

IMPOSSIBLE GLOSSARY

G O A I
L S R O

Work

I P S B E
M O I L

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*Down to work! Ways of Doing and Activating
within the Social Network*
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What we encounter in many of the projects under discussion here is not a disembodiment of artistic practice, but a process of social interaction mediated by a physical and cognitive co-laboring. Site is understood here as a generative locus of individual and collective identities, actions, and histories, and the unfolding of artistic subjectivity awaits the specific insights generated by this singular coming-together

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Art faculties and colleges are complex communities that do not recognize themselves as such, either from inside or outside these communities. As teachers in the faculty of fine arts at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, we have observed that the role our community plays in society depends on how it identifies with this complexity. When it is acknowledged and fostered, arts universities can extend their activity beyond the walls of their lecture halls and transcend their educational objectives. Our research project “La incorporación de las comunidades artísticas universitarias a las narraciones de la modernidad y del presente” (Incorporating University Art Communities into the Narratives of Modernity and the Present)², in which we approach the form/creation/artwork not as an object of study but as a means for producing knowledge and as a catalyst for processes in specific contexts, takes this notion as its point of departure, and we have also used it to approach the definition we were asked to provide for this glossary.

To quote artist Hito Steyerl's description of the “Lensbased” course she teaches at the Universität der Künste Berlin, “Form is understood as an organising principle that is anchored within material reality and which affects this reality in turn.” “Form is,” she continues, “the material of aesthetic production.”³ The dissolution of the theory/practice duality is the backbone

* The Spanish term obra has diverse connotations. For the sake of this glossary, the English term artwork is our primary orientation, but not the only one possible. Obra can also denote any “work” of creation, or an “oeuvre,” or one’s general activity; within the context of this study, it is oftentimes more appropriate to use work, a more general, open form, when referring to projects that involve participation or collaboration.—Ed.

1. Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 139

2. Research and development project within the National Programme for Fostering Excellence in Scientific and Technical Research, ref. HAR2015-64469-P.

3. Hito Steyerl, “About,” *Lensbased.net* (blog), http://lensbased.net/blog/?page_id=740.

of our definition of the term “artwork” in the field of artistic practice and collaborative creation, and this definition is also related to our experience with Extensión Universitaria⁴, where we came to realize that the faculty did not identify itself as an artistic community, and where we also noticed the lack of attention paid to the collective in the university education. In order to try to create this sense of community, we decided, among other things, to change the meaning of the exhibition space by creating a call for residencies. Over the four years in which the space was occupied by groups of students, we saw how the potency of the collective was activated. We also saw how the residencies at La Trasera—a name meaning “the rear” or “the back” that (significantly) replaced the name of the exhibition space—were the first thing to be eradicated by the status quo when it resumed its direction of the faculty in 2014. This decision revealed an awareness by the new directors that what was at stake with the residency was nothing short of the questioning of issues such as the myth of the artist as an individual genius and the identification of the artwork as an object, as opposed to processes that could implicate immateriality or other ways of working. Curtailing possibilities for students to independently manage common spaces, as well as pointing out exactly who wields power in educational institutions, reflects the force of collaborative art practices in the appropriation of space, even if, in this case, responding to it meant dissolving it. “Institutional space is also, and above all, public space”⁵ in the cases we analyze in this text, the work-space relationship, as it plays out in different ways of doing (things)⁶ and proceedings, is fundamental.

Collaborative practices tend to prioritize the very process of participation and even production of the social network that develops these practices. So does this emphasis presuppose a neglect of what has been known as the “artwork,” identified as the “result” of this process? Within this rhetoric many artists have wanted to renounce the term altogether. But why call it by another name? To what debates—some of which have not even reached Spain—do the terms “artwork” and “result” refer?

4. We coordinated the vice-deanship for University Extension at the Fine Arts Faculty, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, from 2010 to 2014. Our task was to organize activities on contemporary art there through different programs, some of which we created ourselves, others which were created through public tenders. Our a posteriori reflections on the work can be found in Selina Blasco, Lila Insúa, and Alejandro Simón, eds., *Universidad sin créditos. Haceres y artes: un manual* (Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas and Comunidad de Madrid, 2016).

