
The Feminine Art School

I'm shy about what I'm going to tell you: I believe the only way to 'challenge' an art school today is to change everything so that it becomes 'feminine'. This came to me as a revelation, so I'm still thinking about what it might mean. It is about a transformation of the learning process, but not a feminist one. It is not about introducing a quota, or claiming a certain discourse/ideology, even if my idea of the 'feminine' school includes a large number of women who teach and learn. Many artists I know — women — share the concern about the incapacity of our institutions and our institutionalised artists and curators to surpass the structures and the language used to express social, aesthetic, and technological change. Convinced and unconvinced at the same time that a revolution against the post-Fordist-male-capitalist order is possible, we all reunite our voices, incite our critical thinking, and turn our minds towards an awareness that will be embodied in an eternal denouncement of all inequalities. I fail to see this 'method' as helping women get to the place they deserve to be — because the logic and language that have historically developed to promote leadership in small groups of interests depends on money, and women do not "move" enough money to have significant relevance in the capitalist contra.

This is not a lament; it is a call for different logics and discourses that may be more open, or at least more able, because these have not yet taken the form, or reached the mature state, to be able to introduce a mind that contests, which could construct a realm of roads for all of us to follow. I mean 'all of us' because I believe what is good for women is great for men, but not vice versa. I know the notion of the 'feminine' might make you shiver. It is the last thing I want to be or to become, a result of my feeling that men, the system, institutions, parents even, desired me to become, and once I did, I was reduced — like police reduce their suspects — and placed in a spot that was small and local and full of others like me and not large and bright like the spacious universes that men have concocted for them to inhabit. I am only now discovering that the force of the notion 'feminine' is to name a way to sense the question of experience from a completely different angle.

Why do I want a 'feminine' school? Because the 'feminine' is another name for attributes, and I believe education is the word we use for acquiring traits. Traits that not only modify behaviour but also the experience of behaviour. Traits are also the visible markers of what we may or may not have in common; they represent the possibility of communality or radical impossibility. As much as I can envision a 'feminine' school of art, I foresee that not many would like to embark on this. This may be a good thing because it means we have to quickly

learn to advertise other traits that are better than the ones the 'feminine' represents. The school of masters, the school of media, the creative school, the school of interdisciplinary matters: all these simply represent a will to expand the possibilities, but they, however, follow the old script of art practice and worse, the idea that art practitioners are all the same type of people with a few exceptions. When these exceptions become the norm, even if only in small numbers, their traits must be introduced into the DNA of our understanding of art practice.

It is fundamental to see that the way we educate students of art is wrong, and I'm not talking only about women. To put it like that is simplistic, but simplicity might help us produce an image that can further articulate more complex arguments. The feminine school is and has always been about gender, and I would extend that to race too. I'd also like to introduce the idea of religion but it is far too complex to argue at this point why I think it can be positive to address the question of belief, a fundamental question in the history of art that manifests itself in many important ways, and that still determines the values we think we need to defend. Of course, a feminine school today — one that makes you 'see' gender and race, that makes you feel it and sense it as the core material of art's interaction with the social, with the senses, with capital and other forms of production — is about much more than the manners of gender identity. We've been taught many manners, and they do not work. Quotas are manners, ways of good public behaviour that ignore the changes below the surface. Our current democratic systems are sick with these tics, which cohabit far too well with the rise of the ruthless, with the fascists who we see more and more in every country of Europe.

This feminine school is not a delicate programme. An urgent matter that has been expressed many times before but which has never taken place; it is a different type of understanding of all the principles that we defend. And once we live them, we do not need to thematise or defend them anymore. It is difficult to do but we've known how to do it already for a very long time. Referencing differently, reading differently, collaborating differently, scaling differently, addressing matter differently, presenting work differently, using the terms differently... Differently is not synonymous with critically. The feminine makes no point to thematise gender, and to conflate it with race is uncomfortable. It irritates the whole social tissue and transforms the very ideas of experience, taste, and value that we've historically inherited from art. Not because of how we talk about it but because of what we do not know about it.

I could have used a different notion, but I think the feminine represents a challenge. Everyone seems to know what it means, yet its historical significance is emptied out today. It is this emptied notion that we can occupy. We can reload it with a debate about what the questions are that constitute art's ambition today.

