

XXV Jornadas de estudio de la imagen. CA2M, 20th October 2018.
Panel discussion with Ángel Bados and Lucía C. Pino.

I will begin by talking about the reason I think I was invited here. I think I was invited due to my bad reputation, because I have a bad reputation when it comes to explaining what I do. Which doesn't mean I don't explain it. On the contrary, I haven't stopped explaining, but perhaps I haven't explained how I'm supposed to. For example, there are works that I never explained because it would be like explaining a joke, and there are others I might have over explained. In fact, I have discovered that rather than having a work explained in too much detail, people prefer for you to explain very briefly why you don't wish to explain. Or if you don't like giving explanations, then people prefer you to use a medium that doesn't require them –because depending on the medium you use, you will have to explain more or less.

When I entered art school I was already tired explaining, because I came from commercial graphic design, where you get used to explaining your work to the clients all the time. But in art school, the problem got worse. Once there, not only did you have to explain what you did, but you also had to explain yourself. I remember, for example, listening to one of my peers on the first day of class as he gave his personal opinion and explained things about his private life as part of his explanation of the work. I realised that it wasn't enough to explain the work, that a new subject emerged, which was yourself. And as you appeared in the explanation, the subject to which the work was formerly explained disappeared. At first I gave explanations to clients with money, and now instead of clients you had an abstract mass of public made up of a teacher –who explained things that no one understood–, students with an inclination to explain themselves, and an imaginary and completely virtual art world, about which no one ever explained a thing. And then the money, which was nowhere to be seen.

That situation was so astonishing to me that in my years as a student I spent my time gobsmacked by this regime of explanations, and began looking for alternatives. So I signed up for all the classes where other things were explained: aesthetics, anthropology, sociology, history, etc. The problem is that in those classes people spent most of the time interested in other types of explanations, which were explanations about art itself. So I began to look for artists who had had this problem before, and like many easily impressed students, I came across conceptual art, for whom the explanation about the work itself seemed to be the only thing of importance.

It didn't end there. After university, my inquiries on explanations continued in the form of projects. My first exhibition was made up of explanations of works that were never made. My second project consisted in doing lots of things without ever explaining what I was doing. The work I made with my first grant ended up

as an explanation about why I couldn't carry it through. And the following one was a project to understand who we explain things to. Those were learning projects, weird ones, which however illustrate how long and conflictive my relationship with explanations has been. And I'm sure that many of those gathered here would fit into this first-person perspective. Today, with some distance, I still don't explain the work the way I'm supposed to, but I do spend time explaining why I don't explain it as one should. And even, –and to include myself in that explanation and speak like a true artist– even why I don't `want` to explain it as one should.

One. To begin with, there is a mechanical problem: in order to explain something, one first has to know it. But this isn't my case at all; being the maximum authority in my own work, I can assure you that I have no idea what I'm doing. This doesn't mean that I don't explain it; it simply means that in my opinion, those explanations are rather arbitrary. Furthermore, I don't think one should be ashamed of that ignorance, that one should see it as an advantage. Sometimes it's the work pulling you behind it and not the other way around. As any other artist, I often wonder how I ended up doing certain things. But I think that it's a flawed question, because in fact, it wasn't really me who ended up there, but the work and I, and hundreds of thousands of works and "I"s that exist or have existed before us. So, the question wouldn't be "how did I end up doing that?" but "how did I get us there?". It's what someone I met called "the benefit of the ignorant". Which means that when you don't know how something works it's easier to change its functions. That is, the less you know about your work the better, because then your work can be more things.

Two. Secondly, there is the problem of incorporating the voice into the explanation. Since explanations always have a voice, then if explanations about the work are part of the work, the voice is also part of the work. The thing is that the space occupied by the voice is taken away from that of the work. And sometimes the work is subject not only to explanations, but to the voice that explains. And if we give equal importance to the voice, the explanations, and the work, an artist has already covered two thirds of the ground needed to become one. That's why making art is compatible with hating art. Because making art becomes a mere formality for being an artist.

