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ANTHROPOLOGY BEYOND ITSELF?

ABSTRACT

Since the late nineties, many artistic collectives in Barcelona and Spain in general have defined their practice in terms of active political intervention, in what some have defined as Artivism. Originally related to the anti-globalisation movement, this active involvement in politics involved the participation and organisation of demonstrations. Some critics of 'artist' practices dismissed them as achieving the opposite effect from what they intended – instead of making these demonstrations more effective, they turned them into 'works of art', 'performances' without effect. One of the things the article discusses is this dismissive understanding of 'performance' as something ineffectual and anti-political. The author argues that this situation has changed substantially in recent years, as these activist movements have become engaged in larger social movements. He addresses this question by looking at the different forms in which these 'performances' have been integrated into political movements, from the 'artmanis' organised within the anti-globalisation movement, to the organization of the 15-M square occupations in 2011, to the more recent 'Escraches', or public acts of accusation to politicians organised by the PAH (Platform of Mortgage Victims).

KEYWORDS

Anthropology of Art, Autonomy, Participation, Barcelona, Barcelona en Comú

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INTRODUCTION

In his recent book, *Art beyond itself*, Néstor García Canclini argues that contemporary art has become 'post-autonomous'. Artistic practice does not result only or preferentially in art objects, but it is inserted in multiple contexts, from the media and urban spaces, to digital networks, the social sciences, and forms of social participation. In these terms, art would be no longer defined by the 'art world' or the 'artistic field'. Its practice is actually questioning the very division of social labour that autonomy implies, and by the same token, the sociology of art and the art history based on this notion, from Bourdieu (1993) and Becker (1984) to Foster (1995) and Bishop (2012).

One could ask if the notion of 'post-autonomy' describes *the facts* of the international art world today: one could argue that the international art world certainly exists today, as an autonomous field of practice. Still 'post-autonomy' points out to a tendency and an aspiration, as García Canclini would call it, a form of 'imminence' (2014: 218) in many different forms of artistic practice in the last few decades. It may be an interesting idea to think with, in terms of the possibilities it opens, rather than as a descriptive term.

In this article, I would like to interrogate the notion of post-autonomy further in two directions. First by pointing to how is artistic practice inserted in politics, in particular in reference to my own research in Barcelona. Second by bringing this notion a bit further in relation to Anthropology. If Art becomes post-autonomous by its insertion in the social sciences, and in particular Anthropology, can we also imagine a post-autonomous Anthropology? That is to say, if art is not just art, but something else, including Anthropology, can the same thing be proposed for Anthropology? Can we imagine an Anthropology that is not just an academic discipline but a form of practice inserted in many other contexts, the media, the city, digital networks, art...?

To imagine a post-autonomous anthropology is to move a step further into an argument that has already been made by many authors, about the collaboration between art, anthropology and other disciplines (Schneider and Wright 2005, Schneider and Wright 2010, Schneider and Wright 2013, Ingold 2013, Sansi 2015, Holmes & Marcus 2008, Holmes & Marcus 2012). In most of this literature, however, this collaboration presupposes a mutual recognition, an exchange between partners. But the post-autonomous moment dissolves these separations,

in which anthropology plunges into unknown territory. Rather than fair collaboration, post-autonomy is the result of processes of participation, in which the participants become part of larger wholes perhaps to the expense of their individuality, their autonomy.

To interrogate the possibility of post-autonomy, I will focus on a specific example, the relation between art, politics and the social sciences in the last few years in Barcelona, Spain. But before that, I will expose García Canclini's argument in more detail.

POST-AUTONOMY

Néstor García Canclini's last book, *Art beyond itself*, argues that Modernist theories of the international artistic art world or the artistic field were based on a number of assumptions that may no longer be tenable. The artistic field, for Bourdieu (1994), would be a result of the process of division of labour in modern societies (like France for example), in which art and cultural production would be given their own space, their autonomy. The art world, for Becker (1982), would be a network of specialists that collaborate with each other – again, a model based on the modern division of labour. The international art world would be a highly specialized, autonomous and elitist network (Thornton 2008) organized as a market working back to back with financial markets, and hence its centers would be based in financial capitals like New York and London. The difference between the model of the 'field' and the 'international art world' is that the field presupposes a national frame (France for example) of public institutions that make the genesis of this field possible, while the international art world works as a global market. And yet both models, public national field of art and the international commercial art world, are based on the assumption that artistic practice in modern societies is highly specialized and differentiated, and autonomous from other forms of social practice, not just from other professions, but also from politics, religion and economy as different fields or worlds of practice. Hence the purpose of a social science of art would be to describe the autonomy of these worlds or fields, and their internal structure.

