

The rules of the game

A conversation with Avelino Sala on art policies.

by PSJM

"Nothing is a work of art without interpretation that constitutes it as such."

Arthur Danto

"Art is every artefact... to which the rank from candidate to appreciation has been given by some other person or persons acting in the name of a certain social institution (the art world)."

George Dickie

"Art worlds are made up of all the persons whose activities are necessary for the production of specific works in this world, and maybe also others, defined as art"

Howard Becker

The institutional theory of art has a character of urgency after the representation crisis of the twentieth century, and they illustrate a current situation in which the artist seems to have as a primary objective the institutionalisation of his work, the endless search for legitimization within the world of art. This turns the work of the artist into a combination of theoretical and practical strategies that serve him as an effective positioning of his cultural product.

No doubt, the work of the artist has become so complex that currently it offers complex and endless structures that not only reduce the production of the work, but are also planned as a strategy that goes through different stages from the public relations, theorisation, planning and presentation of projects, the implementation of projects, the capacity to find economic resources to implement them. In fact, the artist is a cultural manager, a PR specialist, a producer of his own work, a publisher, a designer, a gallery owner... All these exercises are approached without a clear professional condition, which makes the mission even more complicated.

In this sense the publication of a magazine such as Sublime seems to me a fully artistic attitude.

Its publication responds to different needs, but among them one important one was that of creating a platform from which the work of young people would be made visible. Young people do interesting and powerful things from the visual and written spheres. It is obvious we are talking about a magazine published from the eye of the artist; that is, the approach will never be the same as the one found in other kinds of publications, although in fact this "strange" condition is what really gives character to the magazine.

Publishing a magazine such as Sublime from the periphery is a kind of continuous resistance exercise. Another rule we keep is to work with honesty and far away from prostituted spaces and difficult environments in which too many actors are involved in this world of art.

In any case, this figure of the artist publishing a magazine is often not comfortable for some people—they move you into marshy land, nobody's land. You are one thing for some

and another thing for others, and sometimes one feels like a kind of intruder in his own environment, although the truth is that I feel myself to be an artist who does other things as well—but the attitude is, mainly, artistic, or, better put, restless, non-conformist.

I understand politics as a skill or diplomacy and also as the set of orientations or guidelines guiding an action. Artistic activity seems a political activity. What percentage of your time do you devote to creation and production, and what percentage do you devote to “the rest”, to art politics?

I think the art world is highly competitive. As we mentioned before, the artistic condition is very complex. The channelling of a work of art goes through several phases. In the current context, the production is more and more industrial—that is, done by third parties. This implies that the artist's work is practically in all cases a group act, based on collaboration. I think the artist more and more tends to have an office and a warehouse and not a studio. The romantic idea of the ivory tower has vanished with the passing of time.

In my case, I have the magazine, and this is why I am in permanent contact with curators and artists, from whom one always learns things. The advantage is that you are always updated, although there are also many disadvantages. The most important thing is to devote the appropriate time to each activity, to enjoy both. And also, to maintain a serious and honest work production—this is probably the most important value an artist has; without it one is lost, because if the work fails, the structural basis also fails.

Do you think artistic education should also have a programme of strategies and public relations as a key part of training?

I think that more and more we are all obliged to try to make people understand that this has to be professionalised. We cannot go on with the idea of an artist as a romantic bohemian. The antihero doesn't have any more room in this society.

The professionalisation of the artist is a complex challenge. I don't exactly know how people are getting training for this at Spanish universities. It is true that in other places they work within a contextual reality adjusted to reality, with practical cases, with real problems, a search for financing, for spaces, etc...

I have studied in the UK, that is my real experience, and there one of the main aims was that we should leave universities as art professionals, and, if possible, qualified, with clear ideas.

The art worlds show, if you go far enough inside, some paths to be walked, doors to be crossed and spaces to live in. A tube map with stations, with names and lines that cross. An invisible network of personal, intellectual and commercial relations. What is the place you find for the proposals by outsiders that surround, attack and criticize these structures? Has the alternative become only the institutional niche?

The line that ends separating the institutional from what is at the margin is marked by the context. The danger is that the proposals by outsiders end up being absorbed by the

art establishment. What is true is that one can work from independence even if he works within an institution, and one can be very alternative but in the end he does shaping and slavishing games.

The world of art is full of contradictions... Many bets far from the “official” circuit end up entering it, and that is why they should not be distorted...even when the proposals are startling, are fresh, honest and sincere, I think it is one of the things one most enjoys in this little world, when one sees that small projects end up working, and that everyone works because they want this to happen. What comes after is another story.

For centuries, art has been on the side of political power; contemporary art, however, represents a reaction line against the established and a line of political protest, but dependent on the institutions and structures handled by the powers. System Paradoxes?

An absolute paradox. I repeat that the art world is full of contradictions. To be subversive from inside, one needs to know how to do it very well without falling into the anecdotic or into the vast; furthermore, there are many artistic attitudes that within this context lose their primary meaning, namely, they do not have the same meaning as before. If, furthermore, these power structures are the ones that decide which reactionary discourses are valid, what can you say? In the end, everything dilutes into a kind of mud that leaves few options to take the head out of it with freedom

Walter Benjamin dreamt of the emancipating effect of the film industry. Up to what extent do you think art could change society?

Well, if we didn't even have that utopian vein right inside I don't think you or I would be here trying to discuss this topic. I believe in the transforming power of art in the sense that it can help build a better society; the societies that maintain a high level of culture are more developed, that is a fact. I think Art is just another vehicle to arrive at that situation, and there is no need to say that art helps us grow.

Is there any symbolic denunciation in your video regarding the show of political power, its theatricality and grotesque paraphernalia?

Yes, with this work I tried to draw a parallelism between the images of electoral campaigns, so exaggerated, prepared and artificial, and the exaggerated movements of a dance such as the tango. The characters in the video are dressed very elegantly and smart, and dance in a kind of catastrophe area, a metaphor for the environment in which the politician usually moves. I think that political activity always responds to these exercises with extreme artificiality, and no matter whether that political speech is being given on a pile of corpses or at a dumping site, it is given with a smile on his face and a happy tone, with an elegant suit on, like my dancers.