

In route with the Commons

Archive and Memory of a Possible
Constellation (2017-18-19)



This book-guide contains forty-five literal transcriptions of the conversations that the author had with the forty five grassroots communities who are the protagonists of the archive The Constellation of the Commons. You can watch the videos by visiting the archive: www.constellationofthecommons.org

The immense work of translating each original video was done by an important group of people mentioned in each chapter and in the acknowledgements of the book and without whose work (largely volunteer) this material would not have been possible.

The original content was preserved, including colloquial expressions and phrases. The decision to include the raw material was made with the purpose of facilitating authentic materials in pedagogical contexts where Spanish is not the primary language used.



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In Route with the Commons. Archive and Memory of a Possible Constellation (2017-18-19).

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I thank the teachers along the way, those who came and those to come. To Toni Serra *) Abu Ali for the seed he planted, I have profound gratitude.

Under the new moon of Shawwal the caravan is already leaving to travel across the world, and one can no longer stay behind, the luggage must be prepared, loaded, travel light... As in every journey, there will be moments of joy, delicious gardens, and also slopes and descents to deserts frozen or burning, lost in the labyrinth, reencounters, consult the map and the stories under the light of the nocturnal bonfires, and between the perhaps assailing cliffs along the path, the more or less inevitable detours, tedium...getting back on track... at some point we can forget where we were heading or what our motive was, if there ever even was one... or even forget where we came from or if we really did it... but we also find the looks and words that reaffirm the path, whispered or sung, and the stories of the caravans that came before us... the stars written in the heavens like letters of memory. (Toni Serra *) Abu Ali)



Constellation
of the Commons

Preamble. Pluralizing the self¹.

*Materialist Pragmatism: When they say it's impossible
and we respond that we are working on it.*

What responsibilities come with taking the floor to speak? As I speak about the commons in first person, I am obliged to delineate a set of biographical coordinates that inform the position I am writing from, analogous to the archive of which text is both a consequence and a part. The first coordinate has to do with the question of where I decided to contextualize the study of the commons and why I made this choice; the second is linked to the position from which I construct this project: what feeds it, whose voices am I joining, and of whose work do I consider myself an inheritor. To start out, I would say that the reflections I have collected in the introduction that follows this preamble are the product of five years of research and reflection shared with other researchers, activists, militant individuals in institutions, people involved in social and solidarity-based economies, as well as people involved with social centers, ecovillages, AMPAS, nonprofit cooperatives... in short, people involved in communities of anticapitalist practices, who are practitioners of a Gramscian “good common sense,” a type of sense that often emerges in moments of change. These individuals are people in movement, united at the grassroots level by a common political endeavor. I must also add that my experience of the commons precedes the present and can be traced back to a biography that is both my own and shared with an entire generation. Always in contradiction with the interior capitalist matrix, the commons is, or tries to be, present within actions and speech. I try to make it an everyday exercise, not always achieved, which consists of coherence and care; it represents my attempts to manifest a collection of practices and knowledge that I have inherited, and which in many ways articulate the position from which I breathe, think, feel, teach, research, and live. For me, the commons is a vital position, a way of life, and also a political position that is anticapitalist, militant, responsible, solidarity-based, and dedicated to the project of an eco-friendly, just, and sustainable society, where all people have equal access to opportunities and material conditions.

The contemporary experiences of the commons exist in relation to the memory of the public sector's past. In the past, we enjoyed a series of advantages upheld by the rule of law, which allowed us the ability to, for example, attend public school, be seen by Social Security doctors, use public transportation, and, for those that chose to, study in public universities, without acquiring insurmountable debt. In the '80s it was still possible to enjoy social rights, which, let's not forget, were hotly contested.

¹ Introduction translated from Spanish to English by: Michelle Marinello. Reviewed by: Hannah Sherman, Sherrie Fernandez-Williams and Derrin Pinto.



We lived protected in greater or lesser measure by a state administration that had not yet sold out the public interest to the private sector and capitalist market. In those years, the rights of the working class were defended by communities composed of neighbors, social centers, unions, and workers' commissions. At the same time, people of my generation grew up bearing witnesses to the effects of what was packaged for us as an exemplary and peaceful Transition: the implantation of an unfettered capitalism. One of the first consumerist acts brought about by this capitalism was the sale of illegal drugs on a massive scale, resulting in a significant decline in the population of young people. Other consequences include the decline of anti-draft, pacifist, feminist, and environmentalist movements; the decline in labor unions at the same time the capitalist society of *well-being*² was being established; the progressive cutbacks to social assistance and rights; decreased protections for self-employed individuals; the phenomenon of increased human and labor precarity; the intensification of social discrimination on the basis of gender, class, ideology, or physical or intellectual disability; the emigration, occurring at the end of the '90s, of those of us who fled Spain predicting that there would not be jobs there; the cultural shift to the political right and social de-politicization... In the restitution of the commons there is the presence of a series of tragedies, both personal and collective, that we are still processing before we can deal with them openly in the public sphere. It seems as though history has turned backwards instead of going forwards, and the last bastion of the Franco dictatorship has reappeared in the dictatorship of capital.

Understanding the context in which we grew up explains, at least in my case, why the outburst that was the 15M movement, with its great display of logos and posters referring to the commons, seemed so familiar to me. In fact, now that I think about it with time and distance, what really grabbed my attention in that moment was seeing that for some people this language was a novelty. And it was this perception of "novelty" for something so familiar to me that drove me to pursue the following question: at what moment does something central to one's biography become a possible political axis for social and environmental transformation? That is why, since 2014, I have been searching for traces of anticapitalist practices of the commons within institutional contexts —yes, even in these ecosystems there are anticapitalist defenders of the commons— as well as in the contexts of self-governed communities. I chose to contextualize my study of the commons in these particular segments of reality precisely because of their autonomous or quasi-autonomous quality, which lends them an unusual capacity to exploratively design practices of care, government, co-management of resources, and the recognition and representation of all their internal factions, including both their differences and the whole they make up together. Narrating a vision of the commons from the position of their own practices allows them to nurture a group vision, a *meanwhile* that lies between the desire to carry out the capitalist model to completion and the desire to imagine a new reality to come. But things being what they are, we cannot lose sight of what the true enemy is. As

2 When in cursive and with a hyphen separating both words, this is my invention and is intended to underscore the difference between a state of wellbeing and the existential state of well-being. In this way, I am marking the difference between a *welfare* state and the doctrine of *well-being*, which is a product of neoliberal logic. This model of a society of *well-being*, according to Agustín García Calvo, is geographically situated "in the middle of the rest of the world," (18) the rest of the world being places in the process of development and to which "there is no other future, other idea, or other aspiration than that of integrating into the Society of Wellbeing." (25). At the core of this model, everything including the subject is raw material that gives movement to capital.

the economist Xabier Arrizabalo would say: “Social processes are open and for that reason it makes sense to intervene in them, with the objective of steering them in the right direction. But these processes are not limitlessly open, which is to say, there are rules. Are there solutions to our current problems? Of course. Are these solutions to be found within capitalism? Of course not.” (Conversation with X. Arrizabalo)

None of this has to do with talking *about* these communities, but rather *alongside* them, *from* their perspective. I aimed to tell their story as someone who is a companion on their journey, not a discoverer of it. This is what I was taught by Luis Martin Cabrera and Ellen Mayock, it is about giving a narration the space it needs to occur, without cutting it short. I had to prepare my gaze, to frame and denature it by observing and anticipating, as Claire Simon states in *Recreations*. The decision of how to best write about and represent my observations has also been a process of spontaneous discovery, becoming more developed as the material results of my interviews grew. Ultimately the process of mapping out, engaging in, and creating audiovisual recordings of my conversations dictated their own final format- I would create an archive of recordings, translations, and transcriptions also accompanied by an essay written in the first-person plural. This constellation of stories would allow each of the people I interviewed the space to tell, in the first person, a contextualized truth from their own story. The series of recordings I obtained during my trips to Spain revealed so much to me, much more than reading materials alone had allowed me to discover about these communities beforehand. Our contact, connection, and the communion of our hopes and desires all gave way to the context and final form of this project. It was necessary to *be there* because being there is where those unexpected, unthought, and untold stories emerged, spoken out loud. Through the bond of shared desires and anxieties, I was able to audiovisually archive collective conversations that became increasingly intimate in nature. As you read, you can listen to these conversations in their digital archive: <http://go.carleton.edu/constellation>.

The resources of cartography and audiovisual ethnography provided me with the tools needed to pursue the study of the commons through the lens of its praxis. For this study’s methodological design, I followed the inductive qualitative investigative paradigm outlined by Ruth Sautu in her work *Everything is Theory (2005)*. This methodology makes it possible to identify utterances as being sociohistorical, institutional, group-based, or individual-based through the use of the direct testimony of social actors. I have also chosen to place the materiality of life at the center of this cultural work. This focus gives life to the digital tool resulting from this project, allowing it to be a source of knowledge and thereby communicate the energy and life of the collectives that are represented within it. I aimed to avoid two pitfalls in particular: cultural extractivism and the tendency to impose theory over praxis. The result, I think, has been worth it because of what we have achieved —I emphasize the plural as it includes all of the people and organizations participating in this project. In a confluence of education and research, we have communally created a tool with the potential to transform diverse sectors that tend to operate in isolation. Instead of remaining in isolation, we have cooperated to call attention to the different realities that we occupy. In this confluence there are tools, dialogs, contributions, voices, and experiences. That is how the audiovisual archive and this guide to the conversations were created, which together make up a commons of knowledge.

On one occasion in a conversation about academic work, Boaventura de Sousa answered a question by saying that it is necessary to return to the practice of putting one foot in the street while keeping the other in the office, on equal footing. If the

materiality of life stops being the center of our focus, we run the risk of neglecting the social dimension of our work, falling into a web of pure abstractions. Rehumanizing the humanities means re-centering focus on life and its materiality, with all of the contradictions inherent to structural causes of the phenomena we study and that, let's not forget, we are also a part of. For this reason, this guide and the digital tool that it is based on are not exclusively the result of a process of research; they also represent a collective and shared effort made possible with the support of members of the La Vorágine collective and the very careful editing of Emmanuel Gimeno Lodosa. We hope that your reading of this material infects you with the energy and hope you need to keep going—because there is no possible separation between action, thought, feeling, imagination, affection, and life itself. I end this preamble with the words of Toni Serra*) Abu Ali, which remind us that in this journey it is also important to remember that there are things you have to stop doing in order to keep moving forward:

What should one do? It is not just about what we can do... which is a lot; but also NOT doing much of what we do: let's not collaborate anymore, let's not self-censor or fool ourselves anymore... let's not stay quiet... let's start calling our collaboration with this growing totalitarian system 'work'... let's call self-censorship and our solidarity with our own impotence 'peace of spirit'... Let's now speak with disobedience to the idols of power; that is, let's speak with Life... which is One yet unique in each one of us. Let's stop collaborating with our work... let's be transformed and take advantage of that effort...let's crack holes in its hull... let the water enter, and let it sink... I do not speak of hate and resentment, which it already reproduces without rest...but rather I speak of loving from the root...radical love.

Toni Serra*) Abu Ali

This archive of memory recounts this entire journey and many other things, including the path you carry in your hands.

Introduction. From one commons to many others.

From my point of view, humanity only has the possibility of survival if it attains, sooner or later (let's hope sooner), a common denominator of axiological sense, a common cause or unifying desire—in order to be united by one shared will belonging to a shared sense of meaning—.

(Viktor Frankl *¿Neurotización de la humanidad o rehumanización de la psicoterapia?*)

In the happiest country in the world there are people who, in fighting for a more just society or for the defense of ecosystems, are sentenced to death, even if they still don't know it.

(Emilio Polo Garrón, *Horas de guerra. Minutos de paz*)

The guide that you have in your hands is the result of a research project focusing on the culture of anticapitalist commons and their practical expression in the Spanish territory. The collection of transcribed conversations is available in an audiovisual format in the digital, bilingual tool-archive called Constellation of the Commons / Constelación de los Comunes. You can access this digital tool by accessing the following link; all of the contents of the site, including this guide, are made available under the *creative commons* license: www.constellationofthecommons.org

1. What is the Constellation of the Commons (CC)?

The Constellation of the Commons (CC) is an audiovisual archive containing the experiences of the commons told from the perspectives of self-managed communities engaging in anticapitalist practices and operating in the Spanish territory. Symbolically speaking, CC is a space for positive news and lays the groundwork for developing ethical-political practices in the 21st century. It is also an informative tool and a non-profit commons of knowledge, with the aim of being shared and reproduced. In this space, social activism, research, and teaching are connected. It is the product of 6 years of research and collaborative participation of all of the people who make up the team, as well as all those who have shared testimonies and other contents. At this current moment, the project is comprised of forty-five conversations, but the digital project is designed to offer space for any person who wants to participate and add additional experiences and content.

The contents of this commons of knowledge are organized and presented in a manner originating from the very practices that are laid out within it. The archive is testimony of a political, cultural, ecosocial, and existential position that runs counter to complicity with the capitalist system. When I refer to this countervailing position, I am referring to an ongoing process, a daily attempt that makes it possible for horizontal leadership to become increasingly institutionalized without losing its footing in the street. The adoption of this practice, both individually and collectively, potentiates a critical and interpretive autonomy that allows us to act as dissidents when the need arises. This vision foments a certain wisdom for recognizing the radical contradictions that traverse not just our bodies but the entire system to which we belong.

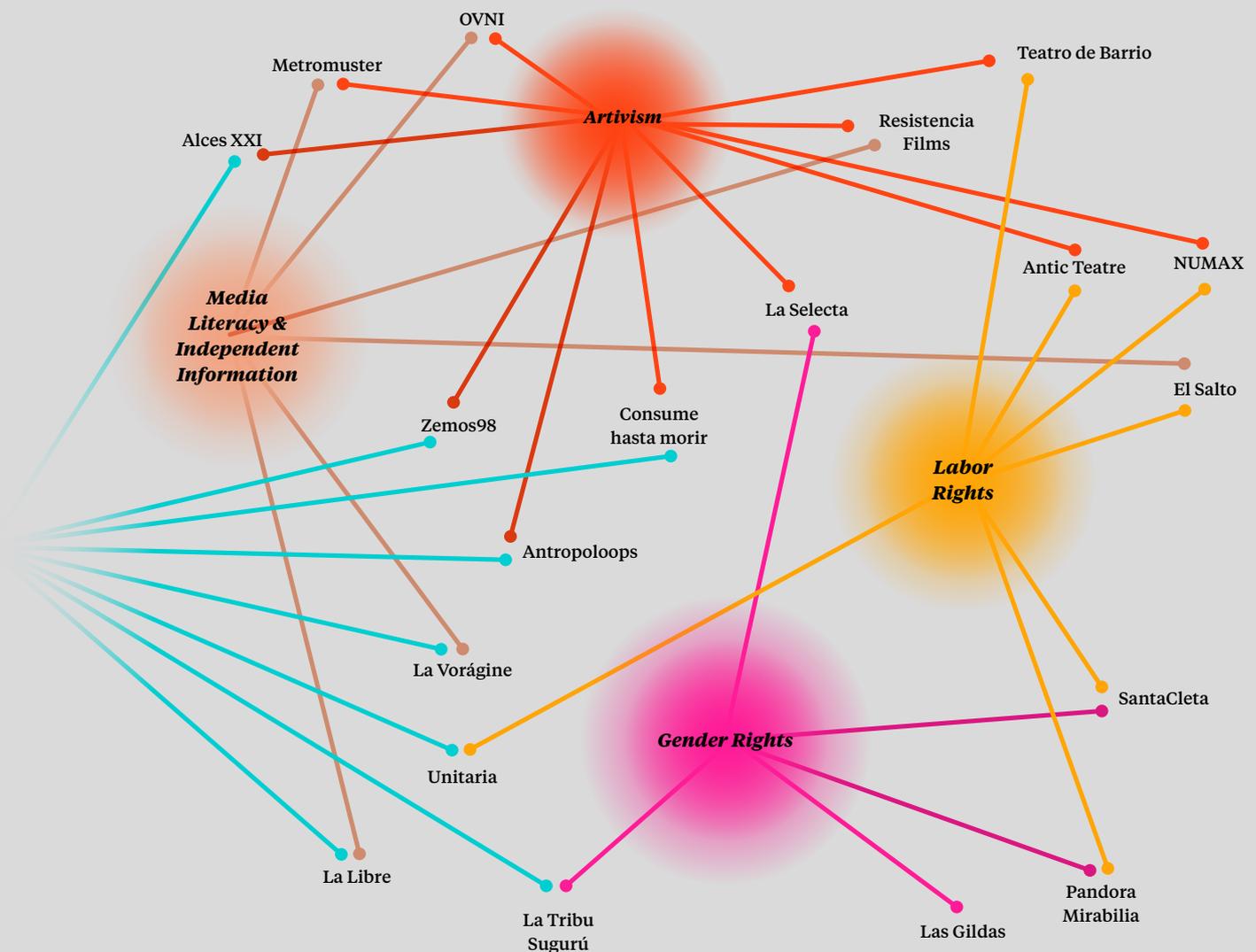
As is the case for all archives, although people may not admit it, the classification I have created for this archive is arbitrary and conjectural. From the analysis of forty-five total interviews, I have created eleven categories that I have referred to as stars or thematic nodes. The categorization scheme for these nodes does not exist prior to the contents of the archive, but rather it is a part of it. Each one of these thematic groups is related to the underlying issues of life within these communities that are studied: social justice, environmental justice, the right to health care and self-care, gender equality, the right to decent work, the defense of the rights of migrants, the right to decent housing, the right to wholistic and expanded education for all stages of life, the right to media literacy training and accurate information, activism as a form of political expression, and the exploration of new political and economic forms. Clearly, the list of social causes is incomplete, since we are only dealing with one particular moment in this movement's history.

The collective reading of all of these conversations organized around these eleven constellary nodes communicates a transversal and socially creative force that explores



different ways of supporting, incentivizing, and creating pressure for structural change in response to these communities' demands. Obviously, these eleven causes do not come close to representing all of the causes existing in the Spanish state, nor is the group of communities selected representative of all of those in the Spanish state. What I have put together in this guide and digital archive is an initial sampling that I hope expands with time. Both in the guide and in the digital tool, each thematic node is assigned to a group of communities sharing similar practices. The criteria for ordering and linking these groups is applied according to the importance a certain cause has within each community. The primary relationships and causes important to these groups do not impede the establishment of other possible relational nodes; in fact, in reading all of the interviews, one can find resonances between all of them.

When considering the question, "In what world do we want to live?" these communities answer with a plurality of responses and various creative and revolutionary formulations, in the sense that they validate alternative ways of understanding property, the government of the public interest, work, human relationships, our



relationship with the planet, care, commercial transactions, education, etc. The story of these practices does not tend to appear in traditional media, nor is it taught in the classroom; it is for this reason that it seemed important to convene a sample of such groups in order to archive their testimony with the goal of creating a record of the change they represent and are setting into motion. Sharing this work with professionals in library, technical, digital, and audiovisual fields has allowed us not only the creation of an open-access, professional tool; it has also made it possible to apply library cataloguing methods to the tool, allowing its contents to exist in the institutional ecosystem of facts. The cataloguing process for this project has been documented as a written protocol, available for use by anyone wishing to produce or catalog the result of a self-managed research project in a digital format³.

Finally, this collection of testimonies frame an optimistic horizon, its stories celebrating existing successes while also stirring up hope for the future. The crisis we are living in not only requires urgent action within the legal, juridical, economic, and political spheres, it also requires a cultural effort. If our ethical, creative, and political health are of primary concern, and if it's necessary to resist ways of living that are contrary to life itself, then it's of vital importance to create stories that can be used to do away with the cruel optimism⁴ and techno optimism⁵ inherent to capitalist common sense. The Constellation of the Commons is a modest contribution towards this effort. Its chorus of personal accounts points towards a possible path that is not exempt from its own contradictions and obstacles.

2. What do I mean when I say “good common sense” in the context of these communities?

When communities of anticapitalist practices talk about the weight of hegemonic capitalist common sense as being conservative and reactionary, direct or indirect reference is being made to good common sense. The theoretical elaboration of this concept is owed to Antonio Gramsci, who establishes a difference between acritical common sense, a concept similar to the adoption of dominant ideology,

3 This protocol can be found in the Constellation of the Commons menu.

4 This term was coined by Lauren Berlant; variations of this concept are “gore capitalism” (Sayak Valencia), affective capitalism (Alberto Santamaría), and culture of *well-being* (Palmar Álvarez-Blanco).

5 This concept is being developed by activist groups such as Ecologistas en Acción (Environmentalists in Action), environmental researchers like Yayo Herrero, Jorge Riechmann, Alberto Cuesta Martínez, and Iñaki Prádanos, as well as creators like Miguel Brieva and Oscar Clemente.

and good common sense, which is more revolutionary in nature.⁶ According to Gramsci, in all revolutionary processes the removal of a hegemonic power is in question. In this context of struggle, Gramsci explains that one frequently witnesses the work of two contrary forces: “good common sense” (*buon senso*) and “common sense” (*senso comune*). Good common sense facilitates a critical vision in people that allows them to pass judgment on a determined ideology; common sense, on the other hand, is a mechanism through which conceptions of the world are reproduced and transmitted such that they are absorbed acritically, like a set of “habitus.” Habitus here refers to principles generating practices and representations that constitute a system of durable but not immutable dispositions, that are both internal and acquired (Bourdieu, 1988a, 1988b).

The communities involved with this project are bearers of Gramsci’s “*buon senso*” or good common sense. In describing these communities in this way, in the same manner as Gramsci, it emphasizes their critical quality, evaluating and denouncing structural causes that are responsible for the problems that devastate our world. Such problems include: processes of violent privatization, de-regularization, financialization, precarization, and the proletarianization of workers who are historically stripped of the means of production and, therefore, “entirely dependent on subsisting through the labor market” (Alegre y Fernández Fernández 139). These problems are innate to capitalism, as well as to political programs aimed at increasing productivity and therefore securing benefits for financial elites while directly undermining the Welfare State, the public sphere, and social rights. All of these operations are highly lucrative, as they are effective means of government and subordinating the subject, who observes that at the same time minimal governmental protections are disappearing, a state of vulnerability is becoming normalized. This new social class, termed the ‘precariat,’ not only observes the reduction in their income per capita, but also witnesses an accelerated decline in living, environmental, and existential conditions at the individual, social, and planetary scale. Proof of this is in the data provided by www.globalissues.org,⁷ which demonstrate that almost half of the world population –3 billion people– live on less than \$2.50 per day.⁸

While all of this is happening, these same financial powers make sure to communicate, through their various means of communication, a capitalist common sense that is replete with values belonging to the liberal tradition initiated by John Locke (1632-1704): the defense of private property, the fantasy of individuality and its accompanying

6 It is Michele Filippini in his work *Using Gramsci* who uncovers all of the nuances of this distinction. In accordance with Filippini, if today it is difficult for us to know what we are talking about when we use the expression “common sense” it’s because we lack a good translation that clearly distinguishes between the two gramscian concepts: “Good common sense” and “Common sense,” which have nothing to do with one another. This distinction is important since, among other things, in his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci distinguishes between *senso comune* and *buon senso* (the latter translating as ‘good common sense’ in English); the latter term, with its positive connotations rendering it much closer to the English term ‘common sense,’ represents ‘the healthy nucleus that exists in “Common sense,” Q11§12, in SPN: 328.

7 The complete report can be read by following this link: <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats#src1>

8 For up-to-date information, consult The 2014 Human Development Report “Sustaining human progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience” presented July 24 in Tokyo.

instinct of self-preservation that motivates fierce competition, and support for freedom of choice and circulation —when it comes to owners of capital and the market. In many ways the communities of anti-capitalist practices contained in this guide, in their function as counter-hegemonic groups, make an effort to explain the negative consequences that these capitalist practices produce in human beings and nature.

Good common sense arises as a possible way out of the nonsensical capitalist program that runs counter to humans' social nature and vulnerable condition. Viktor Frankl, founder of speech therapy and survivor of a German concentration camp, depicts this nonsensical way of life in his 1974 lecture titled *Neuroticization of humanity or rehumanization of psychotherapy?* In this text, Frankl pinpoints the origin of all crises of sense or “noogenous neurosis” (16) within an “existential frustration” (16) and warns that not dealing with this frustration results in neurotic symptomology and in the development of all of the pathologies corresponding to the extreme individualism that is characteristic of capitalist society. The nonsense that exists within capitalist common sense is not only responsible for states of “learned defenselessness”—a term coined by Martin Seligman— and extreme competition. It also supports an environment of overall mistrust that impedes the establishment of connections between people. In equal measure, this nonsense is the root of the development of other social pathologies characteristic of our time: aporophobia (Adela Cortina), sociophobia (César Rendueles), age discrimination, and a collection of new social addictions (Francisco Alonso Fernández). This crisis of sense is accentuated in the era of solitude (Edward O. Wilson and George Monbiot), given that the isolation that we live in favors states of complacency and inaction. In “societies of control” (Deleuze, “Post-scriptum,” 278) mechanisms are developed in order to manage possible dissidence or alterations from social order. New laws are put into place and procedures arise to channel unrest into protests that are devoid of action— activism from the couch is a good example of this. I will not take the time here to relate all of the theories that validate the fact that capitalist common sense normalizes and naturalizes individualist lifestyles where entertainment and constant hyperstimulation of the senses coexists alongside self-exploitation and self-induced insomnia (John Crary, Luis de la Cruz, Jorge Moruno) in a life that is hyper-connected 24/7 (Isidro Catela, Sergio Legaz). All of this consciously and unconsciously contributes to the stabilization of common sense and capitalist order. In this context, divergence from the norm is considered a problem, above all when hegemonic means of communication utilize stigmatization and demonization against any proposal that tries to alter the established social order.

For both Viktor Frankl and the communities represented in this project, it does little to palliate this condition by recurring to entertainment, leisure, or self-help industries. The only possible alternative to this capitalist nonsense is manifested in self-transcendence in community. By self-transcendence, Frankl means “the fundamental fact that self-transcendence is always aimed beyond oneself towards something beyond the self, towards something or someone, or a cause to serve, or a person to love” (22). To explain this fact, Frankl uses the metaphor of the function of the eyeball, whose physiological capacity for visual perception of the world is dependent on its inability to see itself. The moment that the eye observes itself, we lose vision, because that irregularity is the sign of a physiological problem —cataracts, clouds, glaucoma, macular disease, etc. In this metaphorical sense, Frankl describes capitalist individualism as an irregularity: “Human existence is disturbed in how it focuses [only] upon itself, on something within itself, stuck on itself” (23). In the same way that the eye must be able to see beyond itself in order to view what surrounds it, “human beings, if they really want to be human, must be able to leave themselves behind, forget themselves,

dedicate themselves to a task (...) and in doing the task, a human becomes human, becomes themselves.” (24) With the metaphor of the eye, Viktor Frankl differentiates between a being that is individualized according to capitalist criteria and a social being with good common sense. According to his writing, self-transcendence has nothing to do with states of tranquility or recipes for happiness. Ethical conscience is that which humanizes us and differentiates us from the animal world because it acts within us like an organ of sense from which we assume responsibility towards other people and our surroundings. It has the potential to put limits on individualist relativism and the defense of personal freedom at any cost, which justifies the right to act in any way, no matter how destructive. Ethical conscience also locates the good life within vulnerability, care, and normative compromise, which are far removed from voluntarism. Once it is awakened, ethical conscience permits “humans to escape, resist the consequences of existential emptiness: they will not submit to totalitarianism, nor to conformism. Their ethical conscience will be the only thing that says no.” (33)

For the communities within the scope of this project, it is clear that they have a good common sense that is linked to an ethical conscience made up of communitarian values such as mutual support and acknowledgment, solidarity, equity, and hospitality. These values act as a counterweight to individualist common sense that, inevitably, we inherit and carry with us. The stories of these communities contain an echo of the Machadian paradox that “you make the path as you go,” which means that there is no singular way for us to get out of this predicament. Recognizing this fact also means accepting that the way out of capitalism will be neither instantaneous nor without paradoxical situations, relationships, or actions, which are important to learn to contextualize. Avoiding rushed judgment, which is a remnant of our inherited individualism, will be part of the listening exercise that we have ahead of us. From my point of view, and considering the material conditions of capitalist reality, the mere existence of these communities is cause for celebration. On the other hand, their social function exposes our orphanhood at the hands of the state. When thinking about the work that many of these communities do on their own account, one ends up wondering why, in a society that supposedly has welfare protections, it is those working at the margins of institutions who are supplying necessities for citizens. This represents a crisis of care in developed capitalist societies-- as a result of this crisis, the good common sense of these communities is charged with taking care of these needs. This is not the place to develop a detailed explanation of the structural capitalist causes that provoke this crisis, but, as philosopher Patricia Manrique expresses, it’s important to not lose sight of the fact that broad and rich reflection over this field comes directly from feminist and ecofeminist traditions.

[These traditions], far from being a mere reconsideration of ethics, or being a problematic from a socioeconomic point of view, point to the necessity of their universalization such that [caretaking] labor ceases to be invisibilized, obligatory, and unpaid for women and instead becomes a matter for men and the State. This carries particular relevance in the 21st century, in that a serious [crisis of care](#) is being encountered: the break in the nuclear family model, which has taken its toll on other social support structures, hand in hand with social atomization, has added to the inversion of the population pyramid for aging societies, making it so that elderly and other dependent people have increasing difficulty obtaining care. It becomes increasingly necessary to foment co-responsibility with men and the State, and to also create a feminist critique about how [this labor ends up placed on the backs of poor and racialized women in the European context](#). Nancy Fraser situates

this issue within a broad frame, noting that [the crisis of care is, in reality, part of a general crisis in physical and symbolic reproduction](#) in contemporary societies. For this reason, feminists like her and Federici, who collaborated for years with the international 'Wages for Housework' (1982) campaign, demand a salary to remunerate part of this labor. (Co-dictionary of CC)

The cultivation of a cautious good common sense, in the concrete case of the communities focused on in this project, must also be linked to the desire to discover an ethical-political principle that can guide in the design of a just world, where equal material conditions are available for all. In this context, it is not arbitrary to recur to ethical-political concepts, since by doing so, following the path of Francisco Fernández Buey (1943-2012), one denotes a clear desire to link together ethical and political questions and ideas in order to arrive at normative propositions that lead to a government and joint management of public interests.⁹ As Fernández Buey himself writes:

As far as its innovative contents goes, this desire to meld ethics and politics has oscillated between the affirmation that in the end *everything is political* (when new subjects reclaim new rights) and the affirmation that politics has to be *ethical in a collective sense*, from the public sphere (when new subjects think of themselves no longer as reclaimers of rights but rather as part of what could be a new power). (32)

In all recorded communitary practices there pre-exists an implicit denunciation of institutional and state frameworks that put the demands of the market above those of people¹⁰. The multiplicity of needs that have arisen as a consequence of the capitalist processes of privatization and precaritization of all spheres of life force citizens to respond by trying to invent mechanisms of their own to resolve them. When carrying out these solutions, lessons are learned, contributing to an ongoing process of informal education. This process takes on the structure of an open classroom, where people learn to relate in ways that are democratic, equitable, careful, dedicated, interdependent, and eco-dependent. Within this environment, the conditions are such that individuals can test the waters of a new, participative democracy, with an economy that is cooperative and solidarity-based, that does not respond to the demands of the World Bank of International Monetary Fund, but rather to an ideal of social justice.