Questions surrounding politics, the social, identity, as well as the blunt servers of the market actually fall short of challenging how gender functions in our world. The fact that women still do not play an essential role in the governance of our societies is not "merely a question of time." It is a question of the system, a system that one day may not depend on the logic of either/or but that may instead resist this logic. We are very far from this kind of revolution. All of our political ideas and images depend so much on the Platonic logic of reversal and on the more recent Foucauldian socio-political affirmations of agency. Therefore, to claim that we should create a feminine art school is to claim a "will to power;"

to use Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of the notion coined by Friedrich Nietzsche: to be able to name those elements that are genealogical in the different forces that participate in producing a feeling of increased strength and fullness. In other words, we can say that feminine forces — excluded from all modern and capitalist definitions of power, leadership, and even sexuality — are the traits that we need to deepen in order to gain an unprecedented meaning, pushing the “main features” of a traditional understanding of art and the role gender plays in it to the fore.

In this process of becoming a woman, art and art practice will be able to discover not only new words, new notions of experience, but also new relationships to science and technology. It might all seem radical or impossible, but that's only because we — men and women — are still closed off from the true process of transgenering not only our bodies, but also our notions of knowledge, culture and time.

This might be read as fantasy, or just an irritating speculation about a transformation that has at its core ideas of gender far too wild for you to see how it can all be applied. I believe in the importance of art, but not because it provides our society with different experiences, especially since we aren't able to name the strength of such an experience. The strength is in the knowledge that art has been accumulating a gender by and of itself; art is not merely a locus or a place to talk about or thematise a subject-matter. Art is a gender that has been accumulating an incredible knowledge about a type of making that is different from labour. Art is a gender that has been approaching the form and structure of ignorance just as much as it has been contributing to the conditions of knowledge. Art is a gender that is permanently distracted, and from this, it gains a complex understanding of how intelligence functions. Art is an innocent gender that enables rigour. It is innocent because it is inseparable from the particular and identifiable entities that we call the real, yet it always remains a non-identifiable element that allows for identification and interpretation.

Labour

Over the last decade, I have spent a fair amount of time thinking and talking about labour. In the early years of democracy in Spain, labour structured the possibility of imagining art and artmaking as not only a way to pivot between conceptual premises, allowing the maker and the viewer to reach another conception of taste, but also to gain relevance by surpassing existing language. Art is a reflection of the conditions that make life, a working life, possible. A working life means a life determined by production, subject to the power relations of capital and its logic in the aftermath of a de-industrialised world, which keeps on growing and expanding the same logic all over, inch by inch. Labour names a life that needs to do in order to be able to survive. Labour is repetitious and, like prayer, a practice that legitimises the existence of those who labour. Art is also now trying to be part of this legitimisation of machine of labour. This, after centuries of apparent exclusion, and suffering from that feeling of being a class without the burdens of payroll conditions. A fiction, since artists have always tested the limits of labour... However, the revolution of conceptualism lays in its linking not only seeing with thinking, but also doing with a more regulated form of making.

Procrastination

The first stage of my thinking on writing and making was procrastination. True, one of my most admired friends, the writer Enrique Vila-Matas, has dedicated a large part of his oeuvre to the subject. He wrote a beautiful novel about it in the year 2000: *Bartleby y compañía* (Anagrama), translated four years later by Jonathan Dunne as *Bartleby & Co* (New Directions). Another friend, the poet Kenneth Goldsmith, has been rehearsing the matter of procrastination and our relation to the internet. Procrastination has a bad reputation. It mirrors the good traits of labour in a negative way. However, in seeing the rise of a new and fresh interest in research expressed by institutions dealing with art, it seemed just right to introduce the enemy notion as a way of producing a more complete picture of what artistic research could be or is. A few years ago I wrote¹:

In answering the question “what is reality,” Anton Zeilinger says: “That which we cannot agree on. We need to undertake a thorough reconstruction of the basic concepts that we use every day — reality, time, matter, space, light — so that we can use them to define new situations both inside and outside the laboratory. We live our lives immersed in categories. If we want to use those categories to interrogate reality, just as a lawyer interrogates a witness, we must understand what they mean at each moment. And that’s where philosophy comes in; it is what best explains the historical dramatisation of those categories.”

Artists, like scientists, are pioneers when it comes to creating new forms of connectivity between worlds that seem to have nothing in common. Artists embark on writing novels, conceiving treatises, discovering archives, devising therapies, and choreographing bodies; they set out on the endless study of everything that contributes to different formulations of what we call reality. It would be banal to describe all that as mere play. Rather, we find ourselves before a strange form of research that is charged more than ever with an awareness of the parallel between producing art and understanding the world. Since Marcel Duchamp, and perhaps much earlier — indeed, perhaps forever — art has been eager to house a knowledge different than that of academia, and to provide the ultimate reason for modifying that academic knowledge. Much of contemporary art attempts to develop works and situations that make it possible to read the past freely, to take flight and approach the unknown.

