



On the structures of art and art itself

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Contemporary art is continually re-examining itself, incorporating as it does a critical gaze enabling the evolution of a sector that needs to understand the present time in order to question it and offer possible responses, viewpoints and options to it, going beyond those that can be considered *a priori*.

Analysing structural models and possible forms of production, presentation and distribution forms part of a routine working procedure that opens up a field wider than can be found in other sectors. Needless to say, discussion of structural models need not imply an absence of dialogue about content, about artworks, about the creative act itself.

Contemporary art is creation in present time. It responds to, questions and is contextualised by the present, and it is for this reason that it needs to find channels enabling rapid communication with society, in order both to interpret it and to intervene in it. Clearly, contemporary art continues to be a space in which there is a certain freedom, possibly due to the fact that it is seen as something with a rather negligible effect on social reality. However, we can also say that it is a necessary laboratory for testing elements, attitudes, systems or aspirations that may be useful for social development. We need to forge links to enable this field test work to have a real effect on things.

Laboratories generally operate outside ethical restrictions. Scientific laboratory experiments can take behaviour and substances to the limit, as the “results” obtained from them will be used, not at the time of testing, but at a possible future time that may be improved (or not) by the practical application of what was tried out earlier in the laboratory environment. It is not exactly the same in contemporary art. The laboratory is in present time, the discussion that takes place is about real elements and, even though future applications may emerge (we might think, for example, of the field of education) art is far from a romantic model (or, for that matter, from being a classical model) of distance, bohemia or superiority, and awareness of durability fades in importance before the need to adapt to the context in which they appear.

Understanding artistic practice as a laboratory implies changing our very idea of a laboratory. Research is launched, but not with the aim of achieving a single result. There is no technology to apply nor any logically structured process. We will find a different way of understanding the laboratory on each different occasion. Procedural codes are not

established externally (as in a science laboratory, where what has to be done is well known to all); rather, the process for action is laid down by either the situation itself or according to the artist's wish. The way the process itself is explained, the decisions that are adopted and the final form taken by the project will also be unique to each different occasion.

Our laboratory will also contain much more than those used by scientists. Users will be an important factor, one that serves to bring in other viewpoints. The laboratory will go beyond its pre-defined margins to become present at different moments and in different situations and structures. This broader definition of the laboratory also implies rethinking how we understand artistic production and presentation. We start from the idea that each creative process will be different, that the rhythm, the possible conclusion, the degree of interaction with the user, the need or lack of need for a physical space, the search for objectualisation or the ephemeral, the need for visibility, to suggest just a few examples, will be different. There are no unitary products. In fact, it is hard to talk of products when we are faced by processes and experiences, exchanges and the establishment of platforms for dialogue.

The laboratory serves us as a metaphor for testing, for the testing ground and for the reliability of this testing. But we are in a non-binary situation (nothing is black and white) and everything must be received with a high degree of acceptance. The possibility of experience and emotion will not be defined in usual ways. The art laboratory is not that of the commercial cinema. There we also find rules and methods with more than a century behind them. In the cinema, the laboratory served to define a language, whilst in art, the laboratory serves to negate the idea of a single language, to open up all possibilities and then to accept the questioning of anyone who wants to take up a position, react, analyse, criticise or refuse what they are offered.

But the laboratory continues to be unreal. It continues to be a secure test field. Do we want this security? The security of supposed distance from reality is eliminated when constant reconsideration arouses doubt about what is being done. We are witnessing an evolutionary process in which we are constantly going back to start from scratch once more. We learn, but often need to return to primary experience. The sum of experiences makes it possible to generate an opinion, makes it possible for this opinion to reinforce the critical viewpoint towards art and, on a secondary level, for this critical viewpoint to be applied not just in the art sector, but also in society as a global concept.

In this intangible laboratory, with its uncertain results, its experiments that are so difficult to translate into established languages, we are confronted by a system that needs to find connections with reality. A system for presentation that must be preceded by or run parallel to a production structure. Production of meaning, basically. A meaning that will, however, take different forms. In speaking of this unstable laboratory, we need to remember that the structures supporting it must also be malleable, able

to constantly adapt to different ways of going about things, to unexpected situations. There exists the possibility that the support structures may finally end up defining the ways of going about things, but then we must accept their temporary nature. A way of going about things is no longer effective once the connection with reality is not that we seek, once it ceases to generate doubts and possibilities with regard to a reality around us.

These support systems must also be permeable, fostering the contact that art seeks and that society, perhaps without knowing it, needs. Traditionally, official systems of artistic presentation placed art outside society: the security inside the museum, the internal narrative of the collection, the creation of a personal history...