At this point of the introduction I must specify that the worldviews of the community organizations that this project focuses on are not naive —they know full well that they are not in a position to directly offer alternatives to the IMF, World Bank, or NATO. That being said, as Léonidas Martín has stated, immaterial transformation of the world operates in the interstices of the structures of the capitalist state, and experimentation with other modalities of consumption, relation, cohabitation, and production creates a pressure that politicians will eventually have to respond to. Surely,

9 Buey writes: "First of all, the separation between the ethical and political, established in the origins of European modernity, has a methodological foundation, but it has been perverted in the practical life of societies. Second, the primary problems that we call political refer to unresolvable ethical principles and, vice versa, there is no matter related to private behavior that avoids political or juridical-political considerations" (33).

10 The book by researcher Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People*, contains this illuminating result.

production and exploitation under capitalist conditions are obligatory relations, and are seen that way by the majority of those affected by them, obligated to function within their existing logic. It is precisely for that reason that the collective vision, attempt, or *meanwhile* represented by these organizations is in and of itself an achievement. This constellation of energies and knowledge all exist under capitalist conditions and are thus traversed by its fundamentals; however, conscious of this weight, they exercise their praxis as if from a place of self-critical awareness of being the product of a concrete temporality and set of conditions. In this sense, this cultural ecosystem of diverse forms of self-organized citizenship does not present itself as a “naïf” redeemer or repairer of an unsustainable system, but instead as proposers of concrete change and mediators of new practices of relations that are not contractual. We are witnessing the display of a collective political project that equally contemplates both social and personal transformation. Their forthcoming narrations not only legitimize their emancipating potential but also discredit the process of stigmatization¹¹ that they have been subjected to by mainstream media, which tends to dispense capitalist ideology, according to the needs of the power that it serves¹².

3. Why an archive?

The Constellation of the Commons is not a conventional archive; it does not politically and culturally reproduce categories that are naturalized and authorized by hegemonic thinking. As a mechanism of power, the conventional archive tends to function as a technology of hierarchization, organizing everything related to knowledge in a given society; they are also a testimony to everything frequently left out or excluded by the powers that be. In fact, in conventional archives the function of the archive tends to be restricted by the operation of the archive itself. For example, as Andrés Maximiliano Tello writes, one infrequently finds reflections that problematize the conditions of the institution the archive is part of or the production of the archive itself, as if archives were neutral spaces and not places where “constraints that make the social order are implicitly naturalized within the archive (at the state, judicial, institutional, organizational, digital, and cultural level), but also what has been excluded and left out (...) seem to not respond to any type of premeditated decision or to any type of systemic violence associate with archival practices” (26-27).

Rather than representing a “naturalizing principle for the organic construction of records” (Tello, 27), the Constellation of the Commons expands the concept of an archive, opening it up to other functions and practices. The archive need not be limited to the storage of (in many cases selective) memory. It can also be a bridge or vessel for communication, a place to connect and debate, an open classroom, a territory for dreaming, collaborating, playing, remixing, establishing relationships, and sharing knowledge, materials, and visions. According to the work of Maximiliano

11 The idea of not forgetting the glimmers of resistance throughout the course of history is also very present in the work of Walter Benjamin.

12 The influence of this process of normalization of capitalist logic and the culture of *well-being* becomes critical in mainstream media communication, as if they represented the only possible imaginary; proof of this is, for example, that Margaret Thatcher’s political party contracted the services of publicity company *Saatchi and Saatchi* for the 1978 campaign responsible for establishing Thatcherism and the Reagan-Thatcher alliance.

Tello,¹³an archive should not “be reduced to the result of administrative activity that is autonomous or isolated from the social body, as it is rather the heterogenous product of a group of social relations and tensions that are much greater, whose condition of possibility is given by a concatenation of bodies and forces that do not pertain at all to any determined social organization by nature” (27). I also coincide with Toni Serra-Abu Ali, cofounder and pioneer architect of OVNI —one of the most important audiovisual archives in Spain— in believing that an archive of the loose ends of History allows us to keep record of things that rarely form part of official memory:

Self-managed capsules of memories of people, collectives, and communities. Small archives that escape the large nodes of power or confront them. Counter-archives, anarchives with concrete functionalities that don't call for a supposed objectivity so much as a subjective intentionality. Linked to a place, to a land, a city, a neighborhood... and to a moment, to its appearance and disappearance, the course of its passage, its needs, worries, and dreams, to its particular balance of what is and is not visible. Unlike large archives there is no purchase of bibliographic materials, nor any extractivist will whatsoever, but rather a deposit that is created and collaboratively self-managed. It is not the result of an exterior gaze fixed on an object of study, that analyzes and classifies it, but rather a rhizome of interwoven memories, which emanates from bonds of community. (Conversation with Toni Serra*) Abu Ali)

For some researchers and collectives such as Andrés Maximiliano Tello and the Working Anarchival group, it's necessary to nominally distinguish this practice from conventional archivism. For this reason, the term “anarchive” is sometimes preferred—I myself have defended this usage in an essay. However, after a conversation with Amalio Rey, a writer and lecturer well-versed in processes of collective intelligence, I opted to maintain usage of the term archive. When aiming to short circuit the mechanisms that produce, authorize, and maintain existing power and knowledge relations, it is vital to empty existing vocabulary of its former meaning in order to “dispute the unique territory of thought that conventional archivists have carved out in the language recognized by the discipline” (Amalio Rey, email correspondence). Likewise, and with an eye towards the democratization of knowledge-creation and access, I thought it important to register this information in a conventional archive. Accordingly, I applied to have this material included in institutional databases, the goal being to authorize its existence. The fact that CC is cataloged in a library not only allows it to be located by anyone who carries out a library search, it also helps ensure that its material will not be lost amongst the rest of the online storage existing for products of the Digital Commons. The cataloguing protocol that I have created with Celeste Sharpe and Sarah Calhoun could be a starting point for a conversation that is pending in the research world about how to jointly manage the library corpus, as well as methods for authorizing and cataloguing digital and self-managed materials.

Finally, by including a digital archive with P2P (peer-to-peer) logic and a *creative commons* license within the ecosystem of the conventional archive, in a way we are calling into question the relationship between power and knowledge. This does not mean there is no verticality inherent to the process of research and its

13 Tello's thesis promotes abandoning a positivist historicist interpretation of archives in favor of a hermeneutic where the archive is interpreted as an event. In his proposal he uses Foucault's position in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, as well as that of Deleuze and Guattari when he writes about the archive as a “social machine,” and that of Paul Veyne when he analyzes the foucaultian method as “hermeneutic positivism” (37).

implementation. In all archival and organizational work there is a certain leadership of experts that inherently carries with it an asymmetry of power. That said, it is also true that we can set up compensatory mechanisms that redistribute power in a different fashion. For example, in the case of the Constellation, I invited the participants of the project to modify the interview questions, which I sent prior to each conversation. This allowed us to delimit the scope of knowledge in an agreed upon manner. I also facilitated participant involvement in the process of editing the final video for each conversation. Once this project is open to the commons, I hope that it is continually added to by other communities that wish to see themselves represented in the Constellation and join a wave of creative energy for change.

4. Why archive in the form of a constellation?

Walter Benjamin wrote the following in 1935: “the crisis of democracies can be understood as a crisis in the conditions governing public politics.” (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction 26). Later, when interviewed by university professors and students in 1976 about his work *Vulgar Lengua*, director Pier Paolo Pasolini gave a call to action to “give a new life to these old progressivist ideas” (79). At many points in time including the present, progressive ideas have been in need of intervention and innovation.

Inventing new tools to record and showcase different forms of social relations responds to this need, allowing us to update and revitalize progressive ideas related to the commons. In the case of CC, updating progressive ideas means thinking transversally and in a complex or interdisciplinary fashion about the structural causes of current social issues. In this sense, the visual organization of the communities around 11 interconnected thematic nodes allows for the creation of a reading that is not only relationally complex but also necessarily incomplete, highlighting a mere fraction of the abuses of capitalism. The constellary Benjaminian way of thinking inherent to this organization allows us to emphasize the importance of linking together the parts, of grouping and regrouping them in order to create shared visions and highlight the complex network of causes to the problems outlined in the project. Benjamin writes the following in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*; I think it is worth rereading here:

Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena, and in no way can the latter be the criteria with which to judge the existence of ideas... Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed. And surely, it is at the two extremes where these elements, whose separation of the phenomena is the function of the concept, become more evident. (14)

The meaning of this quote is perfectly captured in a text published on the web page <http://walterbenjamin.es>: “the constellation prioritizes particularity (...) In Benjamin’s constellations, a concept would not have as much value by itself as in relation to other concepts or universes of concepts, so that concepts will have different values depending on the system or constellation they are located within.” Why a constellation? Well, when one crosses beyond the capitalist threshold and the neon signs illuminating the capitalist fiction burn out, we are enveloped in

a terrifying darkness. When that happens, like for the travelers of antiquity who navigated earth and sea, the only guide in the night will be constellary visions.

To reason, feel, imagine, and think in a constellary fashion about the historical moment of neoliberal financial capitalism, including the naturalization and normalization of its common sense, means considering the spectrum of possible positions against capitalism, opening up our field of vision to our blind spots. Considering the variety of communities studied in this project, the solution to the problems of our historical moment does not seem to be singular, especially not for a revolution that has ethical, cultural, political, legislative, and moral dimensions. It is not just about reducing corruption and violence, nor is it only about stemming the tide of extreme individualism so lucidly described by Robert Reich (26), which manifests itself in the defense of competition and personal interest at all costs (26). It is also not only about intervening culturally with cynical, apocalyptic, skeptical, or utopic positions that nurture a climate of general mistrust. It is in the sum of all of these efforts that we will find a possible way out of this *meanwhile*.

In a text that will be published in *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 23 (2019) my colleague Steven Torres and I wrote in response to the materialist historical turn present in the research we do in the Humanities. We pointed out something that seems important to cover here as well, which is that the primary challenge inherent to this materialist turn is that of abandoning epistemic closed-mindedness and instead achieving a nodal theoretical focus and comprehensive ecological perspective that is not only capable of describing issues, but also attaining compelling results. From our perspective, one of the pioneers of this model of analysis has been Donella Meadows, member of the Club of Rome, and co-author of the first international report about exponential growth and planetary limits *The Limits to Growth* (1972). For Meadows, the change that we need is not only to be found in research, but also in visions. In a conference titled "Down to Earth", Meadows dares to propose that the scientific community embrace vision as an integral part of scientific work:

What is your vision of a sustainable world? Not just solving the problems of unsustainability that are all around us; not just survival, but what you really want. Apart from the physical part of the vision (social and ecological demands), what makes you excited to work in the world, to be part of it? We need implementation talents (a making something come into being), behind that we need models, information, how to form the policies, theories, what went right and wrong, and even behind that we need clarity of our goals, vision, and it has to be socially shared and discussed and formulated. We are lacking in all these arenas, and we have a world that is not meeting our goal for sustainability. (...) It is easy to get to implementation first but before that we need to be sure that our models are clear and above all we need to be sure that we know where we are going (...) we tend to focus on information and the models (...) We tend to fall into the trap of modeling. Our rational thinking takes us first to the search for solutions without even thinking about the vision. We take the last steps first...we are taking for granted the vision or the goal.

Meadow's analysis, a comprehensive and interdisciplinary work reflecting the values of the Club of Rome, is very much in line with constellary Benjaminian thinking. It succeeded in becoming a part of the social scientific fabric, becoming a model for scientific action. Figures like Lynn Margulis, Richard Lewontin, and Robert Sapolsky are representatives of this same vein of thought, which is synthesized by Charlotte Hess

and Elinor Ostrom in the field of Commons Studies, contributing a general vision of the commons of knowledge as a “shared resource” (27). The nodal and constellary format of this archive is based on this model, where thought is organized around a complex vision in collaboration with multiple disciplines and ways of thinking.

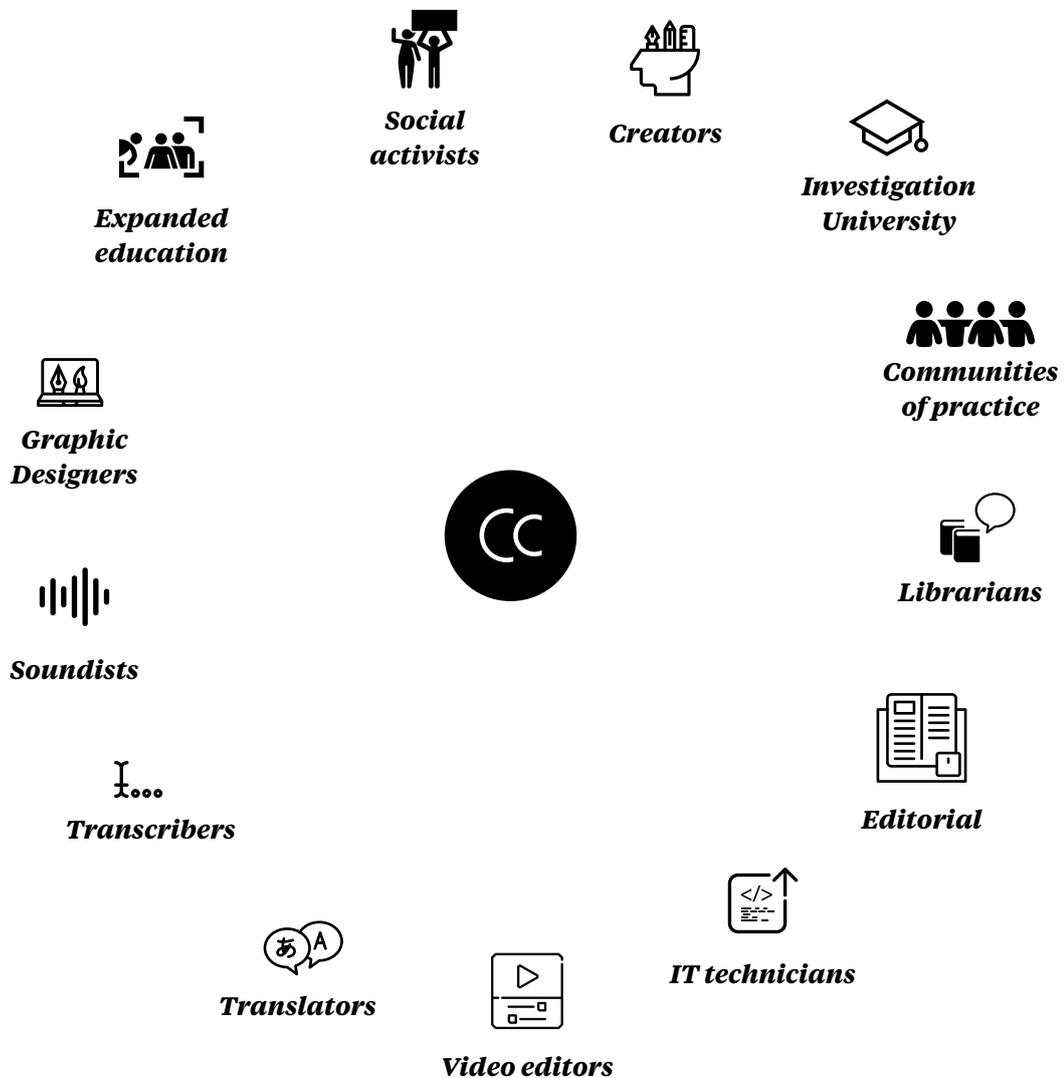
To think diagrammatically means to establish relations and ties in order to open up their possible meanings. If we also think about such a diagram in a nodal or constellary way, grouping elements according to how the parts communicate with one another, then we are learning to call practices according to their names, avoiding the imposition of categories that force upon them a meaning that does not belong. In agreement with the International Astronomical Union, my colleague and astrophysicist Joel Weisberg explained to me that in modern times, 88 new constellations have been identified. I came away from that conversation asking myself, how many new anti-capitalist constellations remain undiscovered? The sky, like a plane of luminous resonances, where those particular cases could be found. A trace of light like a flicker of hope, like a signal that guides the life of the spirit.

5. Constellary Gratitude

Like everything else that is open access, in order to finance this project I had to use personal funds. It also required the investment of vacation time, a great number of trips, and a trimester-long sabbatical that I was able to extend at first with a small grant and later by requesting unpaid time off from my university. In addition to these personal funds and time off, I also received help from grants from the university where I work, Carleton College, in order to fund collaboration with Claudia Hernandez, Emily Bruell, Edgar Felix, Alex Wachino, and Christina Tarazi; all of these people have been indefatigable collaborators involved with the tedious tasks of transcribing and translating the various different texts.

In addition to the above list of collaborators, I must also thank those who contributed the audiovisual fragments that illuminate the project’s 11 constellary themes (thank you to Pau Faus, Mercedes Álvarez, Nayra Sanz, Elías León Siminiani, Oscar Clemente, Cecilia Barriga, and Toni Serra*) Abu Ali); not to mention Susana Álvarez Rodilana, for her camera work on our trips, as well as her assistance throughout the entire editing process. Then there were the wonderful book and digital designs created by Emmanuel Gimeno Lodosa, including his marvelously designed logo! I am thankful for the extra hours put in by Celeste Sharp to transform this project from an idea and metaphor (the constellation) into a digital tool. Also key to this project was the work inventing and co-authoring an open access library cataloging protocol, which was done alongside Celeste Sharp and Sarah Calhoun. I am thankful for the sound work done by Su Lance Xiong, the documentary *ALCESXXI* that Miguel Ángel Nieto allowed us to view free of charge, and the two interviews provided, as a gift, by Oscar Clemente. I must also give thanks for the innumerable volunteered hours spent editing, reading, and contrasting versions of transcripts by Javier Entrambasaguas, Roberto Robles-Valencia, Hannah Sherman, and Michelle Marinello. This project would also not have been possible without the steadfast and volunteer help provided in different moments by two students who took my classes and today share in this communal vision: Alexa Botelho and Carinna Nikkel. There was also the support of Dann Hurlbert, who helped me put together the equipment for each of my trips. I am also indebted to all those who, without having a clear idea of what they were getting

themselves into, believed in me and committed to writing outstanding entries for the co-dictionary. It also behooves me to thank all those who offered to be interviewed, leaving us with a legacy of testimonies of the commons. I am thankful for the fantastic drawings done by Miguel Brieva; the audacity of professors Javier Entrambasaguas, Derrin Pinto and Steven Torres for using the interviews in their classes to test the waters of this material; and for the room and dinners provided to me in the homes of Nayra, Miguel, Laura, Oscar, and Nuria. I am grateful for the long conversations with Steven, Manu, Toni, Roberto, Annabel, Ellen, Claudia, Xabier, Joel, Buffy, Sherrie... There were so many people, so many moments, that CC not only represents a commons of friendship, but also a solidarity made up of shared time, visions, knowledge, support, care, and work. This archive is open to growth and self-expansion, to becoming more robust with experiences, and further nurturing this vision of a *meanwhile*.



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Catacombs Aboveground.

Belén Gopegui (spanish writer), godmother of the Constellation of Commons.

(Madrid, December 16, 2019)

Translated by Hannah Sherman

Goodday, thank you for allowing me to participate in this moment, because just being here is an event, because this project is not just a book, rather it is also an event that will have its positive ripple effects. I'll start by reading some words that I wrote in my novel, *El comité de la noche*; I do not believe that books are written by the individual authors, rather I believe that there are parts of society- sometimes in conflict- that are written through them. For that reason, I've chosen this quote that is like any other, only because I believe it describes with precision a part of what unites us today. It's from the beginning of the book, Alex is talking about a collective's assemblies and refers to one of the topics that they've talked about, saying:

We were talking about the commons and somebody shared an argument that they had heard: they said that we could solve the dilemma by taking a path that neither fights it nor submits to it. They spoke of the example of *The Martian Chronicles*, as on the other hand in *Spartacus*, the slaves decided to leave rather than submit or fight. Of course, neither Spartacus and nor those today allowed them to leave, we don't have rockets now, not even planets to go. The solution, then, was to mutate, they said, mutation which is a way to leave while having stayed. And how is it done? Again, imagine what it would be like not to tear down the foundation but rather to start to construct another world there, in front of everyone, although, obviously, with prudence and guile when it's needed. A kind of hideaway in which you're in motion although it seems like you're not moving and, finally, when the enemy turns around, it turns out that you've already arrived. If we start building it all- the communities, the cooperatives, the okupations, the collectives, the networks, the new relationships, if we mutate, maybe the war wouldn't have to be bloody nor long nor leave everything devastated, maybe it could just be the advancing of those who have known how to cultivate and hold down each stretch gaining towards the sea. If we manage to make them desert their armies, their police stations, their safes. Or if we were so many that defeating us would mean razing the whole country to the ground, every single street. If we manage to build catacombs aboveground, not imaginary but real, streets superimposed on streets, like dance floors on top of the wilderness.

I think that this reflection approaches well the space where this magnificent tool/ constellation wants to intervene, and it's something like the dilemma between "the final battle" and the "meanwhile."

In my opinion, this shouldn't be framed as a dilemma but rather as a sum. We don't have to give up on trying to change almost everything, but that goal cannot paralyze the now. The tool that we're presenting today is not a theory, it's not a proposal, it's, as I was saying, an act, it's a deed. I have in mind various collectives that should become a part of it, and I'm eternally grateful that this tool is not something that's closed, nor something that's theoretically open, but rather something that was born from the effort to prototype a path for those who will join later.

Well, as is known, a material system is something that is formed by two or more related

things, a system possesses properties that its components do not possess, called emergent properties. This Constellation is a system and through it there will emerge, as there have already been emerging, properties that will help us to live and to fight.

Among its thousands of interesting characteristics, I'll point to a characteristic that is minor but is important. I'm referring to the aspect of the interviews, to the wonder of finding cataloged and real the questions that we're always asking among ourselves but that don't seem to form a part of any non-alternative media, for example, the question to Las Gildas: How is your activity different than that of aid and assistance groups that, consciously or unconsciously, reproduce colonial capitalist hierarchies of power?

Or the question to ColaBoraBora: "What does it mean for ColaBoraBora to grow in a non-capitalist sense?" A part of the response given by the representative of this collective is useful to us in thinking now about this tool and in thinking about our lives and our struggles. Ricardo Antón says, referring to the difficulty of economically sustaining- and therefore, with lives, with sleep, with care- projects that are fighting capitalism:

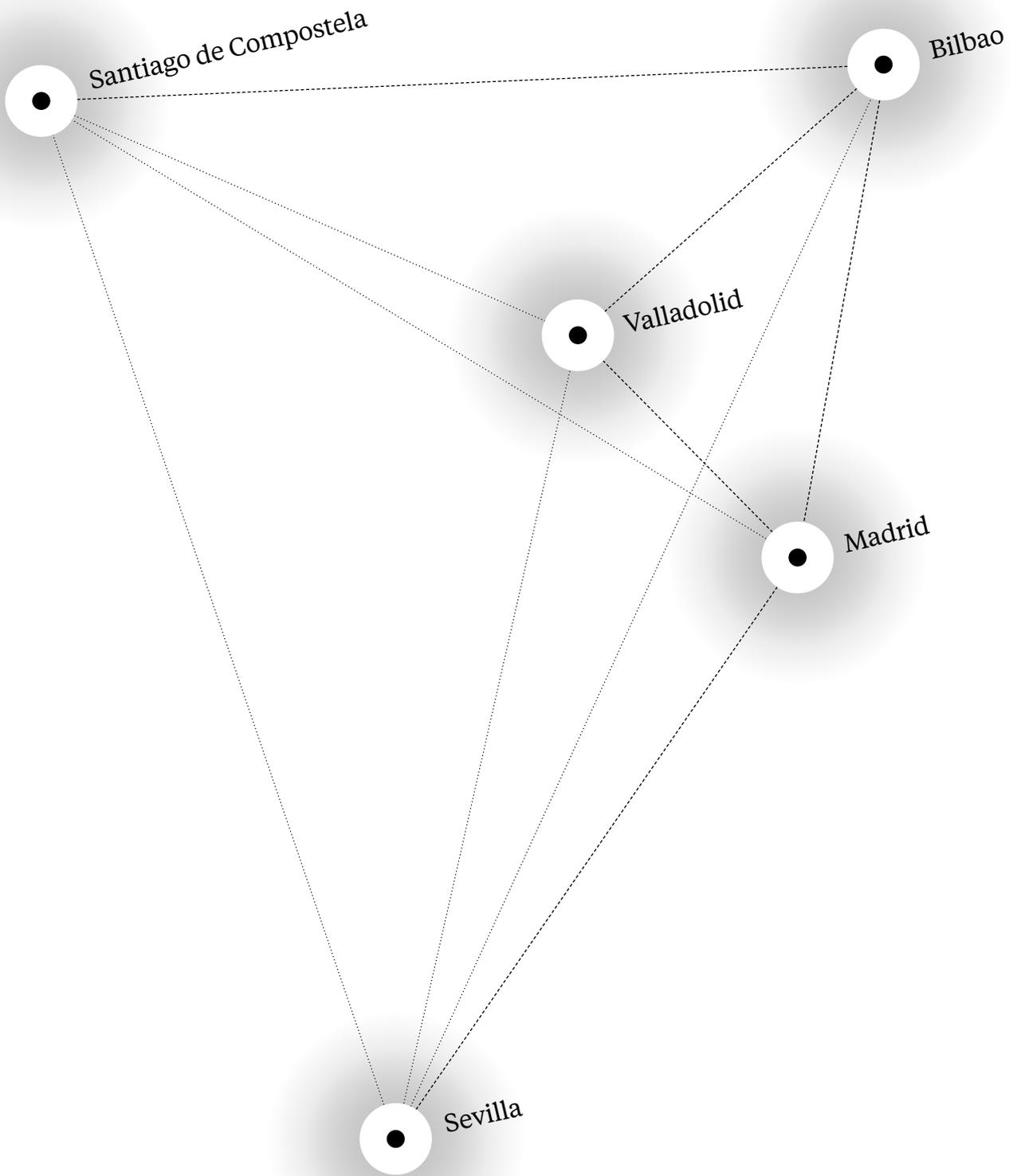
Do we have to think about how to readjust the system in which we're in dialogue with capitalism, just to bring capitalism closer to a space of seeking consensual dialogues, agreements, and of not being confrontational, when really capitalism also has its lions- alluding to the lions that devoured the Christians-?

I believe that the Constellation of the Commons is putting into practice a non-binary logic that is neither escapist nor used as an excuse.

COLLECTIVE	CITY	INTERVIEW DATE
Pandora Mirabilia	Madrid	03/22/2017
Alces XXI	Zaragoza, Madrid	06/01/2017
Libros en Acción	Madrid	06/22/2017
El Salto	Madrid	06/22/2017
Entrepatrios	Madrid	06/23/2017
Teatro del Barrio	Madrid	06/23/2017
Arenero	Madrid	06/24/2017
PAH Madrid	Madrid	06/24/2017
ColaBoraBora	Bilbao	06/26/2017
Wikitoki	Bilbao	06/23/2017
Argos. Proyectos Educativos	Seville	06/28/2017
Santa Cleta	Seville	06/28/2017
Zemos98	Seville	06/28/2017
Ecologistas en Acción	Madrid	07/04/2017
La Selecta	Sierra Norte de la C. de Madrid	07/05/2017
Numax	Santiago de Compostela	12/14/2017
Unitaria	Santiago de Compostela	12/14/2017
La Escalera	Madrid	12/18/2017
Medialab Prado	Madrid	03/03/2018
La Tremenda	Barcelona	03/05/2018
Metromuster	Barcelona	03/05/2018
Enmedio	Barcelona	03/06/2018
OVNI	Barcelona	03/06/2018
Antic Teatre Espai de Creació	Barcelona	03/07/2018
La Troca	Barcelona	03/07/2018
La Tribu Sugurú	Barcelona	03/08/2018
Arcadia	Barcelona	03/11/2018
La Ortiga	Valladolid	06/12/2018
La Libre	Santander	06/25/2018
Las Gildas	Santander	06/25/2018
Sosterra	Colindres-Cantabria	06/25/2018
Colegio Vital Alsar	Santander	06/26/2018
La Vorágine	Santander	06/26/2018
La Molinera	Valladolid	07/18/2018
Casa de Respiro	Sierra Norte de la C. de Madrid	07/20/2018
Trabensol	Torremonca de Jarama, Madrid	07/22/2018
Autofabricantes	Madrid	07/23/2018
Consume hasta Morir	Madrid	07/24/2018
Antropoloops	Seville	09/09/2018
Colegio San José Obrero	Seville	03/22/2019
Resistencia Films	Madrid	01/12/2019
Pasaje Seguro Ya!	Santander	01/18/2019
Fundación de los Comunes	Madrid	03/04/2019
La Bancada Municipalista	Madrid	03/04/2019

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2017

Pandora Mirabilia





Constellation
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Collective's name
Pandora Mirabilia

Name of the interviewee
Soraya González Guerrero

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Reviewed by
Emily Bruell



Tell us about yourself and your project

My name is Soraya González Guerrero, I'm a journalist and I work in a cooperative group of six social workers, I've been working in this group for ten years. It's called Pandora Mirabilia, and we try to connect communication to feminism.

How did Pandora start?

It started with a group of feminists when we were in the faculty of a journal called Meigas. At the end of our careers in journalism, we did not like the available jobs because they were almost all in publicity/ advertising. The job market was bad and the jobs that did exist were not fulfilling and we wanted to do something related to education, communication and feminism. We came with backgrounds in activism and working collectively, and we decided that we wanted to politicize our work environment so we decided to make a cooperative.

What does the concept of a cooperative mean to Pandora?

It means that there are no bosses, that it has a horizontal structure, that it belongs to everyone, that pay is equal, and that we operate with an assembly model. We have meetings every 15 days and we address the point of the day which is usually the work we're doing on economic issues. We're also part of a secondary cooperative called "Tangente" ('tangent') which is made up of 18 cooperatives working in a network.

How do you economically organize this self-governed collective?

Currently, in the cooperative we're all contracted workers. We have a place we're renting, an accountant and manager. There are years that go better than others, for example this year has gone better for us than other years and there have been years where it did not go so well, but we never stopped paying everyone their salary. When we make more money because we worked a lot, we try to take more vacations and make investments. For example, now we have an idea of making more materials like "Un cuento propio" (a story of your own) and we're positioned to keep doing this type of work.

