a summer translating the work of women I admire, I read a series of questions about their 'ecology of practices' out loud to the audience. In the performative lecture I highlighted that editing is a precious practice that emerges from listening and a sort of invisibility that leads towards what Clémentine Deliss calls 'conceptual intimacy', where words and worlds are inhabited, generating new spaces of presentation.³⁶⁸ At the same time, 'Editing Spaces: A Rehearsal to the Test' recuperated the definition of *publication* as 'making public' and exchanged the idea of the *exhibition* as 'narrative machine' for that of *publication* as an 'expanded book' that can also unfold a set of other possibilities including cross-temporal approaches, choreography of bodies and movement, through the extensive ideas of text and support structures.

In the end, the set of projects presented in this chapter points towards an ecology that bridges theory and practice while critically engaging with modalities of epistemic investigation capable of expanding the curatorial field of activity by means of editing.

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Whereas the premise of delineating a field of knowledge that covers an ecology of curating (misaligned from its ethology) led me to develop a methodology of 'thinking with' others, the discomfort of identifying the rhetorical paradoxes of various institutional processes led me to recognise that the precise way we 'think with' these others allows us to hold multiple, sometimes divergent, positions.

In thinking with Puig de la Bellacasa, I concluded that these divergent positions often 'dissent within' the very same organisational structures. Hence, muddling through pre-existing institutional models such as the 'democratic museum' allows this dissertation to stress the idea that for a practice that does not directly fit within the division of theory and practice, curating requires narration in the same way as that politics does.

Narration in curation is necessary, particularly if we accept the idea that museums and tourism were born at the same time and were entrusted with similar historical functions: the

³⁶⁸ See 'Editor-as-Curator. Hypertextuality and the Destruction of the Author', p. 64.

impossible political mission of giving unity to the fragments of the world (nature and culture) and the equally impossible political task of offering the illusion of staging this nature/culture dichotomy for the traveller. The processes of musealisation and touristification have as a result been part of the same world history. Nevertheless, in recent years, massification and commodification have saturated the discursive devices that have kept them separate, while at the same time exposing the institution's common violent and exploitative root in all its crudeness. This exposure has initiated a dispute about the very same impossible mission – of giving unity to the fragments of the world, and in doing so, the desire of those in power to keep nature and culture separate from one another.

I argue that this diagnosis of the 'contemporary condition' as a cancellation of any form of representing reality in space and time, as outlined in 'The Rebellion of the Intervals', gives continuity to the various crises of representation and legitimacy revolving around new canon formations and identity politics in a period when criticality and opinion are hardly differentiated. These formations and politics, in a context of saturated discursive devices, generate excess, or even noise pollution – another type of surplus value.

The sense of unease led me to open the chapter 'Storytelling (Dissenting within)' with Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller', a short account introduced by Mar Villaespesa, very present in 'Across the Sand', in which the author recuperates a moment in history in which experience had fallen in value. If in the 1930s the art of storytelling had been exhausted in the written press, the birth of the Internet in the 1990s had similar consequences for Villaespesa's editorial practice. Whereas information was consumed when 'new' in both periods, narrative offered another rhythm, concentrated forces and provided memorable experiences.

In the financial crisis of 2008, however, social media complicated this narrative. This crisis also revealed the emergence of new ways of storytelling, of narrating this experience differently in what Spain's current Minister of Universities, the well-known sociologist Manuel Castells, called a 'network society'.³⁶⁹ From the written press and the world wide web to social media, storytelling surfaced for 'earthly survival'.

The chapter continues the argument, discussing the consequences of the economic crisis that brought winds of change, making visible an increasing disenchantment with institutional ecologies that were incapable of caring for the social urgencies of a paradigmatic present. Austerity measures entered the Spanish Constitution, raising the *principle* of budget stability to a constitutional mandate. Prioritising the payment of debt over people's needs, this new alignment widened inequality and made the tensions of political antagonism visible.

The *indignados* movement and its political consequences changed the rules of the game. One of the reasons why these new organisations were founded and in turn elected was that they told the story in their own way. Many of the *indignados* learned from Ernesto Laclau and

³⁶⁹ Manuel Castells, *Network Society. A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Los Angeles: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, 2004).