5. Olga Fernández López, Zoe Mediero, and Azucena Klett, “En medio de las cosas. Investigación indisciplinar, entre el espacio artístico, la academia y la ciudad,” in *Transductores 3. Prácticas artísticas en contexto. Itinerarios, útiles y estrategias*, Antonio Collados y Javier Rodrigo eds. (Granada: Diputación Provincial de Granada, 2015), p. 225.

6. The term *hacer or haceres*, “way/ways of doing (things),” which has taken on a currency in this discourse, was coined by Jordi Claramonte, Jesús Carrillo, and Paloma Blanco in their book *Modos de hacer. Arte crítico, esfera pública y acción directa* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2001).—Ed.

It is evident that creative languages and media such as photography, audio-visual work, edition in its broadest sense—from fanzines to artists’ books—as well as, in general, all media we associate with documentation, tend to be more naturally identified with the work of art, largely for their historical association with traditional exhibition spaces and the market. Nevertheless, we would also like to highlight how disciplinary codes are stirred up and subverted when tied to collaborative processes. Two examples of the many we could analyze are: the problematization and, in some cases, dissolution of authorship; and the reconsideration of the archive. What is worth examining in this latter case is not only how archives are presented but also other aspects that we could situate within the thorny ground of the use and appropriation of memory, as well as the creation of mechanisms to facilitate their access. In short, we asked ourselves why certain repositories are in museums, even if they are at times held in specific departments, and how the status of documents is affected by being kept in museums rather than libraries or actual archives?

To think about the forms of collaborative practices means using new terms and finding ourselves in spaces of a different nature. And those spaces, for example, we might define as “in-between spaces.” Jordi Claramonte, who has explored the notion of “ways of doing things,” notes that this “in-between” has on its flanks works of art on one side and activism on the other, being neither one nor the other. This site (or this non-site) shifts the emphasis onto the mode by which we view the world, a mode that is relational, that creates the task “and even the values from which the task arises as a necessity and is eventually well resolved.” Claramonte continues, saying that the mode is the beginning and the engine, not the result; it is something that subverts dichotomies, in this case the dichotomies that contrast what supposedly comes first (action) to what comes after (forms). Modes that, we might say, trigger, activate, lead to new old names: “it is no accident,” says Claramonte, “that the oldest word we have for referring to these modes of making is poetics, which means nothing other than ‘to make.’”⁸

With respect to forms of collaborative practices, another term that could be employed—a hybrid word, like poetics, but with a social dimension—is “imaginary”. The imaginary could be used to identify and recognize visual languages, to propose artworks, of course, but also different kinds of artworks that escape aesthetic perception or that are only identified as

7. Jordi Claramonte, *Arte de contexto* (San Sebastián: Nerea, 2010).

8. Jordi Claramonte, “Haceres,” in Blasco et al., *Universidad sin créditos*, p. 160.

such when under attack from those who appoint themselves the guardians of forms of tradition, even if that tradition is of recent creation. The notion of culture as an accumulation of constantly disputed signs and as a changing, conflictive process, not to mention as the political essence of popular culture and folklore, all of which are essential in the construction of imaginaries insofar as they reify modes of acting and living within our social reality, has been discussed by Jaron Rowan and Rubén Martínez.⁹ That the aesthetic paradigm is not merely a formality has been a subject of debate ever since the 15-M demonstrations created the possibility that—through the collectives that activated the public squares—political processes could result in what we call “new works” or, from a more radical perspective, artworks par excellence. Debates also arose about these new works’ potential for constructing possible worlds, along with the frustration caused by the upholding of a familiar aesthetic that is ostensibly politically aseptic, and, in light of the divided opinions they produced, the debates were indeed much needed.¹⁰

The context we refer to here “implies that the artwork functions as a critique as well as an amplification of the vital potential that we dispose of and that we actually put to use”¹¹ it refers to the articulation, production, and distribution of artwork within society by experimenting with new modes of political action, by inhabiting and thinking about territoriality, public space, and mechanisms of citizen participation. In this sense, it is important to take into account the institution. For years Spanish institutions have been spending exorbitant amounts of money on appointing from scratch contemporary art centers, which have sprouted like mushrooms everywhere, without first defining their objectives and contents. The beneficiaries of this lavish spending have been artworks that are suitable for museums and the art market itself. The programming of the new state-run contemporary art museums has virtually ignored collaborative practices, or relegated them to residual spaces. The fact that by their very nature these “artworks” put up resistance to the museum is no excuse for their official invisibility. To give a prime example, at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, these works can be found in