What is the employment model of this collective?

We have a seven hour day and we try to keep track of the hours that we work. That is to say, if this year or these six months I've worked 50 hours or more, then we try to make up for it by having more vacation days or suddenly saying, "I'm taking this day off as compensation."

Are there people in charge of the internal organization of Pandora?

No one is in charge as such. There's one person in charge of everything regarding the locale - materials and technology. And then we coordinate projects. There are projects that come up and one of us always coordinates them. Even if there are four or more of us on the project, there's one person that coordinates that project.

What are the main activities that you do?

We do many things related to training and social intervention. From gender violence prevention workshops, sexist violence prevention, workshops of love and sexuality. And we do a lot of training on topics related to these themes, as much in early education as high school and groups of women in the adult population. That's one of our lines of work: social intervention and training. Also, we do online training about the issues of gender with our perspectives. Because many of us are journalists and we like to write, we have several creative writing courses with a feminist perspective. These are courses that we wanted to have and we've looked for ways to do them. We have not gotten funding from anywhere. Also there's a course we have online that is about eco-feminism, and I believe we've done 16 editions. Then we have consulting in order to make equality plans to make an organization's perspective on gender more transversal. We have made various plans in order to include the perspective within the organization, as much in communications as in the relationships the organization has; in the plans that they make, in how they communicate... Also we have a part of the group that we hadn't really named before but that would be called cultural management. For example, these last two years we've done two campaigns related to sexual violence and feminism. Because of that, we've had to think about everything from how to share out these issues in general to the supporters, how to move it through different districts, different spaces. And it's a line that we have liked a lot, we think it has a lot potential.

Can you tell us about a cultural tool that Pandora made?

For example, "Un cuento propio" (a story of your own) was a gamble. We had no budget, we started to write the stories and we joined with a musician, Camila Monasterio, that also has written parts of the stories. Next, we made a micro-financing campaign using crowdfunding. We spent a year thinking about ideas, selecting the protagonists, the subjects, then we started making the micro-financing campaign. We did an approximate calculation of what it was going to cost to produce it - what it was going to cost to pay the presenters, print, layout, and graphic design. Everything was also done with a fairly tight budget, not at market prices. We have paid everyone but not always at the market price. What happened is that many times the people that wanted to be in the project loved it and the hours, for example to write the stories or to share them, that was not in the budget. To make a micro-financing campaign takes a lot of work and you have to make a communication plan. But that has had other results: on a promotional level, we've met many people, many organizations. We have been able to use those materials in our own trainings. So, the budget of the crowdfunding campaign may not have covered all of the expenses, but the return we've gotten can't be monetized because a lot of it is on a symbolic level.

What is the best way to address the issues of gender in our society?

From our perspective, the ideal would be to have a comprehensive and continual intervention. Since we started ten years ago, we have been getting better at this

type of intervention. There were projects ten years ago, in fact there was one that we had going with various cooperatives called “Con vistas a la Igualdad” (Looking Towards Equality) that touched upon many aspects of education. There were many workshops and there was training for parent associations, for families and for faculty. However, there have been rather large setbacks. In fact, one project that we had with the women’s high school, called “Proyecto relaciona,” (Project Relationship) was a project around love and sexuality that lasted for many years. There were several of us working on it, but also a team of very good professionals, and it was a project that gave training to teachers all throughout the Spanish state. This project has disappeared. They got rid of the title “amor y sexualidad” (love and sexuality) and replaced it with “Educación Afectiva” (Education on Affection) because they did not want to use the word sexual. Later they called it “Educación para la paz” (Education for Peace) and took it out of public the public sphere, really making working conditions take a step backwards. It’s been taken over by a company that doesn’t value equality in its statutes. There’s no compromise or real interest in equality. So it’s reduced everything to March 8th (International Women’s Day) and November 25th (International Day for Eliminating Sexist Violence). But the politicians have no interest in equality. People in technical positions, especially women, are interested. We have found a lot of interest from teachers in elementary school, in schools that want to make contact with us, to know how to proceed, to ask for information, materials ...

Does Pandora’s intervention in the classroom represent a substitute for teachers’ work?

We supplement the teachers; we interject during elective hours, and this is super important because it gives merit to what we’re doing that it’s not merely an extracurricular activity. We’re professionals that go to classrooms and the teachers stay in the classroom, so we put on the workshops during these elective hours. The perspective of gender isn’t usually incorporated in general subject matter, and you can’t expect teachers to be experts in close, sexual relationships. So, just like there’s a psychologist at a school, sometimes there’s a co-teaching figure in a school. Professionals outside the classroom enter and these people can be contracted by a company or can be part of a cooperative.

Who uses the services of your cooperative?

We work a lot with some public administrations doing social interventions in schools or with older women in cultural centers. We have also worked a lot with NGOs. We’ve done consulting, as much to include the perspective of gender in organizations as to promote communication and provide educational materials.

What is the profile of a typical client?

I’ve spoken a lot about the informational social intervention part but, for example, in the courses that we do on feminist writing there is a general profile: they’re young people, in general women, most of the time university students or even some who are older, retired, and who like to write and have an interest in feminism. In the courses we offer on eco-feminism the profile is also women, mainly. There have been men in many of the courses, but only five or ten percent. But there’s an interest in information and knowing how to connect, in this case, environmentalism and feminism. The truth is that these are young women, some older, some retired, there are women from here, from all of the autonomous communities and even from Latin

America sometimes that have enrolled. And sometimes they are in organizations, so they want to get training to later take the information back to their group.

Beyond the realm of education, in what other areas does Pandora take action?

Education is increasingly placing a lot of importance on communication. Currently we're making a lot of plans about communication, for example we're involved in a project called "Juntas Emprendemos," (Together We Begin) formed from various cooperatives that put together training courses for women with business ideas and we link the social and solidarity-based economy with feminism. We're doing the part of facilitating communication.

What does it mean for Pandora to be a project of the social and solidarity-based economy?

Well, it means that the object of our work isn't profit. Of course it involves being able to pay workers, but also to provide quality, dignified working conditions. And later becoming a cooperative. For me, it's fundamental to work in a network, and I'm not interested in growing exponentially, I want to open networks, to help other people create their own cooperatives. I'm not interested in Pandora becoming multinational. What does interest me is for there to be many Pandoras and for us all to work in a network together. So, becoming cooperative, fair, quality work, and something I think is also really important is care and self-care within these cooperatives. We speak about holistic sustainability: being sustainable on an economic and a human level. Looking at how we handle the stresses and excess of work. Now for example we're in a moment of crisis of care because many of us are going to be mothers, so we ask ourselves, "What do we do in a moment where we're going to see various decreases in number of workers and how do we handle this without going crazy and while being able to guarantee these people a place to return to in the cooperative in the same conditions?"

Where does Soraya place herself within feminism?

To me feminism is really "feminisms" because it's feminisms in plural and there are many streams and it's very diverse. I like things I read on various different feminisms or ecofeminisms that reverberate with me... there are many offshoots that all seem incredible to me and I think one can learn from all of them. I think you shouldn't reject any of the offshoots...for me it's essential that feminism is anti-capitalist because if it's not anti-capitalist, well that seems incompatible to me, doesn't it? This capitalist model is unsustainable and chauvinist so it has to be feminist and anti-capitalist and open to diversity. It doesn't only speak for one type of women. There's not a single figure of a woman, there are many ways to be a woman and to be a feminist.

Where does Pandora place itself within feminisms?

We define ourselves as feminists and we have a simple and clear dedication to feminism and what has been able to change is that we have thought of new ways to disseminate feminisms. Like for example the exhibits, or for example the stories we've written. Since we're also searching for more artistic and creative forms to ensure that feminism reaches the "fourth layer of the onion", to use a metaphor, and that it doesn't just stay among people who are already convinced.

How do you see the present and future of Pandora?

I think that right now we're pretty consolidated and that we've passed through a crisis that didn't succeed in stopping us. I think we have passed through the worst years and that now we have a trajectory and our own projects. I believe that additionally we've learned to diversify and not have just one crop that could leave us with nothing if we were suddenly hit by a plague, right? We plant seeds in many spaces and are always opening new doors, new paths, and I think that this is the key to our resilience. So, I believe that I see Pandora as my life, my work, and my community. So I think that we still have many years in us and we'll continue changing because between new people or other people seeking excellence will join...I see a long future with changes and comings and goings.

From Pandora's point of view, what does it mean to grow in conditions that are not capitalist?

Well, the objective is to come into play in public politics. There should be many projects for the world, not just for people who can pay for them. That way the courses we offer can reach tons of people. For me the goal is that feminism and education in values and equality of opportunity reach as many people as possible. And fortunately, we're not the only ones who can do this. There are many other entities, collectives, and organizations.

Alces XXI





Constellation
of the Commons

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Socixs del colectivo

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Palmar Álvarez-Blanco (Minnesota) The four-day conference of ALCES XXI takes place in the city of Zaragoza from July 3rd to 7th. Yesterday, Monday, July 3rd, we had our first meeting with all those who had just arrived in the city, and we did an opening ceremony at the Zaragoza deputation. There, we gave the title of honorary members to two people who have helped a lot: Vicent Fuster, the tourism deputy here in Zaragoza, and Ramón Acín, the writer who accompanied us in the first workshop in Valladolid in 2011 and who offered to help us manage the event a bit with the council. After giving out the titles and having a very good reception set by Vicent, we went to drink wine at Salón del Trono. There, we spent some time celebrating the arrival of those who had just gotten to the city and preparing a bit for the following day. After the wine, we left to accompany the guests who had just arrived in the city, who are very diverse people. We had Constantino Bértolo, Belén Gopegui, Diego Escusol, Nayra Sanz, Miguel Ángel Nieto, people of the collective world like Zemos98, Pedro Lucas, and Toni Serra-Abu Ali who came from OVNI (Barcelona Observatory of Unidentified Video). Well, we were there drinking a bit with them to welcome them to this event, and then the members of the group left to continue working until early in the morning.

Directly to the Zaragoza Radio

Palmar Álvarez-Blanco: Hello, good morning. Thank you very much, you too. Well, ALCES XXI, the 21st century Spanish literature and cinema association, is a collective created by people from the world of education, teaching, and research as well as cultural agents, so it includes a range of movie directors, editors, and producers. We are very diverse people; we are not only professors. It is true that there is a great percentage of participants from this year who come from the United States, and almost everyone who is here are people who teach literature, culture, and cinema in Spanish in the United States at the university level. We come together every two years. The first workshops opened in Valladolid. The University of Valladolid welcomed us there. The second ones in Madrid. We were welcomed there by Esther Bendahan at Casa Sefarad. The third ones we did in Soria. There, the Antonio Machado Foundation with José Ángel González and Graziela Fantini welcomed us, and now we're in Zaragoza. I don't know where the next ones will take place. It depends on who invites us. What we normally propose to the cities is that they admit the cultural activities in exchange for a place to develop the conference, so it's kind of a sharing of spaces.

Ana Luengo (San Francisco) ALCES is not just a couple of workshops, because you know during the time when there are no workshops there are people here, not just scholars, who you can communicate with, and suddenly, something catches your attention or you remember people who are thinking about similar things perhaps from a different perspective, other approaches but with who you can communicate with.

Sebastiaan Faber (Ohio) The people who I meet during workshops often become part of my professional circle of colleagues, conversation partners, co-authors, as well. The workshops are isolated moments, three very intense days of contact, but they go a long way because they change practices afterwards and allow for longer term projects as well.

Ana Luengo The workshops are a space where we work intensively for a couple of days and spend the time communicating, discussing things, which I think is very important, something that's been achieved in some way with the new sensitivities like active listening; trying to listen to others to the point of being able to rearticulate many things.

Berta del Rio (New Jersey) What I learn and discuss in ALCES, obviously, permeates all dimensions of Berta as a daughter, Berta as a professor, Berta as a researcher. Keeping in mind that many of the things that are learned here include listening to others from a place of affection, and not with an imposition of judgment or argument.

Isabelle Touton (Burdeos) Something about ALCES that I will never forget is when in the workshops in Soria, 2 years ago, I was in the last general assembly and I thought, "For the first time in my life I belong to a community that has meaning to me."

Susana Álvarez (Valladolid) The feeling when the workshops end is one of satisfaction, of happiness and of thinking that we're doing something that can matter, and that there are people who value it and it can contribute something very important in their lives, not only at a professional level but can be important on a personal level, as well, because they take something from ALCES and from other colleagues.

Constantino Bértolo ALCES is a recovery of what the university should have been and isn't anymore. In ALCES there is a cultural and knowledge concern that to me appears to escape what we would call the miseries of the world of knowledge.

Diego Escusol singing

Photographer Fernando Sánchez

Oscar Pereira (Nebraska) The first meeting we had was in the year 2011. After the great recession of 2007/2008 there was a very important process of re-politicization throughout Spain that those of us who have lived for many years outside have been able to perceive with much clarity and ALCES, in a way, it's a phenomenon related to what I'm talking about, and one that is really interesting in that it can contact these younger people and also participate, so to speak, in this process of re-politicization. It seemed very interesting.

Palmar Álvarez-Blanco In political terms, I would say that ALCES XXI is a non-partisan collective, as Óscar Pereira says, we are plural but not neutral. It's a response to a systemic, planetary and human crisis of people who make up the collective sphere and who want to sit down and imagine a different model for education or for cultural research and dissemination. All this was also born as a response to the commercialization of the University. We're talking about capitalism, we're talking about university neoliberalism, educational neoliberalism. It's worrisome when the research agenda is not defined by the subject itself but by the market, the market of ideas, the knowledge market that also exists.

Steven Torres (Nebraska) And the market, in general.

Palmar Álvarez-Blanco Exactly. Well, it's all cause for concern. I believe that we also become an echo of the neoliberal assault on the Institution, and we have always had this in mind.

Belén Gopegui (Madrid) There is a popular song called "Los que" ("those who") where it says, "Those who take shelter in nuances are not understood," and I have the feeling that the world of culture and education increasingly, especially academic education, covers itself with nuances to defend itself from I don't know what, and I believe that what needs to be done is the opposite. I think it's something that ALCES aims for; that we stop covering ourselves with nuances and start fighting to change things and end inequalities.

Actress Laura Corcuera

Palmar Álvarez-Blanco ALCES XXI is an adventure. The truth is, it's been a process of 8 years, 9 years already. It was created from a restlessness, like a dream, and has been projected over time into something that is changing all the time. It started as a conversation with friends. We were seven friends: Edurne Portela, Steven Torres, Susana Álvarez, Teresa Herrera, Ellen Mayock, and Javier Torre, who decided to embark on something that at the beginning didn't make much sense, and it started making sense as we started to think about it further. It was to create a home, a meeting space between fields that are totally separated and that very rarely meet: teaching on the one hand, research on the other, and creation on the other.

Edurne Portela (Escritora) This initiative was born from what we consider a kind of gap in the profession, a space in which to resolve some current problems of the profession that had to do with teaching, with the questions of university tenure in the United States, with the way we evaluate our colleagues but also with that lack that we found in the University and that was kind of our isolation from the world of active and contemporary culture and with the world of activism. So, I think that with the ALCES initiative what we were trying to do was to create a space without the common hierarchies of academia in the United States which, despite everything, are deeply rooted, and at the same time that it was a bridge of communication with contemporary culture, with film directors, writers and also with activism that was not yet being developed as such; 15M had not emerged yet but there was a need for action, to transform the world in which we operated. So, it could be a world, a working relationship and a professional narrative and also a much more 'transversal' kind of learning, to use a word that's become very popular now, but that in a way felt necessary from the beginning of the Association.

Drumming

Palmar Álvarez-Blanco And, of course, the great adventure was taking something that was a dream and turning it into an association. The challenge of designing it into something legally. We are nominally positions that function as a collective. Horizontality was always an initial premise and group work was another.

Steven Torres (Nebraska) Effectively, the ideas of the collective and of horizontality were key from the start. From that first conversation we had where we began thinking about what could be done. We had this shared perception that there

were some deficiencies within the field of cultural production, and we thought about what could be done in that sense, how these deficiencies could be met, and how to generate a space for genuine dialogue where these different segments of the field of cultural production that are often totally segmented from the rest and where often there isn't much communication. The editors are here, university professors over there, institute or school teachers over there, playwrights, poets, novelists, essayists, film directors somewhere else. Everyone in their own bubble. And within the academic sphere different non-shared vocabularies are generated instead of trying to generate vocabularies that facilitate communication. That logic of distinction in the sociological sense is often pursued instead of seeing how cooperation, solidarity can be maximized and in some way be useful for society and for the community in which we are in.

Palmar Álvarez Minnesota We obviously always had questions of gender, class and race issues in mind when creating a space where the intersectionality of these problems is discussed not only from the research perspective but from the teaching and creation as well. And then it was about replacing the principle of competition between ourselves for the principle of solidarity through cooperation.

David Vila (Tennessee) Sometimes I think that my grandmother, for example, knows more regarding mutual support than many academics when they talk about it. I think what ALCES has going for it is that it does very well in combining the world of the people who study the culture with the creators of culture and also with the citizenry or with normal people who may not be interested in the study of culture itself, but who consume culture and who live in culture, so I think it breaks down the hierarchy a bit. Everything gets organically in contact.

Plenary session of activist collectives We have Pedro Jiménez representing ZEMOS98, Iñaki Alonso from Teatro del Barrio (Neighborhood Theater), Laura Corcuera from La Selecta (The Select), Guillermo Valenzuela from Nociónes Comunes (Common Notions), Valentín Ladrero from Ecologistas en Acción (Environmentalists in Action), Silvia Nanclares from Pandora, Palmar Álvarez from ALCESXXI, and Toni Serra from OVNI. I'm going to pass the microphone now and you can introduce yourselves.

Oscar Pereira One very interesting thing about this association from the beginning is that it brings together people who do very different things. Not only people who are dedicated to teaching or who are part of the education system. I was amazed to see that writers, filmmakers, documentary filmmakers, and comic book artists like Miguel Brieva also came to the workshops. The possibility of also meeting and getting to know these people and see a little of how they think and how they see the phenomena of culture is one of the dimensions that make these types of meetings more interesting than usual.

Participant of one the workshops: Dear coworkers, I can't stand answering the question of whether I am a man or a woman. To remedy this, we recommend the transformer device that can be used as a princess crown or a beard, allowing one to be Pepita on Mondays and Pepito on Tuesdays.

Nuria García (Workshop Organizer): So this has been our workshop.

Sebastiaan Faber: With the same unusual formats where we set up the seminars, the workshops allow much more interesting and more participatory exchanges.

The workshop that we just had in the first session was on journalism and academia and there were 20 people. There has been a constant conversation, non-stop. People were animated, interested. There have been disagreements, there have been agreements, but I think that people have come out with the idea that this has worked. Nobody has been bored at any point, I believe, while in a typical session of an academic year it is noticeable that people are not learning anything because the formats are not productive, and here, I believe that the energy invested in rethinking formats has been worth it because it works.

Bécquer Seguí: This format explains it well. The most important information has to go in the beginning, and then, each paragraph explains why this information is useful or not.

Jorge Gaupp (Nueva Jersey): I joined ALCES mainly because of the vision that it has of uniting what happens in reality in society, both in the US and Spain and globally, with what we do in our work which is kind of cultural criticism, cultural analysis. We have powerful tools that are useful, but if we are not in contact, we won't learn anything.

Seminar Participant: I feel very honored to have the opportunity to participate in the seminar titled "Genealogies of Sefarad" and the place where we get together, Zaragoza, has a very special meaning to me.

Jorge Gaupp: I also believe that when a lot of people get together to debate about texts and previous work, something interesting always surfaces. I think that the format of the workshop is the greatest departure because the idea is for there to be continuity and for something to be created afterwards.

Oscar Pereira People in universities live in epistemic bubbles... Here you find some postmodern constructionist... talking about the construction of reality and whatnot. Then they leave, get in the car and automatically they forget about whether there is a reality or not; they actually drive while paying close attention to other cars.

Jorge (Jordi) Marí (North Carolina) It's an association that raises above all the question of relevance, of the work we do, making it useful, making it make sense in society, not purely this academic game in which we usually live, sometimes isolated from society. But that what we do has utility, meaning, and this for me is very important.

David Vila (Tennessee) Another thing that I think ALCES does, and that other conferences and other academic events don't, is bring the academic to the social movements. I think that's very important because on the one hand, academics want to study culture and have a social purpose, and social movements are doing that, but on the street, the interesting thing would be to join both positions and cooperate. I think ALCES achieves that.

Palmar Álvarez-Blanco We wanted to emphasize that ALCES is, above all, a praxis and an exercise in mediation and facilitation among all of us here representing different spheres. There is the world of teaching, of research, and the world of cultural and collective agents. ALCES XXI is also a place of analysis and intervention in reality but always insisting that everything we do has to end in a praxis. It has to materialize in concrete exercises and in concrete actions.

Ana Luengo (San Francisco) In these workshops, I have organized a seminar with a colleague, Roberto Robles, on the genealogy of the culture of commitment, to

really think about that. That would be the function that we have, as the people who work in teaching or in any cultural field, to transform society in some way.

Miguel Brieva (Illustrator) Well, the mission of ALCES is something that's being built all the time on the fly. But I think it has to do with spreading different ways of approaching the phenomenon of culture. Creative expressions and such that are usually kept in marginality, in this strange spinning world in which we live, definitely end up having probably some of the most value. At least for me.

Belén Gopegui (Writer) At the end of the day what those of us who work in the world of culture produce comes from many sources that are external to us. So, being able to return that as ALCES proposes and share the materials seems very good to me, and is what I try to do: share some of my materials or my ideas here in the meetings and on the web and in everything that it's being created.

José Ovejero (Writer) I'm a writer. This means that if I'm with university professors, I'm usually the outsider. I'm the guest who arrives, participates, is treated normally, says what he has to say and leaves. Here, it seemed to me that it was much more interesting to be inside. That is to say, you're not that guest, you're a part of everything and that also means that you can participate, even suggest topics for conferences, propose workshops, etc. So it seemed to me that there was a greater fluidity between the academic and the creative, even within the structure of what I was used to.

Susan Larson (Texas) I really like that there are film people, literature people, people who organize all kinds of associations in Spain. It's an opportunity that we don't have in other conferences, with other groups: to connect the artists themselves, writers, film directors with professors who are in the US, in various parts of Spain and in other parts of the world who are teaching these movies, those texts. So, for me, it's an incredible opportunity to talk to the artists themselves.

Section of the documentary displayed in the workshops "The Muted Transition" by

Miguel Ángel Nieto: "At the bottom of the boat, the fisherman sleeps and the mother sea rocks him, the engine sings lullabies. At the bottom of the boat before sunrise, wake up the oars, child; you are already a fisherman."

Silvia Nanclares (Writer) I always come away from the workshops with many contributions from other visions. Also, that idea of seeing Spanish culture from the outside. ALCES' perspective brings a lot to the things that are happening here and that as we are living them, we don't have the perspective that they can have. And I come away with the desire to continue working and to realize or solidify the really rich ideas that come out of here. The desire to reach even a bit of a part of those proposals and realize them.

Constantino Bértolo (Editor) Here, I don't see individualism. I don't see this need to be selling ourselves, this need to become a name, but rather I see a huge capacity to find conversational partners. Something that to me it seems that today it is really difficult, finding people who you can talk with, who you can learn from while you speak, while you teach and while you listen. This is not easy. We have to thank ALCES, which, I can see with satisfaction, has increasingly expansive power and nevertheless isn't losing its personality.

María Dolores Lorenzo (Nebraska) I personally incorporate almost everything I learn

here in my classes. For example, I incorporate documentaries that I've seen here, things like that. ALCES is like a window for me, a window open to new ideas.

Vicente Rubio-Pueyo (New York) The things that I read through ALCES or that come to me or the discussions in which I have already been able to participate already help me think about how I could give classes in another way or find tools that can help me to teach in other ways; it also helps me to link research and teaching, which, unfortunately, are often understood in totally separate ways, so [it lets me] find ways to collaborate and use activities that influence both fields.

Ana Luengo (San Francisco) For my classes, it is vital. From here, I get in touch with people who I may not have even known existed, I imagine things that I could see only on the internet or on my computer. But it is very different to see a documentary on your computer than to see it in a context where you can then start a conversation with the person who made the documentary and you can talk to the people who have seen it.

Jordi Mari (North Carolina) All this is directly applicable to my classes and my research because it makes me much more aware of my writing, of the effect that what I write will have.

David Vila What ALCES creates for me, and for others like me who are still finishing their doctorate, is a horizon of hope, so to speak, because if there were not these types of platforms, then often one loses the desire to continue participating in academic elements because they see they really don't go anywhere.

Sebastiaan Faber For me, it's essential because that proposal of breaking with the formulas and the academic routines is very important.

Megan Saltzman (Philadelphia) There are many people outside the university- artists, activists, architects, lawyers, people of all kinds who are working on many of the same issues that we are working on within the University. They're investigating, exchanging information. So I think it's very important to include them in the conversation and in the action.

Jordi Mari Much of the approach to the things we do at ALCES is very pedagogical and can be applied directly to the way we interact with our students, the type of activities we do with them, the way we evaluate their work.

Susan Larson ALCES gives many of us the opportunity to imagine a different university system. How to imagine a new way of working and a new way of doing research, a new way of teaching. A little outside of these limitations, those limits.

Silvia Nanclares (Writer) What has always attracted me most to the ALCES mission is that idea of breaking the barrier between academia and the world beyond it, always very aware of the privilege inherent in being a teacher, getting a place in North-American academia with all the privileges that that gives you, and the desire to be able to put that symbolic and material capital towards collectivizing those privileges and those resources.

Ana Luengo I think sometimes it seems that there's a verticality of knowledge from academia. It's like the knowledge that comes from academia occupies a

superior space for many people. And from ALCES we try to change that dynamic and say that not all knowledge is occupying a space in the dialogue.

Constantino Bértolo (Editor) This is a meeting space. And in a meeting space what you find are basically voices and real people. This is also thanks to the kind of acts and the type of coexistence produced around the meeting, not academic coexistence but a more personal coexistence, more about exchange of experiences and stories. It seems to me that this closeness, so to speak, of ALCES to everyday experience is what makes one learn and creates the real experience we're so grateful for.

Eduarne Portela (Writer) ALCES was thought of and structured always thinking that it was a space outside of the elitism so typical of the world of culture and the world of the university. That is to say, it was a space in which all the people who wanted to participate came to contribute but also to learn to dialogue, to break those hierarchical structures so common in both fields.

Vicente Rubio-Pueyo New York Something that I have experienced living in the USA is that it's a reality that can never be an individual process. I can't decide alone. Okay, I'll be good, and I will try not to be competitive. It has to be something that has to happen in a collective space.

Eduarne Portela (Writer) I think that behind all this there is this interest that is highly democratic, to democratize a structure like the university or even cultural so that everyone has a place.

Ana Luengo ALCES is not only a really intense experience, but it is also something for the long run, and we go slowly because we are going far.

Susana Álvarez (Administrator of ALCES XXI) There are still many challenges. First, we are few people. We would like to have more people, more people involved who could work continuously during the two years. Not only during the workshops, that support is also very good, but outside them, a continuous work. That would be an important contribution to get. Then, on the other hand, I think we have to make the attendees feel that this is theirs. That it's not that they collaborate with the group, no; the group is all of us. So, letting them know that they do not have to ask for permission to help. It's not help. This is yours. So everyone can work.

Libros en Acción





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
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Location
Madrid, Spain

Collective's name
Libros en Acción

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what is your relationship with this association?

My name is Valentín, I've been working with Ecologistas for over ten years and my task really is managing self financing for the training courses and the publishing house. There are some other things, but fundamentally that's it.

When and how was Ecologistas en Acción (Ecologists in Action) born in the Spanish State?

Ecologistas was created in 1998. After the experiences of some other associations that came from afar, the idea arose to unite many small organizations that already existed in order to found what I believe was the first state environmental organization. Greenpeace, Adena and even Amigos de la Tierra are like branch offices from other countries, so the first organization to be created at the state level was Ecologistas en Acción in 1998. So, next year in 2018 we will turn 20 years old.

What type of association is it and how does it work internally?

It was created, fundamentally, as an association. Let's say that it's a confederation of federations and delegations throughout the Spanish state: Andalusia, the Canary Islands, Catalonia, Euskal Herria (the Basque Country). In Euskal Herria, for example, it's called "Ecologistas marchan" (Environmentalists March). All the federations have an important independence and each federation has groups; there are more than 300 groups altogether. It's a confederation, a confederate association where there's a council that meets every three months, an assembly that meets once a year; it's usually in December because the association was born in December of 1998 and every December, in a different part of the state, there's an assembly where all the partners and members of the federations and groups get together. Then, every three months, there's a confederal council where the representatives of each federation come together, they meet here in Madrid and they comment on how things are. Ecologistas en Acción, in addition to being a confederation and having federations throughout the State, is also divided by areas and commissions. There are areas of urbanism, ecofeminism, energy, anti-globalization, and education. So all these areas, both within each group and at the confederal level, are the ones that do the job of being at the forefront of the problems we're facing.

What is the mission of this association?

The mission is wide ranging. The protection of nature and the environment, the denunciation of everything that has to do with the

continuous impacts suffered by nature and the environment and, above all, we're based on the core thinking of social environmentalism, which is, I believe, what really differentiates us from other organizations. Social environmentalism covers many things, from the conservation of biodiversity to who has the means of production, pollution; a whole series of things that have a lot to do with capitalism and the system we're suffering under. It's political environmentalism that differentiates us from other associations such as Adena or Amigos de la Tierra in Spain.

Could you tell us about the publishing house and the editorial board of *Ecologistas en Acción*?

The publishing house, "Libros en Acción", was founded in 2009 but it didn't start to function as such even precariously until 2010 because, in the end, it was still a publisher that belonged to an environmental association, so it was not a publishing house per se. Little by little it has been becoming more independent and autonomous, within the policy guidelines that the association works under, of course. It was founded in 2009 and we started publishing and distributing in commercial bookstores in 2010. The publishing house started with a small editorial board of three or four people that, due to the workload, gradually left the committee. Now it has been working for a few years with a new editorial board. There are six of us and there are people who write--such as Belén Gopegui or Miguel Brieva--who also publish. There's also Yayo Herrero; Pedro Ramiro, who is also working at Omal; and Çois, who is a very active member of the agroecology commission and who has also written a book; and myself, as well. The projects or works reach the editorial board, and that's where it's all decided. The board makes economic decisions about investment in books, as well as decisions related to content. Above everything is the secretary's office, which is how the Confederation and the association in general work, but really, the editorial board already has a significant amount of autonomy and we're publishing around five or six books a year. The entire editorial board is made of volunteers except in my case, since I'm within the working group of the confederation of environmentalists.