García Canclini is proposing that this modernist model may not correspond to the situation of contemporary art and culture in the twenty-first century. For García Canclini, contemporary art is becoming post-autonomous: "art practices based on *objects* have increasingly been displaced in favor of practices based on *contexts*,

to the point that works are now being *inserted in the media, urban spaces, digital networks, and forms of social participation where aesthetic differences seem to dissolve*" (2014: xviii). And that is partially a consequence of the fact that contemporary society is no longer based on the strong narratives of modernity, in which the division of social labor between fields made sense. For García Canclini, contemporary society doesn't have a story line, a project, a vision of the future either in political and religious terms. In this situation, art appears as a possibility, not as an alternative politics or religion, but simply as a space that can provide with metaphors to address what García Canclini calls 'imminence' – a sense of what is coming into being. This is not a mystical state, but "the experience of perceiving in the existing reality other possible ways of being that make dissent, not escape, a necessity" (García Canclini 2014: 168). This formulation brings García Canclini close to Rancière's notion of the politics of aesthetics as proposing new distributions of the sensible, and he certainly does make reference to Rancière, but García Canclini does not want to reduce or circumscribe artistic practice to politics, as an already established narrative. For him what is interesting is precisely the 'post-autonomous' condition of art, and its insertion in different circuits outside of art as an institution, like in the media, urban spaces, the social sciences, and in processes of social participation.

Still, there are a number of questions that are left opened in this argument. To start with, do we really live in a society without a story line, or is this just the effect of a hegemonic story that becomes invisible – the story of uncertainty and crisis we live in? Why does art have this power of addressing imminence? And what are the consequences of this imminence? Why can't art result in new narratives, in new politics? Secondly, at a more critical level, this post-autonomy of art can be seen, in rather negative terms, simply as the subsumption of contemporary art in the society of the spectacle, where art becomes just one more commodity for mass consumption. This maybe a rather simplistic argument, but also one that has to be addressed and explained if we want to discuss where is art if it loses its autonomous condition. This connects with a third point: in more ethnographic terms, the examples used by García Canclini are very successful artists (like Santiago Sierra or Gabriel Orozco), very well placed in the international art world, that in spite of any theories of post-autonomy, still exists and is growing. As a matter of fact, the international commercial art world has never

been as powerful as today, and the pressure for artists to professionalize (or in other terms, to abide by its power) have never been stronger. This international art world coexists, in ambiguous and complex ways, with always growing peripheral, perhaps post-autonomous practices and spaces, we could call them 'third spaces', that do not necessarily respond either to market or public sector logics. And yet it would be important not to reduce these 'third spaces' to a 'third sector', as in the 'NGO-ization' of art practice. Fourth, and last, it would be necessary to think also about what are the consequences of this post-autonomization for the social sciences, and in particular Anthropology, which is one of the social fields in which art has been inserted, according to García Canclini.

To conclude this section, I would say that to understand this post-autonomous moment we have to consider at least four possible spheres of 'insertion', which at the same time are also loosing their autonomy: politics, mass cultural production, the so called 'third sector', and the social sciences.

ART AND POLITICS IN BARCELONA

I will try to address this issue by focusing on a specific case, the city of Barcelona. I was born here, and I have been living and doing research in the city for the last few years. I have been doing fieldwork on the events I will report, but I have been a part of social and cultural movements in the city for years. Some of the people I mention in this paper are not just my informants, but my colleagues, and friends. I myself could be, in this case, an example of a 'post-autonomous' anthropology.

