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VOL. 3. N° 5
**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DEBATE ON COLLECTIVE
 AND PARTICIPATORY ARTISTIC EXPERIENCES
 IN THE URBAN CONTEXT**

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Context and situation of collective and participatory artistic experiences

In recent years we have witnessed a steadily growing reappraisal of participation and collaboration in artistic practices. This is not a new phenomenon in the field of art. Collaboration flourished in the artistic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, or the experimental art of the 60s and 70s. As in these past periods, recognition of the collective began to grow – almost to the point of becoming a fashion – around the same time as new social and political movements started to emerge.

The influence of specific new factors needs to be taken into account in today's context. The development of technology, the spread and accessibility of the Internet, and globalisation are undoubtedly key to the regeneration and reshaping of the collective and the participatory in a wide range of fields. There are many instances of how these concepts and their potential for transformation are being put into practice in varied contexts. Some examples are the citizens' movements protesting against a wide range of abuses of economic and political powers, the call for more participatory democratic models (growing since 2011), the spread of consumer cooperatives, the growth of social exchange apps, or the networks of investigators working to uncover corruption at local and international levels. All these examples can be understood as phenomena of collective resistance. The response from any one of the many forms of power has been to quickly deploy defensive strategies to control, invisibilise or appropriate this collective potential. Examples of these strategies include attempts to impose a (one-way) model of transparency as a control mechanism, stepping up surveillance of urban and virtual spaces, changing legislation to control social movements and meetings in public spaces, or delegating the public functions they have abandoned to citizen collaboration, among others.

These current issues and concerns have repeatedly been addressed in the arts in recent years in a less constrained, more experimental way than is possible in other areas. There have been numerous and diverse collective and participatory initiatives, from the recreational to the socially committed; artistic practices that have made visible, and sometimes, as though in a methodological laboratory, have allowed us to anticipate conflicts, debates and social transformations with significant connotations for the present.

In the current social-cultural political and artistic context, the main objective in preparing the present monograph was to invite authors to critically rethink the evolution and present state of collaboration and participation in the arts within the urban contextual and relational framework.

Several lines of debate emerged from this initial proposal, covering theoretical approaches as well as practical case studies undertaken in variety of contexts. The initial lines suggested to spark off the debate included a reflection on the role of the arts in the numerous participatory and collaborative processes taking place in the urban context, or considering the meaning and value of participation and collaboration today in contemporary artistic practices. The objective of both these cases is usually to activate or generate transformations in the specific contexts in which they act. Other lines suggested were the exploration of transitions between art, education and political or social action;



the mediating role of technology in collaborative and participatory processes; or methodological reflection on collective practices. Further possible topics that could arise from collaborative processes included the construction of visual imaginaries, narratives and cultural representations, the development of forms of self-management, the crisis of representational models, or the role of the institution.

Bearing in mind the interdisciplinary nature of *kult-ur*, the journal behind this monograph, and aware of the need to provide some points of reference for readers who are less familiar with developments in contemporary art, in this introduction I address some basic questions that I think will help to put into context many of the reflections and experiences gathered in this section, and at the same time provide some pointers and links to some of the basic founding questions *kult-ur* addresses on emerging cultures in the city.

It is worth noting that since the beginning of the twentieth century numerous artistic practices have chosen to experiment with the links between art and life. For these practices the urban setting has been a core space for reference, reflection and action. The shift of focus to life initially entailed a profound questioning of the traditional fine arts and the main key values that had underpinned the art system until that point. These practices emerged from critical approaches and proposed crossing the line of established criteria on what had until then been considered artistic activity. Considering the art-life link involved cultivating an awareness of a situated, contextualised and relational activity. Art (initially considered as a plastic, visual activity) gradually became a field of sensorial and conceptual experimentation, especially from the 1960s onwards. Art explored dialogues with visual street culture and with other arts (sound, performance or culinary) and at the same time started testing the disciplinary boundaries, traversing and blending with other areas of knowledge (the sciences, politics, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, psychoanalysis, communication and education). These enquiries resulted in a reshaping of experimental artistic practices, with process taking precedence over product, action and concept prioritising object, attitude and positioning overshadowing technique or formal representational resources. At the same time, these practices challenged some of the essential foundations of the art system, such as the role of the “artist” and the “viewer”, the value of the idea of authorship, the concept of representation, the conception of the artistic object, the modes of production and management, or the value of the institutions and the system of validating art, among others.