How is the publishing house financed?

Through self-management. The publishing house sustains itself. It's another part of the financing that the organization has, just like the magazine, the training programs, the subsidies to the projects. The publishing house specializes in essays, mainly, and then we have also published some fiction, but more based on drawings, not much text. These are the two main formats. There are also some collections. The most active collection is "Cartografías de vivir," (Cartographies of life) which is where we have published some of the books that have had the most impact. To select what we publish, we value the contents and profitability. We make this clear, we're transparent. We believe that the books are for reading and we try to make them accessible to the reader.

At its inception, what were the goals of "Libros en Acción"?

One of the aims of the publishing house when it was founded, aside from putting on paper the political thinking of social environmentalism which is fundamental to us, was also to become profitable in some way.

What is the publication criteria?



Well, the criteria we use are evidently within our way of thinking and acting-- that is, our day-to-day activism, what we think, what we want to tell, what we want to express and what we want to tell people, not only to those who are close to us but also to people from outside. I think it's one of the most interesting aspects, that we want to reach not only people who are close to us but also a reader who is aware of environmentalism, who is interested, who is curious but who isn't an activist; that is, to reach a reader that isn't working on this on a daily basis. I do believe, after seven years, that our books have a certain credibility or guarantee that they are well written and that the contents are interesting. Therefore, one of the criteria of a publication is that it has to reflect what we are. I say from here that we're open to project suggestions that are logically related to what we are in *Ecologistas en Acción* and with the criteria already mentioned before. From here, I put out a call for people who are writing about these topics to send them to us, both in Spanish and in other languages, and, of course, in any language of the Spanish state.

What are the channels of distribution for your materials?

The material of the publishing house is distributed through various different channels. A typical publisher usually has a distributor. We, apart from having six or seven commercial distributors, let's say, which reach libraries throughout the State, we also have a very interesting alternative channel. We've made a network with 5 or 6 distributors that are very much in accordance with our way of seeing the world and that are also very active and have been for many years: *Traficantes de Sueños*, *Virus in Catalonia*, *Cambalache in Asturias*, *Zambra in Málaga*. We've made an interesting network there that we complement with commercial distributors, but we also sell on our online store and to groups for their own members or for their markets; we also sell in our establishment. This overall means that we reach both very different people and people who are within the network that we work with. The idea right now is to renew the website for *Ecologistas* and, within that website, there will be a blog more focused on the publishing house. That will be where we really plan the publishing extras. In addition to the books, there will be interviews with authors who have written and with people who interest us, there will be images, suggestions, forums and a feedback that we don't have right now. I believe then it will be time to create a space for *Libros en Acción* as a publishing house within the organization but with a certain autonomy. And there we will be able to work very directly, uploading news--not only our own, but also of those who are close to us--and also with our readers, and we will be able to receive suggestions and many other things.

Do you think these materials reach university classrooms?

Yes, but we would like them to do so even more. It's true that these materials reach students through the authors, because some are professors at universities, but I do think that a challenge for us is trying to reach even more. We organize events in universities and for some presentations we invite professors and teachers and I believe that in the university context we are known as *Ecologistas en Acción*, especially in the sphere of environmentalism. It's true that we still have to reach out more, although a year ago we started an experience with *ALCES* that is very interesting and I think it can bear fruit in expanding and multiplying the work we do in the Spanish state with some universities. But yes, it's a challenge that we will be able to address with *ALCESXXI*.

Thinking about other publishing houses with a political orientation, what is distinctive about your publishing house?

Well, I think it's social environmentalism. Social environmentalism is very broad and there are publishers that touch upon it occasionally. We address it from the beginning to the end-- that is, we reach down to the bone. There are also publishers who also do interesting work with political essays, in fact, three or four years ago we were founders of the association Contrabandos (Contraband) an association made up of publishers of various sizes, some with a long history but also some smaller ones, such as ourselves. That association of Contrabandos was, fundamentally, for publishers dedicated to the political essay, because there were some connections. Icaria, for example, publishes things that have a lot to do with what we work on, but we direct everything we publish toward social environmentalism. In addition, what we do is based on formats and authors that are highly committed, authors with backgrounds in activism. Not only are they writers who write, analyze, and investigate, but they are also activists. I think that is a difference that other publishers don't have.

What differentiates writing based in theory from writing based in activism?

I think an activist knows the context better, that is, an activist will be out on the street more often. For example, not too long ago we published a book about fracking, about the experiences of collectives around the world that told their struggle against fracking in the first person (in the United States, in Australia, in Germany, etc.). We were able to do that because we have an important international network of activists with whom we're connected. I think that activists live on the street, they live this day by day and I think that their way of writing and their way of transmitting is distinctive because they are not analyzing and prioritizing and proposing from above. In all books, aside from having exposition about the topic and analyzing it, we try to offer alternatives. We don't want to be catastrophists, we always want to provide alternatives and those alternatives are contributed, I believe, from daily activism, because it's the only way you are seeing reality and you can look for alternatives. It's not only a matter of telling the story and talking about the negatives, about where we're getting involved or where we're currently stuck; there are also alternatives that come from the street that are valid and coherent.

What impact do you think 15M has had on the perception of social environmentalism?

I believe that 15M has had an impact on many things, and yes, I suppose in this area, as well, in how it's perceived. 15M was the beginning of many things; groups were created around topics like this one and also many groups have been strengthened, many small groups. A very important network has been woven together and it has also had an influence within environmentalism, of course. 15M's nature isn't only political, it's also closely related to interests such as environmentalism, antimilitarism and feminism.

What fuels hope and activism in the field of publishing in a moment of political discontent?

I believe that the impetus comes primarily from the passion that some of us have to edit and publish books, which are such beautiful objects. Before this publishing house, the people of the editorial committee had already worked on other things. For example, Belén Gopegui and Miguel Brieva are dedicated to writing beautiful texts and making

beautiful drawings. That is to say, there's a prior passion and that's the beauty of making a book, of taking care of it, of getting it out, even if it's only partly yours—after all, the book is always really the author's and, in the end, the reader's. We're also driven to continue tackling the conflicts that exist between society, human beings and nature. I think there are many conflicts and many issues that aren't adequately processed even in the media, because of that urgency that never grants one the time to talk deeply about these issues. Nor are they dealt with sufficiently in the publishing world, because there are not that many books on these topics. I think there's a drive to continue creating thought, to continue transmitting ideas that seem wonderful to us. We have published books like *Rebeldías en común* (Rebellions in common) about the common sphere, or *La gran encrucijada* (The big crossroads) about the collapse. In the books there are notes that motivate us to continue creating alternatives and ideas so that people can reflect and debate. I think that paper is simply one more way to do this, and we think it's beautiful to continue to create, especially as you said, in moments of inactivity after the 15M, in these much less intense moments. Well, I think that books are another way of thinking and reflecting; besides, these are rather unusual books and there are wonderful findings inside them.

How do you picture the growth of the publishing house in the future?

To be honest, it would be very similar to what we have now; it's not really a matter of money because then we would become like Random House and it would be horrific. I think we're fine as we are. We would like to have better communication because within the publishing house we lack communication. What you said before is true; there are readers out there who are interested but have not yet heard of the publishing house. It's true that we have the challenge of making our books more and better known. Is that accomplished with money? Well maybe it would be good; perhaps it would be nice to be able to translate some of those wonderful books that are being published in other countries. Perhaps it would be good to have greater dedication, both from the board and from myself, that is to say, to have more time to dedicate ourselves to this publishing house... If that means money, then it would be good, but it would be for these things.

Why do you think that social ecology is still an unresolved issue at a time like this of environmental and social crisis?

Well, as far as the ecology, I don't know why it seems like environmentalists aren't viewed very positively in society. Everyone says that they are necessary given climate change, pollution, etc., but then environmentalists aren't really viewed favorably either by those in power, obviously, or by normal people. I understand that being an environmentalist entails the stereotype of being old, outdated, but I don't know... maybe people believe that there are other priorities when really what we're defending and what we're fighting for is the fundamental priority, that is, the survival of human beings despite the continued attack of capitalism, of consumer society, which is devastating everything, including the environment we live in. But people see other priorities. For example, if someone is unemployed, the first thing they want is to have a job and it doesn't matter whether or not that job leads to contamination or exploitation, they don't look any further. Once a person has money, they can address other things, they say, for example. So it's a subject that isn't a priority for those in power, obviously, nor for ordinary people, because it has not been well explained. Climate change is very much a recurring topic, but 15 or 20 years ago climate change was a fantasy. Now we have indicators that are telling us that there's a very serious problem and 20 years ago it was not. These are little steps that are taken and at some point it will sink in, I'm convinced, for sure.

El Salto





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
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Collective's name
El Salto

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what is your relationship with Diagonal and El Salto?

My name is Martín Cúneo and I work as an editor in El Salto, among many other things. I've been in El Diagonal since its inception, more than 12 years ago, and now I'm revitalizing the campaign of its new stage, El Salto. I work on tasks for the campaign, from weaving alliances with other projects to defining and developing its web presence.

Can you explain what Diagonal was?

Diagonal was born in 2003, at a time of great social mobilization when there was no media further left of the newspaper El País, the main social democratic medium in Spain, to cover or give representation to all the things that were happening on the street. Then Diagonal emerged as a proposal from social movements to give voice to everything that didn't find representation in the media. In Diagonal, a whole series of people came from other media outlets such as Molotov, Camisa de Fuerza (Straitjacket), and the Asamblea de Periodismo (Journalism Assembly) with the idea of making a form of journalistic-quality media that reflects all the things the mass media doesn't cover. We launched a proposal and got more than five thousand subscriptions, which allowed for continuity in a project that many said was impossible because it works without advertising from large companies and with an assembly system, without bosses, everyone being paid the same, sometimes not even being paid. During all these 12 years, we not only endured but we became the school for many now prize-winning journalists. For example, in the last big photojournalism awards ceremony in Spain, the three that won were collaborators with Diagonal. And not only has it been a school of journalism, but everyone in the new wave of politics, at some point, has gone through the pages of Diagonal: Pablo Iglesias, Iñigo Errejón, Ada Colau. I don't know if this is something to be proud of or not but it's a fact.

Why did the Diagonal project end and El Salto begin?

It's not that Diagonal ended but that its closing was used to launch something bigger. There came a time when we realized that we had reached the ceiling, that we have accumulated too much inertia and routines and that the only way out of that stagnation was to plan out a completely new thing with more people. Stagnant waters always end up stinking, and that kind of happened with Diagonal. We're here again with a sufficiently exciting proposal to be able to draw attention in a world where we weren't the only ones to the left of El País; there were other media that were also competing for a more politicized society that demanded that critical information. We believed that it was necessary to make a strong commitment to create a great medium

like Diagonal that works based on other principles: democracy and horizontality, quality with demonstrable independence. Everyone says it's independent and what we're interested in is creating a method that guarantees that independence, not at a fixed moment but over time. So that what happens with so many other media sources that say they are independent and ultimately end up depending on banking or the large multinational advertisers doesn't happen to us.

Why the name “El Salto” (The Leap)?

El Salto comes from a tribute to the first leap taken by El Molotov magazine, which later became Diagonal, joining other media and other projects to answer the question of how we can make critical information reach a broad audience. El Salto is, once again, the same question. This time, it's doing what was done with Diagonal but on a larger scale, including eight territories, with alliances with 30 media platforms and with a much bigger scope than I think El Diagonal had at the time.

What part of the project do subscriptions fund?

Unlike other news outlets, the subscription, both in Diagonal and now in El Salto, contributes almost 70 percent of the funding.

On the web they say that El Salto “is a proposal promoted by the Diagonal newspaper and more than 20 communications projects from all over the State to launch a new media in 2017.” Which communications projects are you referring to? Does the principle of cooperation or competition predominate among these projects?

Well, there's all kinds of things, from already existing media outlets that launched El Salto with us, like Arainfo in Aragón, or El Salmón Contra Corriente (Salmon Against the Current). There are other projects that are being created as support or allies of El Salto in Andalusia, Galicia, Navarre and also people in Extremadura, in Asturias... There are many territorial projects, some that did not exist before and some that already existed, and many that use the platform of El Salto as another method of diffusion so the work isn't duplicated. If for example we're interested in the topic of intersexuality and there's a collective like Pícara Magazine, they're the ones who work best on gender, feminism, etc., we make an agreement with them, and instead of working on the same thing, we optimize and between these two media outlets we pay better for collaborations with people who write. For that, we distribute the news on paper, they do it on the web, we don't compete and we're optimizing limited resources to have a wider impact. That is, collaboration over competition is one of the fundamental principles.

How will we see El Salto disseminated?

We started with the paper because it was what was easier for us and because we need to build and develop the web version. It's a complex website that enables us to host television, radio, and different territorial platforms so that it's a completely decentralized website, there's no central house but each territory, each autonomous community, will see a different website. We tried to correct Diagonal's mistakes, which was to focus too much on the paper and to forget the web, radio, and audiovisual presence. We understand that it's in the audiovisual medium where you can overcome the limitations that we encounter when reaching an unconvinced or wider audience. It's also complicated because many times the financing is tied to the paper and not so much to the web or the audiovisual, and then it's very difficult to get out of that spiral.

On the web, you speak of El Salto as a democratic platform; what makes it that way?

We're really inventing it, because there aren't many; there are small, horizontal democratic news sources, but there are no medium or large-sized media platforms that work in this way. For me, democratic primarily means that the property of the media outlet is collective, that it doesn't belong to a small group or doesn't even belong to the workers but belongs, to begin with, to all the readers and all the people who make the platform possible with their subscription. In this cooperative structure, subscribers have 40 percent of the decision-making capacity, meaning that 40 percent of the medium belongs to the subscribers; the other 30 percent belongs to all the people who collaborate with the project and are a member of the collective but aren't employed, and the other 30 percent belongs to the employees. It's not that it's "owned by" these parties, but that represents the weight that each one has in making decisions. Another thing that makes a news outlet horizontal or democratic is that large decisions are made in assembly where all positions are eligible and revocable, as well as basic issues such as that there are no hierarchies. There's no boss or director; everyone receives the same salary based on the work they do—the same hours worked means an equal salary.

In terms of content, are you also a democratic medium?

That is yet to be discovered; a democratic medium right now may be Twitter. In this sense, we want to open participation channels and make it easy and possible to participate, but we believe that the information must be credible and corroborated, and that does require some control of information and the pace of creating training prevents us from being able to discuss and approve everything. What we do is an evaluation *a posteriori*, including fairly large participation when proposing and deciding content, but with everything thematically organized beforehand internally in the collective. There, we do propose issues. And then we host a participatory assessment with the collective publisher, with partners and with related social movements where we evaluate the potential for joint efforts for the following year.

Can you define what a "collective partner" is?

We have what's called "collective social figures," which are related social organizations that share the need for a news outlet like this to exist. They support the project economically, although that money isn't very significant, but it's a form of commitment. They'll participate in an annual meeting to outline the priorities for the following year. We haven't done that yet, but it's one of the ideas for the following year. For example, Ecologistas en Acción (Environmentalists in Action), Viento Sur (South Wind), these are already "collective partners" and right now there are about 30 or something like that, and that number is growing; there are also unions, like CNT for example; there are a good amount.

Does El Salto have a specific political affiliation?

I would say that we have a *movementist* belief that basically is summarized in that each person you ask is going to tell you something different, and that is a wealth that this project has. There are anarcho-sindicalists, communists, people who go more for the institutional route, people who don't agree with that, etc. But I think that in common there's a certain faith or conviction that the main transformations take place from below. That doesn't mean that we completely discard institutional

work because we believe it's another way and whoever wants to can try it. What we will do is reflect that work and try to make sure that those people who are trying the institutional way, often with good intentions, meet the demands of society that arise.

What is your relationship with institutions?

Well, at an informative level we try to make our main objective—at least as I see it—at this point of institutional assault reached by the mayors of the main Spanish cities, to push and drive these governments to make real policy change and not miss this opportunity that may not come again. That is basically the relationship. Many people who are in these institutions know us, but that is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it opens doors to us to have publicity, but on the other hand, it's complicated because sometimes you have to get their attention. Although you know them, you have to do it, and it's always a pain.

On your website you wrote the following: “Our objective: to create our own medium with greater resources and capacity for impact that contributes, from the field of communication and quality journalism, to create social transformation and to create other stories about reality from analysis, research, and humor.”

What are the groupthink-based stories that El Salto tries to counteract?

Well, to begin with, connected with what was said earlier, that mobilizing is useless; that only work from institutions produces real changes in society; that things can't be changed; that things are the way they are; that the European Union is immovable; that policies of stability and cuts are the only way out; that there's nothing to do but head towards the climate-induced end of the world. That's kind of the groupthink happening, I think, but not only of the Right, I think it's also in the so-called “politics of change” and in Podemos, which also share many of those principles. I think one of the main communicative functions of El Salto is to counteract this avalanche by saying, “No, look what happened here in the Spanish state with 15M.” It really has been the 15M, at least we see it that way, who has made it so that in Spain there's no xenophobic reaction to the crisis. Everyone knows that the people responsible for the crisis were the bankers, not the immigrants nor the refugees, as is sometimes in other countries like Great Britain or France.

How did 15M influence the inception of El Salto?

Well, very much. It's a delayed response. In other words, we started talking about El Salto in 2013, more or less when it was clear that there was an increase in the demand for critical information, that everything we had been preparing for more than a decade came to pass...and it caught us flat-footed; we did not have the size nor did we have the infrastructure and resources to meet the demand for critical information that was required based on the content we had been producing for ten years. Suddenly, all the mainstream media were talking about evictions, debt, wealth sharing, corruption, and we were left saying, “We've been preparing for ten years, and when it happens, we don't know what to do.” We didn't do very well, we were in a way a reference for certain people who were there, but we were very small and unable to have the role we could have had if we had sufficient resources. Other media also emerged that went to occupy spaces such as El Diario.es or the online version of the newspaper Público, Infolibre (Free Info), Mongolia. A lot of media emerged because there was that lack, because we were there but we did not know how to do it at the time. So El Salto is a way of saying, “Let's try

this proposal to build a different news outlet that works in a different way.”

How have you navigated the lack of female representation in the media?

Regarding the issue of gender, we're aware of what is underrepresented in authorship, in the sources, in the interviews; you can see from the first figures that we do make an effort so that practically all the interviewees are women and almost all the opinion pieces, which are typically like a monopoly of men, are women's pieces. So yes, we have taken special care in that, other things can escape us but in the interviews and in the opinion pieces almost everyone is a woman.

What space do voices of migrants or minorities occupy in El Salto?

Not only migrants, there are also minorities here in Spain like the Romani who aren't represented. This community is even more invisible than migrants. For example, we have a blog of people of Romani ethnicity who were in Diagonal and will continue in El Salto, and that's very good because the space is open to very different voices. Yes, we're attentive to all that, but it's true that we have put almost more focus on the issue of gender and now that you ask me, I think we've left it kind of forgotten.

What is the hallmark of Diagonal and El Salto?

An activist journalism in a certain way, sometimes more journalism and sometimes more activist, that tries to show the complexity of the processes not in black and white, not trying to demonize the processes nor put them up as ideals.

Is there a truth behind journalism?

I don't think there's a truth behind journalism. I think that depending on the focus, there are approaches where if you take a picture of a demonstration you can focus on the people who are protesting or the people in their cars who can't get through the traffic. Normal, traditional media focuses on people who have problems getting to work. We focus on the protesters; neither has lied. In other words, the “fake news”, I think, is a detail that the media has invented. That's not so important compared to the number of poorly focused or badly situated approaches, which are much more dangerous because they notice much less. What you have to be worried about is the information that the big media are generating, which isn't false but is simply focusing on the one percent and not the ninety nine.

What is El Salto's goal for growth?

Well, on several fronts. First, when we have the web that will allow for growth very close to the territory, to the local. What we're going for is what we call “a local scope and a global analysis,” allowing each page of each territory's copy to be personalized and ranking and valuing the information that is produced closer higher, but without forgetting the global context. They are dependent “nodes” that are fed by a general “node” that provides them with state and international information. Then each local node adds the information of its territory in such a way that the local part and the global part are combined in a single node.

We believe that it's a fairly new modality to not make the local go to a tab or make it buried among a lot of other news that isn't general, but centrist, because

in Madrid we always think that Madrid is the center and that local things about Madrid are general. Nowhere else sees it like that, much less other places in Spain. Another way of growing is strengthening the same alliance that we've made with media in Spain to connect with media at the European and Latin American level.

What has it meant for you, personally and professionally, to participate in these projects?

It's been lifelong school. It's been my life. I've learned practically everything I know in various areas like design, how to love a campaign, how to write, how to interview, how to understand complex processes. I started as a designer, then I ended up coordinating the closing of Diagonal, then I was an editor and now I work in advertising. I've done a little bit of everything, and right now I do everything at the same time. Well, and now I'm working on the website too. I think it's, I don't know how to say it, it's an issue of not only activism but also realization, of having something of your own where you can really do it better or worse...I always say that the ink to make a good or bad article costs the same, that it's up to us to be able to give it the best we have, to make it really useful, to make it worth something.

What has been or is currently the biggest challenge in both projects?

Well, the job insecurity and considerable marginality. The story of Diagonal is the struggle of how to make the principles compatible with the impact; it seems like either you have a lot of principles and little impact, or few principles and a lot of impact. So trying to find a balance in that. To do something that reaches people but has principles; that is, not to sell yourself to the devil at the first chance to be able to reach people. That was really the question behind Diagonal, and it's the question behind El Salto.

What is needed to open a medium of communication that reaches a majority?

To make a news outlet, you need permanent jobs like: management and administration, subscribers, distribution, accounting, and advertising. This can be done with five jobs plus the advertising; that is, there would be six jobs. You could reduce it to three if you want, and all of them would be done poorly. Each news outlet would need three positions so that the rest of them can dedicate themselves to content creation. What happens, and it happened to us in Diagonal, it happens to every news outlet, is that they end up devoting too many resources to management issues and can't fully develop the content part. So, in the end, most of the resources go to nothing. So the logic is if we link up many media outlets, we can optimize all those resources. Someone who manages six hundred subscriptions can manage seven hundred, and if they split the cost of good software, that person can manage five thousand, ten thousand, or twenty thousand. Then, the economy of scale, especially generating a clear reference that draws attention, that generates hope; that gives people hope of creating a news outlet that can cope with all this manipulation and the lack of principles in communication. This was kind of the nucleus of the idea of El Salto. It's kind of the idea of the theory of the space-time continuum, to create a mass that arches through space-time and attracts everything from attention, to subscribers, collaborators, advertising, etc.

Do you think cooperation is a challenge in communication projects?

Of course. I believe that communication projects are too connected to the ego, to different egos and media figures that gain followers or prestige on talk shows. That has been an obstacle. We're constantly struggling with that, even inside here. We have always said that there are no stars among us, and that's something that has encouraged us not to kill each other and also to unite with other people. But it's still difficult to find the right point of cooperation in which the two come out earning exactly the same and neither is left with the feeling that another is earning more than them from that collaboration.

Is El Salto a response to a moment of political discontent?

This a moment of great disillusionment with everything. With this language of "you have to get muddy," "you have to get dirty," "politics is like that," "you have to give up everything you believe because it's the only way to do it," etc. We, in that dead context where nothing moves but where people are still very aware of everything that the 15M meant, decided to launch a big news outlet that works with other rules. And it worked to a certain extent with good results. We now have 2,600 new subscriptions, which is pretty good especially considering where we came from. Not only that, the gravitational field that we created around El Salto worked to attract interested people despite us being accused in other media of being the medium of the Podemos party. It seems that people now want to advertise more, to go to the kiosks and buy it. These are things that indicate that there's a return of hope with all this transformation and this novelty. Now whether it will last or not, I don't know.

Entrepatrios





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what's your relationship with this project?

Nerea: I'm Nerea and my relationship with this project is that I'm one of the people who will live in the building in the future Entrepatrios in the Carolinas.

Nacho: And I'm Nacho and I'm Nerea's neighbor in 2B.

Nerea: I'm in 2D.

Nacho: Entrepatrios is a cooperative living project with the "right to use" system, which is important, the element of the right to use, because there are a bunch of cooperatives out there but one of the values we've added to ours is the right to use. What we're trying to do is to bring back the concept or apply the concept of a neighborhood community, of being a neighbor in a communal sense. It's something that's already present in a way, but it's lost a bit of its meaning, or we feel that it has.

So with this project we're trying to make life easier by sharing things in the building. We're promoting the idea of mutual support, like a social pillar, both inside and outside. This is the key to the environmental aspect, meaning that the building has to be designed respecting the social environment from the inside out, while also prioritizing the natural environment.

And the other part is the right to use, this idea of making life easier and making ourselves rethink these structures that we live in but don't own, meaning the pillars of capitalism, pillars that we understand to carry this individualistic vision that also transversally destroys communities. And from the start we want to take that out of the equation.

What does it mean for Entrepatrios to be a self-managed cooperative?

Nerea: We're coming from a long process of many years of planning this project, and some people have put in even more years, like Nacho. At the start there was already this nucleus of families that was a part of the project. When we bought the site we were more families than could live there, so we began a participatory process among everyone to see what criteria we were going to follow to see who was going to live there.

What criteria did you follow to select the 17 families that are going to live in this cooperative?

Nerea: It was really a set of criteria that, in the end, gave a final score to each family. So we took into account how long they had been with the project but we gave the same weight to how they had been

involved with the project. We wanted to consider something like, maybe you had arrived a year ago, but you had been really involved and you had put in a lot of time and effort or maybe you had arrived seven years ago but for whatever reason you hadn't been able to put in a lot of energy, and we valued that. We valued community, what kind of relationship you had with the other people, to not isolate anyone in the community. This was less important, but we wanted to know a little which people you wanted to live with. And then lastly we considered some specific circumstances, for example, families with dependents, or older people, because there are a bunch of families with kids, but there just weren't that many of those cases.

Nacho: Mostly because among the families that were committed to the project, not many had those characteristics.

Nerea: Right.

Nacho: We gave that some weight, but then when we saw that that didn't reflect the internal reality of the project, we reduced that.

Are all of the families Spanish?

Nerea: Yes we are. Or they're Spanish speaking. We have one Cuban, two Argentinian.

What is Entrepatrios' model of community?

Nacho: Entrepatrios is a bit of a community of communities. So, Entrepatrios is a community, but in the same critical moment that Entrepatrios emerged, other communities started to emerge with members of Entrepatrios and others. That's why I say that it's a community of communities that don't overlap but do intersect.

So, alongside each other, we began collective initiatives to raise children in community, initiatives that nourish Entrepatrios families and Entrepatrios families do the same and nourish the collective initiative. There are other dimensions like Ecologistas en Acción ("Environmentalists in Action), affiliated groups that don't really overlap but also nourish and are nourished by it. And we also have workspaces where we share a physical workspace and those, in turn, intersect with the other groups.

Isn't it paradoxical to create an anti-capitalist project that includes buying a site?

Nerea: The paradox would've been if the city council would have ceded us land like they often do in other European countries with this type of initiative, because for me that is the greatest source of tension in the project. It's a project that challenges ownership, but you have to buy the site as real estate, which is the sketchiest market that exists in this country. And that's a big source of tension for me. But I guess that was the way we made the project possible, and when you enter the real estate market it makes you realize what you can access, and what you can access is your second or third tier preference. And even this requires a lot of economic effort.

What would you change about the article that talks about the right to housing in the Spanish Constitution?

Nacho: Yeah, I would change that it's not true that everyone has the right to a house. It's not necessarily a right. I would make it so everyone has, and will have a home.

Is this a political project?

Nacho: For me, it's a political project in the sense that it's working to find a solution to satisfy people's needs, trying to make people happier, thinking not from the individual but rather the collective point of view. I mean, not the collective within this community, but more generally, like if we were to replicate this, it would really transform the city and make it a happier, more habitable model. So it's a political project in that sense, out of the need for a general transformation.

Nerea: Yeah, I think how we manage our lives every day is political, you know? Managing our lives meaning like how we decide to organize our lives. You can organize your life in a very anti-democratic way or in a democratic way. And for me that's how Entrepatrios is a political project. We're managing our lives from different angles, thinking about our daily lives, the future of the community and the future of the individual, collectively. And we're thinking about other people, keeping in mind issues of justice (regarding the environmental crisis). All the things that you have to think about when you're doing politics, we're integrating into the project to make it holistic.

Nacho: Right, Entrepatrios is clearly a political project. We want to make our lives easier and less exhausting. But more than that we want to be happier politically-ourselves and our greater context. So, the fundamental intent of the project was that it wasn't only our thing but rather that it was something shared and public. But because of our political moment, it hasn't been easy to make this a public project. So there were two options: continue with public pressure so that someday we could make this something open to the public, or, without giving up that fight, make this project a reality. And our strategic focus is, making the project a reality will make it easier to make the project public.

Can you explain what Entrepatrios means by “right to use”?

Nacho: To explain it in two sentences, the right to use is all the benefits of renting and all the benefits of owning without any of the drawbacks of renting or owning. With it, you're not tied to one place for life. With it, the weight or the obligation that you have to a specific space is not yours alone. Instead, it's shared. And what do I think are the disadvantages of renting? Well, precisely that it's not you who decides how long you stay, it's your landlord who decides. That isn't the case here. Here you decide; you stay until you die. Even your children can say that they want to stay, because they inherit the right to use. And with private property these advantages and disadvantages I've mentioned overlap because with buying property the big advantage is that you decide absolutely everything about your home, like if you want to paint. With the right to use, it's the same: you're the one who chooses everything that happens with your home; you don't talk to anyone, you decide. But you can't sell your home. It's not yours in the sense that you can sell it or mortgage it because it's not yours, it belongs to the commons.

How does the construction of Entrepatrios connect to green architecture and to the social and solidarity economy?

Nerea: We looked for a bioclimatic building, basically one without a lot of energy needs. As a matter of fact, housing stock isn't the biggest energy drain in cities but it's still a pretty big one. It's a building designed to have low energy consumption, as in, it'll be really well insulated for both summer and winter. And now, with the

summer that we're having, we're even more proud of how the building will be. Also, we're going to try to meet all our energy needs, which won't be that many thanks to the insulation, through renewable energy production from within the building itself. And also, we're thinking about the building materials. Right now we're in the process of deciding if the doors will be made from wood and where will that wood come from and from what kind of company. And we want them to be environmentally conscious companies that have the values of a social economy. So, from the insulation to energy production, from water usage to building materials ... from the paint, the structure (which is going to be made of wood), to the windows—basically everything.

We've had to give up some things because, in the end, the site is what it is. Also, regulations, they are what they are, but above all we've thought a lot about common things. Like what how we want to use common spaces and, to do those things, what types of structures or equipment we needed to have. So, even though we probably won't have a vegetable garden, we will help to make a neighborhood community garden instead of having it inside the building itself. And there will be a common laundromat and bike parking because a lot of us don't have a car and don't plan on buying one.