Chantal Mouffe that politics is about the ‘assembly of the social’ through the means of rhetoric, antagonism and passion. Social and political discourses play with metaphorical operations of substitution and re-presentation. Whereas ‘the political’ implies a gap, ‘politics’ establishes the balance.

When I was researching the notion of *new institutionalism*, I recognised that these political narratives taking place in Spain crossed paths with that of the curatorial landscape that had primarily developed outside of the Spanish context, a learning process that *Concreta* as a discursive tool allowed for. This sparked a desire to go precisely beyond the discursive and to embrace transdisciplinary knowledge production, defined as an ‘educational turn’ in other European organisations, into a post-representational scene that gave continuity to the crisis of representation, which itself followed various waves of Institutional Critique that had challenged and continued to challenge canonical narratives.

For scholars such as Nora Sternfeld, Antonio Gramsci’s approach to education and culture to challenge hegemony was instrumental ‘inside the post-representational museum’. What I argue in this chapter is that the Spanish institutional arena provides a long-lasting, multi-layered, and complex context, which has set in motion this very same idea in the fields of curating *and* politics, offering greater insight to the field of curatorial knowledge.³⁷⁰

Drawing on this argument, I introduce my discussion with Mouffe at the University of Cambridge as part of the symposium ‘Mobilising Affects: Populism and the Future of Democratic Politics in Spain’, which was instrumental for the advancement of my thinking. The symposium and the exchange with Mouffe took place right in the middle of my initial writing period, while my ideas were still in formation, yet the sense of urgency was very present. The symposium was a clear example of how the explosion of populist discourse in Spain had forever transformed our understanding of contemporary democratic societies everywhere.

The event focused on the eruption of populist mobilisation from 2011 onwards and the emergence of the new political parties such as Podemos – at the time of the symposium holding some posts in the first coalition government in Spanish history. The symposium aimed at engaging with the so-called ‘affective turn’ in the social sciences and humanities, and the new configuration of bodies and technologies of mediation, which, as previously indicated, relates to processes of identity formation, post-representation and trauma while increasingly relying on information and affect. Consequently, new processes of joint articulation, materiality and relationality emerge.

In Mouffe’s view, passions must be understood as a type of common affects mobilised in the political domain, where new forms of identification are created. In her defence ‘for a left populism’, the theorist expressed how she thinks that neoliberal hegemony has come to an end after decades of being unchallenged. But has it, really? Strategies towards addressing

³⁷⁰ See ‘The Post-Representational Paradox’, p. 41.

radical democracy and the formation of counter-hegemony have not yet led to an agreement among leftist circles. Ultimately, when experience falls in value, not only ‘editing’ and ‘storytelling’ contribute to the understanding of our worlds, but ‘caring’ for reassembling the social fabric is a political obligation. This is the ‘maintaining’ and the ‘continuing’ and the ‘repairing’ that Tronto describes, as mentioned above.

The lessons provided by the new institutionalism of the 2000s, which drew on the Institutional Critique of the preceding decades, are instrumental in this discussion. Curatorial thinking has set in motion experimental proposals that address this very same preoccupation with institutional infrastructures, examples of which the field of curatorial knowledge introduces, and the final chapter rehearses – leading towards ‘the *curatela*’ as a research model that responds precisely to this post-representational paradox.

From the social to the affective turn, activism, forms of collectivity and Institutional Critique continuously renew their commitment – which in the case of Spain its commitment had its foundation in the 1990s, when the economy shifted from rural industrial services towards cultural tourism – to the current feminist struggle in which emotions and passions play a fundamental role in thinking with care in an interdependent world. Since knowledge and subjectivity occupy a privileged position within the entanglement of the very same system that generates value, the critical distancing that those disseminating and fighting institutional structures over the past century had, is no longer feasible. I argue that drawing a demarcation line is impossible.

Today, rebellion becomes simultaneously a method, critical rhetoric and transgressive celebration. Therefore, the transition from the social to the affective turn forces us to complicate Mouffe's dualistic definition of ‘antagonism’ (us vs them), and embrace her most relational proposition, ‘agonistic pluralism’, aligning with other forms of joint articulation and entanglement as those presented in this research.