Those words have since been interpreted as a defense of artistic research in an academic context, under an academic form. However, I had also intended to say that in making, a form of inquiry that is closer to procrastination is inscribed, a productive way to activate thinking, a thinking that is loose and needs to stay loose.

Loose

Gregory Bateson wrote somewhere in his 1949 essay *Experiments in Thinking About Observed Ethnological Material*:

I want to emphasise that whenever we pride ourselves upon finding a newer, stricter way of thought or exposition; whenever we start insisting too hard upon “operationalism”

¹ *Clandestine Happiness. What Do We Mean by Artistic Research?* Originally published by the Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) at *INDEX* number 0, Autumn 2010.

or symbolic logic or any other of these very essential systems of tram lines, we lose something of the ability to think new thoughts. And equally, of course, whenever we rebel against the sterile rigidity of formal thought and exposition and let our ideas run wild, we likewise lose. As I see it, the advances in scientific thought come from a combination of loose and strict thinking, and this combination is the most precious tool of science. My mystical view of phenomena contributed specifically to build up this double habit of mind—it led me into wild “hunches” and, at the same time, compelled more formal thinking about those hunches. It encouraged looseness of thought and then immediately insisted that that looseness be measured up against a rigid concreteness. The point is that the first hunch from analogy is wild, and then, the moment I begin to work out the analogy, I am brought up against the rigid formulations which have been devised in the field from which I borrow the analogy.

I started reading Bateson again. When I arrived at the Institut Kunst, I relapsed into my old habit of programming with a discursive coherence. During the years leading up to dOCUMENTA (13), I thought I was cured of piling theories onto making in order to reach a ‘better’ understanding of art. But I was wrong. Faced with the task of reflecting upon the curricula, my first instinct was to identify important material and put it in order. Then I realised my acquired academic idea of order corresponds with neither artistic practice nor the new order introduced by reading as scanning through texts. Also, this kind of reading was there — in the past — not only to present relevant arguments and to teach how thinking thinks, but also to induce similar ways of writing. I have always thought the way certain academic traditions train people to write is a problem, and if there has been a revolution in finding one’s own voice in text it has happened because of texting (emailing as well). Of course, the last thing one should do is to adapt to the new situation and create a customised set of tools for easy learning. Yet this has already been done in the millions of existing textbooks that students of all disciplines need to absorb in no time, which is not that different from wiki-screening the Western canon of references and thinking logics. The task is actually so complex it cannot be strategised. We cannot impose this mission upon ourselves, to find out how to deal with the necessity of challenging the old discourses, without even knowing them, of reading less or in a radical different way, and of acquiring the skills that address in a new language — of words or of matter — core questions about gender comprehension, technology, power structures, and perception/experience in the fields of culture. When I say we cannot, I also say we cannot avoid trying to do so. But if we try hard with our minds, we may just end up becoming lazy and critical of the current situation. Being lazy is just being tight. A tightness I identify not only as a quality of a certain way of obliging thinking to take a direction, to be oriented towards a point on the horizon or just a goal, but also as a way to name a tension that is now more than ever present in our bodies, in our institutions, in our social DNA.

I like the way Gregory Bateson describes the relationship between tightness and looseness. Thinking and working, like the cardiac cycles of contraction and relaxation, on the importance of looseness, of all the impulses and energies that are not directed, planned, or strategised, but lived. Without these energies, thinking — and more importantly, novel thinking — is not possible. Risk-taking is the process of learning how this interplay affects our intelligence, our comprehension of the world.

Art is not the only discipline in which these ideas are constantly present, but it is surely the one that sincerely expresses an interest in undertaking constant research on the future of the possible in relation to experience. We are conditioned to be aware of life more through function and labour than through other aspects like our gender or the place we are in, or our curiosity towards how others live their lives. This is probably why these non-labour parameters are gaining space, because they suggest an understanding of life that cannot be reduced to the same instrumental framework. The tension between the labour-oriented worldview and aspects of life outside of this labour has increased. 'Revolution,' if one may use this term, lies not only in the energy we invest in contesting the 'patron' or the logic of the economy, but also increasingly, in the collective energy we invest in producing new realities that do not adapt easily to the old ones. The revolution of tomorrow will not be in the form of a riot, but in very large numbers of people 'defining' their gender, creating even more complex and intense networks, relating to nature and technology in a more psychological and less tool-like way... To break old habits or create a hole in systems is innovation. It is so radical and novel that it scares us, a little. In order to be ready and to train, art is there.