How has the process been of creating a community collectively and through assemblies?

Nacho: That's also interesting because as you're designing the building, you're also constructing coexistence. So, the design phase is crucial and that creates tension, because you're constructing community. The habits you have when you're designing are very important because you're projecting into the future. To someone you don't know in assembly in the future, it might seem like the assemblies are useless meetings, because we spend almost all our time together in this really intense way. But there's really hard work being done by the cooperative, by the people who are involved, and there's a ton of collective wisdom between these people, which makes this a very interesting facilitated process. It's really interesting to figure out how to make a group of these dimensions, debating the things that are important to you. And it works in such an efficient and effective way. I'm really happy with this part of collective construction.

What is your model of community?

Nacho: It's a model of mutual support, of making ourselves happier. Again, these are the advantages of a small town, the closeness you have with your neighbors. You won't just be an anonymous person in the building. You know the person who lives across from you and you know that you can ask them for help, and you know that you can take your chair outside and extend your home a little farther as it opens up to the others. Or that we'll put doorknobs on the outside of the doors—we're actually talking about this today—so that from the outside the door opens. I mean, it's the idea of permeability and of knowing the people around you and sharing with them without getting to the point of a complete loss of individuality. Sometimes in small towns there are confrontations. And that's where the idea of trying to have everyone respect these plots comes in.

Entrepatrios is also a learning process. Are you documenting your process to create a story of common use?

Nacho: Yeah, we're already working on it internally, how to make everything we're

learning, all this experience we're accumulating, get organized so that it can be useful to other people, so that they don't make the mistakes that we have made. Maybe, as far as the points that we thought were key issues, it will be important to them to see how we confronted those. We've already started, we just started to organize our story and we want that to be participatory. There's a first meeting planned for July 5 to start that process, so that we can end up with a kind of manual on how to live in community and not die trying or something like that.

What has Entrepatrios' relationship with institutional reality been like?

Nerea: The statutes, for example, were a real adventure because statutes with the right to use didn't exist in the city of Madrid. There were some statutes for some people from the sierra that had made a "co-housing," but for older people, but they didn't exactly apply. We had to talk to the people from Barcelona who were doing something similar. That was an adventure because the civil servants had to actually read the statutes and then approve them, but without any idea of what they had to put in some of those right-to-use statutes.

Nacho: And they would say "But what are you doing? Don't put that there, take this out." And we would say, "You don't have to challenge me on this; let me handle it."

Nerea: That was an adventure and then, with the city council, well, you've experienced this more, but I think our relationship with the current city council of Madrid has been a good relationship, but the reality that we've found ourselves in is that their housing priorities are different because there are I don't know how many thousands of evictions happening right now. So they really liked the project and that we have had good interactions with almost all the councilors, but they have different priorities.

Nacho: We've worked with almost all the councilors and all the directors of municipal companies we've needed to and the answer is always the same: a pat on the back, but then the reality doesn't materialize, and well, it's what Nerea said. They have other priorities.

Where did the desire come from to live in this model of community?

Nerea: For each of us it comes from a unique space, I imagine.

Nacho: Yeah, although I'm sure that it has a lot to do with your education or the friend group you grew up with or the first group you appeared in or your family or I don't know. I guess that it would come from something there, some example, some education. For me, the piece that came from my family was the concern for the sociopolitical. The part of living in community is where I started to get together with people who were in Entrepatrios, when we were all eighteen.

Nerea: For me, it's really a restlessness that was born from my activism in Ecologistas en Acción years ago. That space is where I personally started. On top of that I've always been really involved in the educational aspect of Ecologistas en Acción and there's where we quickly started asking ourselves questions like what is truly important, what are the questions they don't ask in school, what are the questions they don't ask in your family, what questions are the important ones? And that's where you find out that the most important thing is how you live, who you live with, who you share with, and who you surround yourself with when you face difficult situations in life.

Do you think that the current educational model answers these questions?

Nerea: The educational model isn't designed to respond to what is truly important in life. It's designed for something else.

Nacho: It requires people to be able to handle eight or nine hours a day with a predetermined workload, without complaining too much. And on top of that, feeling like they need to personally overcome it. In other words, from the time you're three to when you're eighteen or twenty something (if you decide to go all the way through high school or college), so around fifteen years of your life, eight hours a day you're learning to be in a very specific space. Luckily, there are experiences in this society that challenge that.

Nerea: We have a teacher at Entrepatrios that challenges from the classroom.

Nacho: But, as a system, we're not yet challenging this, especially at the institutional level. I think more and more we're challenging it at the level of practice and that you find more and more people who are beginning to not think that their kids need to do their homework as soon as they get home from school, or people who find it more interesting for their kids learn to talk and dialogue and debate, that they learn to defend their ideas through argument. But at the institutional level, not yet.

What practices and things that you've learned do you think can be important for the formation of communities?

Nacho: One of them is, start working on the issue of group cohesion at the same time you're working on the other pillars. Work on the financial analysis because we've seen that in this market, especially if you're going to go private, your response time has to be really fast when you find the right lot to buy. That idea of finding a lot and then sitting down and deciding if you really want it to work, it isn't possible. You need to know the economic resources that you can mobilize in very little time. Also, when you stop to design a participation process, at least in our case, which I think turned out pretty well, it took four or five months to design.

Nerea: And we're still working on it. The key is to keep trying things over time. Some things work better than others and some cause more tension than others. The method isn't perfect, far from it, but it isn't finished either. For me, if someone wanted to start an initiative like this, the most important part would be to have an issue to address as a working community, and a good portfolio of resources for participation, decision making, and how to come to a consensus because this is difficult stuff. There are seventeen families that are putting all of their energy into a project that for them is their life, their next thirty, forty years are going to transpire there and that's hard. So you have to be careful during this part and I think that bringing some background into this type of process is important because if not, you can get stuck in infinite loops and difficult situations. For example, how to pick which families live together, I think that could have been really tough and very complicated if we hadn't had that experience in how to come to a consensus and how to make it so everyone is happy with the decisions that are made. Actually, the first question we asked was "If you don't end up living in this building, how would you feel?", and people answered, "I would be happy if the process had been transparent" and "I would be happy if I felt like they had really taken me into account."

Nacho: Or that “I would be happy, if I knew that there was going to be support to launch another project.”

Nerea: But we asked that beforehand, and I think there’s a lot of wisdom in the group. So I think that’s important, having worked that out a bit.

Nacho: And there is another thing we’ve learned related to that, the idea of not losing the transcendent meaning of what you’re doing. Understanding the transcendent meaning of what you do means that even where you might stay out of a particular process on the ground level, you’re not shut out of its transcendent meaning. You keep feeling connected to a transformation that goes beyond this housing. Not losing that transcendence is really important. And that transcendence also gets to the point of learning to always be looking at the specific details and the big picture, even when you’re having little spats with your neighbors at the assemblies because you’re tired... don’t get stuck in the details and instead focus on how that relationship has been from the beginning and how it will be after ...

Nerea: Because you’re going to live with the same people for the next thirty years.

Nacho: Exactly, and the moment that you go from looking at them like “Oh shit, you’re gonna talk to me like that?” to “I’m going to ask you for salt tomorrow, and I asked you yesterday and you gave it to me with a smile,” and so you say... “Yeah, yeah, okay.” I think we’ve handled all our issues with this idea and it’s worked better and worse in different moments, but I think that it’s fundamental. And as we see the little disputes people from the new Entrepatrios project are having, I think that they’re starting to settle things in the same way. But they’ve had their little disputes where they stop looking each other in the eye and, of course, the problem seems huge. Look people in the eye and the problem stops being so big.

Nerea: And there’s another thing that’s important to me. In every group, you have to learn how to trust each other. And that you can’t be in charge of everything. Some people do this, other people do that. And that’s really clear here, because there are a thousand little decisions to make and it’s impossible to be in all of those. And actually sometimes that creates tension, because you can’t help decide how many solar panels there are, what faucet we use, the type of insulation, and do the finances at the same time. You really have to trust each other, trust in everyone’s capabilities and wisdom. So I trust that the finances are done well and everyone else trusts that the solar panels are installed by the person who knows that the best. We do that a lot, which is essential to the project. If we didn’t, it would be impossible to move forward.

Nacho: And that trust also comes into play long term, in the sense that, within that dynamic, everyone is going to get their moment. Meaning that if you value everyone’s involvement and if you know that everyone’s involvement is going to look different, you start to see people or things that were central to the project move to the sidelines and people that were on the sidelines become central. For me, understanding that diversity of participation is really important. And also confronting conflict head-on once there’s an established base of trust and mutual support. With that base, we deal with conflicts collectively and we resolve them as a group.

For example, one conflict we had was with the bank. The bank did an initial economic assessment of us and told a number of families that they couldn’t live in Entrepatrios. So there’s a moment when you say “Okay, the bank is going to say

one thing, but we decide for ourselves.” We can’t throw out what the bank said because they’re doing our financial analysis, but we’re the ones who decide.

The bank was asking for an individual meeting with every family, but we decided that first we were going to have a meeting with everyone—those who had been asked to meet with the bank and those who hadn’t—to see how we could come up with some solutions. If someone can’t be a part of the project, that affects all of us. So we began to establish that dynamic of “Let’s resolve this as a group,” which obviously helps us now. However, that doesn’t discount that someone might see herself as more involved because the problem affects her more directly and she could, at any time, make a decision.

How do you navigate the tension between individual desires and collective necessities, keeping in mind the reasons Entrepatrios was founded?

Nerea: In general, I think that part comes relatively easy. In the sense that, there’s a feeling among the group that there’s space for what each family wants, space for your dream... And also, the team that we work with on the technical part of the project allows that a bit. But no one forgets the collective part or the importance of collectivity. I think we all know when to give up our individual part, and there haven’t been any painful individual losses for anyone. When we divide up the houses people’s individual desires become really clear but no one forgets the collective part of the project. So we were able to balance people’s desires and things they give up. I think things are being regulated fairly naturally.

Nacho: I agree, except that I don’t think that it’s natural.

Nerea: Okay, natural or group-oriented.

Nacho: I think it’s not natural in the sense that these things don’t happen by accident. It’s natural, but not accidental. You begin to create these dynamics and you have to work within them, so that’s the form you have to work with. For example, one of the important and fundamental processes is how you bring people into the project. When we started to decide who the seventeen families that would live in Entrepatrios were going to be—and at that time we were twenty-two families—I mean, some families had been around for six months, as in they were pretty new. But it’s not like they had been around for six months with zero history of investment, regarding the personal relationships they had or the fact that everyone had to go through a reception process before joining the project. The key intention with the reception process was to set up a small dialogue where you were interested in the needs of the person who was coming in; but at the same time, you explained the project they were getting themselves into so they could know what it was all about, and we always showed examples of how we were resolving different conflicts so that they could get an idea of what the relationship between the individual and the collective looked like. So you arrive with an image that we’ve shown you of the project, and on top of that we try to show that image in a nice way.

Nerea: Without mentioning the number of hours we dedicate to meetings...

Nacho: You say that to be funny, and you talk about the other things more grandly, so you’re expressing both things. So the person arrives, enters this space, and they already see it, because they identify with what they were told. And suddenly they’re a

part of the snowball. When you've created this inertia, it becomes really hard to resist that to do things differently. I think that's key, and it doesn't happen by accident.

Nerea: Yeah... that's true

Nacho: It's key.

Nacho: This didn't happen by accident. I mean that this project has a social architecture that was designed. I remember a series of meetings we had to decide how the reception process was going to be, because we need the process to be streamlined and not have big obstacles for the new people who come. We already have enough obstacles without adding more from within the group. And before you were talking about things people had to give up, I think there would be two things: one, I think this process also creates this dynamic because, when all is said and done there aren't any individual losses, the things that people give up are understood as sacrifices. What is there are acceptances. "I accept this because I'm part of it, and suddenly it feels like my decision—even though it might not have been my favorite option. It's the logic of assembly. That's one of the reasons for this convening. And I connect the construction of this project with something I like to call 'the legitimacy of sacrifice' which is when you find people who start to defend stances that aren't their own and they say stuff like, "Hey, this shouldn't be that way, because if we do it that way it only benefits me, and it needs to benefit more people."

Nerea: "That would mean I would get to live in the penthouse but..."

Nacho: "...but we should make a decision to benefit more people." For example the long-standing members of Entrepatrios were the ones who put the most emphasis on not making time with the project a priority when deciding who was going to live where, or the newer members were the ones who were saying that time with the project should be a priority. Or people who had proved it was really in their favor to do things by voting would say "No, let's not do a vote because then we won't pay attention to the diversity of thought, like with these two opinions." These types of practices, if you also make them visible, have a powerful effect on collective learning.

What does growth—in non-capitalist terms—mean for you?

Nerea: That this project can be a seed for many more projects, that it can be an example for the institution, and that, in a non-capitalist future, the city housing market adopts a right of use model instead of a property model, because with private property you reinforce the protected model of housing. And, for me, a non-capitalist future would mean that we act as a seed for the neighborhood. That Entrepatrios can be a space where other people can come back and find each other and themselves, because that's not something we invented either... that people can come back to rediscover that it's possible to live in the city differently, with different values. I envision the building and I imagine it bringing things to the other neighborhoods. Our neighborhood is close to the San Fermín neighborhood, and there you see the people out in the streets, sitting in chairs talking to their neighbors. We're not going to invent anything new, but yeah, we're going to for example live surrounded by buildings that are more modern, with a different vibe in ours. Being able to be planting and cultivating different values for that non-capitalist world, for that non-capitalist future.

What keeps activism alive in these moments of political discontent?

Nacho: I would say three things. One is the hope and excitement of knowing that you belong to something transcendent. That's the driving force of hope, that feeling that you're a part of something beyond what you can see, and it's key. That even the process might be useful. That in the process you're gaining something, understanding that you're going to have some lofty goals, but just by trying you're going to be able to achieve something good. If you can't make the building happen but other synergies come up in that process because something worked well, then great. That's not a failure. And you have to celebrate those small victories. And then patience, first with knowing from the get-go that a lot of these things aren't short-term goals, and that doing this is really hard. But that doesn't mean that you're not going to be ambitious.

Nerea: What moves me the most, thinking about the transcendence, are the people who go on this journey with you. That's really powerful for me. Having the sense that, whatever you end up constructing, the whole journey you take and all the good things that come from that—things that go beyond whatever you end up constructing—they're going to be worth it. That part stays. We have this colleague from Ecologistas en Acción that always says, "We're all headed toward environmental ruin, but I'm going in good company, at least I'm in good company." As we face these times of great problems, people are facing problems that are truly horrible, and they're really lonely. And a lot of collectives and struggles are connecting people with the idea of, "Get together with other people and we can face this thing." And for me, that's the most relevant thing. Getting together with people that you see are worth it.

Teatro del Barrio





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
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Location
Madrid, Spain

Collective's name
Teatro del Barrio

Name of the interviewed
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Who are you and what is your relationship to El Teatro del Barrio (the Theater of the Neighborhood)?

I'm Iñaki Alonso, I'm an architect and I work in the field of architecture with an interest in environmental ecology and lately, for six or seven years, in issues of social environmentalism. I'm here kind of by chance, the world of culture isn't my world, although architecture is obviously very related to culture, but I don't work in theater. I had a good relationship with Alberto San Juan and after traveling with Alberto he told me that he wants to set up a theater or manage a theater where a somewhat alternative theater can be produced and with a certain political and reinvigorating tint. I really like all the collective processes and I convinced him to do it from another place. I told him: "Since you want to tell how to change things, change them in the way you do things" and that's why I ended up developing and founding Teatro del Barrio.

What type of cooperative is El Teatro del Barrio (the Neighborhood Theatre)?

It is a legal form where the partners become part of the company. Through a contribution of one hundred euros to the social capital, any person who wants can be part of the company. With this we build collective enterprises, with all this model's positive and negative aspects but positive in the sense that people are empowered in the process, they belong to the process, and by belonging to the process they can make decisions, they can be involved in building the culture they want. So, if there's an affinity with the project, well, you join the project and together we will build the theater we want to have.

Who works at this cooperative?

The cooperative is a cooperative of cultural consumption, so people become partners to be consumers of that culture, and then the cooperative hires people who work within the theater. It isn't a workers' cooperative, it is a cooperative of services, specifically cultural consumption. Then the workers may or may not be from the cooperative, in fact, people are hired without consideration of whether or not they are from the cooperative; they look for the best worker for that position. If that worker then decides to join the cooperative because he or she is involved with the project, then perfect. So, I would say that seventy percent of the working people are members of the cooperative, but there's no direct relationship like in a workers' cooperative. Right now there are ten people working: two work in the bar, two are technicians, and six in the office.

El Teatro del Barrio is a political project. Can you tell us about the meaning of this political dimension?

We refer to the daily life of politics because in the end, politics is everything. We believe that politics isn't just elections every four years, and here we're really involved in the politics of everyday life. Every decision of every day is a political decision; what I buy in the supermarket is a political decision, who I have my electrical contract with is a political decision. We try to change that global vision where politics is about politicians and certain times, every four or six years. Politics is not about politicians, it's about citizens, and the certain times are today and now and every time I do something. So that vision of transformation of the paradigm of politics is important. We try to make a political theater from that point of view. That's why it's very related to the political realm and we talk a lot about responsible consumption and we spread the message that everything is political and that when we want to transform things from one sector, many other sectors are involved. If you want to change things from the theater, you can't forget what happens in other places. That's why there are signs that you see in the theater like, "This cooperative consumes renewable energy." It's not that our fight is in culture here, and then there are the rest of the fights over there. It's that all the fights are very related, what happens in the field of culture with what happens in energy, with what happens in the world of finance, banking or food. Then politics, seen from that point of view, of the everyday, is a daily responsibility from a complex and multi-sectoral vision.

When speaking about this project as a part of a "citizen's movement," what movement are you referring to?

Right, we refer fundamentally to this 15M awakening claiming another democracy, other ways of doing. We also said -- we've been going out to the streets for a long time, demanding that things change from above, what politicians should do, but we, as citizens, have a great responsibility that things change, so we said, "Go out to the street; you have to keep going out to fight for the most just things—for the social issues, for the environmental issues, for health— but we cannot stop or stay at home or be in the street fighting. We have to, at the same time, build projects that identify with what we are defending." So, when you go out to the streets to protest you are trying to change things, but from a traditional paradigm, right? From up to down, from top to bottom. But we can also change things from the bottom up. That change of vision is the change of not so much going out to the streets as to start building projects. Imagine that now two million people in Spain change from the regular banking to an ethical bank, well, then banking would be radically changed in this country. Or that two or three million people decide to consume theater of this type, then it changes the paradigm of how theater works. So, we have a lot of responsibility as citizens; we cannot limit ourselves only to going out to the streets to protest so that the people from above can change things as we want; but we have to kind of provide an example and build processes we believe in.

Was El Teatro del Barrio born from 15M?

No, it was independent. But there is a lot of interrelation between their forms. The 15M was a moment of creating a space to debate and build assemblies in the squares and to think about how we do this to generate collective processes. In El Teatro del Barrio, the first thing we did was open five or six sessions where we invited everyone we knew to tell them, "Hey, we have this idea, do you want to get involved? What

do you think?" In that sense, it has a lot of similarities in the sense of constructing spaces for questioning. When you build a questioning space, people interact or join in, or not, and shape it, don't they? And well, that is the similarity in method.

What is the relationship between El Teatro del Barrio and the Institutions?

The relationship with the Institutions is to seek support and try to gain favor for this type of theater. Then we associate with other collectives and cultural agents and we do a little lobbying, pressure, because the whole issue of VAT, taxes on culture. We try to pressure the Administration to consider that culture is a form of education and that it is necessary for society. So, they have to take care of it and favor it and that part seems not to be very internalized by the Administration. We do not want anyone's house to be related to politics or the Institution. This is not a body that depends on the City of Madrid or the Community of Madrid or any institution of this type. Nor is it, however much one wants to relate, the house of Podemos or any political party. That came from within the DNA of the Theater from the beginning. There have been many things that have been done about politicians, but no political party can organize anything here. You can organize a televised interview and bring on one or two politicians and have a debate, or any other organization can hold a debate. When the political party Podemos was introduced, a group of people was introduced to consult with citizens if they were going to assemble a political party, right? And it was presented here at El Teatro del Barrio. From there came a digital consultation, and that came out with great strength, right? And then Podemos was assembled, and since then there has been no political act here of Podemos as an institution. We want to transcend political parties and try to be a little transversal in order to generate independence and not get tied to anyone. We want this to be the home of many people, not exclusive but inclusive. And that's an important part, because if not, in the end we create ghettos where people feel excluded. And here there are people who feel excluded, but by personal choice of each individual because at El Teatro del Barrio, we always have the intention to be inclusive.

What is la Universidad del Barrio (the Neighborhood University)?

El Teatro del Barrio has two free spaces for citizens: one is La Universidad del Barrio, and another is Citizen Tuesdays. The University tries to generate training around two fields: history and economics. It also tries to generate alternate views on the economy. We have a vision of the world from a neoliberal economic perspective, where the economy seems to be the only lens through which you can look at the world, and ninety or ninety-nine percent of the decisions have to be made from the perspective of the economy. But today we know that there are other economic movements, other ways of seeing the economy, and the economy has to be accompanied by these other views. It can't be a monolithic view. So, we work with visions of all kinds: triple balance, economy of the common good, the blue economy. Different visions to generate a wide array of viewpoints, a view which is a little more complex, with social indicators, environmental indicators, because in the end you see that all economic actions also have an impact on social and environmental issues, which, in turn, indirectly, have an impact on the economy again. Not being careful with environmental problems then generates a series of problems that generates other economic problems. But because it's a vision that's a bit more long-term than the immediate one of investment, the short-term of "this costs so much," it's not included in a vision of the traditional economy. So, we're generating training in another way of looking at the economy, another way of looking at history. We are not in the University; we do not give degrees, and it is not a traditional university from the traditional academic perspective.

La Universidad del Barrio seems to fulfill an unresolved need in the traditional university. Why do you think this is happening?

The University is very anchored in certain inertias and ways of seeing things and society goes much faster. So, when I see the things that happen in the University and how they teach students today and I see the things that are happening in society I say, "But, God! When these people go out to work, they're not going to be informed about anything." That happened to me at the time, but now things are moving even faster. I, for example, work on ecological and social architecture issues, and at my University, first of all they hadn't taught me anything about this, and they don't even make space for me to talk about it. I talk about these things in other forums, in other debates. Here I've been talking about matters of co-housing, of ecological projects, but in the University, they practically don't invite me to tell all this. In the end, you have to tell it in another place. We have to try to mix the University's training with social realities and what is happening nowadays because if not, we're producing another vacuum that's like a self-training space for you to integrate yourself into what society is asking of you. You can leave a university and fall into line, which obviously leads to a lot of inertia, but if you want to be at the head of thinking and contributing to society, you leave the University, you have to train yourself and then you have to integrate yourself into those positions that are a bit more leadership-based, more innovative, that contribute something to society. So, in that, I see that the University has fallen very far behind.

What kind of people get involved in la Universidad del Barrio?

People who come in person, people who follow it by streaming; above all, diversity, a lot of diversity.

How are the activities of Teatro del Barrio programmed?

What selection criteria are followed?

There is an annual program scheduled three or four months in advance. It's decided by a Programming Commission, which in turn is subdivided into three committees: one for children, another for theater, and another for music. We were receiving a lot of offers because the Teatro del Barrio was well situated, and everyone sent us things that they wanted to show here, right? And that generated a problem and a conflict, because we could not accommodate them all, because in the end we're not an alternative theater, in the sense that we can't promote things that would be the public administration's responsibility. We have a very high rent; we have twenty-five thousand euros of expenses here per month, and we have to guarantee that the room is seventy-percent filled. What risk does that have? Well, it means we can't experiment or house a lot of experiments that could be very nice, but that would put us at risk. So, we have to do a lot of quality programming so that people come and experience it; we're opening the door to new things, but always looking for a balance that gives us a certain economic sustainability. So, we've been learning as members and the programming committee as we've been forming; it's been complicated. Now we are transitioning from receiving things and choosing from them to going out and saying, "I want that particular work to be in the Teatro del Barrio because in the DNA, in the way of doing what is being told, it is something fits with our way of doing things." In these three years, we're learning to go looking little more and to select better.

El Teatro del Barrio is a playful project. Can you talk about the centrality of this aspect?

Well, because they can steal many things from us or there are many things we can't access, but what they cannot steal from us is joy. It is something that we have the obligation to keep in us and be able to defend the things we want from there. So that's a principle that we worked a lot and we insisted that this type of projects have to be done from there, from joy. And for that reason, we built another space on Fridays called "Dance Nights," where there's a live orchestra and we try to celebrate. I believe that celebration is one of the fundamental pillars in any collective construction. Any collective process has different spaces; there are spaces of proposal which are key where people have to propose and say what they think. There are other spaces of decision where decisions are made based on a series of proposals, and collectively what is most important is decided. There are spaces for conflict resolution because we're people and you build the common project from people's emotions, and sometimes this generates conflicts among the people and you have to know how to solve them and dedicate spaces to solve emotional conflict. We can't get into any common process thinking that there's never going to be a conflict, there are always conflicts, but we have to find the mechanisms to know how to solve them, and the spaces to do so. And finally, the spaces for celebration. If everything is work, decisions, and conflicts, and we don't have spaces to celebrate the milestones we're achieving, the victories or even failed efforts, any collective process will exhaust itself. So, in this sense, celebration and joy are key points in any collective process.

Thinking about the relationship of El Teatro del Barrio with other theatres, is the prevailing norm that of competition or collaboration?

No, here I think there's more cooperation. I'm not so much involved in that part in relationships with other theaters. We have a relationship with the theater La Mirador, for example, Juan Diego Boto comes here a lot, we go there, to the Mirador, and there is a relationship. Also, Alberto and Juan have known each other for a long time and so there's a strong brotherhood, and with other theaters as well. I don't see much competition.

How do you combine the spheres of the sciences and humanities in this project?

In architecture, we work in both worlds. I always tell how when I played rugby, the team emblem was a compass and a rose. The compass representing the technical part and the rose the human part, emotional and more creative. So architecture moves in both worlds. For me, it's important as a collective process because I in architecture also work to build collective processes. There came a moment in architecture that I said to myself: "this about building houses so that people move into these houses; I have already decided how they are going to live." If I build a block of houses, I have already decided how they will live. But, on the other hand, if I build a community and accompany in deciding how they want to live, the vision changes completely. So now I build houses for communities and I accompany them in the decision making process of if they want to have a covering with an orchard, a common laundry, or if they want to have common spaces for guests. So, there's a similarity in terms of the construction process of collectives and their dynamics of construction. For me, the Theater has also been a laboratory for collective construction, for learning how to build a theater. You take out many things that are then used to construct a building from the perspective of constructing dynamic, social communities.

What culture are we talking about in El Teatro del Barrio?

The culture is related to everything we do every day. In the end, culture is very closely related to our customs, our habits, our ways of doing things. I think that's where we have to build a powerful culture. A cultural fabric that makes us, not different, but at least that opens doors for us to see ourselves from other points of view. Culture is also a process that can build processes of subjectification taking us to other places, other ways of understanding reality. I believe that culture in this sense has a lot of responsibility because it can make us leave this paradigm and see other paradigms.

Do you think El Teatro del Barrio participates in the process of Co-education (collective education)?

Co-education ... well, now we live in what I and many other people have understood as the revolution of the common for a lot of time... not so much time, we could say it's been since Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics on "common goods." We have co-housing, co-education, co-everything. We are rethinking society as something that's been intrinsic to humanity since it was born and that the capitalist system has annihilated in favor of an excessive individualism. In this revolution of the common, education has a very important part in common construction or the responsibility to educate ourselves again in these new values, right? So, I understand co-education – it's not a term I knew before – I understand it not so much as something where some teach and others learn, but in how we teach each other and learn from each other in order to evolve towards other points of view.

How has the process of funding this project been?

I'm not telling you that everything was rosy because there have been many complications, it's made us sweat, and at certain times we said, "We have to close this project," and then we said "No, no, let's do it this way or that way..." If we had closed I could talk to you about failure, but we have not closed so I can talk about potholes, I can talk about hard times. And not only have we not closed, but we are in the most alive, more intense moment. We are starting to produce works that don't depend only on Alberto; members and new people are producing new works. It's going well financially, there are more and more members; that is, this is a really good moment for us.

What would it mean for el Teatro del Barrio to grow in non-capitalist terms?

We had an assembly last week and we asked ourselves that question, because we've been around for three years and now we have a certain economic sustainability. This year it's going quite well and we met in the fall to think among all of us what it means to grow. If you ask me at the end of the year, maybe I can give you a collective response. Right now, from my point of view, from an individual response, I believe that we're in a moment of growing internally in terms of learning many more social dynamics to make meetings faster, more effective, and resolve conflicts more quickly. Making all our collective operation streamlined, being more solid and more experienced. This is an experiment. Running a theater with four hundred people is not easy, you have to establish governance systems: the governing council, the different commissions, etc. So, building all that from a culture that we come from that's more individualistic is not easy; we've done it in three years, but now we have to solidify it. You have to improve it and you have to grow in that learning and operation, but that's a more personal vision.