At the turn of the century, some art collectives in Barcelona were looking for alternatives to the commercial art sector and/or public art institutions, working in collaboration with activist movements, applying different forms of visual and media production to specific political struggles. A very explicit example is the collective Enmedio, which means literally 'in between' formed by visual artists, film makers, photographers, graphic designers... who in their own terms, decided to "abandon their field of work" ("abandonar nuestra area habitual de trabajo"), to contribute with their skills to build tools for social protest. The tools they used were directly or indirectly inspired by situationism: the production of situations and interventions, performances, forms of public detournement, etc. (www.enmedio.info).

Two of the key political issues in Spain at the turn of the century were the enduring unemployment and

the precarisation of labour, as well as the housing crisis. In spite of the economic growth of Spain at the turn of the century, most of the jobs for young people in Spain were precarious and poorly paid, and the access to housing was becoming increasingly difficult. From the early 2000, the price of housing had been rising exponentially in Spain, creating a housing bubble that would eventually explode in 2008. But before the crash, a social movement emerged to ask for the right to decent housing ('vivienda digna'). An assembly in Barcelona, under the name *V de Vivienda* (V for Housing) organised a number of actions during 2006. Besides demonstrations, they organised all kinds of situations, like a Pyjama party at IKEA (www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO-fre2w6YI), and provoked disruption in several public events, with a character called *Supervivienda*, who dressed like a superhero. Enmedio were actively involved in the organisation of these actions, even if it wasn't just or manily them: this was the collective action of an assembly, formed by social activists from many different backgrounds. Actually some of them were anthropologists. The Ikea occupation was the idea of the anthropologists rather than the artists, if these distinctions did make any sense. All these situations and events were not framed as works of art with an author, but as political acts organised by an assembly, constituted by people from different backgrounds.

All these events could appear like a rather colorful if irrelevant form of political protest, if it wasn't for the market crash that finally happened in the following years. After 2008, the banking system collapsed in Spain like in many other countries, and with it the mortgage crisis reached unprecedented levels. Spanish laws are particularly harsh on mortgages: the law determines that if a person borrows money to buy a home, they can only be freed of the debt when it is repaid. Even in the case of death, the debt is not canceled. Many people were evicted and they still had to pay their mortgage. In that context, the number of the people affected by the housing crisis grew exponentially. As a result, the social movement for dignified housing became much larger, and what were relatively small movements, like *V de Vivienda*, became the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), a much larger and cross-cutting social movement, which was not just a bunch of activists, artists and anthropologists, but people of all social backgrounds and nationalities, amongst them many immigrants.

But still, the strategy of the PAH was based on Direct Action. Through a number of public campaigns, like

STOP deshaucios (STOP evictions), the PAH was able to make the media turn their attention to the housing situation as a national emergency in 2011. The tactics of the PAH were to organize a micro-mobilization at the site where an eviction was taking place, to create a public outrage that would eventually stop the eviction, or in front of the banking institutions that ordered the evictions. Another technique used by the PAH, the *escrache*, was very polemical but it also gave them a lot of exposure in the media. The *escrache* is a type of demonstration in which a group of activists go to the homes or workplaces of those whom they want to condemn and publicly humiliate them, in order to influence the media, and governments into a certain course of action. In 2013 the PAH organized a petition for dignified housing, asking the Parliament of Spain to officially change the mortgage law, collecting 1,500,000 signatures. The initiative was discussed in Parliament, but it didn't pass. However, as a result of that initiative, the figure of one of the leaders of the PAH, Ada Colau, became extremely popular. Ada Colau was a former student of philosophy, actress, squatter, and full-time activist since the early 2000. She was dressing up as Supervivienda. She exemplifies the trajectory of a generation that started to get politicized in the nineties in the anti-war and anti-globalization movements, then moved to more local, immediate struggles, like precarious housing and labour. Since 2006, she worked with the NGO Observatori DESC, a social rights watch organization. It is interesting to note the change of image of Colau in her trajectory – from her performative impersonation of Supervivienda, to her image as representative of the PAH, a serious and righteous public speaker.