Innocence

The question of writing is linked to the exercise of criticality. Central to the inquiry into knowledge has always been the principle of scepticism. Unlike ancient scepticism, which was based on the variety of sensible appearances, modern scepticism — at least since Michel de Montaigne and David Hume — has revolved around the status of relations inside understanding: the need not only to understand what passes through understanding but also what forbids understanding by withdrawing sense. Here, a new interest in the non-transparency of language appears, in its incapacity to fulfil the task of expression and communication. And this produces a paradox: the relevance of grasping the reverse of knowledge, and the role played by humour as well as fiction as practitioners of (non)sense. To not only ask how knowledge is produced, but what supports the myth of a language capable of expressing this, is one of the possible tasks of a different way to conceive theory, one in which genres are inextricably mixed with their opposites, where the strong perlocutionary effect of the 'innocence' is ascribed to a strong affect: the need to understand. To inquire into knowledge implies the effort to formulate — through logics and languages that surpass disciplines — how inextricable relations among things, language, matter, form, sense, are possible. It means to account for the terms, the possibilities as well as the circumstances, in which the principles that associate the animate with the inanimate, or objects with memory, or animals with other animals, or seeds with art, or theory with the logics of politics, or poetry with knowledge, occur. And therefore it cannot come as a surprise that imagination is a central principle in the invention of the knowledge that takes place in art — a task that does not mimic an activity of academia, but that, in an excessive and subversive way, produces time and space for it, constituting a new 'culture.'

The main trait of fiction and imagination is their potential failure. They do not serve as solid ground for a speech act; they are an interference in the logic of an intentional assertion of meaning. Art has retained this inversion of the relationship between meaning and saying as a way

to overcome the traps of consciousness, the transcendental principle that rules the modern conception of the individual, that defines the political as an unambiguous text marked by intention of meaning and able to produce and reproduce a very definite sense of empathy. This exercise of accepting the riddle of ambiguity, the constant alteration of the relations between matter and words, time and meaning, defines a research manner that calls for a radical reconsideration of the role of language, of straightforward conceptions of how things interact, as well as the inventory of monologues produced by serious forms of meaning.

And this is how the term innocence comes into play. Innocence is a non-concept; it is a modifier. It denotes the attempt to introduce a difference into the relations that define knowledge, the limits of language and the event of thinking in art. At first sight, it could be mistaken for a noun, indicating disenchantment, a relativist position. Yet soon, positivity creeps back in; innocence is the verbal expression of a movement. It names a tension, a state of imagination aiming toward the potential reorganisation of the structure of the known and those who think they know. The “maybe” is the emblem of attention, a positive form of privation — the privation of certainty, of the statement that forms a conclusion — that introduces not only fiction but a dimension of theatricality, since it puts all elements into play. So rather than a quest for the void, the dance introduced by innocence can be taken as a journey that introduces us into the realm of artistic research as an active reconsideration of certain representations of knowledge in the context of art. By asking “What is the reverse of the known?” the form of inquiry that takes place in art amounts to an intuitive grasp of a philosophical and political problematic that not only defines what culture is but what it may be in the future.

Innocence, yes. It has nothing to do with morality here, but it helps us to get ready to address another very complex and challenging task: the inquiry into the structure of ignorance.

Ignorance

That is where I am now. I think the many multiple and different futures that come from all sides are dependent on us to interpret ignorance and its structure. There is not much I can say about it yet, but the notion does not express a negative nature. Enlightenment, modernity... our culture has invested a great deal in avoiding darkness, in filling the void — ignorance — with knowledge. However, in the future I would like to invest some time trying to see ignorance as a force that has agency, and not only a negative one; as a logic that is alive in science, in computation, in technology. I would like to see ignorance as a force that structures the way we are moving, away from the timeline, the alphabetic code, the certainties acquired through the stability provided by judgements. If there is something an art institution can do, it is allowing us to understand how to trust art in the complex play between ignorance and that something else outside of ignorance. Making art is a radical contribution to a form of experience that long ago abandoned the aesthetic of surprise.