This chapter takes us back to Benjamin's short text on the storyteller, but also to Haraway's biopic, *Story Telling for Earthly Survival*, in which this figure is not only presented, but defended for earthly survival. Four decades after Barthes's death of the author, storytelling reclaims the ability to expand our historical and political understanding of what Haraway calls ‘natureculture’.³⁷¹ This concept, first proposed in 2003, lays the foundation for rewriting the entanglement of the natural and the cultural, the bodily and the mind, the material and the semiotic, through the analysis of our behaviour with companion species beyond the human. In other words, it does the groundwork for imagining a joint future in opposition to modernist dualism, the long-lasting approach that compartmentalises the complexities of the world to maintain the status quo. Like in the previous chapter with the *whirlpool* and the *muddle*, both

³⁷¹ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

Benjamin and Haraway's approaches to *storytelling* highlight the thin line that separates representation and empowerment from replacement.

Yet, as Puig de la Bellacasa emphasises, resistance to conceptual enclosure is not without political purpose. Giving a fair account of many, varied feminist discussions require us to cut across fixed theoretical and academic divides. It is precisely the transversal nature of feminism that I argue in this chapter has the potential to muddle simplistic modes of mediating and dividing the social, and therefore our lives and imaginaries.

Borja-Villel raised the issue of the role of the exhausted author before Podemos and En Comú Podem won the Catalan elections. Yet, Podemos's impossible consensus on how to address affects and care in the formation of a counter-hegemony created a controversy and subsequent split in their previously unified ideation of the way forward. In our conversation, Mouffe also argued that the heterogeneity of the multitude was not enough, and therefore struggle, dissent and indignation were needed to transform political governance. How does this statement relate to the practice of curating and the curatorial? Where are the struggle, dissent and indignation located within the post-democratic museum?

Drawing on 'The Potosí Principle' exhibition, I pose this question and argue that the democratic and critical premises that were the foundations of a debate around public production are currently unravelling. In thinking with scholar Yaiza Hernández, many have tried to make visible how the kinds of critical claims that many 'progressive' organisations have repeatedly made, have in practice been betrayed. And, as I stated at the beginning of this research, 'neither more nor less was at stake than the possibility of imagining a concrete horizon of dignity and "true" democracy in our societies.'³⁷²

However, the difficulties of implementing alternatives that escape the logic of competitiveness and consumption are very present, as well as the uses and abuses of theory, which I argue must follow the problem of instigating changes rather than remain abstract and distant. The level of abstract theory provided allows us to imagine things as they are not, and to imagine things otherwise in present times is a must. Hence the rise in public programming as a mode of curatorial practice in recent years and hence my proposition of 'the *curatela*'.

But is the museum's role to shape, to share, to serve? What about the multiple modes of care it could engage in a defence of other feminist forms of radicality that do not succumb to the logic of continuous growth, mobility and the economy of visibility advanced by the museum? ...because 'the museum *will* have to provide care like a hospital does, while still being critical'³⁷³ as Borja-Villel commented within the context of the pandemic – troubling many feminists, including myself, who saw in his futurity the very acknowledgement of scarcity.

³⁷² See 'Concreta means *con crescere*', p. 61.

³⁷³ Expósito and Borja-Villel, 'In Conversation'.

Indeed, the museum ‘will have to *continue* to provide care’, wrote Pablo Martínez in response to these same words.³⁷⁴ The museum will have to continue caring for those who do the caring and improving the working conditions and status of educators, mediators and all staff members who do outreach work. Ultimately, the museum must challenge the policies of accessibility that have separated culture from education since Franco passed, and it must avoid the shaping of a cultural sphere that is at odds with life.

It is no coincidence that the Reina Sofía museum has just launched the Situated Museum network, precisely to give *visibility* to the emergencies of the present and to alleviate them. In the same way as the site-specific practices of the 1970s were connected to the various waves of Institutional Critique, the ‘situated museum’ emerges because of the deficits of new institutionalism. Yet, as I argue in this thesis, conceptual art demonstrated the radical emptiness of aesthetics. As an ontological support, post-representational practices acquire their meaning in a relational and contextual manner. In addition to ‘giving visibility’ under the artificial promise of emancipation, what my research clarifies further is that what is at stake is the social space of presentation. My focus has been on the question of *how* the urgencies are going to be alleviated beyond the rhetoric of representation. What role will the practice of curating and the curatorial play in this new situated museum?