What was once a radical, small, situationist movement had become a movement of masses with a strong public approval. Part of its success was a result of a very effective use of the media. Art collectives like Enmedio actively collaborated in the media strategy of the PAH, from the demonstrations, helping build what Enmedio calls Visual Objects like in *Photographic actions, We are not numbers*, or through the graphic campaign *Si se puede, pero no quieren* in 2013 (Yes it can be done, but they don't want to). The campaign consisted in the massive reproduction of the message "Yes it can be done", in a green circle, and "but they don't want to", in a red circle. This campaign summarized in two sentences the political contestation to what had been the hegemonic political discourse in Spain after (and before the crisis): the

notion that there was only one way out of the economic crisis, through the austerity enforced by the conservative Spanish government and ordered by the troika, and that it wasn't possible to change the mortgage laws.



FIGURE 1:
SI SE PUEDE, PERO NO
QUIEREN (ENMEDIO, 2013).

The success of the PAH and these campaigns eventually had larger political consequences. In 2014 a wave of new political formations and coalitions emerged, partially drawing on the new social movements of which the PAH was the leading example. One political party, *Podemos*, clearly connected with the *leitmotiv* of the PAH campaign (although arguably, also with the Obama campaign: “Yes We can”. But that is a different story), extending it to political power itself: the core message was, and still is, yes, it is possible, we can win the elections. The leaders of these new parties come from different backgrounds. They are young political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists, artists and cultural producers, NGO workers, many of them with precarious jobs. They are not, in other terms, the usual politicians. One of the main and most successful accusations that these new formations level against the traditional political formations is that they are a ‘caste’: an endogamic network of power relations, not based on merit but on corruption, and which doesn’t represent the interest of the people of Spain but their own. As opposed to this accusation, the traditional political parties accuse the new political formations of precisely the opposite: of not being professional enough, but amateurs. In opposition to the ‘caste’ accusation, they have been described as the ‘chusma’, the rabble.

One of the new leaders that has emerged in this wave of political transformation has been Ada Colau, who presented her candidacy to the city council of Barcelona leading the coalition *Barcelona en Comú*, *Barcelona in Common*.

The people who formed this coalition were in their majority not professional politicians. In spite of that, they won the local elections in May 2015. A similar coalition, *Ahora Madrid* (Now Madrid) won the elections in the capital of Spain. This was unprecedented, challenging the hegemony of the traditional parties, and also of the traditional media (newspapers and television) associated with them. During the campaign and after the criticisms to these new political formations were fierce, and focused often, in the unconventional backgrounds of the new politicians. Ada Colau's past was pointed at as scandalous: how could a former squatter become a mayor? Pictures of her as an activist, disguised as a superhero or as a fairy, were publicly mocked by adversarial media, as a proof of her lack of seriousness and professionalism. Several other members of her team were pointed at, in particular her communications secretary, Agueda Bañón, a visual artist who participated of what was called the 'postporno' activist movement, a feminist movement that produced queer media. Pictures of her pissing in the middle of an avenue caused a big uproar in the mainstream media. Little was said of her expertise precisely in the production of alternative digital media, starting with her engagement with the anti-globalization network Indymedia since its foundation.

The success of this 'new politics' is interesting at several levels. At one level, the criticism of the caste of old politicians can be read in moral terms, as a discourse against corruption that proposes the necessity of a new politics lead by young 'normal people' (*gente corriente*) from the grassroots that are still in touch with the people (*el pueblo*). At a more deeply sociological level, however, what is interesting about this new politics is how it is reshuffling the division of labour, and the division of power, established in Spain since the death of General Franco. To explain it in very quick and simplistic terms, one could say that the division of labour was based upon a clear separation of politics, which was partially professionalized, from other fields of intellectual labour, like the academic field, and the field of art. At the end of the dictatorship, a young generation of activists had to decide if they became professional politicians or worked in other fields – like the social sciences, art, the media or the third sector. Some of these fields became also professionalized, and they became the ecological reserves of radical leftist thought, while the mainstream of politics and the media moved steadily towards neo-liberalism. At the same time, however, the relation between economic

power, political power and media became increasingly promiscuous. The accusations of the new politics against the 'caste' do not only impinge upon corruption but also on the revolving doors (*puertas giratorias*) between politics and corporate economic and media power: in other terms, the clear fact that the 'autonomy' of social fields is not respected in the promiscuous relations of economic power, media corporations and politics.