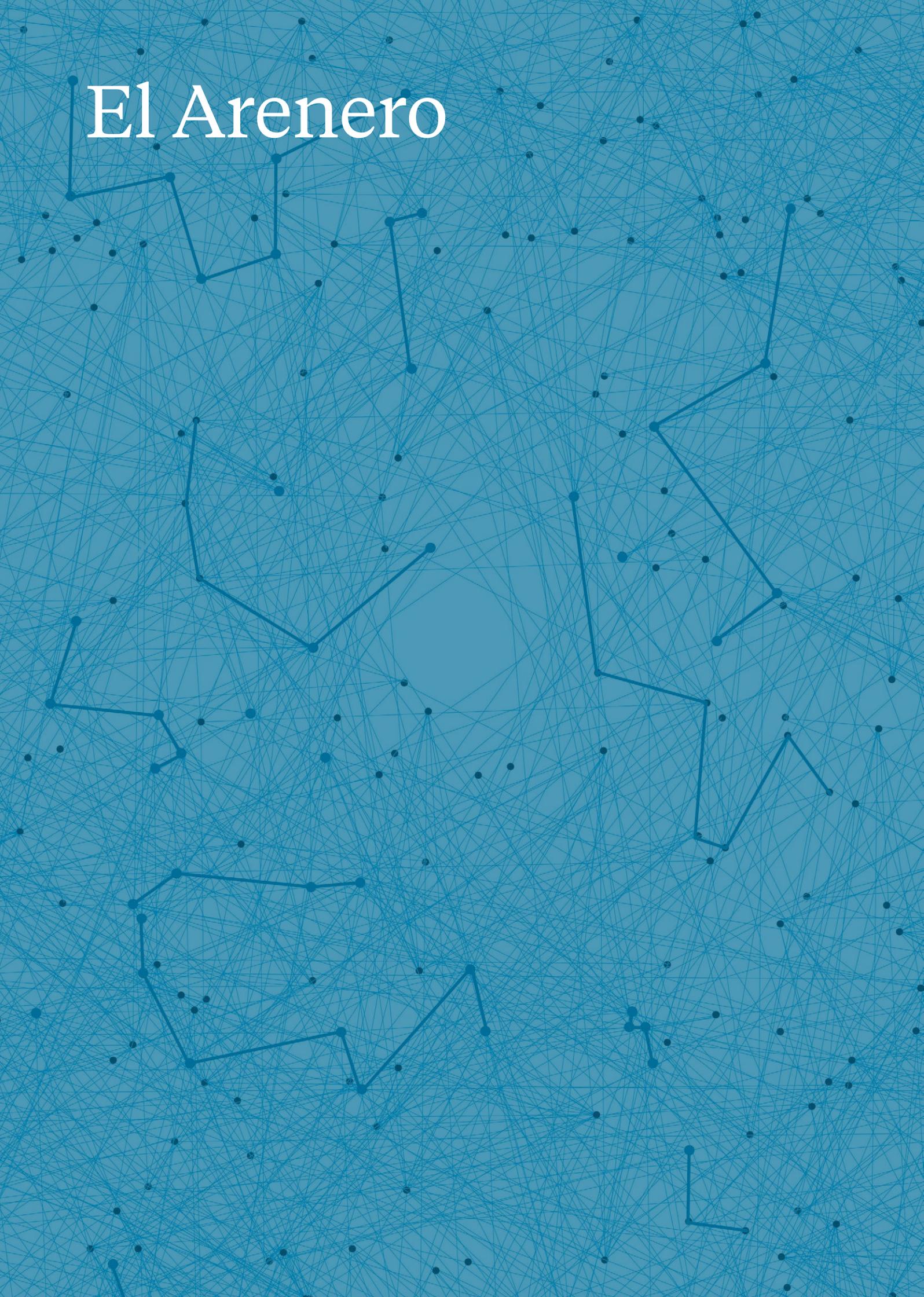
What would you say is the motor that sustains hope in moments of political discontent?

I'm going to say that it's the "yes you can"; the "yes you can" and the fact that later you get into it, and it's real and it's tangible and there's transparency and you can do this thing or the other, you can be in the governing council. There are none of the ego fights that I've encountered, for example, in many collective processes. Here, people don't want to be president, nor do they want to compete for more power. There is a very healthy horizontality. In that aspect I think that's very important because, well, collective processes also have that problem of ego battles, and I think that that lack here also generates hope.

There are many people who believe that things aren't working well in the world and there are problems but that you can't do anything through micro-actions. I always say the opposite. That one day I decided to consider changing the world and decided to change my world through the things I'm connected to. So, being comfortable with the way I'm a consumer of politics or energy. Well, there are people who don't believe it. We don't expect to change the world with Teatro del Barrio, but we do aim to change our world and our space, where we come and do the things we believe and have a place where we collectively build a vision of culture, theater, and the world.

So, I don't set very high goals, and for people who don't believe in where the Theater is going to go or that is going to change the world, I'd say I don't think that the Teatro del Barrio will change any world but ours. And this has changed me. The world in the sense that for me is like an extension of my living room. I have my house, my living room, and whenever I want, I come here, I find friends, I have a beer, I chat and it's a space for meeting and growing and learning. Once you find yourself, you share, you learn, and you develop. In that sense, I invite all the distrust, all the criticism, all these people, for them to share it and if they learn, great, and if they don't learn but they learn from other spaces, other places, fantastic; But they shouldn't shut themselves in and think that there's nothing to do. I think we have a lot of responsibility there.

El Arenero





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewees
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Who are you, and how are you involved with this project?

Pablo: My name is Pablo, and I work in social education. Before working on the El Arenero ('The Sandbox') project, I had always worked with adolescents, specifically related to social exclusion. I've worked on the project as a partner for the past four years, since the project started.

María: I'm María, and I'm the mother of two children who are a part of the program. In my professional life, I'm a biologist and a high school teacher.

What kind of self-managed project is El Arenero?

María: We started the project a little over four years ago; we had our first son and after some time at home — after the short maternity leave and some time with an at-home caregiver— we started to look at what was going on with preschools. And we saw that there were some public schools that we liked well enough, but that we didn't have access to because they had very few spots, and there were other, more vulnerable families ahead of us, logically, so we started to look at the private ones. We only looked at ones that we were told were really good, and we were horrified at the kinds of things they did... it was a space completely cut off from family participation, you would drop your kid off at the door and pick him up at the door, but you weren't a part of that important time, those early childhood moments. So we thought, if there isn't an answer to this important need, the need to care for our children, then let's create something that will help us care for them the way we want to. Pablo is actually my sister's partner, and they had spent that year traveling around Latin America, and Pablo lived in Galicia but was about to move to Madrid, and he didn't have any work... He didn't have any idea about how to care for children, he'd never even changed a diaper, but we thought that it wasn't as important to know everything about caregiving immediately as to love the kids. Love them and want to take care of them, right? And the diaper-changing and learning other types of things, like how to resolve conflicts really it's something that you learn (and this goes for me as well, as I'm a teacher, although of a very different age group) in the classroom; you learn alongside them. And from there we got a few families who knew Pablo and a few who didn't. But that's where it started, as an attempt to satisfy a need for something that we weren't finding in any other site. So, instead of each child staying in their own houses, we decided to do childcare collectively.

Pablo: The first year that we started, we were based in a house. I don't think it was part of the families' idea to establish all of this for the long term; especially in the first year they were thinking it would

be only for when the kids were 1-2 years old. We started with six families but there were only five kids. So we started with 1-2 year olds, we started out with the organizational model that we still use today, as María was talking about, with the perspective that one of the most important, abrupt changes kids have to face is leaving home to go to school. And I see El Arenero as a model of this transition. I see it as a model of transition because of the involvement and participation of the families, and because by the end of the course, all of the families are caregivers for all of the kids. So we started out with five kids aged 1-2 years old, and the families really responded positively, I was delighted, and the possibility arose for us to add more families and to start to look for a new location. We found this site that we really like, it met all the requirements for space, light, and being close to the park — we go to the park every day. In the second year, I think there were seven or eight kids, and now we have ten, which we kind of see as the limit, because we go to the park every day, and it's not a kindergarten — it's not the same in terms of safety, because you're in a park, it can be pretty close to the street. And we also see ten kids as the limit because we take naps here, and we can barely manage to get ten kids to take a nap.

What is El Arenero's legal status?

Pablo: We are represented as an association, as that was a way to give the project a legal form, and also a way to hire me legally, but this is an unregulated project. There is not an institution that regulates these types of spaces. At the beginning we lived with a little— I cannot say if it was fear or not, it's very subjective— a feeling of hoping they wouldn't find out about us, they wouldn't see us. It is true that we go to the park every day. We go with ten small children to the park, we're unregulated, they can close us down at any moment if we receive a visit, but that's the way it is. If we don't try doing things this way, we won't be able to create alternatives, because it is very difficult to create alternatives within institutions. We've operated four years, confirming that the model is viable, and it is. There's not any relation with the institutions, and at the beginning I was thinking, "Well, I wish there was a guideline that regulated this type of space". But now I think about not only my work, but everything that we've generated around the project. If they want to close it they will, so we'll be careful... So, now I don't know if I want there to be regulations, because surely we would not be able to meet any of the requirements even if they were very flexible.

María: Within that debate and understanding all of the concerns, I believe that it's necessary to go for it. It's necessary to understand and see that this is possible and that if in a given moment there is a problem, we are not alone. There are the families that were there before, there's the Institute, there's the retirement center, there are the people from the orchard, there are the people that go to the park every day and see us... and that grows, and it makes us strong and it lets us believe that there are alternatives.

What age of children is the project designed for?

Pablo: Here in Spain, education isn't obligatory until six years old, but of course starting at age three — and María knows this better than I do— the lines to get a spot in the public schools get long. We've always had kids from 1-3 years old, (well, 1-2 the first year, then 1-3), but of course every year some family says, "I don't know why you don't continue up to four years old," and it seemed a little complicated. But

this year there were two families that suggested it, that wanted their kids to stay in the project until they were 4, and I said “Look, this is a challenge for me, I would really like to do it.” And in the coming year, we’re going to have kids 1-4 years old.

How do families participate?

María: The truth is that the project has been evolving as we do, in this four-year journey, but since the beginning, one of the important pillars was that the families were really active participants in the process, including in logistical matters. For example, it’s us families that cook and bring food for all the kids, Pablo, and his aide. We take turns with this throughout the year. We also help Pablo with the daily cleaning and, once a week, a deeper cleaning. The families have the option, if both work in the mornings and can’t take their turn, to pay a little more. But there are families that can take a turn – taking a turn means being with the kids and with Pablo, who’s always there as an educational and emotional supervisor. And this is important because although Pablo can handle ten kids, obviously if there’s a problem or something... the idea isn’t to help them play – Pablo can explain this better – but to watch them; there’s so many moments of the day in which it’s important to be there, watching just in case something happens. So what we, the families, do, is have participatory roles in logistical matters and how we organize the space. We’ve had educational debates, methodological ones about how we want to solve the conflicts that arise, and this has all been a process of learning together, in which our perspectives as parents complement Pablo’s as a caregiver, who is greatly involved with the kids but in a different way.

So El Arenero has become a fundamental space, not only for the kids but also for the families. At 4:00, we come to pick them up, although it’s a flexible schedule, and many afternoons we stay there and have a snack, without Pablo since his workday’s over, although sometimes he stays to chat. So there’s a network outside of what happens here every morning 9:00-4:00. And this network is important because it’s how we share how we parents manage the tantrums that start around year two, we give each other strategies, we help each other, and we comfort each other when we think that we’re being terrible parents. And we realize that losing your temper happens to everyone. It’s a space that transcends these four walls and that has created really strong emotional connections that we’ve kept up with families whose children left the school two or three years ago.

How does this community make decisions?

Pablo: From the beginning, it has been private and self-managed. It’s the families who built the community, who pulled it together, and decisions have always been made in an assembly form. We have a monthly meeting, we also have additional meetings when necessary, and all the decisions are made in that form – on pedagogical issues, as well. Obviously the weight falls on me because I’m there every day, and I’m the children’s supervisor, but sometimes we have workshops for the families, and the families in the meetings participate in the pedagogical part. All the decisions we make are made in an assembly.

María: And as Pablo has been learning, we’ve been changing as well; I always remember the year before starting school, I said, in those methodological debates, “Perhaps we should start doing an activity that’s more guided, right?” because I was worried about my kid jumping into formal education, but now with my littlest one I

say, "Please, no guides!" I want him to go through the same types of processes that are being done here. As Pablo's noted, this is how they grow more and learn more.

Pablo: I feel like it's a project that we've worked together to build since the beginning, at an organizational level. We see that there's been super important progress, and I'm okay with the fact that I didn't know any more than the kids at the beginning. I see how we've all evolved, and I'm really content with the process. And even if we say that I carry the weight of the pedagogy, that doesn't mean that the families can't have opinions, of course. And it doesn't mean I feel questioned, either. This is not a project where I feel like I'm being told, "This is how things are done, don't do it that way." I've also been growing — this year we hired an early education teacher with many years' experience working with young kids, I meet with her twice a week.

María: Yes, we'll say that Pablo is largely responsible for coming up with plans because he is the one who directs instruction the most. And he's gone from knowing almost nothing to knowing a lot of things, from training here and external training in other, similar spaces, which he's been soaking up. But he comments on what we should do and the families are so happy to learn how those processes are happening and that they have the possibility to think about them. There have been debates of whether or not we see something as doable, and those debates have been a very interesting and enriching learning process because, in reality, education is not usually like that. You propose one thing, and then something happens, and then something happens after that. But this is something that we're building as we go, and to have a guiding reference in this process like Pablo... I always say, Pablo always thinks about what is best for the kids and then what's best for the families or others. His focus is always on them and that's like a guarantee that, although we might make mistakes sometimes, or things could sometimes be done in a different way, it's okay because we keep sight of what's important-- caring for and respecting these children and treating them as people, so that they are not seen as creatures that cannot do anything for themselves, but rather as being super autonomous in a variety of ways.

Pablo: I think that for any educational project, it is important that the pedagogical programming is shared. Otherwise, I don't know if this would be a viable pedagogical project. So, this project has programming that's collaborative. But I also see a richness in the variety of adult figures that kids have in their everyday lives-- other ways to be. This doesn't mean that we are going to do things totally differently, but that we live with more adults and all relate to the children in a different way; in the end, everyone has their own personality and relates to children in their own way. And I see this as a richness. And in a big city, which tends toward individualism and has very few collective spaces (as if raising kids only happens in the house), I see a lot of strength and richness in the kids having tons of adult figures as references.

To what extent did 15M help jump start this Project?

María: Of the families that initiated El Arenero, many of us have participated very actively in *Ecologistas en Acción* (Environmentalists in Action) for many years. I think that this has nourished the project in many ways. To start with, everything you see, we've made, including the kitchen; we've put in work as a collective to get comfortable with this space and make it our own.

Pablo: More or less.

María: I think that saturated our organizational model, that the decisions should be collective and assembly style. That's not to say that we haven't learned that there are decisions in which Pablo's opinion is more relevant, because he has a different perspective than we do. But I think that all this experience of participating in social movements made us believe that we're capable of creating something like this. Although it's been four years, when it was created we didn't think that four years later we would have to be kind of dramatically saying which families could join and which couldn't, because we'd love to let everyone in. At the beginning there was a bit of wondering, "But what about next year?" and right away we saw that this works.

Another thing that has fostered participation in this project is that, for example, the food that we consume here is environmentally friendly. We don't just mean this as the kids and staff eating healthily, but also on a global level, having a food model based in local production, without participating in the industrial agriculture that depends on fossil fuels. This is essential, too, for trying to change this destructive, predatory model of food production. It's a small thing, feeding a few kids, but what we've noticed is that there were families who didn't eat ecologically before and have adopted this model not only as a matter of individual health, but as a link with the earth, with the planet, and the rest of the people who participate in the food chain. These things also go spreading throughout families, and that's important; in that vein, we've also had debates about energy. Do we get hot water -- because there isn't any here -- or do we continue washing with cold water? Do we keep the living room warm or can we have it cooler, and have the kids wear more coats in the winter? These are profoundly political issues, and here they've had a practical dimension. And you have to decide with little kids, they've made us rethink things, not only in this space but in the spaces of our individual homes.

Are we witnessing a burgeoning political project?

María: I think that it's a project that is profoundly political, and it is profoundly political because it promotes a different way of approaching caregiving, which is confined to an invisible social sphere. As everything related to caregiving is traditionally done by us women, to suddenly put this on the table -- that there are families who want to raise our kids in a big city and don't want to do it alone, that we want to do it with other people and that we believe that there's strength in this, not only for the sake of learning but for our way of understanding the world and acting within it. Reaching consensus takes time, making the food takes time, cleaning takes time, debating over how we resolve conflict takes time, but this is how we want to construct it because it seems to us that this is a unique way to fight -- although it's in a small space -- against a predatory system of life, of resources. These projects are a way not just to resist but to propose an alternative. We don't just talk about resisting the battering of capitalism, which proposes a homogenized, boring, and memorization-based education with zero creativity. This project is not just a form of resistance against that, but is also a way of building something different. And when we build different relationships with our kids, they've already learned here that you have to come to agreements, you have to wait if someone else has something, and you have to ask, you can't push. And they quickly learn the phrase "Let me borrow it when you finish," or "I'll wait until then," or "Right now it's not my turn," or "I'm getting angry and I have to deal with my frustration." But they learn with the others, they learn with Pablo, they learn with the other parents because we all know we have to say something even when it is not our kid, and we have learned to do this in a communal way. And the families learn that these collective projects require effort, but they make us capable of constructing

something new. We may encounter difficulties and things that don't work, but, without a doubt, they have an inspiring potential in this situation of civil crisis, something hopeful that makes us think: *well, when climate change forces us to restructure our society, because energetically speaking we're not going to be able to continue living like this, we've had a rehearsal of how to do it, understanding ourselves in a different way.*

Now I'm not limited to my own experience, my house, where I leave and go to the park alone with my two kids-- no. I'm part of an experience that has enriched me with a ton of things and has made me stronger. I have also been able to help others and I have constructed a model of thinking in which we don't feel burdened and alone in a big city because if I leave from work late and I can't get back, I know that my kid will be alright. Everything will be alright and nobody will give me a dirty look for arriving late once again, but rather the opposite. There are families that have had their second child and there's both a celebration for everyone and the reminder, "When you give birth, give us a call," because the other nine families will happily stay with your kid, and your kid will be happy because they have another model figure in their lives. So, it's a way to fight against individualism and to create collectively from the hope that we can really create new things.

Pablo: The concept of caregiving is a political issue. The concept of caring for the children, but also the concept of caring regarding adults, as well; how they're supported, but also how I am supported. I imagine that workers in private schools for young kids would very much like to have the conditions of salary and vacation time that I have.

Has this experience redefined the way you understand your work?

Pablo: Very much so. I come from that background, I studied social education. I practically always worked with adolescents in a situation of social exclusion, whatever you want to call it, but with private contracts (that still take public money) that put a project out to tender every year. The businesses are presented and then they hire you. There was a while where I was very tired, not just from the labor conditions, which were bad, but from the relationship with the people I was working with, whether it was families or adolescents. These are projects that, depending on the money that the administration wants to allocate for that given year, are put out to tender. So, every year, there's tons of social projects put out to tender and you don't know which will continue, or whether you are going to have a job in January... you don't know if you will be able to have a job with that family. I very much remember talking with kids and explaining many times "Well, before you there were who knows how many, and after you there will be who knows how many..." This means that the relationships that you establish with the families you work with are commercialized by the model of hiring with public money but private management. Now I find myself in a project that is completely the opposite, that, independent of the labor conditions (which are really good), is built through a collective and through continuous human relationships. For the first time, you can see progress in the project, and how solid it is.

What happens in the community when children turn four?

María: It's our turn to go through that now, since after four years our time here is coming to an end. And El Arenero continues to be a place where families that aren't here anymore still come visit some afternoons. It's a space that the kids can recognize as their own. Within this group we have formed emotional connections so

that we see each other not just here, but in other spaces... we're going on vacation together in the summer, for example. Strong networks have already been created that are well maintained because they generate space for us adults to hang out, and for the kids, too, who are all of the same age, so it's a perfect symbiosis. They're playing, and we're also enjoying the company and the relationships stay strong...

What type of people participate in the project?

Pablo: The space is self-managed and private and maintained by fees paid by the families. And the fee of the families that take turns working as childcare assistant (which is a seven-hour commitment) isn't very far from the fee for public education, and much better than the fee for private. And we always knew from the start that it was a project that would come to whoever sought it out. That is, on the one hand, conscientious people came, who believe in the collective and have some connection to it, and other people came because it was affordable-- that's the objective. It's what happens with everybody who can't pay, not necessarily this kind of education but this model of child-rearing, which is not just about the pedagogical part here from 0-4, but also everything we've built around the project, everything about the collective, everything between families... I always knew there were many people stay away from this model, and yet we think it's a viable model, this experience. Although it hasn't been very long, four years tells us that it's a viable project with a lot of strengths and we've started these past few months to go over it again. We're looking at the theoretical part of how to expand this model's reach, although it wouldn't mean replicating El Arenero in its entirety, because that isn't our objective, but still having the base of families whose participation we can count on, organized as a collective, and with a pedagogical vision of childcare with respect towards the developmental processes of children. We want to come to neighborhoods and collectives and people who can't pay for this type of education. We're developing the theoretical discourse to make contact... our idea is, we don't want to come to a neighborhood, to a group and say, "Look, we have this thing, do you want to do it?" We want to take advantage of the work that organizations are already doing, some of which we've known about in various neighborhoods for a long time. Then we want to present a little bit of the idea to them, the proposal, see if there's a need and if there's an interest that stems from that need, and from that interest, build collaboratively with them.

What impact has the project had in this neighborhood?

Pablo: This year has been an important one because we've been able to go out into the neighborhood, and not just keep it within these four walls. At the start of this course I went to speak to the Institute and I told them what we were doing here, to see if they were in any way interested in doing anything together with the teens. There was a director and teacher for PCPI, formerly known as "The Social Guarantee," a program for boys and girls who hadn't finished their ESO (obligatory secondary school), that were very interested. So, the agreement was that the teens would come once a week, just an hour. There, we planned an activity with the kids, and the teens were there, doing this activity with them. This was until December and later, in January, we changed groups to another program, which is PMAR--María knows more about that--and six teenage boys and girls came for an hour a week with an activity that we would plan or that would be planned by the Institute, and the teens would join in that activity. It's a way to leave here and generate connections, it's a way for education to transcend; it's in every moment of life, it transcends these four walls. Here we have an Institute

of I don't know how many students, and there was no type of relationship between us, and we all worked in education. Why not do something together?

The feedback was very positive; the teacher we are with now loves it so much that for the upcoming course, we're going to include her in programming, which on a symbolic level is important since it's something that's going to change the direction of the center, the project here with El Arenero... and how learning is organized by means of relationships. Learning happens in all environments, but there's also learning that's not seen and that involves relationships with others. You see how the adolescents play with the children and how the children are seeing another type of model figure. Of course, there are mothers and fathers around, but adolescents provide something else.

María: Yes, the children call them the big kids. The boys and girls come from the Institute...

Pablo: They ask, "When are the kids from the Institute coming?"

María: And I think that it's also very relevant because those who come are in particular educational programs. They're teens who have been kicked out of the education system and are in special schools. They're the "bad kids" of the Institute, "the ones with problems," "the biggest potheads," "the most..." you see them on the road and you say, "Ugh, those guys!" Well, those are exactly the ones who come here, who make sure that the kids don't trip, who are watching to make sure they don't choke, taking away little things they find on the ground....

Pablo: They write stories for the children. Their teacher has a background in linguistics and they make stories for them, they write and draw them... and later they read them, it's unbelievable...

We started all of this, I don't know, in November, October, around there -- by February, March, we were getting really positive feedback... The kids ask when the teens from the Institute are coming. We went to speak to the Retirement Center because there is a retirement center next to the park where we go every day. I went with the teacher from the Institute and we told them "Listen, this is what we're doing in El Arenero, would you be interested in us starting to plan something with the retirement home?" and they accepted, it seemed interesting to them. Our relationship with the retirement home wasn't very established, but since then we've been going there once a month. And I asked the workers and they said yes, there are grandmothers and fathers who are very excited to see the kids. You can go in and see them watching TV, and I imagine that doing that every day... I know television stupefies us; for older folks even more so. So seeing the children gives them a lot. Later, they sing some songs, traditional songs that the kids and the people at the retirement home both know... it's very sweet.

This summer, in the front you can see that there's a place, a coworking space; last summer the space was empty and the idea popped up, this idea of expanding the project, for the project to grow not in a quantitative way, but a qualitative way, we had this idea to make a coworking space thinking about putting caregiving first. All in all, the project reaches many families that have more autonomous, freelance jobs. Not everyone does, but many families do. That's why they can take turns, they can dedicate a morning each week to be here accompanying their kids. There are a lot of people who work from home... so why don't we start our own coworking space? And this year I think there are two families, there's a family

that was here the second year of El Arenero, and there's also a family that will come during the next course. So... since other projects keep popping up around this, centered on caregiving. If all goes well, the idea is that when we recover the investment from the fee that people pay for this space, although it won't be a lot, we will reinvest in the project or in another peripheral Arenero project.

How do you work with children?

Pablo: My intentionality is, above all, that they experience things that might for logistical reasons not be within their reach every day. It's not so much that I offer activities as that I offer materials, and as long as there is respect towards those materials, towards the space, and towards their classmates, they can do whatever they want. There is an objective, the objective is that they experiment and that they do whatever they want to with the materials. I can put breadcrumbs, colanders, glasses, spoons... and they'll do whatever they want with that stuff, it's all about intentionality, that they explore based on their interests. There's no "this is done this way," they will have time to be told that in school, how they have to do things, and that things only have one use. One of the things that I like more than anything is watching kids use objects. Adults have a single use for objects, but for kids it's not like that. In the symbolic games that they invent, the use that they give each object is infinite. We don't want to stifle that creativity.

How has your experience been as a mother in El Arenero?

María: It has evolved as a process, and we have changed as a family, as well in a ton of different ways. The truth is that I doubted for a long time if I could be a mother because it was nauseating to imagine myself sitting in the park alone in the afternoons with one child or with two children. It was a vision that horrified me, because I thought that it would be very boring. So, during these four years, two with my older one and two with my younger one, I believe we've learned that you learn about everything through experiencing and living. I think they're two very happy kids that laugh a lot, that don't get scared going up the stairs of the entrance, that understand how to ask for help when they need it, that know how to resolve conflicts even though they don't always get what they want, but that also know that when there's something you don't like, you say, "I don't like that, I don't want you to do this to me." So, as a result, it's a little bit easier for them to understand that you shouldn't do things to others that they don't like. I believe that this way of trying to express what they feel and seeing what the others are feeling helps them take the step to being in a group of 25 people, which is, for example, what happens when they move on from preschool.

I believe that what they have gotten here is a ton of people that love them very much, which helps their self-esteem, their learning, and helps them be people who have different strategies for resolving conflicts and additionally to feel better in many situations. For me, my biological family is very important and I know they are important models for these kids, but I believe that all of the people that have lived with them these four years and that will continue to live together are just as important as models. Affection and love can do many things. It is also a political tool, and I believe that that is made very clear for the kids, as individual children, and for us, as adults, as well.

Could you talk about how you perceive the current education model?

María: Well, I believe that the current educational model is profoundly segregational... It removes diversity from very early ages and it's homogenizing in the worst sense

of the word. It seeks to discipline and it expels those who raise their voice even a little. It drives out those who are creative in a different way from what is supposedly established... and it's for the survivors. I believe those who make it to university are survivors of an educational model in which they have swallowed things that not only are they not interested in, but that bore them. They have learned to keep quiet and that not defending themselves is easier. I believe that it rewards silence more than words, not questioning is more rewarded than questioning. I believe it rewards memorizing more than reasoning. Recently a course finished, and one of the teens had written something that seemed marvelous to me. One of the phrases that he said was, "In this educational process that we've had in school, they valued us from zero to ten. We've been numbers between zero and ten. We understood that the closer we were to ten the more valued we were, and the more we moved away from ten the less valued we were." It then said other beautiful things, but that part seemed like it summarized a ton of things. That said, I believe there are places where they believe in adolescents much more than they believe in themselves sometimes.

How do you keep hope and activism alive in moments of political disaffection?

Pablo: I believe that a lot of it comes from looking at the past, the present situation, but especially looking towards the future, feeling that from the beginning the project has worked, that the families and the children and I have been really content, really comfortable with the project, for me that's the best motivator, to see the children so happy in the space... how marvelous it is to be playing all morning. I'd love to remember how my life was when I was two or three, because we don't remember being able to play all morning or all day. For me, the driving force comes from feeling that the project is working and that the people and the children are content, as well as looking towards the future of the project, the more peripheral project that we told you about regarding bringing a pedagogical and organizational model to environments that don't currently allow it. For me, I hope soon to be putting time and energy into that.

María: For me the driving force without a doubt is the children because, although we adults may not always see eye to eye, the children are so happy here. They come in the morning, run around the space, then they tell you what they've done here. You can see that after they leave, they'll still come to this space and feel it as their own. The joy that comes from participating in this project is so great that when you come to pick them up in the evenings, they don't want to leave. This is what keeps El Arenero going. The children are the motor. And Pablo and the families grease this motor every day. But I believe that in all of this, the whole collective process has been very important. Sometimes we say "So, I guess we'll have to make another Arenero, right?" to the families, for example, if they can't get in, and we say, "Well, you can call others, we can give you the tools," but they lack Pablos to jump into things, to keep moving forward in the face of difficulties and keep focus on the children. That's what makes us all reframe things when there's something not quite right... you look at the children and they immediately reposition you so you can see what the priority is, and the priority is always that they're content and happy, so we'll have to figure out the rest of it, but that's the priority, and they bring us back to that every day.

Pablo: For me as well, one of the most important things is the network that is built around the project; for me that's the most beautiful part. To see the network of care and affection built through the common need of child-rearing is amazing for me, and it's not quantifiable, it's something incredible, it's really

impressive. And it seems to me that this is the engine of change, that this collective project, collectively built, with childcare as the common need, transcends the educational project. For me this is the great strength of the project.

María: I obviously agree with this. I would define ourselves as a network of care that understands those cares as something profoundly transformative and political. Not like a way of resolving a necessity, but as a way to transform society.

What would it mean for El Arenero to grow in non-capitalist terms?

María: I believe that to grow means that this experience needs to be replicated in other places and, of course, adapting it to the singularities of each site... but for me growing would mean for there to be more people who, when they see that there's no way to satisfactorily resolve something with respect to childcare and other things, they can make one themselves; you can't do that alone, but surely there are other people that are thinking the same thing, it's just a matter of getting together. Keeping in mind what the purpose is, remembering that the obstacles don't block your way completely, and having a goal, which in this case is that our children would be cared for with respect and tenderness... Growing would mean for many more people to think that these things are totally attainable, for our point of view to be altered in an urgent moment of change, and for these little experiences not to change global politics, but they do prepare us for a crisis of civilization in the form of an energy collapse, when we'll have to change our way of living on the earth, and this project prepares us to do this in a way that's far more just, fair, sustainable, and at peace with our own planet.

Pablo: I agree completely. Often people will ask, "Do we want to grow this into another, bigger place?" I always say, "That doesn't interest me at all, to tell the truth." I'm not interested in El Arenero increasing the number of children. I want it to grow in other ways, with other people, with their contributions. To grow is to take responsibility in a collective way, not to outsource our problems. I mean, capitalism leads us to resolve everything individually, and whatever we can't solve for ourselves, we outsource. We hire a service or a retirement home or a preschool because we don't have any other solution. This is not a criticism. It's true that the society leads us to this way of living, that you have to resolve everything with your partner, and what you can't solve yourself because you don't have time, you outsource. So for me, to grow is this: that in the end, this model can spread a collective sense of responsibility for caring for our ourselves and each other.

PAH Madrid





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Emily Bruell



Tell us about yourself and your participation in this project.

I'm Diego; I'm part of the activist movement for victims of the mortgage crisis. I'm a victim myself, and I'm also fighting for my right to a home in a bad bank's block. The bad bank is "the Spanish bad bank", like in England, like in Ireland; a bad bank was created with the bailout in 2012, and we're recovering, occupying houses that the bad bank owns in order to fight for leases. That's one part of what's done in the platform, which is a general movement for housing rights and against the lifelong debts that people are held responsible for when they lose their homes here in the Spanish state.