9. Rubén Martínez, “Tu cultura es algo ordinario,” *Nativa.cat*, July 13, 2014, <http://www.nativa.cat/2014/07/tu-cultura-es-algo-ordinario/>; Jaron Rowan, “Operación: politizar la cultura popular,” *El Diario*, November 2, 2015, http://www.eldiario.es/cultura/cultura-comun_0_446906228.html. Subsequent comments on these thoughts can be found in tweets by both authors at @RubenMartinez and @sirjaron.

10. Jaron Rowan, “He visto unicornios caer del cielo en el Palacio de Vistalegre,” *Demasiado Superávit* (blog), October 18, 2014, <http://www.demasiadosuperavit.net/?p=266>

11. From Los Equipos Fiambrera website, <http://www.sindominio.net/fiambrera/teoricos.htm>



Gabriela y Sally Gutiérrez Dewar, *Villalba Cuenta* (Villalba (Re)Counts), 2012

relation to the department of public activities. Though this rather calculatedly chosen—name reflects a desire to include collaborative practices, its policies are developed in a world parallel to that of the permanent collection, which is only somewhat willing to include the kind of work that results from such practices, and only after complicated negotiation.¹²

Though fairly easy to create parallels with other connotations of the word work, these parallels are nonetheless striking. Much has been said about the real-estate bubble and the unfinished (construction) works that like a sinister archaeology blight the landscape of Spain (where there is no money to demolish them). Less talked about, though, is the bubble of art that is conceived as (art)work-commodities.

We should not forget, however, that what the crowds in the squares proclaimed was, “You don’t represent us!” “To speak of institutions has come to mean, in effect, to speak of institutional crisis.”¹³ The delegitimizing effect of corruption triggered a longing for democracy and a new institutionalism. Today, thanks to a few exemplary new organisms—such as Medialab-Prado¹⁴ or Intermediae¹⁵—that work with a sensitivity to their context and constantly question the inside/outside, we can say that the reappropriation of the public sphere is more than just a possibility, and that it can be achieved through collaborative work that focuses less on quantitative results and the tyranny of time that these demand and more on the possibilities of real integration in the social fabric through time, tools, ways of working, and objects that would identify works that require evaluation using specific, qualitative parameters and terms such as “fragile,” “unstable,” or “chance.”¹⁶ To pronounce these also leads to a distant territory that must be mentioned, however briefly given the scope of this essay: works that exist in private, domestic, or everyday space.

The methodology we follow here has tried to approach several paradigmatic instances/works of collaborative art that elucidate or can be considered representative of a typology, or that call into question and/or make visible some of the key factors in the types of practice we have outlined. We logically begin with the premise that collaborative works, which intrinsically involve fusion and contamination, can not be separated into fixed categories.

12. One example that could be analyzed here would be the mediation for the exhibition *Un saber realmente útil* (Real Useful Knowledge) by the Subtramas collective. See <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/actividades/acciones-saber-realmente-util>.

13. M. Domènech, F. J. Tirado, S. Traveset, and A. Vitores, “La desinstitucionalización y la crisis de las instituciones,” *Educación Social*, no. 12 (1999), p. 20, <http://www.raco.cat/index.php/EducacioSocial/article/view/144294/383946>.

