

Dislocated Spaces: El Ojo Atómico, An Antimuseum of Contemporary Art

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As you all know, the title for this round table is *Dislocated Spaces*, and I have to say that I identify closely with the subject, because for more than a decade, my life has been inextricably linked to a space that is not only dislocated—in other words, out of place, in an awkward relationship with the world—but which also has the sinister plan of dislocating others. It goes without saying that to me, the *raison d'être* of an alternative space like Ojo Atómico can only be to produce a dislocation in the art system and a disarticulation of its internal and external structures, in order—ideally—to attain a redefinition of itself and all its terminology.

But before attempting a description of what Ojo Atómico is and has been, I would like to be clear about one thing: we usually assume that an alternative space is an alternative for the artist. In other words, it offers an alternative in terms of production and diffusion to those artists whose work falls outside—or dislocates, as in the title of this round table—the expositive setting of the gallery and the museum. In this sense, the alternative space offers the creator a context that is both physical and critical-discursive in which to develop his or her work, outside—whether above, beneath or beside—market demands and institutional censorship.

Nevertheless, I think that these days we should envisage a space that is an alternative for the public. In other words, a space that offers that complex social entity we call a *public* a physical, discursive and political context in which to come together and have access to cultural experiences in a fashion that is at the very least different from the one imposed by the hegemonic art system, on both a local and a global scale. A space where the very constitution of the public as a social form emerges *from or around* antagonistic discourses.

When I founded Ojo Atómico in 1993, the project followed the first model: i.e., the artists' creative needs took precedence over other considerations. The context was particularly difficult: the market collapse in the 1980s combined with the institutional paralysis that had followed the Olympics and Expo 1992 in Spain, in an art system generated by the ARCO fair, which excluded anything that did not conform to the Spanish market's limited range of interests. The program focused on site-specific interventions in a large industrial building, so that artists could experiment with languages and formats that had never been seen before in Spain. The program's profile was also local and generational. The project articulated the notion of a *Shadow Zone*—a social and cultural space that was semi-independent and semi-hidden from the local art system, where optimum working conditions could be created. Though this caused difficulties for certain artists seeking visibility above all, my argument was precisely that visibility

in such a corrupt system would necessarily have a negative effect on the work, given that the work does not exist independently of the world. To have meaning, it has to be located in a discursive and institutional space, within history and within society. That is where the relationship with the subject is produced, and if this space is distorted, everything will become distorted. The great Polish writer Gombrovič stated that to a large extent, man depends on his reflection in another person's soul, even if that other person is a cretin. As a result, it was necessary to create a parallel subsystem that would be interdependent but follow its own rules. And this is an opinion that I maintain to this day insofar as my country is concerned.

I believe it was during my time in Mexico between 1997 and 2000—the years leading up to Mexican art's explosion onto the international art scene—that I began to shift my attention from art production to the formation of publics. In 1998, I was working very closely with La Panadería, and its influence was immediately evident because it was a place where discourses of high and low culture and their respective publics intermingled in an exemplary fashion. That year, I worked on two projects: on the one hand I was the curator of the exhibition *Domestic*, which involved interventions in nine residences in the Condesa district, bringing the work and the public to a very specific context in which the relationship between subject and object was transformed and acquired new interpretations. On the other hand, I applied for the Rockefeller foundation fellowship for the La Panadería program, and had the opportunity to make an in-depth study of its history and of the intermingling I mentioned earlier. I based my application on those two studies, and eventually it was awarded to me.

Consequently, when María Acha and I reopened Ojo Atómico in 2003, our premise was very different from the original one. The project was still local, because an alternative project must be deeply rooted in its social and historic reality, and on that level, it had to respond to two specific questions: ARCO's centrality to the Spanish art system, and the compulsive construction of museums—more than twenty-five over five years—following the media and public success of the Guggenheim franchise. Now the term *antimuseum* has emerged, in opposition to this type of institution where the container—the building—is the most important element, and the programs and collections are either totally lacking in meaning or claim to emerge from the most central part of the mainstream, ignoring their peripheral condition. This is the case of MUSAC, for instance.

Returning to our basic premises: at this point in time, our exhibition program is international, and the set of problems we deal with exist within a very broad critical current regarding the institution of the museum, the crisis in the public sphere, the loss of cultural autonomy, or what would entail the implantation of post-Fordist production systems for contemporary art. To sum up, I'm going to cite a text by Jorge Ribalta that precisely expresses our point of departure: "We cannot maintain a conception of the cultural sphere that is based on the critique of instrumental reason, given that nowadays,

subjectivity itself is immersed in the processes of capitalism. We need other discourses to defend the specificity of art and culture, beyond the classic modern paradigm against instrumental reason. [...] As such, the heart of the issue consists of finding alternative methods and discourses that are truly significant and emancipating."