What is La PAH, how did it come about and what social realities are inscribed into this platform?

Well, the platform for victims of mortgages is a nationwide organization, in other words, in all of Spain. Its acronym, PAH, stands for "Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca," or "Platform for Victims of Mortgages," which began in 2009, one year after the international crisis came to Spain, the crisis that began in the United States in 2007 when the subprime junk mortgage bubble burst. Here, the crisis came in 2008 and it was initially created because of the problem of homeowners with lifelong debts to the bank to acquire housing. For viewers in the United States, you have to understand that Spain doesn't have the same regulations as the Anglo-Saxon world. Here, if you hold a debt with the bank, if you turn over your house you aren't relieved of the debt; it's different from what happens in the United States and in England as well. Here, you lose the house and you're left with the debt. These are lifelong debts that can be 200,000 or 300,000 euros. And, apart from this still-burning fire of mortgaged homes, that fire has spread to other areas of housing, like rental properties. There's the serious crisis going on now that went on during the first quarter of 2017 as well. The number of evictions had gone down but it's rising again, on a nationwide level, for rental properties specifically. And this is happening fundamentally in Madrid and Barcelona. So it's true that the problem has shifted, and the public face of the problem has moved to the other sphere of rental properties. And in the midst of this there are many more households in very atypical situations, like occupation, for example, or as tenants not recognized legally but that entered as tenants. They have entered with a key and with permission, not kicking down the door; they're not squatters; they're not "ocupas," "occupiers," as we call them here. But they're still considered squatters. So all this reality that has been expanding and becoming more complex is kind of what La PAH is dealing with right now.

What is La PAH inspired by and who is it for?

For a foreign audience, so they understand: La PAH has a lot to do with community movements in the United States. In fact, we've been inspired

by them. It's a tradition that did not exist in Spain, the tradition of community, neighborhood organizations. Here, there has traditionally been more importance placed on the worker's movement or of certain neighborhood movements twenty, thirty, or forty years ago, but currently that's in ruins, so it's had to kind of start from zero. La PAH also has a lot to do with organizing in neighborhoods, from public places where people meet: churches, markets, parlors, centers where people go to fill out their papers. La PAH spreads from person to person at these places. So that's something that we've learned from many grassroots movements based in the United States, learning to understand who the leaders were in those communities. So what La PAH does is really related to that because it organizes a multicultural sector, and that's also very new in Spain. Spain is a country that was beginning to have significant increases in immigration in the period just prior to when the crisis began and the housing bubble burst. Only since the year 2000, mostly people from Latin America, but also those from Eastern Europe and Northern Africa, including from the countries of black Africa, started coming. Immigrants started to constitute an important part of the population in the working-class neighborhoods. So beginning in 2000, really, that population began to be a statistically significant part of Spain's population. Spain's growing economy experienced five or six years of adaptation, and then immediately became an economy in absolute crisis. So that's the reality that's been experienced in Spain for ten years. This situation has to be explained because it has nothing in common with that of the United States. The United States has been a multicultural country since, since its foundation practically. In Spain, multiculturalism existed, but it's completely obscured, including...well, you all know the history of the expulsion of entire communities to force them to convert to Catholicism, that's obscured historically, right? So when really this new multiculturalism arrives and it's obvious, you can't ignore it after 2000. La PAH began organizing in 2008 based on that reality, and that's what began to come together. Although Spanish families also found themselves indebted, those who bore the brunt of the problem and were left without any option are the immigrant families. It's not that the immigrant families get themselves indebted more or had been more imprudent than the Spanish families. The Spanish families acted the same. The difference is that the immigrant families were in a weaker position because they didn't have support networks here. If you're left without a house, and you can't go to your in-law's house because they're in Ecuador or Bolivia, you don't have any option other than joining other people that are in your situation. This began to be a part of La PAH. So part of the work of La PAH is to organize in response to this.

What relationship does La PAH have with 15M?

La PAH was created in 2009, but it expanded in 2011 during the citizen response that made up the movement the press called "Los Indignados," "The outraged," but that called itself 15M because it started on May 15, 2011. So, although La PAH existed before, when it grew to the statewide level along with the 15M, it expanded through one of the platform's campaigns, the campaign "Stop Desahucios," "Stop Evictions," against evictions in these kinds of homes with lifelong debts. That campaign was the one that made La PAH more popular, and connecting with a movement that was based on an assembly, La PAH acquired a form that was radically assembly-minded and democratic. If the 15M hadn't existed, surely it wouldn't have been like that.

What discourse does La PAH advocate?

There isn't a very extensively delineated discourse in La PAH. There's a general discourse on rights; we're human beings, and we have a right to a roof over our heads.

It doesn't go much beyond that. So anything else has to do with academic conceptions, you have to investigate, you have to ask questions, and you have to produce them. In La PAH there isn't a lot of time for that. So, it's more practice that defines our work; within practice, it's true that ideally everyone would fit in, but there are disagreements. Within La PAH, many people coexist who get along better with some than others; above all in the last two or three years we've noticed certain problems. For example, in my case of La PAH in Vallecas (which is a historically working-class neighborhood of Madrid), certain barriers are opened between people; there's no need to idealize, and it's true that not everyone joins together flawlessly, the Morroccans with the Spaniards. In theory, it's like that, but in practice, well... even so, it continues to be a common house, as they say. Common house isn't the word, but it's a kind of common site, that's what it is. It's understood that there's the idea of mutual support, I mean in an ideal sense.

How does the Spanish constitution include the right to housing?

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 includes a series of fundamental rights like the right to housing and the right to a job. What happens is that they're included in a section that was never ratified, they were not rights that were really protected under the Constitution. Yes, the right to property was protected, but the right to housing was not. It's like a second class right. So, there's always that contradiction when we're saying that the right to housing in the Spanish State isn't fulfilled, but we really know that it's not a real right. In the Constitution itself, it's formally a right at the second or third level of priority. There are other rights that come first, such as property and then more basic rights such as the right to physical integrity, which of course are fundamental rights.

Can you tell us about Spanish mortgage law?

The mortgage law in the Spanish state is a law that was created in order to protect principally the borrower, the bank, in the case the bank of Spain. So what it ensures is that guarantee of the loan, the house itself, is retained by the bank with the outstanding balance, but beyond that you still owe the debt to the bank for life. There is a specific procedure and a special procedure in the courts in order to proceed to the eviction that's in accordance with this mortgage law. And it includes a series of clauses which are the ones we've been getting to know with the passage of time and that, right now, today, are declared illegal by the European Union, but it's taking time for these standards to arrive here in the Spanish state. The judicial area of the European Union has already said that they're illegal, but until that's adopted by the courts here, it may take some time.

Why has the decision of the European tribunal still not taken effect?

Because there's a very strong oligarchic bloc in Spain that's structured around banking and the financial sector and it must be explained that the Spanish specialization in globalization has been in the tourism and real estate sectors, which are sectors that are regulated and encouraged by the government and are very protected. The issue isn't so much deregulation as a regulation in favor of the wealthy. This is a global trend, and in Spain it means that the stronger sectors, finance and real estate, are the ones that are protected under these terms. That is to say, evicting people is hugely advantageous for them, because they get to keep the debt, and they can hold that debt and continue to collect interest on it even if they've sold the debt, like in the subprime mortgage crisis, because the banks no longer retain the debt but rather have placed it in markets...they can still reclaim it. A completely atypical thing, I mean,

the phenomenon isn't atypical (this is how the crisis began in 2007, the subprime mortgage crisis), but here the bank that gave the mortgage, although it has already placed the debt elsewhere, still can charge and evict that person and say, "I'm the owner of this house." That, we think, is really an anomaly, at least at the European level.

What are some of the difficulties that La PAH faces?

Right now the difficulty... there are many, I mean, we don't have them itemized. We face many at once. There is a new economic cycle that has to do with what we said at the beginning about renting, about transferring the same problem that's in developed economies, in the metropolis, since the 70s. It has to do with financialization, it's the same problem. The press focuses on it as if it were something different every time because that's how they sell news. But no, it's the same problem of financialization. Housing is a financialized commodity. In Spain, that has gone through different stages. With the crisis, when the problem of credit emerged, and the problem of the economic slowdown, well, the problem affects people who are a bit higher up the social strata. It's people that you can say are middle-class. And now, this issue has returned to affect the people who it had always affected, but in the specific niche of rents, it continues to affect the middle class; I mean, there's still a very strong crisis of the middle class in Spain. So, with this change, La PAH isn't working to make that problem more visible, especially from the younger generations. In La PAH, there's very little presence of young people with a university education. That's a problem, I'm not saying that this is La PAH's problem, but that's a problem. A visibility problem. We are in a situation of undercapitalization at the movement; in emergencies, we aren't able to aid all of the evicted people. It is true that now in the consultancies many people arrive with the eviction from a rental property, which are the majority of evictions that happen. Yes, there are young families who are being evicted. But they're families of the working class, a social sector that in Spain has been very invisible since the Transition.

Our society is mainly composed of middle class individuals and here it's been agreed that society's problems are the problems of the middle class. So of course, young people come to La PAH. In my La PAH of Vallecas, many of those who have been evicted in the last two months, because we've had a ton of evictions, are 24 or 25 year-old couples with children. They aren't people from here in Lavapiés, but young people who live in shared apartments, university students that are now being affected by gentrification in the center of Madrid. That's kind of what's centered in the course of the rent crisis, which is a more general problem, but is focused a lot in this sector.

In the PAH, for whatever reason, we aren't taking charge of or representing that problem. Many people have become activists in La PAH, and at the core of La PAH's activism are people who know nothing about activism, but they lack all kinds of tools, and there's no time to have debates and discussions as they should be had. So what happens is that when everything goes well, everything goes well, but when there are momentary setbacks, there's no serious, analytical discussion where each problem is isolated. We really have a whole list of problems that's immeasurable right now; it's not that there's a single problem, we have lots of problems. Those that are micro-political, and there are problems that are macro that have to do with the economic situation. You need to individualize these kinds of things or isolate them from an analytical standpoint. You learn that now in the university, and back in its day, you learned that in the worker's movement, in the athenaeums. It's not that you have to learn it in the university. There used to be other kinds of institutions where analytical-scientific thought was taught; that doesn't

exist anymore. There is no intermediate stage. People who can't access that, can't access it. And there's no other place where you can acquire it because it doesn't exist, what society has is self-organization, as a result of which we have to create these institutions while we're dealing with everything else, so it's too much for us.

How have the municipal councils for change in Madrid and Barcelona responded to the housing crisis?

The city councils for change, Madrid and Barcelona, are those that have most increased evictions in all of Spain in 2017. These are the councils that were going to end the evictions. They are municipalities that have also gathered many people and even the slogan of "sí, se puede." It's slogan that isn't really La PAH's; it's a motto that comes from the movement of seasonal workers in California, César Chavez et cetera, you know it too. "Sí, se puede" comes from there. And La PAH picked it up from those migrant movements. From May Day of 2006 in the United States, we collect all of that from there. But, really that's known in Spain because of La PAH.

Why do you think that extant tenant unions have started up even with La PAH already existing?

A central problem for the left now in Europe, and throughout the world, is the distance between the working class and the professional, liberal classes that are involved in the left's discourse. There was already an organization, La PAH, which was having a lot of success in connecting these two worlds. Why on earth are they separating again now? Why now in Barcelona and Madrid are they creating tenant unions? You see the photo of the evictions that the tenants' union is stopping in Barcelona and you see the pictures of the evictions of tenants that La PAH is stopping in Barcelona this week, and you see the difference. You see that in La PAH there are many more dark people, many more different people, immigrants, Spaniards, but you can see that they don't come with their backpacks, they don't come from studying at the University, do they? And you see other photos of the union of tenants, and you see that those who are stopping the evictions are the kids of a university education and you wonder, *why have we returned to that?* It's a step back. It's a setback, but apparently it may not seem like one, it may seem like they're adopting the logic of La PAH, like it's expanding and that's good, because it gets distributed. But in subjective terms, it's clearly a setback. We are still working on this and we're processing it, and for some of us it's a strong source of frustration.

What happens when a person is evicted? What is the next step?

Spain is a Latin country with a Mediterranean culture, so here the family has replaced the policies of both the market and the State. Where neither the market nor the State intervened, there was the family. In fact, for this very reason, it has been said that neither the State nor the market is very developed, because almost all the needs have been covered by the family, and, well, by women, right? So what happens when you're kicked out of your house if you're a typical Spanish family? Well, you're going to live with a father-in-law or a mother-in-law. That's the most typical thing. Or there are many families that don't have the problem of eviction, because it's the extended family that's paying the mortgage, as is the case for my brother, and probably the majority of cases. My brother has been unemployed for years, his partner is working but she doesn't have sufficient income to pay the mortgage, so my sister-in-law's grandparents and my parents, my brother's parents, are the ones paying. So this is very typical before

a situation involving eviction is reached. So that's the tough part. And everything else, what we call a housing emergency, is when that isn't the case. So what happens when that isn't there is that the state isn't there as a support either, and the market begins to parasitize and to enter very strongly in the rental market. So right now, not even renting is an escape, because in order to rent, if you're thrown out of a house with a mortgage or you get kicked out of a squatter house that you were renting, they demand four months rent in advance, they demand collateral, they demand "un nómino," which is what they call having a legal work contract with a salary of up to 700 € per month in some cases. "Show me that you deposit one thousand seven hundred euros a month, and I'll let you rent." It isn't that it will cost you one thousand seven hundred to the rent. It's that in order to sign the contract and to live here, you have to have this salary for me to be sure. And that's because there's a financialization of the market, which is to say that they create their financial buffer also for an assured profitability. So this is causing a lot of people to be thrown out. That's why evictions are increasing. What happens in a city like Madrid, where there's no public housing? In the Spanish State as a whole, two percent of the housing market is social or public; even within the stock that counts as public, it's not really social. These are truly two different categories because here public housing and social housing were two different things. But, putting everything together, it was around one or two percent, which is very little, and in Madrid, we're in that situation. Further aggravating this situation, the previous governments of the conservative party in power before the current party Podemos, have sold housing. The governments don't have money and owe money to the banks, so they have to get rid of the assets they have, like real estate. That's in theory, but in reality, it's exploitation. It has nothing to do with economic rationality, but that was the excuse. We don't have money so we're going to sell, and in the case of Madrid, five thousand public housing units were sold in 2013. All in one year. So the city of Madrid lost five thousand public housing units in 2013, which, in turn, has generated many evictions and a lot of occupational problems as well because people have been entering and occupying the houses that have been left empty. These people have been later evicted. And then we learned that they haven't even sold those homes for what they were worth, they have sold them below their price. So it's not true that they sold them because of the debt problem; rather, as Podemos says, it's a plot. There's an agreement between the various agents of the economy, "We're going to prey on everything," and herein lies the problem of the deficit. The problem of debt is a problem for social democratic governments; it's not a problem for conservative governments. It's a problem for the next people, but for me it's not a problem because I'm selling below the price. So, what situation are you in once you've been evicted? Well, that's an institutional situation. In Madrid, as well as with the government of Podemos and Manuela Carmena, is a combination of public and private agencies that give you the option of staying at a hostel, a hotel, "I'll pay one or two months of private rent for you," or you enter the public housing waiting list. Little by little, they're managing the avalanche like that. They are saying "this here, this here, this one here," "battered woman, here," "Single parent family with five children, here." But of course, before you get that "here" there are another twenty people, so basically there's no place to live and you go to the street, or you go to another city. That's the reality.

What is the social housing policy in Spain?

In Spain, there are three administrative levels that are the central Government of the State, that is, the Government of Spain; next is what are called Autonomous Communities, which are regional governments in a model like the Federal Government in the United States, and then there are the municipalities that are the third level.

The housing policy is the responsibility of City Councils and the Autonomous Communities. The central government makes general legislative frameworks on banks, on consumption, on mortgages, that's the purview of the central government. But the part concerning housing is local. Then there are those two organizations, the Community and the City Council, and right now everything can be summarized as: there's no housing; there's no housing policy. Now the new city council of Madrid has taken over the operation that the municipal council of housing had which was to build social housing, an operation that had been put on hold. Well, now they're building new housing, which has advantages and disadvantages. It's not that it's all good. But, when they finish building those four thousand homes that they have said they're going to build, we'll be in the situation we were in in 2013. In other words, as far as public housing availability, we will have what we had four years ago. And four years ago we already had a huge problem. This is very difficult to convey to people who are wrapped up in the hope of change, of municipalism. They're saying that the evictions have stopped, that now everything is very beautiful, that we're building, but in practice, even if you manage to do this thing you're doing, if it gets finished, which remains to be seen, we will be like we were four years ago. So this is the reality.

How has the mortgage problem changed?

In all of Catalonia, Valencia, Murcia, all the areas of the Spanish Mediterranean coast, the mortgage problem is gigantic today. It's also huge in Madrid. It is still a big problem, but we're in another political phase, in another economic phase, also a phase of governing the very banks with this problem. But the mortgage problem has not been resolved. Here in Spain there's a lot of fondness for soccer, and we say the problem has been cleared to the corner. When the attacking players arrive and throw the ball and the goalkeeper clears to the corner, but it has not been resolved, play continues. So the mortgage problem is like that, because it's the problem of private debt and household debt, which is kind of kicked to the corner by policies that have to do with European governance, the response of the European central bank to the crisis, they started buying debts. That has caused interest rates to go down a lot, and the mortgage problem has been somewhat calmed, but it's still there. In the first quarter of this year the mortgage evictions in Madrid have increased. This isn't a separate problem; until the mortgage law is changed, this won't work itself out, it will continue happening there. That said, we always try to make it very clear that the evictions are still a problem because it seems like it's a thing of the past. Through the struggle, through the very changes that the entities have been taking, the problem has been slowed a little. But the regulation is the same one we had, the one that caused the problem. So until the regulation is changed, the problem is still going to be there.

From your point of view, how should the housing problem in Spain be solved?

We think that it's about taking housing away from the big holders. It's not about building new housing. There's an author who's the director of the New Left Review called Susan Watkins that in an article of the time, around the time of the referendum in Greece about the bailout with Syriza, she'd already made a characterization of the new left, populist or radical in Europe, and she characterized them, differently from the common sentiment, as a kind of new radicalism of weak social democracies. We've seen it now in England with the Grenfell Tower scandal. Corbin has said, "We have to expropriate the homes of the rich to relocate these families," and that's been the furthest social democracy has gone in Europe, and it's being said that it's incredibly radical. So this is the situation we're in. The claim that we have in La PAH that you

have to take away houses from their owners is seen as a radicality, but as we say, it's not radical, it's redistribution, it's what's been done the whole life of social democracy. Measures that are completely reformist, absolutely reformist movements are seen today as communism. Why? Well, that's where we are. Actually, even we aren't saying that we have to expropriate; we're saying that there's a legal concept in Spain that's called the transfer of use. With that, you avoid people calling you a communist, saying you're expropriating, and the owner is obliged to give up use of the property but remains the owner. That's what La PAH advocates. In other words, in La PAH we're advocating for the owners continuing to be the owners -- you can see that we're *super* radical. Even so, we're very far from that. But we think that, as Susan Watkins argues, the state doesn't have the capacity. That is, the State is creating four thousand more houses in Madrid, and it's not going to have the capacity to manage them. The management of the four thousand homes will be delegated. Currently, the State is mush...when we speak of the State, of supporting the State more or less, I'm not advocating for more government. I'm advocating for taking away from the owners what they have. That doesn't mean advocating for more State. Advocating for the State means, do I make four thousand more houses and have them managed by the current State in Madrid that's a mess of NGOs, social workers, social services, who make reports? That's the State today; they act as police for the poor. Well that isn't what La PAH stands for, it won't advocate for it at all. Because if you make four thousand more houses, first you have to make people go live there, and here in Spain there has always been the problem of a total lack of public housing, and then when there was a surplus, it was not distributed, and that will happen again to people and to the people who are occupying houses you decide to legalize. I'm part of the idea of less State. Simply take the owners away, and that implies less State, that there's just a regulation by which the owner is committed to the rental properties. That means less State because it means less social workers, less reports, less agencies, less of that, less mediation. But they have us trapped with that nonsense of the State. In the background, it's like the left has placed the State on an altar. And it's an altar that doesn't make sense because the State is property of the oligarchies. I don't want more State under those conditions.

What keeps your activism alive in moments of political apathy?

Right now, it's a very hard time, because I'm fighting for my own rent. But in the end, it's what I hold on to. Right now it's very complicated. Until we come up with some way out that the state will consent to, rearming the strategy is going to be difficult. Right now, we're in a really difficult moment. Me personally, what do I hold on to? I grabbed onto, I don't know...the courage of friends and colleagues, seeing people with lives very different from my own, trajectories very different from mine. But even that runs out. Right now my fundamental motivation is to get a rental. I'm in a unit, so mine is one of fourteen other floors, so it's not entirely my own place.

I know you're familiar with Pau Faus's Seven Days with La PAH. Can you tell us what you think of this work?

It seems to me, by far, the best source on the mortgage crisis in Spain. There are other works in a more journalistic vein that have tried to explain La PAH, but precisely because they're journalistic and because they're objective, in the end, they don't explain anything. I'm a journalist. So I know how it works. In the end, journalism is a code that you use to bring about a journalistic story where there must be a part and a counterpart. Pau's work work explains La PAH very well, and it explains the problem very well. So I don't believe there's any

documentary better than that. It's something that people should see now that they're talking about tenant unions and such. There are very rare ideas there about doing individual advocacy, and I'd say, "Watch this and understand why La PAH is supporting collective advocacy, not having centered everything around the expert figure of the lawyer." That came out very clearly in the documentary.



ColaBoraBora





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
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Collective's name
ColaBoraBora

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and why have you joined this project?

My name is Ricardo Antón, I'm from Bilbao and I'm part of ColaBoraBora. At ColaBoraBora, we are a social initiative cooperative. We are involved in what is called the alternative solidarity-based economy. Before, we were a non-profit association (ASL) called *Amaste* that formed in 2001. Then, after many years, we went from being an ASL to being a social initiative cooperative and we changed our name; we call ourselves ColaBoraBora.

We have five people, and we mainly come from artistic and cultural fields, always understood as spaces open to other social, economic, and political spheres. We work a lot with the transformation of the public sphere, understanding the public sphere as something that should be managing at least part of common life. Our work always tries to transform public policies or public programs. We are dedicated to help design other, more open, more participatory, and more co-responsible environments in which citizens, the public sphere, and the private sphere can be found. This is kind of our work. At the beginning, we focused more on communication and guerrilla marketing, and from there we moved to more informal education processes, especially with teenagers. From there we began to work more and more collaboratively, but when we founded ColaBoraBora in 2010, that was when collaboration suddenly became the principal focus, the transversal axis of all the projects.

Why the name ColaBoraBora?

Well, it was a bit of a play on words. Between the idea of “Bora-Bora”—the island in the Pacific, a kind of supposedly paradisiacal island—and the idea of collaborating. It was like an island of collaboration, playing a little bit with this idea of the island as Neverland and the island in Utopia by Thomas Moore. It was a bit like creating a fictional space between the prevailing reality or the world where we live and a projected desire. A kind of fiction that could be that treasure island ... a kind of utopia ... and see how to move between the ground and what you would like to be. Well, the ColaBoraBora aims to be a space for testing that. At first, we liked the idea of island, then we began problematizing the idea of island, thinking about the idea of an archipelago because an island is more of a self-referential space, like a whole world within itself, and we have been thinking more about the idea of network; islands that are connected to each other and that feed each other. So that's a little bit of the idea behind the origin of the name. Also at the beginning, we called ourselves *Amaste*, which was a name that came from my parents' art gallery; *Amaste* was an acronym of my last names, but if we're always talking about collective intelligence, it can't be called something like my

own name. So we liked the name ColaBoraBora¹ more because it had that game of something that was already collective, and that belonged to all of us who were working on the project and, at the same time, had a kind of symbolic capacity.

Why be a cooperative?

Being a cooperative is important for us because coming from artistic fields, we really like to work with forms and, after all, the legal forms are another way to do this. When in 2001 we became a non-profit association, we also became a non-profit as a way of claiming that we want to work within the field of art. Not as a kind of bohemian, romantic idea of the artist, but we make this kind of practice our way of working and, somehow, we adopted the ASL as a sort of provocative form of entrepreneurship. The idea was to be able to really introduce the money factor into the conversations we were having. What happened is that, over time, what was at first a strange thing has almost become a norm. Right now, we're in a time when the creative and cultural industries are nearly hegemonic. Almost all the time, they're trying to make you become a company, make you an entrepreneur, make you earn money. So what we had chosen at first as a way to problematize something, had become almost the opposite, right? Like a new kind of dogma of personal companies, of artists who have to be a company.

So the form of a social initiative cooperative—that is, working within the logic of the social and solidarity-based economy—recovered the idea centering work as the activity or the professional part of our lives. What do we want to dedicate ourselves to, what do we want the productive part of our life to be? And then there's the construction of ourselves as a cooperative, a co-responsible collective, more linked to what might be an anarcho-communitarian point of view. Also in the Basque country, there's a strong tradition of cooperatives, because of the Mondragón corporation, which is a corporation that since the fifties, I think, has been building a whole model of cooperative production closely linked to production, mostly industrial, but also a number of services, for example, Eroski supermarkets, in Arrasate, Mondragón. It's a kind of productive, cooperative society in which all work is also closely linked to the creation of community, etc. So, there's that kind of link between a tradition of the commons and communitarianism and the Basque country, where we're situated. This work is a process of rethinking what the cooperative is, because the Mondragón group was created halfway through the twentieth century, it's been growing a lot, it got into a logic of globalization in a growth model and now they're in a moment of rethinking and returning to institute the cooperative model over the territory. So, for us, right now the cooperative form, both in its most formal structure and in its more informal facets, is very interesting and important to us. In other words, how are we going to go back, facing the individualist and very neoliberal idea that each person has to see how they can get ahead, based on their resources and abilities, and instead recover the idea of thinking together and each person putting in what they might contribute or may need, and build models.

What work does ColaBoraBora do and what are your tools and concerns?

We are dedicated to designing collaborative environments and processes; how to give out tools so that people can come to decide what they want to happen or what they want to do. When I say people, I don't mean all citizens either; sometimes they're small groups, sometimes they're the administrative workers themselves, and

¹ The first half of this name-- "colabora" -- translates literally to "collaborate"

sometimes they're even the people in charge—because even when they're part of the few who rule, they don't know how to work collaboratively either. So, all the time it's about trying out how things would be if we thought about them collectively and collaboratively. We are dedicated to offering services that have to do with doing that, and trying to generate tools that facilitate that. All this has a lot to do with “design thinking,” but we do see that design thinking has been assimilated by the current ways of doing things, and is very linked to a continuation of the logic of the status-quo: I look at reality and proceed to the next step. It's like a kind of incremental innovation in which imagination, subjectivity, and other languages that don't involve intellectual thinking, discourse and ideas and brainstorming aren't present. We try all the time to introduce a little subjectivity, poetics, and the body. Focusing on the body is also something that's hard for us, because just as it's hard for us to play as adults, it's hard for us to really inhabit our bodies. I, for example, am someone who talks a ton -- well you've already seen that. I talk a ton but even though I know that the body is important, I don't know how to move my body, I haven't learned. We have to learn. We try to work a lot with the field of performing arts because of that, because in performing arts the body and the relationship of the body with space is very important.

Maybe that's also why we ignore the logic of the senses: the sense of sight and the sense of hearing. For example, we build everything from how we see, and then we talk; we are much less used to listening, for example. We don't listen. We listen much less, or we listen to simply to be able to answer. So we ask ourselves how to value the senses that aren't imposing themselves all the time. So, we are trying to incorporate those things into our practices. Important things that we now obsess over...one of them is time. We see that in most of the groups we are a part of, the problem is time. No one has time. That is why this idea of productive and reproductive work and that robots are going to come to do the work for us really seems interesting to us. Let the robots come to do the work so that we can free ourselves from work.

We also have the problem that we've been told that the money that we live on comes from work. Well, let's see where the money comes from and where sustainability comes from, it doesn't have to come from work because work is something that also ties you to reality and the system. When we work with teenagers, we find it interesting to observe that the power of transformation is in children and retirees—those who have not reached or who are no longer in a productive time of their lives. The question is how to channel that because the rest of us are busy working, and at the same time, you have to pay what you owe. So, one thing that seems very important to us is time and how to free up time to be able to dedicate ourselves to other things that aren't employment. This is closely linked to a universal basic income and also to the recovery of the idea of work, not of employment, but of work understood as everything that has to do with the sphere of care and the sphere of the community.

Another thing we work a lot with is the idea of capital. Using the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, we understand that we live in a form of capitalism where the only capital that has value is money. We want to see how to diversify capital and be able to understand that each one of us gets a lot of capital in different forms. It would be interesting be able to share the vital capital that each person possesses: knowledge, experiences, resources, infrastructures, time, familiarity in a certain context, including money, but not only money. Then we'd need the power to know how to exchange capital and how to convert it into something valuable, so that in the end it doesn't have to be converted to money. What usually happens is that all this capital, in the end, you have to translate it into money

so that you can go to buy bread. Then, the challenge would be to be able to invent a world where the value of capital is not really translatable into money. For example, time banks are a good example of this with respect to time capital.

This concept of “Composition in Real Time,” (CTR in its Spanish Initials) that we’re using now is a methodology that comes from the performing arts. It has a lot to do with this idea of the body, space, and putting it into practice, from the body, what you want to build with others. Then there’s “Hondartzan,” a community of practice that we formed around the concept of the commons, around the idea of community of practice; the “WikiToki” project, for example, is a community of practice, to say, “This is what we think would be interesting to do; let’s get together to see if we are capable of doing it.” Of course, a community of practice has the problem that you don’t really know how to do what you’re doing, and sometimes it’s frustrating because it often does not work and you need it to, and sometimes, for many reasons and because we’re people, and people are complicated-as-fuck animals... well, it’s complicated. But we find this idea of a community of practice very interesting, of coming together in a community around a common interest and trying to go about practicing it in order to learn it. Then there’s the idea of the “Kraak Kit”. Before, when we were doing summer camps, we had a toolkit for ‘cracking things open’ (on a metaphorical level). We worked a lot with the idea of prototypes and with the idea of “prototyping,” the concept of trying to situate oneself in a context, learn what is happening there in that context and what things could be introduced in that context so that others can continue and make more prototypes. And then there is the “Kooptel,” which is a combination of methodologies kind of like the idea of making a cocktail to collaborate. What we think was interesting was that it worked on the prerequisites, the preliminary conditions of collaboration. Normally when we come together to collaborate, we tell ourselves, “We have to do this,” or, “We’re going to get together to do this” but you haven’t even thought about who you are or who the other person is. What interest does each person have in doing what they want to do? So, it’s important to first work on all of that stuff before you start doing what you wanted to do. So it’s a question of dedicating a little time to getting to know each other, to know what each person’s abilities are, to know their interests, etc. Overall, we work on this, generating methodological frameworks and then we try to apply them to specific realities.