14. See <http://medialab-prado.es/>.

15. See <http://intermediae.es/>.

16. Ibid.

The Artwork Is the Neighborhood

The festival *Cabanyal Portes Obertes* (Cabanyal Open Doors) was initiated by the platform Salvem El Cabanyal in 1998 and since then uses a diverse set of artistic interventions to respond to the urban development threat that the extension of the boulevard Blasco Ibañez represented for the Valencian neighborhood of El Cabanyal, which was to be divided into two separate halves. The sociopolitical context and protracted duration of the project serves, in effect, as a journey through recent Spanish history; we witnessed an assault not only on the homes and the urban layout that had been declared a Protected Cultural Property, but also on a way of life, social and human relationships, and a culture and the peculiar idiosyncrasies born out of the community’s relationship to the sea. The network of neighbor associations understood that the intangible heritage—the cultural life—could be communicated in collaboration with a broad collective of artists who initiated a convocation in which photographs, projections, music, theater, and performance were presented, and which were installed in the streets and the neighbors’ homes, making it possible for Valencia’s other residents to understand the reality of the neighborhood.¹⁷ This relationship between public and private; artistic interventions and the everyday context of each home; and this mix of artists, neighbors, and visitors bring art and life together in a collective moment and in a logic that goes beyond top-down hierarchies. By proposing collaboration as a form of resistance and by pooling knowledge, “by laying down a path in walking” (*haciendo el camino al andar*), enough time was permitted for society to sign on to its objectives and methodologies. Thus, in 2015, with the arrival of the “new municipalisms”—other forms of institutionalism—to city hall, we seem to understand, along with the residents of El Cabanyal, that we too are the institutions.

The Artwork Is a Methodology

In this search for milestones, for specific actions, that can help us approach a definition of the term artwork, La Fiambrera represents an example of what a collective can accomplish. They have developed numerous projects, including *El Lobby Feroz* (The Ferocious Lobby), *Sabotaje Contra el Capital Pasándoselo Pipa* (Sabotage Against the Capital Having a Great Time),

17. Teresa Marín García, Juan José Martín Andrés, Raquel Villar Pérez, “Emergencias colectivas. Mapa de vínculos de actividades artísticas (autogestionadas) en la Comunidad Valenciana, 2001–2011,” *Archivos de Arte Valenciano*, no. 92 (2011), p. 515.

YOMANGO, and *Bordergames*. Their activity highlights the importance of those who do things as well as how they proceed in doing so, motivations and aims arising from social reality. Other essential examples include *reHABI(li)TAR Lavapiés* (Restructure and Inhabit Lavapiés), a 1998 call for interventions, and the experience of the *Parque de la Muy Disputada Cornisa* (Park of the Highly Controversial Cornice) with the residents of San Francisco El Grande (Madrid, 1999), whose objective was protecting—against the interests of the archbishopric and the Madrid city council—one of the few public spaces in the neighborhood, a park in which meetings, carnival dances, parties, and summer movie screenings were held. The collective artwork developed by this grouping of different people creates a genuine space of freedom and recovers a mode of relation that combines the artistic process with the identity building of the public domain. In their own words, the group takes on “the struggle against orthodox thinking, or the orthodox life and its cynical little agents: if, in our work, we encounter gentrifying plans of urban renewal, park-stealing bishops, and so many other privatization plans, it is because they make up a sort of collective amalgamation whose common enemy is the proliferation of relational freedoms that used to be called art... or life.”¹⁸ The park is still being used, and if at the time a specific language was socialized, then it was these practices, these artworks, that reinforced the social networks

The Artwork Is a Cooperative Practice

Notions such as “project,” “encounter,” or “event” can be analogous when we speak of “collaborative works.” In the case of the border encounter *Transacciones/Fadaiat*, in Tarifa (2004), a map of the Straits of Gibraltar was created that featured migratory flows, solidarity hubs and networks, and possibilities for the alternative management of Spain's southern border. Both aesthetic and political, the project emerged from the collective Rizoma, in which artists and architects work together via educational institutions to produce events that can reveal political strategies of a new kind of public space by activating different fields of knowledge. As Paloma Blanco has said, “It is difficult if not impossible for a single artist to possess all the knowledge (formal, political, historical, pedagogical, and so on) required to address a true process of hybridization between the artistic and the political.”¹⁹

18. Equipos Fiambrera, “Art as a social process,” *Sin Dominio*, n.d., <http://www.sindominio.net/fiambrera/colaborat.htm>.

19. Paloma Blanco, “Prácticas artísticas colaborativas en la España de los años 90,” in *Desacuerdos 2: Sobre Arte, Políticas y Esfera Pública en el Estado Español*, ed. Jesús Carrillo and Ignacio Estella Noriega (Barcelona et al.: MACBA et al., 2005), p. 41.