On the other hand, the leaders of this new politics are a younger generation, that once believed in the division of social labor in a modern democratic society, and tried to become professionalized in one of these fields – like art or academia, just to realize that these fields were closed to newcomers, because of the precarisation of labor conditions. The situation in politics was similar: the caste is, by definition, a gerontocratic system, in which new people and ideas are far from welcome, and the reproduction of the elite is based on very close personal or even familial ties. In these terms, the political involvement of a younger generation made them progressively aware that the social division of labor, the 'autonomy' of art and science from politics, didn't make sense. And that they themselves *could* become political leaders, they could take over the institutions. Something that only ten years ago, they would never have thought of. But now we have new political organizations full of artists, activists, and social scientists. If they will become 'professionalized' again, is something that we still have to see. But the surprising speed with which they have managed to upset a whole system of power, in spite of a manifest lack of resources, at least is interesting to look at, as a case study.

In these terms, 'post-autonomy', at least from the point of view of Barcelona, and Spain in general, can have a different meaning from what García Canclini implied. Post-autonomy in this case means the questioning of an institutionalized division of social and intellectual labor that separated clearly between politics, art, social movements and the social sciences.

PARTICIPATION

What is the role of Anthropology in this process? In my experience, anthropologists in Barcelona have been involved in this new politics since its very beginning. Not only were many anthropologists participating in many of the actions and movements I have described, but they often see their work as anthropologists as militant research, strictly related to this political practice. Many of these anthropologists were and are working on urban is-

sues, gentryfication, immigration, the housing crisis, etc. In many ways the anthropologist, the artist, the activist, were very difficult to distinguish, precisely because their forms of work were participative and based on an assembly. Hence the 'authorship' of the actions as I mentioned, their status as art, or as anthropology, is quite irrelevant.

It could be argued, and it has been argued, that participation can turn against itself: it can become a policy, imposed from the top down, as a form of political expediency, a tyranny. In the wider sphere of social policy, development and management, participatory processes have become a common buzzword of neo-liberal governmentality. The agents of this tyranny are often NGOs. The critique towards 'participation' policies follows the foucauldian argument, by which the well-meaning projects of empowerment and participation are in fact institutional devices of discipline and control, instrumental to the construction of neoliberal subjectivities. In the field of cultural production, several critical voices have been raised against the 'nightmare of participation' (Miessen 2011, Bishop 2012), following similar arguments. Participatory art practices are often accused of building up devices of social control, and the art practices themselves, of reducing politics to a sort of applied 'social service', in the sense, again, that NGOs are used to provide social services and hide political problems. But we have seen in the case of Barcelona is precisely the opposite: people coming from NGOs, the arts, and the social sciences, using participation not to neutralize politics, but precisely to organize a new politics.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, I want to start by making clear that this post-autonomous moment, as I have defined it in the case of Barcelona, is just a hint, or a possibility, of what it could be, a flash of 'imminence' in García Canclini's terms. The reality, the sociological facts of most art, of most politics, of most anthropology even, around the world, is not post-autonomous. It seems to be the opposite: there is a growing pressure to professionalize, to specialize, be competitive, to succeed in ones' own professional field. And yet I would argue that this is not really a form of autonomy, since this growing pressure takes one particular form in all fields: neoliberal management. This may be called also a post-autonomous world, the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2006). This other post-autonomous, neo-capitalist world is also a political project, an utopia (or a dystopia for most of its

victims). What may change is that not so long ago, neo-liberal management appeared as the only game in town. Perhaps, and I am saying it with a lot of caution, this is not the case any more.