Collaboration and varying kinds of participation have played a crucial role in this transformation of artistic activity, its social redefinition and reshaped value criteria. In the visual arts, collaborative aspects in the creative and production processes have traditionally been made invisible. They were always there, but they were not valued, at first because they were regarded as merely instrumental or irrelevant, and more recently because their potential for questioning was ideologically inconvenient during certain periods.

In the context of art, focusing on collaboration and the varied practices and issues that derive from it represents a full frontal attack on the traditional idea of “genius” or “artist”, implicitly understood as individual, male, western, white and heterosexual. Recognising oneself as a collective artist, or giving viewers (or prompting them to take) an active role in the process of shaping the work, are not only formal or merely productive or logistic questions. They explicitly take an ideological position; they are conceptual gestures that modify the relationships of the sense and meaning of the work, actions of political importance, critical acts that violate the established and force the spotlight onto other values, other ways of doing things, other questions of interest, other discourses. Starting from these positions, people began exploring other ways forward for artistic practice, other conceptions of the artistic and its function, other ways of doing things, other circuits and venues for art (beyond the museum, the art gallery, or academic education), or other ways of understanding the function and management of artistic institutions.

Today, as noted above, contemporary artistic practices are increasingly incorporating different ways of participating and collaborating as core tools into their activity, particularly practices that centre attention on contextual and relational experimentation, on the socio-cultural, the political, the ethnographic, or practices associated with the critical use of new technologies or the web. Although most of them may be regarded as critical, positioned practices, and they set out to play a questioning and transforming role in different socio-cultural contexts, they are not exempt from processes – mounted on various fronts – that attempt to domesticate and neutralise them. In the current neo-liberal, post-Fordist and globalising context, these artistic practices frequently come up against conflicts such as the difficult dialogue between the instituent and the institution, which persistently tries to appropriate emerging practices; or the inertia generated by the huge visibility of certain practices, turning everything that is popularised into a superficial trend.

Ways of reading collective and participatory artistic experiences in the urban context

As part of this introductory frame of reference, I believe it is useful to look at various possible ways of reading this monograph. As well as taking each paper separately I would encourage the reader to trace some thematic threads running through several articles, which in dealing with similar questions, invite debate by contrasting situations and their reflective nuances.

Most of the articles in this monograph share an interest in epistemological reflection on collaborative and participatory artistic practices. This is evidenced in the importance given to identifying and studying methodological aspects and the need for constant terminological redefinition of a common, recurring vocabulary. Hence, we have terms that are apparently synonymous such as collaboration, participation, cooperation, interaction, common or pro-common, and their respective adjectives: collaborative, community, etc. We should attend to both the nuances and conceptual differences between these concepts, and their evolution and redefinition. Related to these terminological questions and their development, several of the articles, from different perspectives and situations, warn of and confirm the dangers of the incessant “hijacking of language” by those in power who pervert, appropriate and twist meanings in a constant battle to dominate the production of meaning.

Other concepts that may lead the reader along transversal routes between articles concern the notion of conflict in the collective framework. There are constant references to the ideas of design, antagonism, resistance, the subversive or incentivising, the independent or autonomous. What is interesting is that all these concepts, to different extents and in different situations, appear in relation to the collective or the social as the specification of critical forms. These issues appear both in papers on relationships in the urban social context and in specific frameworks associated with the boundaries and functions of artistic institutions. Recall that the idea of conflict lies at the heart of any collective practice. Forgetting or ignoring this essential aspect of the collective shows an idealisation, a superficial simplification or domestication of the potential of these practices; I therefore consider the contributions that bring these issues to the fore to be particularly interesting.

A final group of concepts that also appear in several articles are those dealing with ways of doing things, the methodologies, tactics and strategies of collective action, frequently found in artistic practices that define themselves as relational, contextual, political or activist. This growing interest in reflection on collaborative and participatory methodologies and processes seems to be directly related to the flourishing of these practices and the need to share the knowledge and conflicts they spawn. Concepts like direct action, situated practices, cultural resistance, spatial intervention, or self-management address the tactics or strategies of social action, where the relational, mediation or the performative also emerge as key tools. Many of the articles specifically mention commonly used methodologies in these processes that largely come out of hybrid and transdisciplinary practices such as mapping, and cartographic, archival or ethnographic practices.