Finally, this chapter presents how the ‘affective turn’ has created space to address the nature of a thesis that aims to muddle through the institutional arena in Spain since the creation of an ‘ecology of practices’ that constructed a surrounding or habitat (museums), yet neglected the medium, the mediation, the mediator (curators). In this sense, the organizational changes at MACBA coinciding with the appointment of the new director, Elvira Dyangani Ose, comes as no surprise. The problem of governance of cultural institutions was revealed in all its crudeness when the museum manager notified by ‘burofax’ the Chief Curator, Tanya Barson, and the Head of Public Programmes, Martínez himself, of their immediate termination as a result of a proposed change in the museum’s organization. All this was done through a unilateral, hierarchical and opaque process without having been agreed with the museum workers through their representative bodies.

In the same way, it is the duty of these administrations to ensure the rights of cultural workers and the mission of the museum, which appears on its own website, and that among other things promotes ‘the construction of a freer society with a critical spirit.’ This supposes a commitment to models where the management, the administration of the accounts and the bureaucracy, is subject to a direction of a museum ‘public, inhabited, diverse, inclusive, close, accessible, transforming and transcendent’, as stated after the appointment of the new director, but these substantial changes to the operation of the institution were hidden from the media and public opinion and that, on the other hand, seriously compromises the development of Dyangani’s project or that of any other director.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Martínez, ‘Notes for a Museum Yet-to-Come’.

³⁷⁵ MACBA to come < <https://www.macbaporvenir.org/en/comunicado-english/> > [accessed on 20 March 2022].

The incident prompted two other museum collaborators to resign, Yayo Herrero and Marina Garcés, the two philosophers this thesis embraces to position the argument, who issued a statement describing the departures of the directorship of Independent Studies Programme (PEI) as ‘a sad step that once again shows no consideration for staff and students’.³⁷⁶

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In the final chapter, where the biennial ‘Myths of the Near Future’ is discussed as a case study, I conclude by proposing ‘thinking for’ caring instead of ‘thinking from’ a critique of a traditional epistemology of care, one that defines and justifies legitimate grounds for knowledge. Drawing on Puig de la Bellacasa’s position, I argue that ‘thinking for’ contributes to the field of curating and the curatorial by acknowledging the connection between theoretical insights and collective practical politics as performative life thinking.

In addition, this chapter is built from previous positions of ‘thinking with’ and ‘dissenting within’. On the one hand, it encompasses the processes of historicisation and collaboration inherent to practices challenging representational regimes by means of editing, as outlined earlier in this thesis. On the other hand, it questions the oftentimes undisputed curatorial framework by means of storytelling. Together, these epistemic tools contribute to the foundation of ‘the *curatela*’ as an ecology of practices, understood as an exercise of institutional imagination, towards an unhurried politics of attention in post-representational curatorial practices.

The point of departure for the biennial was the idea of an island as a site. According to Deleuze, the fact that many geographers have indicated that there are only two types of islands (continental or oceanic) explains how science attempts to shape mythology and, at the same time, how mythology puts science to work with words.³⁷⁷ The idea of an island is subject to the conditions that make it possible as a story. J.G. Ballard’s ‘Having a Wonderful Time’, from his book *Myths of the Near Future*, was the biennial’s story.

This chapter argues that there is a double movement that happens when arriving on an island – both centripetal and repellent. A kind of magnetic force makes the island a radical milieu. Recognising the first separation in which one moves away, separating from one’s everyday, becomes visible through the manifestation of a connection. Yet, imagining a new setting is often envisioned as a *tabula rasa*, which tends to be a false promise that assures that all the conditions marking the separation as a necessity will be remediated.

At this point in the thesis, however, there is no need to emphasise that there is no such thing as a blank slate. If the nature/culture split has to do with the difficulty of inhabiting the

³⁷⁶ ‘Marina Garcés abandona el MACBA’, see < <https://elpais.com/espana/catalunya/2021-07-21/marina-garces-abandona-el-macba.html> > [accessed on 20 March 2022].

³⁷⁷ See ‘A Desert Island. Against *tabula rasa*’, p. 118.

contradictions of the world, as Adam Kaasa writes, 'Myths of the Near Future' embraces the muddle.