I have argued that one possible key to understand this new post-autonomous moment, is the use of participation, as a form of work in establishing new movements and relations between art, politics and the social sciences. The relation between art and anthropology is not just a dialogue, an exchange or a give and take, where anthropology can provide, say ethnographic methods in exchange of visual methods, or ethics in exchange of creativity. This relation is not a trade or a barter, what 'participation' implies is more than an equivalent value, but getting involved with, becoming part of, for example, a political practice. Participatory exchange is not a commodity but a gift (Sansi 2015). The 'imperative to participate', which transforms art and anthropology, makes them be something more, and something else, than what they were before: it 'extends' them (Mauss 1990, Strathern 1990) it distributes their personhood to something larger. Some authors have talked about 'parasites' and 'para-ethnographies' (Holmes and Marcus 2008, 2012), here I have talked directly about political movements.

We could understand it better perhaps in relation to Callon's arguments on new forms of politics. Callon called a new form of 'technical democracy' (Callon, Lascoumes & Barthe 2011) constituted by 'hybrid forums' in which politics, science, art and all forms of knowledge are brought together (participate from each other) to address situations of uncertainty. This new form of democracy would be opposed to the conventional 'representative democracy' of the past, based on the separation of spheres (politics on the one hand, science on the other), and the 'representation' between them (citizens represented by politicians, laymen by scientists). The examples used by Callon are not just the world wide web, but also other matters of concern, like nuclear waste, AIDS, or climate change. These hybrid forums would overcome the 'double delegation' of citizens to politicians and to experts that characterizes our current model of representative (or delegative) democracy, by proposing to bring together all the actors concerned in these matters, people *affected* and participating in this process. The PAH, in fact, is a collective of people *affected* by mortgages. It is an excellent example of a collective where the distinction between citizens and experts, people and politicians is cancelled.

However, being based on the gift, as anthropologists know well, participation is not necessarily egalitarian, free, and improvised. It can become hierarchical, obligatory, and ritualised (Sansi 2015). New hierarchies, and forms of expertise and delegation can be produced by these processes. But what can still be argued, is that the imperative to participate opens a space of possibility (maybe that is what García Canclini means by ‘imminence’), it generates new situations that, extending the range of its practice and placing it in a larger context, may provoke an interesting rethinking of some of the basic tenets of Anthropology, precisely, as an ‘autonomous’ discipline, as a form of expertise. The ‘post-autonomous’ (García Canclini, 2014) moment in Art and Anthropology, by compelling to participate, being part of larger experiments in ‘technical democracy’ can force us to question in larger terms, what does our work as anthropologists consist of.

EPILOGUE: THE DEMISE OF EXPERTS

Most of this article was written in reference to political events in Barcelona up to 2016. One of the points I am making, with a lot of caution, is that perhaps there are other games in town, different from neoliberal management. I have argued how in the context of the economic crisis, new political actors emerged in places like Spain. These actors are questioning the hegemony, the political system, the rules of engagement, the division of labor. They have bypassed the division between politicians, experts and lay people, generating experiments in democracy that eventually have been successful.

The world events of 2016 have given an uncanny twist to this tentative proposal. In the last few months we have lived through political processes that seem to have some things in common with what I just described: the rejection of the ‘elites’, established institutions, and expertise, have been key elements in the so-called ‘Brexit’ referendum of separation of the UK from the EU, and the election of the Republican presidential candidate in the US elections of 2016. Political commentators from the former establishment and the mainstream media in Spain were quickly drawing parallelisms between these political events and the ‘new politics’ in Spain. For them, all these movements were ‘populist’. One rarely finds definitions of ‘populism’ in these media statements, but basically it has been argued that they reject the ‘elites’ and ‘experts’ and argue the need for the ‘people’ to take over the corrupt institutions that oppress them. The label ‘populist’

is misleading, since it is bringing together radically different political movements – from fascism on the right to socialism on the left. For good or bad these are the movements that are defining the current political moment internationally, and the critics of populism seem to offer no alternative but to return to the certainties of a model where the social division of labour was well defined, a model that may be finally collapsing. The very fact that we are talking about fascism as an actual, immediate danger in the US and the EU really is an unforeseen event, that few people would have considered a year ago. A form of imminence, to go back to García Canclini, if probably not the kind of imminence he or I would be hoping for. In any case, in this situation, it is becoming even more obvious that for Anthropology, there is no alternative but to take sides, to abandon its gilded autonomy, and plunge into new political experiments.

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