Turning now to the specific content of each article, the monograph opens with an introduction to modal aesthetics by Jordi Claramonte. This theoretical paper serves as a reflective presentation of some of the fundamental conflicts that come out of collective experiences of action and intervention in the public space, from complex spheres that shift between the aesthetic and the political. These reflections derive from the author’s experiences of activist practices in several collectives and that revolve around situated “ways of doing” and “ways of relating”. He draws on these reflections to propose three interlinked modal categories – repertorial, dispositional and transitional – as a situated context and concludes by taking up the theories of Hartmann to propose “modes of relation” in a dynamic equilibrium between the necessary, the possible and the effective (what we have to do, what we can do and what we do); interdependent concepts that need one another.

This paper is followed by several articles that explore, through case studies, different practices in different contexts. The first ones analyse cases in Spain from the 1980s to the present day.

Jorge Luis Marzo examines collective practices in Spanish art in the 1980s. He argues that it is time to review the institutional version of Spanish art in that decade, which the transition attempted to neutralise by hiding its most critical or divergent experiences. Marzo defends the fundamental role of many collective artistic practices in that period as cultural resistance and disseminators of alternative ways of doing things, essentially critical and committed to the social, political and cultural context. These reflections are based on a paper recently published by Alianza Editorial that the author has revised and extended specifically for this monograph.



The paper by **Marta Álvarez** describes a series of activities promoted by or associated with some of Spain's artistic institutions (museums, creative laboratories, centres for artistic/cultural production, universities) that have played a critical institutional role in recent years. These spaces have operated as laboratories for a new institutional-ality, in dialogue with the social context, performing the role of social mediator and promoting distributed cultural models. This article nicely complements the reading of other papers in the monograph, such as the article by Jordi Claramonte, as it mentions several specific activities he was involved in.

Ramon Parramon, in turn, describes several collaborative projects and activist networks galvanised by the architect Santiago Cirugeda in various local contexts across Spain since the 1990s. He offers a fascinating analysis of the origins and workings of the Arquitecturas Colectivas network, an umbrella for collectives, associations and individuals interested in alternative cultural practices aiming to promote participatory construction in the urban environment. The article studies several key aspects of this systemic work, which proposes subversive and collaborative methodologies and strategies to facilitate the use of open, repeatable codes to intervene in the social space. We can also trace dissident approaches and challenges to institutional boundaries.

In their article, **Isidro López Aparicio and Vanesa Cejudo** guide us through some of the collective artistic practices that have emerged in response to the new socio-political landscapes. Their research is based on case studies of participatory and collaborative artistic practices considered relevant because of their critical approach. They analyse their potential to mediate and socially activate the viewer through pedagogical and social self-management. The authors propose reclaiming the potential of "creative energy" based on experience and participation, and also analyse the current artistic scene to identify gaps between the nature of artistic action and their audiences' search/encounter. Finally they examine some recent examples of practices in the Spanish context that explore an interest in the common with an inclusive and participatory purpose.

The next two articles describe case studies in the local Valencian context. In the first, **Emilio Martínez Arroyo**, artist, researcher and founding member of the community platform Salvem Cabanyal, analyses the role and development of the collective art event Cabanyal Portes Obertes (1998-2005), promoted and organised by residents of the Cabanyal neighbourhood of Valencia as a way of making their demands visible and resisting the process of gentrification. Today, after years of community campaigning, the project to demolish the neighbourhood has been abandoned and the restoration process is underway. The article analyses these community experiences of citizen empowerment and outlines the bases for two new collective, critical projects, Cabanyal Arxiu Viu and CraftCabanyal, launched to enable this collective community work to continue in response to the challenges and conflicts of the new social and political landscape.

Mijo Miquel complements the above article with an analysis of another recent experience of self-management strategies used to combat gentrification processes in Ruzafa, another district in the city of Valencia. The article takes a transdisciplinary perspective to analyse an urban renewal project involving empty plots, considered as "opportunity spaces", in this neighbourhood. The project proposes redefining the criteria of urban health to establish new more collaborative, transdisciplinary and inclusive relationships in the area. Following a study of the present context and situation in the neighbourhood, he proposes implementing bottom-up strategies such as integrating protocols for self-managed participation and governance through deliberative processes aimed to resolve conflicts and urban transformations.

The monograph also includes two papers from a very different context, Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, one of the world's most violent cities. In his article **Carles Méndez** directly argues that this violence is not the cause but rather the result of the neglect of the functions of the State, of corruption and economic interests, which go beyond the local context. His fascinating analysis of the situation examines many burning issues arising out of dissident collective responses protesting against the femicide and drug trafficking and extortion-related crimes. These experiences of self-management aim to build critical community spaces through culture as spaces of awareness raising and social mediation. In this extreme context collective responses have a sense of survival. Here, art often gives up its aesthetic value in favour of a political, life-transforming value. He also offers an interesting analysis of the way those in power try to take over collectives as a strategy to neutralise the critical capacity of these local communities. In the case studies explored in this paper and in the one by **Hortensia Mínguez and Judith Zamarripa**, two ideas stand out: resistance to oppression, and the recovery of social memory as a form of self-esteem. In both cases collective and participatory art activities are advocated as essential elements of transformation for local communities.