In this panorama, where the public sphere is more of a forum for publicity than a scenario for critical-rational debate, as Craig Calhoun has stated, the museum institution—which in its time was so important to the definition of the new bourgeois political subject and the formation of its public sphere—is effectively faced with a degradation. It is assimilated into the leisure industry, where the public's creative energy and capacity for critical-rational debate are channeled into sophisticated forms of consumption integrated into those post-Fordist production processes, resulting in the loss of something that has been unique to culture throughout the modern age: antagonism.

Simon Sheikh is one of the most interesting theoreticians of the current European progressive scene, and has stated that, "Such matters are crucial to contemporary art institutions, whether they are progressive or regressive in their manner of understanding themselves or seeing others, both inside and outside of the art world, given that art institutions are in fact the intermediary, interlocutor, translator and meeting place between art production and its 'public.' I deliberately use the term 'public' here without qualifying or quantifying it, because it is precisely the definition and constitution of this 'public' as an audience, community, demarcation or potentiality that should be the job of so-called progressive institutions: a place that is always becoming a place, a public sphere."

In recent years, my experience with Ojo Atómico or Antimuseum of Contemporary Art has been productive in that sense. There have been two projects in particular which perfectly exemplify the theories I am advancing here. The first was *How Do You Envision Your Plaza?*, in which we collaborated with different associations and networks from the La Prosperidad district of Madrid in a movement to preserve the square of the same name as a social space, and the second was *Mass Grave*, a video installation on the people who went missing during the Franco regime, a collaboration with the Association for the Recovery of Historic Memory. Briefly, the common factor in both exhibitions was the transformation of the Antimuseum's public. In both cases, the typical public in a space such as this—young artists, individuals involved in the art world or progressive subcultures—was reduced to leave room for people who are not in the habit of consuming art in any form, of all ages, low to middle levels of education, who participated in an event whose political and cultural dimensions they understood perfectly, with no need to *correctly* interpret the codes of contemporary art.

As compared to regressive types of experiences, which imply a hierarchical collaboration with a community, the collectives involved here (residents of the city district in question, the families of the disappeared) did not act as the project's object, becoming objectified for their consumption as high culture by a specialized public.

Rather, they played a central role as the public itself. More accurately, as the contra-public, because due to that *lack of correction* when interpreting codes, there is a dislocation of the art institution's structure, thus producing a social space that is effectively different from that formed by the art public, both general and specialized—in other words, the abstract notion of the whole of society as a participant in specific cultural or consumer practices, practices which are the object of our criticism.

Based on these reflections, we ended up proposing a different program model in 2007, in which the traditional exhibition format is replaced by lines of investigation in specific fields, in which civil organizations and specialists in various fields can participate. In doing so, we hope to accentuate *dislocation*—to continue to use the term proposed by Ivo Mesquita—in the most basic aspects such as an art show's temporary nature, with its characteristic peaks and slumps in attendance, as well as in deeper questions of the organization of knowledge and the self-representation of hegemonic discourses.

In such lines of investigation, there will never be a final moment, a climax, where the result of the work can be seen. Moreover, different social, political, scientific or educational practices will take place alongside that which we conventionally understand to be artistic.

For example, the exhibition *How Do You Envision Your Plaza?* will give rise to a line of investigation on the city, in which we will emphasize the social and urban make-up of the district of La Prosperidad, but also general topics or specific issues arising from such paradigmatic cities as Mexico City. In addition to our collaboration with the residents' association, RED Prosperidad (a forum where neighborhood problems are discussed and movements are initiated), immigrant associations or the local Communist Party cell, we will also seek the participation of architects who take a progressive approach to this subject, such as Santiago Cirugeda or the Madrid collective Área Ciega; artists that deal specifically with the urban theme, such as Eric Göngrich or Projekt Gruppe; or groups such as the primary school art teachers' association Enterarte, and so forth.

The results will be seen in time, but for now, I invite you to follow the progress of this project on our web page www.ojoatomico.com and to participate if you have the chance.

Thank you.

Translated by Michelle Suderman.

Saturday September 2nd

Panel V

Public and Private

Art and Money:

Scenes from a Mixed Marriage

Walter Grasskamp

(Professor, Fine Arts Academy, Munich)

The Pertinence of Dialogue

Ery Camara (Curator, Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso Museum, Mexico City)

Rina Carvajal (Director, Miami Art Central, USA)

(Lecture not available)

"...these days I'm feeling very confused"

Corinne Diserens

(Independent Curator, France)

Tension and Irony Between the Public and the Private:

Contemporary Art Museums Today

Francisco López Ruiz (Art Department Director,

Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City)