Therefore, this chapter also introduces the peculiar historical-cultural character of a determined and territorially rooted idiosyncrasy, challenging representational regimes. Site-specificity, mobility and tourism are inherent to the conception of the Canarian milieu. These islands have been instrumental in the construction of the emancipatory utopias of the past century – Otto Muehl's commune is just one example.

Conquered and rediscovered in the times of Columbus, inhabited by aborigines, these islands have a unique relation with nationalism and colonialism. Mobility is always historically specific and formally expressed, whereas the movement of bodies and capital shaped by technologies of mediation are part of an entanglement in which art is imbricated. Curated by artist César Manrique, the artwork-island that is Lanzarote is a clear example of this statement. As a themed circuit, Lanzarote was designed to satisfy the tourist desire for authenticity, transcendental art and nature. The fact that there are no billboards anywhere, to avoid turning the landscape into a 'vulgar illustrated magazine', is yet another aspect.

I learned about these insular narratives by editing a particular issue of *Concreta*, which led me to initiate a series of books about the subject matter. From the editorial to the curatorial, I travelled to Tenerife and, in doing so, understood that it is not the island that is separated from the mainland, but that I am the one who defines the critical distance from a saturated world with my own body. For Dean MacCannell, tourism aims for authentic experiences and understanding authenticity as a rhetorical effect is fuelled by the perception of the inauthenticity of our daily lives. Yet, this was not the reason why I ended up in the Canary Islands.

'Myths of the Near Future' was the first edition of the Fotonoviembre biennial with a woman at the helm, with which other women would soon align themselves. Together we approached and caress the complex and urgent question of *representation* in a semiotic sense – because signifier and signified (or container and content) are interconnected. All in all, we aimed to contribute to generating a theoretical framework in its etymological sense, as an abstract speculative practice. This framework was instrumental for the development of this thesis.

The biennial is based around photography and as such enters the narratives of global art production, which, as the chapter argues, are criticised for increasing aesthetic homogenisation as well as the dialogic limitations of engaging with local and situated practices. For many curators who have been involved with exhibitionary projects of a similar nature, however, these long-lasting arguments are not necessarily aligned with reality. 'Reality is an active verb', Haraway often states, but globalisation means many things to many different people, and this biennial was certainly a small part of this narrative.³⁷⁸ Yet, the 'lure of the local' has always existed one way or another. For over five decades now,

³⁷⁸ Haraway cited in De la Bellacasa, 'Pensar con cuidado'.

research has continued to attempt to overcome the binary opposites that sustain, in a very simplistic manner, the notion of ‘difference’ and the critique of who speaks and from where – that is, the place of enunciation.

The event put forward the paradox of *representation* as a place from which to share worlds, obligations and remediations of our senses, governed by the means of our milieu. In the same way that the museum and tourism have traditionally fulfilled similar illusory functions of ordering, the desires for an authentic life and the devices that convey them – cameras, mobiles, networks – have defined our medial condition. I argue in this thesis that the indexical and semiotic nature of the image could shed some light on this condition in which the practice of *curating* – that great, suspended conversation within the context of Spain – had much to contribute to the question of authenticity, among other things. The contemporary, intrinsically mediated condition is therefore a curatorial condition.

Artists participating in the biennial were interested in dialoguing beyond the discipline and with unchallenged forms of display. They highlighted the need to embrace a festival format that transcended its capacity as a tourist attraction rooted in the enthusiasms of the 1990s, as presented by ‘Across the Sand’ – in that period full of promises of progress and growth that was called the ‘second Spanish transition’.³⁷⁹

Precisely by discussing the emergence of frameworks from which to confront otherness, this thesis ultimately argues that both the ontology of curating and the ontology of photography provide us with unique lenses from which to advance the argument on post-representation. They are linked to the ways in which human beings exist – look, speak, act – with each other and with objects, while at the same time, like in Cura’s situation of double inferiority, these ontologies operate as referents of those same speech acts, of the gaze and the actions of others.

The semiotic ontology of photography and that of curating are not that different when it comes to tackling the broadening of the art experience. My argument is that both ontologies frame an encounter in the contact zone and aspire to generate an imprint. The biennial’s aspiration to leave an imprint was about the possibility of initiating a conversation on how to ‘institute with care’ in order to advance a museum that could be understood as an ‘ecosystem’ pointing towards the Global South. Curating is a sensual practice of creating signification and the act of keeping a question alive between audience and work, the energy of retaining a curious sense of fun. Curiosity is about care, trouble, cleanliness. It demands our attention because our rhythm is intervened in: it slows down our bodies. Curiosity and attention define what we call the ‘photographic eye’ and like the practice of curating, photography is nothing more than a fleeting event between shutter and eyelid in which an imprint that requires another presence is created in the ‘contact zone’.