The leap towards reality, as an immediate response to this situation, has led, in some cases, to the invisibility of the artistic factor, to a lowering of levels (and it has been seen *a posteriori* that the attitude perhaps continued to be the same). It is not necessary to renege on the phenomenon of art; we must accept that it needs its own turf, just as the cinema, the discotheque, sport, etc, occupy their own ground. Art institutions have no reason to be negative *per se*. The structures peculiar to contemporary art may be effective if seen as what they must be: a space to facilitate content production, in which to present this production of content in such a way as to generate dialogue with the surrounding reality and a channel to distribute this content and dialogue.

We are speaking, then, of production, presentation and distribution structures.

Production, accepting the difficulty the term encapsulates and, once more, broadening its meaning (as we saw previously with the idea of the laboratory) to take it beyond the defining framework of consumer society. Production, then, is the creation of doubts, of processes that are necessary to offer connections outside the usual discourse. Production understood as a sequence in time that must be professionalized. Pursuit of results is not the only way of understanding production; production ceases to be a unique possibility, neither will the producer respond to predefined criteria. Once more, he or she is not the scientist in the laboratory. The hard part lies in the need to select what productions can go ahead. Precariousness makes impossible an ideal situation, one in which all production is possible, and it would be a very different setup in which one would see the feasibility of its presentation or distribution. We need, therefore, to foresee what possibilities for connection possible productions will have. The production of meaning is found in individual agents, but also in group work, in communication and in the gradual construction of something whose finished state we do not know beforehand.

Presentation, a concept whose meaning must also be broadened. If it is necessary to find more systems than the exhibition it is because other

aspirations exist. The exhibition works well as a platform for presentation, and adapts to different needs. The exhibition offers certain content to certain users, it is in itself a language that cannot be replaced by written, oral or documentary language (to give just a few examples). It offers a present time to those users who decide to activate it. However, the exhibition, in itself, does not offer a dialogue in this same present time. The exhibition, as a format, establishes certain starting points whose evolution we can bring about. At the same time, it would appear necessary to articulate other systems in which the user enjoys greater capacity for action, which offer a horizontal dialogue and which equate presentation and the production of meaning. The very idea of production is pushed into crisis by this dynamic but, as we have seen, such questioning is required in order to define art and its structures. The production of meaning may take the framework of presentation as one of its working spaces, understanding that it is this type of production that cannot be stopped, reacting constantly to new elements that enter into play, such as, in this case, presentation.

Distribution democratises the previous process. Production and its presentation are not then reduced to a minor circle, but open up to other spaces, contexts and situations in order to be visited, questioned and broadened. Production and presentation are found at a first step, we can place them parallel to one another, within the same time sequence, whilst distribution should be made the next step, one that justifies the previous process. Distribution may oblige changes to be made to the formats used in presentation, as well as the adaptation of production, but we must understand this work *a posteriori* on the same level as the other two, as the overall meaning is greatly broadened. At the same time, we should remember that this distribution will not always be necessary, as certain productions and presentations are framed within a specific context. And this is also a necessity.

The presence of networks is made more than evident by the idea of distribution. However this may be, though, the structure of the network is not only found in distribution, for the connections provided by a network are also necessary in production and in presentation. A network is information shared by different hubs. It can also be a way of understanding each hub in relation to the others. In this way, it is made particular, not to avert any possible competition, but in order to seek improved effectiveness and the capacity to share processes, doubts and research. It is not a question of unifying, but of establishing real connections and effective information flow. The network also serves to economise on resources, as its use can be shared. The network takes as its starting point the need to share information, in the understanding that information does not come under one particular ownership. Clearly, there are processes and situations that require a certain opaqueness, but not for this reason do they fall outside a constructive system based on trust.

In any case, speaking of networks, we cannot ignore the fact that there must exist different, juxtaposed networks, with different time schemes,

visibility and objectives. On the one hand, we have the institutional network, its rhythm defined by the political establishment, on the other what we might call a network independent of the political rhythm, but not independent of what occurs in society. Contacts between the different networks are necessary to determine the extent to which each is adapted to reality. It is possible to see whether the work performed over time is valid through such contact, through comparison and by gauging their capacity for reaction.

The fact that different networks exist and that they also work at different rhythms ensures that artistic work cannot be reduced to the dynamic laid down by one particular network. When varied possibilities clearly exist, there is no reason for work to be corseted by procedures defined by others. When ample structural resources, networks, tools for distribution, presentation and production exist, when working processes and their dynamic are understood according to professional criteria, when the connection with reality is effective, direct and based, too, on permeability; this is when artistic creation can find release from its structural problems. It is then that artistic freedom enables us once more to consider where we are, who we are, what need there is for everything, based on a necessary questioning that enables us to evolve through experience, feelings and codes that we first decipher then encrypt once more. Surprisingly (or not) it is the same thing that happens when the situation is not what we would define as ideal.