Finally, the monograph closes with two papers on collective practices in the urban context in which the performative is at the forefront. The context of both articles is the United States, but at different times: the 1970s and the present. In their paper, **Jaume Blancafort and Patricia Reus** analyse the relevance of Lawrence Halprin as a pioneer in advocating and using citizen participation to redefine and redesign urban space in the United States of the 1960s. The authors describe the process of the participatory General Urban Plan for Yountville (1973-1975), analysing the importance in the process of various strategies to discover the needs and interests of the town's citizens: Awareness Walks as a way of raising consciousness of place and desires; Take Part Workshops as a way of compiling citizen's experiences; and theatre as a means of communicating ideas in the planning. The paper argues that citizen participation is a key factor in generating a common good, which prioritises the general over the individual.

The monograph section closes, back in the present, with a paper by **Sofía Fernández Álvarez** describing a case study of collaborative performative arts in the urban space. She analyses the process of Body meets city, a collective performance walking experience organised in New York in 2015. The experience set out to reflect on the possibilities of artistic practice to define, question and rethink the relationships between the body and the urban environment. The article describes various strategies applied to involve the public in the artistic activity, the aim of which is to promote collective encounter and the experience of crossing the city, and to encourage joint reflection on city life.

Lines of flight and other dialogues

As the result of conversations with the journal's editorial team in preparing this monograph, other sections in this issue also include articles that enter into dialogue with the monograph and that I would like to mention as a way of extending the proposed reading.

Thus, in the **Extramurs** section, **Luis Serrano** poses some basic questions to inhabit and transform, from a critical viewpoint, the urban mechanism, the result of the relationship between knowledge and action. Based on the theories of rural-urban opposition (Echeverría) and the concept of world-economies (Braudel) he proposes reading the contemporary city as a specific mechanism of the predominant globalised world-economy. This apparently hostile and contradictory stage is at the same time a space of possibilities for social reorganisation, where alternative creative and collective ways of making and thinking about the city emerge that can be supported and accelerated by open artistic practices that remain outside the pursuit of monopoly rents (Harvey), the model inherent to neoliberal mechanisms of urban reproduction.

In turn, **Txaro Arrazola** describes a case study of Plataforma A, a collective of women artists from the Basque Country who, from feminist perspectives, claim greater visibility and recognition of women in national and local art spheres. The article analyses inequalities between men and women, comparing imbalances in educational processes, production processes and recognition by art institutions. She also describes the founding and organisational aspects of the collective.

In the **Stoa** section **Felipe Pantone** talks about his vision of urban art, graffiti and our time, which is an art object in his murals, during his intervention *Structural Destabilization for Vila-real* in the exhibition of art and creativity TEST 2016, Vila-real (Spain).

The **Biblos** section brings the journal to an end with a review by **Leonardo Novelo** of Markus Miessen's book on architecture, *La pesadilla de la participación* (original title, *The nightmare of participation*). In this fascinating book, published in Spanish by dpr-barcelona, Miessen condenses various dialogues with authors from other fields of knowledge on critical points about the concept of participation. Of particular note is the extended conversation with Chantal Mouffe on the idea of antagonism. The importance of the figure of the outsider is highlighted as a necessary element of design in all participatory processes in order to keep the critical spirit alive.

Drawing on this metaphor of the outsider, one who ventures to participate in distant fields, I took up the challenge of coordinating this monograph in an interdisciplinary journal on the city as a meeting place of knowledge. I hope the proposal of this monograph and the articles in it will help to activate and maintain this small door open to design and divergent thought, so vital to avoid being steamrolled by majority opinion, imposed as the only real opinion. It is my hope that the experiences related in the reflections and cases studied by the authors in this volume



will be useful to future collective experiences with a critical perspective, to keep on learning and not abandon the attempt to transform our reality together, to keep on dreaming and striving for a common, and I hope, better future.

Finally, I wish to thank all the authors who have contributed with their reflections and knowledge in this monograph, and particularly the editorial team of the journal for their confidence in inviting me to take on this task, and all the *kult-ur* team for the fluent dialogue and support throughout the whole process of putting this issue together.

The debate goes on, in shared reflection and action.