³⁷⁹ See ‘Editing Spaces Beyond the Mirror. How Words World Worlds’, p. 75.

To create a connection of theoretical insights and collective practical politics in order to ‘think for’ or ‘the *curatela*’, I propose to develop an unhurried politics of attention that attempts to address everyone’s abilities and needs in order to make sure they are provided for and balanced, where resources are fairly distributed and the interdependence between human and more-than-human beings that compose them – workers, audiences and art – is acknowledged. Thinking for an unhurried politics of attention is being aware that the economy as a public sphere is where values are disputed. Therefore, rehearsing what Pierre Clastres defines as a ‘poetic economy’ requires us to be able to operate under the same conditions with equal opportunities.³⁸⁰ The principle of equivalence is ‘good for nothing – good for everything’, and could contribute to an undermining of the productivist and extractivist value system distorting the processes of historicisation and collaboration.

Despite being a denunciation of instrumental rationality, this ‘poetic economy’ does not fall within the genealogy of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, since it is defined as an economy that creates links and tides, joining distant points, creating the conditions for an unnamed ‘territorial intimacy’.³⁸¹ In other words, our aim was to create an environment, a medium, a milieu that, rather than reducing the enigmas of tangled bodies and their images, rebelled and exalted in their postures, gestures, attitudes and movements. An ecology of research and (un)learning defines an affective community – one that finds a crucial resource for social reproduction and transnational, transdisciplinary collaboration in friendship.

The overarching question to consider was how to address *care* as a constituent part of a praxis set in a framework of interdependence, but also alongside the inevitable processes of civil mediation towards the common within the contemporary condition.

Paying attention is not so much a skill as an art that is learned and cultivated. It does not refer to what is a priori worthy of being attended to, but rather what forces us to imagine, to consult, to face consequences that put our ways of being in the world at stake. Attention requires knowing how to resist the temptation to judge; it requires proposing new questions to think together. ‘When it comes to caring, suspending action, questioning an idea with its consequences, it is, indeed, a question of discerning, that is, of evaluating without judging, without criteria that guarantee a judgement’.³⁸²

Susan Sontag already warned us about this in the 1970s, when she claimed that ‘Photography [was] in Search of Itself’ without realising that the challenge was, in contrast, to escape the overwhelming force of its canon.³⁸³ Yet, in the same way that Sontag warned her readers about the perils of canonisation, this thesis could lead to similar results when it comes to curating.

³⁸⁰ Chevrier, ‘Intimidad territorial y espacio público’.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times Resisting the Coming Barbarism*.

³⁸³ Sontag, ‘Photography in Search of Itself’.

For this reason, ‘the *curatela*’ neither represents nor replaces, but rather accompanies, cares for and expands capacities. ‘The *curatela*’ is a precarious balancing act and a metaphor that displaces the protectionist, tutelary functions inherited from another tentative model. ‘The *curatela*’ attempts to change the focus of attention and renegotiate the frameworks from which we think and act. Negotiating policies of a remediating nature beyond the well-intentioned rhetoric of the institution, I conclude, is a must.

This proposition brings affective positions closer to what Latour and Stengers calls the ‘middle ground’, between the firm grounds on which knowledge is established as the construction of a truth or epistemology, and the quicksand, the unreliable base for mediation. ‘The *curatela*’ entails an inescapable tactful condition to reach an agreement in times of trouble, urging us to stay with it and question the contradictions that surround and suffocate us.





Societat Doctor Alonso, 'Myths of the Near Future: ContraKant', TEA-Tenerife Espacio de las Artes (2020). Twelve metres of braided rope were used as a mobile frame to reframe fragments of reality in the museum and its outskirts. These performative frames, randomly and silently proposed by the workshop participants, allow us to sustain attention and challenge our prior assumptions regarding space and time. The moving frame operated as an interval or degree zero of the gaze. Photos: Cine por venir and Ziomara Roja.





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