And three. The importance given to explanations reinforces a false polarity between manual and intellectual labour. And now I am going to explain in a very colloquial way why I think it is a false polarity. Although it's a very old one, it's important to remember that it was reinforced around the 60s in the specific context of transformation of wealthy countries' model of production. Through a manoeuvre that could be coarsely summed up as: placing value on "people who think" and taking it away from "people who make". The aesthetics of conceptual art were created around this polarity, in a sort of celebration of what was later called "dematerialisation", and which reflected the appearance of a new class: the white collar, or cognitive workers.

In fact, there was never just one idea in conceptual art. The more you look into the sources, the more you talk with artists from that period, the more clearly we see that the only thing they had in common was the use of new media. An abandonment of traditional media for artmaking in favour of media belonging to the new economy: television and video, mass production channels, advertising, bureaucracy, the telephone, the fax, office material, computers, etc. To “white-collar oneself”, nothing more. The titles speak for themselves. Four of the titles of the most important exhibitions of early conceptualism were: *The machine, as seen at the end of the mechanical age*, MoMa, NY, 1968; *Cybernetic Serendipity*, ICA, London, 1968, *Software*, curated by Jack Burnham in 1970 at the Jewish Museum in Brooklyn, the famous *Information* by Kynaston McShine also at the MoMA in 1970. They weren’t speaking of the immaterial yet, but it was cooking up. There was an urgency to discredit traditional media, using any moral trick available. In the catalogue for *Information*, for example, and rather gratuitously, McShine says:

“If you are an artist in Brazil, you know at least one friend who is being tortured; if you are one in Argentina, you probably have had a neighbor who has been in jail for having long hair or for not being ‘dressed’ properly; and if you are living in the United States, you may fear that you will be shot at, either in the universities, in your bed, or more formally in Indochina. It may seem too inappropriate, if not absurd, to get up in the morning, walk into a room and apply dabs of paint from a little tube to a square of canvas.”

We proceeded to broaden that mythology and ended up talking about the immaterial as a logical conclusion to the use of new media. It’s as if we were convincing ourselves that art and the medium of art were two separate things. That although electricity, communications, paper, monitors, telephone lines, advertising, contracts, hired people, performers and security workers, monitors and 16mm projectors... are media and that those media are material things, they can be overlooked, because they somehow don’t distort the immateriality of the art they serve. That is, even if they can be used to explain themselves, it’s as if they were secondary to an explanation that is more truthful. “This is not the work, it’s the documentation of the work”. It’s as if they were saying, all the time, that this explanation isn’t valid. That this is a second-hand experience but that there is another one, somewhere, which is amazing and takes up no space.

But the truth is that immaterial economy takes up lots of space, even if we don’t see it, because it’s out in bumblefuck, or because we don’t want to see it. Even today, white collars still eat and need someone to cook for them between calls. And there are more and more of them, and they eat more, and they make more and more phone calls. The countries with the most developed immaterial economies are, by far, those that generate most matter and most waste. Canada, 777kg of waste per capita per year, US, 733kg per capita, Denmark 747, Switzerland 702, Germany 617, etc. Gas emissions, which seemed so

immaterial in some conceptual art works, are finishing off our species. While art was turning more and more conceptual, CO2 went from 5 billion tonnes in 1950 to 35 billion. In the wireless era, 99% of communications still travel through cables. Only in the ocean, there are 1.2 million kilometres of underwater cables. The Internet consumes 70 billion kilowatts each year, more than twice the solar power produced on the planet, without mentioning all the terminals connected to the Internet that everyone here is carrying in their pockets. And the most hard-core is yet to come. In fact, they say some cryptocurrencies already need the same amount of electricity as Ireland.

So, explanations can never replace the work, they already are the work. And the majority of artists, apart from explaining ourselves, also make things that explain themselves and that explain things to us, even if we don't understand them. And their effects are countable. All those things take up time and space. Whether we see them or not. Whether we want them to or not. Because of that, I think that key is not in the "I want", but in the "I must". In reforming a "must" that is still strongly institutionalised by, and subject to, the narratives of the Anglosaxon narratives. Institutions that become ours every time we explain ourselves properly, even if we call this by other names. Even if we call this, for example, professionalism. Why don't we reinvent this obligation? Why don't we fabricate another geometry for the subjectivity to come?

Rubén Grilo, 2018

Translated by Alex Reynolds