This intersection of collectives and people working in the arts, media, communication, and grassroots social movements provides an approach based upon the ideas of freedom of knowledge/freedom of movement, while keeping in mind the complexity, diversity, and contradictions with which it is worthwhile to talk about reality.

By working with a network of live video and audio streams from Tarifa, Tangiers, and elsewhere allowed the creation of a virtual bridge between the European Union and Africa, a mixture of local and global, physical and digital, that orients itself geopolitically through a different kind of architecture, that of data streams. Fadaiat was constituted as an open space that functioned as both a laboratory and a forum for debate between different networks and subjects around three interconnected areas: new geographies, the factory-border (migration and work), and technologies and communication, to provide a glimpse of a possible collective conquest.²⁰

The Artwork Is a Way of Doing Things

Ways of working insert collaborative works into life in multifaceted ways. The project *Villalba (Re)Counts* demonstrates this through a mixture of modesty and openness that characterizes this type of project. The project was developed in Collado Villalba, a town some forty kilometers northwest of Madrid with a population of around sixty thousand, and provides a window onto the Franco era and the real-estate bubble. Many of its inhabitants are young people searching for cheaper housing than could be found in the capital, and there is also a large number of migrant workers who live there. The project was developed within the framework of the Ranchito residency program at Matadero Madrid. Initiated by Sally and Gabriela Gutiérrez, they proposed an emotional mapping of life in Collado Villalba that was archived on and broadcast via the website www.villalbacuenta.com. The project is described as an interactive web-documentary and consists of geo-localized videos that recount aspects of life in the town (a squatted cultural center, Fábrica de Sueños as well as testimonies about tourism and the World Cup of 2010, the year the project took place); itineraries chosen by neighbors and accompanied by experts in urbanism, landscape, and other fields; and very short videos that capture the life of the town, in front of a newspaper kiosk or in a bar, for example.

20. José Pérez de Lama Halcón, “Fadaiat: Relámpago desterritorializador en la frontera,” in *Devenires ciborg: Arquitectura, urbanismo y redes de comunicación* (Seville: Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Sevilla, 2006), p. 143.



Gabriela y Sally Gutiérrez Dewar, *Villalba Cuenta* (Villalba (Re)Counts), 2012

The project consists primarily of filmic work, heavily influenced by the collaborative context in which it was made. The authorship is diluted (which is why we call Sally and Gabriela the project's initiators), because while some of the videos were made by the Gutiérrez sisters, there are also stories filmed by the town's residents, which are uploaded and afforded equal status. In the absence of "professionalism" we might speak of a "weakening" or "attenuation" in the definition of the artwork as art in conventional terms, which had collateral effects in the aesthetic validation of the project within certain contexts. The exhibition of the work is a good example of the honesty in the presentation of collaborative practices. The videos were exhibited at Galería Adora Calvo in Salamanca together with a map of the city where visitors could, and did, intervene to "(re)count Salamanca." The videos were also presented at Matadero Madrid's Nave 16. In this instance, the town of Collado Villalba was invited to intervene in the space, with a somewhat bizarre, we can even say "dirty," result, disjointed from the institution's expectations and artistic parameters, but worth revindicating in the context of these brief notes on the formalization of processes as artwork in the practices we are looking at. For example, for *Villalba (Re)Counts* the typical catalogue was replaced by a calendar that was designed as a recording device but that could also be hung in the town's homes and shops, as eventually occurred. This formalized the project's aspiration of social visibilization and activation, which also materialized in the social fabric with the incorporation of its participants—who used the videos in their election campaigns—in the "new municipalisms."

By Way of Concluding

The collaborative artwork is or can be a process, a methodology, a cooperative practice, a specific territory, a way of doing things, of inhabiting, of approaching the complexity of lives that we are trying to understand and reclaim through the collective. Herein lies its value today. Taking on such a task by looking at the Spanish context in order to dialogue with other cases in Europe led us from Valencia to Madrid and from here to the Straits of Gibraltar. We could find examples from all over the country, but we think that those we have chosen function as typologies with which we can reflect on the structure of the term ARTWORK.