On your website, you talk about the concept of the “un-artist.” Can you explain this concept?

It is a concept used by Alan Kaprow, an artist in the sixties who is one of the creators of Fluxus, an artistic movement that has to do a bit with this idea of mixing art and life and using the artistic practices of a strictly artistic space to interact with other issues of life in all its facets. So, he talks a little about how art needs to stop being art in order to be art as part of other things. Then he talks a little about the idea of “unlearning” and “un-artist”: that perhaps the best way or one of the possible ways of being an artist today is to be a “un-artist,” that is to stop working within logic because art has always been closely linked to the forms and counterforms of power. The history of art as we know it has always been linked to kings, to popes, to representations of power. And right now, to a large extent, it is also linked to people who have money, to hegemonic political systems, even during World War II, for example, “socialist realism,” “abstract expressionism,” has always been very linked to the hegemonic forms of representation or to the market. And then, the idea is how step outside that system, and see what kind of artistic practices can arise from that logic. In the end, both the idea of “un-artist” and “fluxus”—such as

situationism or other types of practices more linked to an art that doesn't seem like art, that people do not identify as art—would be a way to activate advocacy capacities in certain contexts that art could have, except that when it is already identified as art, it disappears. So we always like to think that we keep operating as artists, although what we do is almost never recognized as such by the system itself.

How do you understand the place of art in the socio-cultural transformation taking place?

We always work a lot with the idea of generating new ways of imagining and new subjectivities to understand art as something that opens new questions. Mainly, the changes are cultural ones; that is, for something to change, conditions can change, but there must also be a change of culture, a mental change that has to do with changing routines and ways of doing things. These ways of doing, normally, are supported in forms of representation, iconography that represents certain things. Then, you either change those conceptions, or really the change does not end. So, if much of the change of these deep transformations that we can hope for are cultural changes and symbolic changes and change of subjectivity, then art should have a lot of weight, a lot to contribute, right? We try to situate ourselves a bit in that space too, sort of like art as a way of experimenting that's not really linked to traditional sciences, but that allows us to experiment in other ways and from places that aren't conventional. So that idea of needing to get out of the prevailing logic to really achieve other kinds of things -- we don't know what they are yet, but we know we need other things.

What does ColaBoraBora mean by a network and how are networks activated?

For us, a network means connections with other people and other agents ... we come from very personal networks and networks that are close or trustworthy. We understand that the networks come in many forms and not all "nodes" have to have the same intensity but, in the end, we work a lot in networks and we hope that they are as dense as possible and also close in terms of territory. We work a lot in this neighborhood and we try to work all the time from a point of view of closeness so that the network can really hold you, because if not, the holes in the network are very large and you fall through them. We think about how to build networks that are more intertwined. We work a lot with this idea of the *procomún* (neologism translating to "pro-common sphere"); any community is a network. Then within networks we try to think of distributed networks where there are no central nodes that accumulate power, legitimacy or relationships that instrumentalize the network; we try to make it as distributed as possible and that is difficult because we are very used to very centralized or decentralized models, but not distributed ones. When the economist Elinor Ostrom formulated how a community works, she explained a kind of circle-triangle that we have always liked a lot and that had to do with the fact that there are relationships of trust, appreciation, and reciprocity. At the end of the day, maybe these are the three things that you ask of your main network. In other words, to be able to have a network of nodes based on trust, appreciation, and reciprocity; then that network can be fed by many other nodes, in which those same three elements do not have to work so hard, but to know that in addition to your main network, you can ask these additional components and that they can ask you for these, too. And then try to make it as diverse as possible, I mean, that each person dedicates themselves to as diverse a set of things as possible so that your network contains relationships or knowledge that is as diverse as possible; that is something that also usually fails because

we usually try to get together with people who are too much like us or work on similar projects to us. So, getting diversity is also often complicated in networks.

What is the relationship between ColaBoraBora and WikiToki?

ColaBoraBora is one part of WikiToki. WikiToki is a laboratory of collaborative practices in which diverse people meet to experience collaborative processes; they are interested for different reasons. We are another agent that is part of that Association. We try to be a part of different groups, in general tending toward the local ones. For example, we are part of REAS, which is the Alternative and Solidarity Economy Network. We are part of Karaska, which is a platform for innovation and culture and the culture of innovation. We are part of SAREA, which is a kind of bar, athenaeum, and space for the revitalization of la Plaza Corazón de María, here in the neighborhood. We are part of other projects, and we always try to construct themes that, in some way, interest us and in which the sum of forces multiplies what each one of us could do separately.

What is needed to sustain a structure and a work of collaboration via networking based on relationships of reciprocity, trust, and appreciation?

It is true that it is difficult to sustain networks or be in too many networks because each network requires a lot of effort, but we trust that, right now, it's an effort that generates a lot of weight in our small organization. To belong to so many things and belong in an active and committed way and investing time, resources, energy, enthusiasm in these networks, in the short term is challenging because we are not used to working like this, and it generates a lot of friction, sometimes fatigue and sometimes even desperation. But it's really the only way to work. Sometimes you're kind of disgusted to participate in one thing but you know that it can't happen any other way. It really seems that the system is set up so that you return to your individual space, that is, to a space that, in the short term, is more comfortable, because when you have to think through something with others, you can't think on your own...When you say "I'm going to think what I want" you do not have to take time to work how to come to agreement with others, or understand positions that are not the same as yours. But of course, that idea that I'll get along with the other person who thinks like me does not usually happen when people have their own ideas, right? So, it's tiresome, but it's the way to continue. Here in Spain, when we were little, there was a program on TV called "The Crystal Ball." It was a TV show for children that I've always liked a lot because it had electro-goblins, some dolls that had messages that, today, I think it would be impossible to show on TV. They were very anarchic, very anarcho-communitary and had little "audio pills," little announcements. There were two announcements that I liked a lot. One said "this guy does not read, if you do not want to be like this, then read"—as a way to value knowledge, right? "If you do not want to become a neoliberal shark, read." Then there was another announcement that was "you can't do it alone, you can with friends." We've grown in the opposite direction, each of us trying to be the best, it's really hard to take on a cooperative role... it's like we're not educated, or trained for it. I have to admit that I, right now, am tired. Participating in so many networks, trying to sustain that kind of reciprocal relationship tires you out and right now I am working with a low level of intensity. But, even so, although I am tired right now and sometimes I say, "Damn these networks," it goes away very fast because the times you see the network working and the power of that operation outweigh all those other times which, sometimes, feel like chopping at rocks in a mine.

Thinking about your personal experience, what do we need to do to change reality?

Changing the hegemonic reality is not so easy, because if it were easy, we would have already changed it. It is very strongly built and it's static, right? Normally, the processes that result in change are not like, "Look, five years and we have changed all this!" The changes take time and maybe we have a lot of anxiety because you're experiencing it firsthand, and we know that many of the facets of reality can be cruel and painful, and you would like to be able to transform it quickly. But that lack of patience leads to anxiety, a hastiness that is not good for the collective process of transformation or what it needs. So managing anxiety, knowing how to enjoy this journey is complicated. Lately, I try to remember myself that maybe I won't live to see the change, but I can enjoy this path full of mud and brambles as part of the process of change. So, instead of waiting to reach the goal, you have to know how to enjoy this dump, right? and the mud ... It is true that it is not comfortable, it is not a space of comfort, but it is the right choice to have made. If you want to change things, then you have to deconstruct what there is, you have to do something else, and you will meet limitations, barriers, people who are not looking for that same change.

What is the relationship between ColaBoraBora and institutions?

We mainly work, or try to work mainly with public institutions. For us, institutions are, within the Western democratic systems, the place where we have delegated part of the responsibility in the decision-making for the management of public goods. We prefer that model to a deregulated, neoliberal model, where everything is privatized and, at the same time, we would like that public institutional model, let's say a European one, to evolve towards more open, more participatory democracy with more sophisticated ways of being able to participate and contribute. It is about passing a little from the public domain to the common. Then we understand that the public sphere is the place where we should exercise influence, because the public is who has the ability to activate programs to mingle with certain things that we practice on a more prototypical level. So, our vocation is to work for and with the public—we always say we're a private agent with a public vocation working to broaden the common sphere, this is kind of our definition. It is true that we also try to work from a "kilometer zero" point of view, that is, to be very present in the territory and not to be a global or delocalised market agent.

So, when you work like this, the Institutions that you work with are your home Institutions of your house because to transform anything you have to start by transforming yourself as a person and your immediate environment ... and it is true that sometimes you say, "Fuck, well, why did I decide to live here?"—a place where the Institutions are not very receptive to what we propose, right?—but this is where we are. Trying to transform your reality is the situation we're in, the one we try to operate in. The Basque country is a place that is very institutionalized. We have many Institutions that do many things, probably too many things, and everything is done from the Institution or in a way mediated by the Institution. This means that there is a lot of dialogue with Institutions, and that has its pros and cons because it kind of generates a field where it seems like the institution is already doing everything and it's hard to confront the institution because, at the end of the day, a certain clientelism is generated. There are things that I think would be better done in other ways. Also in Bilbao, in Bizkaia and the Basque country, the same party is almost always ruling; it is true that it does not always govern with an absolute majority, so they have to negotiate, but they work very much within institutional logic. In addition,

the territory where we operate is a territory with such a political affiliation that it seems like if you are not a part of that political party, then you're against it. So it's difficult to get involved in the construction of a common resource that's more open, less partisan, because it seems that they are the Institution. In addition, we find it difficult to occupy that position because we are not affiliated with anything (of any specific party). When you aren't part of anything, you aren't with the other people, and it seems like nobody is working with you, and that you're kind of a weirdo. We are agents who are constantly contributing and building critically, not self-indulgently, trying to find the cracks in things. So it is hard for us to find spaces of trust with institutions; it's like they always think that we're going to want to annoy them, I think, I don't know. We should also ask the institution what they think of us. But it is hard for us to find a true framework for work with the Institution. As we are insistent, they let us make prototypes, but we never went beyond the prototype stage and we didn't manage to finalize any models. Also what I suppose happens to us is that because we're not affiliated with the university either, we're an agent of innovation, but not formal one. We are an agent closer to innovation or citizen science, but we are not a citizen science either because we're a company that offers services in that area. So, we are always kind of in the middle of everything and when you are in the middle of everything, it's an interesting position to be in, but also a very uncomfortable one in which to live; it is also exhausting because all the time you are being pushing to go work in the private sector. The message is that as the public sector is very complicated, you have to go work in the private one. We resist privatization because it's kind of abandoning the public sector to its fate. I am very critical of how the public sector works, but I say, "At least we still have it." The day the public sphere disappears, and we're in spaces where it's increasingly disappearing or weakening, and it will be very difficult to recover. That is, we are letting it loose and when we are aware of that and want to recover it, the same thing will happen as it did with climate change; the day that we really believe in climate change and want to apply measures against it, there is no way, right? Well, for me the same thing happens with the public sector. So we insist on continuing to work in relation to the public, although the public does not give us much recognition, or does less for us than we would like.

What has your relationship with 15M been like?

I'll tell you how I have lived the 15M movement. I went and sat on the stairs of the Arriaga and that's it, we never did anything. I mean, I just saw it happen and it seemed fascinating to me, you know? And I did not intervene as a "normal" person, nor did we get involved in, for example, facilitating assemblies—things we perhaps could have done—because you really saw that it was already happening and that the best you could do was to keep some distance and learn, right? And for me it does have all that power that then can be accompanied with anxiety, like when *Podemos* and all these messes appeared. Maybe *Podemos* is a prototype that has been useful for many things, but now it has already been proven defective and other steps will have to be taken. Yes, there is a process of empowerment. It has also obliged conventional agents to reposition themselves and to take responsibility for things that even five years ago they would not have taken on. Of course for me everything that 15M has had are positive things, so I think it has marked an entire generation. As for effects in the short term, I do not know what to tell you. Mariano Rajoy continues with an absolute majority—what a surreal world, right?—but I do believe that there is something in there that is inoculated, and that at some point maybe all those things will also start to connect and something will happen. Well it's already happening, there's already a lot of things going on.

What space does fun have in ColaBoraBora?

Rhetorically, there is a playful component. We always, always try to talk about the playful things and try to introduce games, but it's true that when it comes to it, we don't know how to play, and we don't have fun very often, less that what would be healthy and necessary. In our case, I think it may have to do a bit with the "Basque rigamarole," an issue of being very responsible. Then we also have been inoculated with that kind of seriousness and, although at the level of political discourse, we have made clear that this has to change, in the day to day, we are too responsible. We do not know how to be irresponsible, understanding irresponsibility as the possibility of going elsewhere and doing an experiment and see what happens, and if it goes badly, it doesn't matter because we have had a good time. So, I think we should be much more radical in looking for this playful component and be much more coherent with what we say and take it to what we do. We tried, but we have a bit of a "serious game" problem; The "serious game," which to me seems like a horrible thing, is a kind of "let's play seriously". That, which seems to me a horrible concept, I see in us. Although we do not work from that logic, we end up playing like that too. There is a Spanish illustrator named Puño who in an internet conference was asked, "when did you learn to draw?" He answered, "no, when did you stop drawing? When, when did you forget?" When you are small, all the time you are drawing because you don't have an idea of what is considered good drawing, you just draw and that's it. You draw something, and what you've drawn, for you, is a tree until later they teach you that a tree has to have a trunk, with branches, that the trunk is brown and another part is green, and that the best drawing in the class is the tree that most resembles the tree and how we are taught to see the trees. So, how to recover that kind of childish vision of a kid explorer, someone who is always looking for limits. That, I think we have, we have lost. What the education system teaches you is to abandon all that.

What place does creativity occupy in ColaBoraBora?

Our work is more and more like creating art. We have more and more to do with creating conditions for others to do things. So our ability to be creative has also been diminishing. I personally have never been very artistically creative, I have always been more someone who manages to take something that was there and synthesize it, give it shape, it's another form of creativity. What we have been doing is making ourselves available so that others can be creative. Generating tools for others to create and understand creativity as a tool for personal and collective development. So, what we do often is lay out the conditions. Probably another thing that we would have to do is dedicate more time to recover that creative part. What happens is that, because our material production conditions are shit—I don't know how we earn enough money to be sustainable—we have to "have our tongue out" all the time, trying to survive. So, of course, when you're trying to survive all the time, it's difficult. We really live in survival conditions that don't allow us to develop other aspects, or we don't know how to do it, we don't know how—in this space of needing to survive—how to make a decision that the most important thing to survive is to recover creativity. All the time, it's kind of like the fish that bites its tail: "What is there to do? Is it that you have to survive and once you survive, then you can be creative, or do you have to be creative to be able to survive?" And in the day to day, we can't free up time or get in the right space because when you're worried all the time about whether you're going to get paid next month, there comes a time when all of your creativity or time is oriented towards seeking resources—which is horrible because you dedicate it all to getting money, which is crap because what you would really like is for money to disappear as a system --or you

are tired and that's not the best way to develop creativity. We work too much. You do not have time or much leisure time to be able to freely develop creativity. That's what happens to a child, who has a lot of time to simply explore the world around them.

Thinking of play as an exercise in unlearning, what is your opinion of the formal education system?

Look, the other day while I was watching TV, terrible news came out; someone said: "Finally at the university we're turning around all the programs so that students adapt perfectly to what companies need," and everyone applauded. And you think about the phrase and it was terrifying! It's like saying, "We're finally going to make all these programs work so that students become perfect workers of these companies." Knowledge is no longer a channel to educate people to be people, to be citizens to develop their desires, to think about the world in which they want to live, but rather the education system has finally become about building workers. And there is no doubt that this is the best thing that can happen and everyone applauded enthusiastically. Education and culture have always been elements of control, ways of forming us and of giving us the form that each system decides is appropriate so that we all fit within the logical patterns that each society demands of us. Now, education and culture aren't interested in how they can do the opposite, that is to say, help each person develop independently, to be able to live in a community full of diverse people, right? So, of course, it's terrible. Maybe we should have the courage to recover play as a space of freedom. I'd like that, but I do it badly. I guess we don't dare to.

What does it mean to grow in non-capitalist terms for ColaBoraBora?

I remember when we changed from a non-profit to a social initiative cooperative, the notary when he had to read the statutes and what the cooperative's statutes imply, said, "This society [ColaBoraBora] is quitting capitalism." In the end, capitalism is the return on capital. Before, when we were a non-profit, supposedly the benefits that you generated returned to the people who had put capital there. Right now, in the model we're in, it's the return on work and the return on investment that are the initiatives you want to develop. Maybe we, in our particular case, have to see if we can normalize our relationship with money, as a tool, even as a transitory tool as we wait for it to disappear, and see if we're capable of being truly sustainable. Because the problem is that we aren't sustainable, because we aren't capable of being a more normalized agent in the market. I don't know, maybe it's impossible, but we try, more and more, to make people understand what services we offer and to situate ourselves within the scope of service and process design so that it is understood that what we do is not such a strange thing. It's a type of service that in the rest of the world there are a lot of companies offering, so we try to improve that within the public administration, to get public administration closer and closer to that, and for what we have to offer to be something that brings value. We would like it to be sustainable so that, if it is sustainable, it can be a space where you can develop more creativity and innovation. Right now, we are constantly trying to see if tomorrow we'll be able to keep the door open, it's almost impossible. So, we need, not in capitalist logic—although we know it's impossible to situate ourselves outside of it because the problem we have is that capitalism goes through all of us completely—to understand how we are pierced by capitalism and to go through practices that allow you to go about emancipating yourself from it. We are there, maybe the problem is how to do that. Mitchel Bauwens of the Peer-to-Peer Foundation, talking about how we are going to make changes, he gave an example that I liked about how the Christians

had not set out to reform the Roman Empire. They did not come and think, let's see how to make capitalism different, no. They started developing Christianity. Sure, the lions ate them, they lived in catacombs, etc ... That might be what we have to do. Do we need to think about how to re-adjust the system in which we are in dialogue with capitalism, in order to get closer to capitalism in a space of seeking consensus dialogues, agreements and not to be confrontational, when capitalism really also has lions and forces us to live in catacombs? We're constantly asking that question. Also, here in the Basque country, I've grown up in a culture of violence in which terrorism occupied a very important space, in which violence was also naturalized in our lives. For example, it seemed that killing people could be normal and even a way of transformation. I think it's important to understand that this is not the case and that forms of violence do not work. But of course, on a daily basis, sometimes you don't know what else to do, right? That's why we need creativity, so that when you do not know what to do, you do not resort to violence. Also the system always has more violence to offer than what you can. They are equipped to act much more violently than any insurgent movement can be, right? So violence is not the way, but negotiation might go along with the system too much, and trying to be dialogic is the same. Because the system does not show much desire to engage in dialogue. So do we have to stay parallel in creating our models? Well, I don't know, what is the parallel world? Where is it? I don't know if there is the possibility of running parallel to this, or outside it, or independently or autonomously, when really, for example, I have a house and I have a mortgage. I mean, there are a lot of factors. You have a family, the concept of family. The capitalist Judeo-Christian culture is pretty well built and I don't know for sure...I have those doubts, you know? How to deal with that model: negotiating with it or situating yourself in another place? And I don't know if we are capable of situating ourselves somewhere else, or if the things we'd have to renounce to really position ourselves differently, I don't know if these options are possible, and if they are possible, I don't know if we are willing to carry them out. Before when you asked me why I keep doing this on a daily basis, maybe the problem is that we with our willingness, desires, wants, are able to reach "here" but not "there." And if we do not dare to go to "there," maybe being here is not enough. Maybe to get to "there" you need to go collectively, because going alone is scary. Well, going "there" collectively is also scary but, perhaps this is when we're building the idea of wondering, "What is collective needs exist to be able to go 'there'?" We are still in that question of "how can we get out of the logic we are in, without considering it too deeply because if you think about it much, you won't do it because it's scary?" We are also in a very well-off society. I guess there are other people who live in a situation where they have a lot less to lose, and they think about it differently. So, the question is perhaps how to approach those people who have less to lose, in a non-paternalistic way, because you know that they still have the capacity to take you 'there' to live with them 'there'? Those are things that bother me because sometimes with the work we do, I don't know if what we do, or part of what we do, is to encourage capitalism to reinvent itself. It's kind of what we were talking about with Airbnb, or this type of project. You generate small, new movements that they know how to appropriate in a brutal way and put at their disposal and at their service. And, on the other hand, we continue "here," without really knowing what the hell what this fucking age we live in is, right?

How do you fuel your hope in times of political apathy?

It's clear to me. I think there is a part that comes to you like it did for character Obelix (as a child he fell into a stewpot and now you're like that, for better or for worse). Then, because when positive things happen, that fuels it a lot. You can be

fighting all day and when something happens suddenly, not everything that you would like to happen but a small thing, that's like a revitalizing pill that lasts a long time. And also because the reality that surrounds us is deeply unfair. So you can't just stand there. I'm, like, intolerant to that...I do not know. The other day I was over there, I found some sixteen-year-old girls who were there collecting signatures... you could tell they were enthusiastic. So I started asking them what they were doing and they began to tell me about their incredible work, everything they were doing. So, to me, seeing that has already fed me for the next weeks; and they just told me four things there, but it makes me say, "Fuck, how cool are these girls, right?" They are like the generational relay, like when I run out of batteries, there are more people wanting to transform all this. So, that's what encourages you, that you see that there are more people also wanting to transform things and that, although we are not a lot of people, we are not alone either. So that, sometimes, can support you, to see, to learn how others are doing things. For example, last week in Seville Zemos organized a kind of Hackcamp with public officials. That's what we really want to do here, but we don't get around to it because the opportunity does not arise or because we do not know how to make it happen, or whatever it may be. But you see that people who you like and who are a lot like you have done something that you want to do, that also recharges your batteries and makes you say, "Fuck it, come on, let's see how to do it." I think all that is what feeds all this.

Wikitori





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
Bilbao, Spain

Collective's name
Wikitoki

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and how are you connected to this project?

My name is Carlos Muñoz and I'm an architect. Wikitoki is a horizontal collective where there's not any hierarchy, so it's difficult to position yourself within a collective where there's no top or bottom. So, you could define my position at Wikitoki as simply a partner or a member of Wikitoki. I arrived at Wikitoki when the project already existed. The project emerged in 2013, if I'm not mistaken, and I came in 2015. I mean, the project was here in this building and in this neighborhood from the start and when I arrived, I came as a resident of the area to work on the space exchange network project. After six months I got involved in the project as a member. At that time there were two options: you could be a member of Wikitoki or you could accept temporary residence. As of right now, those would be the only two ways to join the collective although they're looking at new ways of participating in Wikitoki.

What organizational structure did Wikitoki adopt and why?

As of right now, Wikitoki is an association. It's the simplest organizational structure in Spain. Some ideas have come up of why not to make it a cooperative since Wikitoki is a cooperative association of collectives and it could make sense for it to become a cooperative, but, for now, the experiment is in the association phase. We say that Wikitoki is an experiment with ourselves, of our own experience in small groups, that's why we call it a laboratory of collaborative practices, because in this laboratory we're experimenting and the experiment is currently in an association phase. Within Wikitoki, there are cooperatives, such as Colaborabora or TP, but there's also a community of assets, other associations, there are collectives without legal status, and people who work as freelancers under a brand.

Is this a political project?

I think so because I believe that everything we do is political, so yes, in my opinion, I think it's a political project not linked to any particular political movement or party. That is to say, it's a way to position yourself before life and a political position in the sense that it's not governed by or doesn't share the conventional rules of the world. From the economy to the ways we form relationships, the way we speak, the ways we take care of ourselves ... In the end, everything is politics.

Why Wikitoki?

The name Wikitoki comes from the "Wiki" technologies, such as Wikipedia or all those digital platforms where anyone can contribute and create

a collective knowledge with the contribution of everyone who participates in it. And “Toki” in Euskera, which is the official language of the Basque Country, means place. So Wikitoki would be like a place that everyone builds together. A place that is not only physical, which would be the place here, but one of knowledge and experiences of government models. That is, of how all of this being built among all the groups that form the collective Wikitoki can also serve as common knowledge that is open to anyone. So the idea is not just to generate but to share knowledge.

In this project you talk about the concept of collective intelligence. Could you explain what you mean by that?

I think that collective intelligence is what intelligence always was until, suddenly, people boxed it in, and wanted to draw the line where part of the population had the intelligence and the rest didn't. And then, it became a one-directional thing that came from that entity that had the knowledge and the intelligence and transmitted it to everyone else, because we were the ignorant population, so to speak. But before that, intelligence was something everyone created together. Any challenge is solved with a collective response. So collective intelligence would be a contemporary way of naming something that was always there. In the case of Wikitoki, bringing together many small groups to be a bit stronger as a large collective would be a form of intelligence in positioning. Sometimes people use lobbying as a reference, because this would be a social innovation lobby without all the negative connotations that the word lobby can have today. The smartest thing was to come together and start creating together. And perhaps all the protocols and everything we call the *codes* of Wikitoki could be understood as knowledge, a collective intelligence that we're in the process of making open. One of last year's residencies involved opening up that code and seeing how it could reach more people so that it can be replicated with other models or remixed. Like I said, you see the idea in the name “wiki,” because the idea isn't just to generate knowledge but above all to share it and share it in a useful way; that is, not just dumping it out there but processing the information so that people can understand it. That's where we get into the whole issue with transparency, which isn't just about making things open but about opening them in a way that people can understand them because if not, that shared knowledge isn't effective.

What activities or working groups make up this process?

Wikitoki is a space where everyone develops their own activity but there's a commitment to work collectively. So I think that the main difference between us and other shared work spaces is that we don't just encourage collaboration among people in the collective verbally, there are tools like the “Time Bank”, the “Work Groups”, the “Auzolan” the “Ghost Group,” etc., which make collaboration essential to operation. In the end, it's a self-managed project, so the tasks are distributed horizontally and people collaborate—at first to sustain the project and, then once the project is progressing and there are more resources, they collaborate to develop projects together. So the main activity, the one that takes up the most hours in this space, is each person's project, but for the project to work, each person must collaborate with the rest of the team for at least eight hours a month. Not everyone does everything, but we do things with shared tasks such as, for example, there are some tasks that are more related to the sustainability of the project and some that are more related to taking care of the digital stuff—social networks, emails, relationships with people outside the project—and then there are people that take care of the tangible details—that we don't run out of coffee, that the space is prepared, and so on. Then there

are groups for specific projects, for example, there's the visual identity group which, once that visual identity phase of Wikitoki is done, the group disappears, and that is what we called a ghost group. Other activities go with a specific project such as the space exchange network that I talked about at the beginning which is how I came to Wikitoki. We're twenty-five people and if you multiply twenty-five by eight hours a month, then you get a volume of work that gets interesting. And at the end of those eight hours, which is the minimum amount, you always end up doing more because you like the projects and you're passionate and in the end you spend more time than you should, or maybe not, everyone sees that differently. The space is also open to other activities. For example, this area is open to anyone from the neighborhood or outside the neighborhood requesting space for their activities, from talks to presentations to workshops. Sometimes the activities are managed by Wikitoki, and other times Wikitoki is simply a host or an open space for other collectives to do things.

What tools for working does Wikitoki use?

Well, tools like the "time bank," which is not a time bank in the sense that you exchange time services, but rather a way to quantify all the investment made in Wikitoki. The biggest investment each person makes in Wikitoki is their time. So that tool encourages collaboration because those eight hours that you put in every month are done with everyone else, and it's also useful for quantifying the time people have invested because a lot of times knowing how much you are investing can lead you to look more closely at certain things. I think counting or quantifying is a positive action in terms of how you work with that data later. I'm also interested in the working groups where they take the tasks we've talked about and divide them up. There's also the "Auzolan," which are these occasional work sessions that take on a specific topic. And then there's another form of relationship that Wikitoki maintains with outside agencies, which we call "embassies." Two of those are currently in operation: Karraskan, on a more territory-wide level, and Sarean, a neighborhood project where Wikitoki is part of the project simply as another collective. And something else that's interesting are the projects that come out of Wikitoki like the space exchange network or projects within Wikitoki that are developed by communities that formed around Wikitoki.

What kind of profiles do the people within Wikitoki have?

Actually, the people that make up Wikitoki are pretty homogeneous. Even though everyone's professional interests are in different branches, the truth is that the profile of most people at Wikitoki is more or less the same. As far as gender, it's true that there are more women than men, but in terms of race, education or class, I think it's a fairly homogeneous group. However, because we're in a very heterogeneous neighborhood, in the end the relationships that we form for those types of activities turn out to be a little more diverse. So, in the end, the collectives that make up Wikitoki collaborate with a lot of people from the neighborhood and so that's where the diversity comes in. For example, through the space exchange network in the neighborhood you can find spaces for the elderly, for children, for Africans, for prostitutes, spaces for caretaking or social services. It was a neighborhood that in the eighties had a lot of heroin present, so you can find a lot of spaces related to issues with drug dependence. So the neighborhood itself is very diverse and two things happen: Wikitoki continues to be a homogeneous group, but it has a relationship with a very heterogeneous environment and I think that's where those relationships with more diversity occur in terms of race or social class.

How does the neighborhood see this project?

I think kind of like aliens but in a neighborhood that's full of aliens. So it doesn't really stand out because the neighborhood is full of different things—like I said, it's a very diverse neighborhood. Here in Plaza de la Cantera, for example, we share a collaborative practices laboratory with a sub-Saharan entrepreneurship cooperative, with an Ikastola, which is a teaching center that they run here in the Basque Country, and with doctors, I think they're Caritas, or doctors of the world. So even within this plaza there's already really diverse examples. Considering the neighborhood, I think the sub-Saharan entrepreneurship cooperative is just as alien as the collaborative practices laboratory. So, I don't think it depends so much on race, gender or social class within the collective, but rather on the practices that we do within the collective, which might draw certain people's attention more than others. There are more people who work with this type of practice or discourse in the neighborhood, in addition to the current movement of entrepreneurship, innovation, etc. I think this neighborhood very much lends itself to that type of stuff. But I think the neighborhood is so diverse that there are people who think it's pretty normal or a logical result of this movement for spaces like Wikitoki to arise, and then there are people who still see that as a weird thing ...

Why do you think more people don't know about the types of practices that Wikitoki represents?

The practices we do here are made invisible to people but at a general level; It's not something that is specific to Wikitoki but many of the practices in this area, in general, are unfamiliar to the vast majority of people. I don't know if it's because the media doesn't pay attention to them or perhaps, we should also critique ourselves to break out of our community of all the same people and make an effort ... I don't know what the specifics of that would be, maybe simplifying our discourse or making some of the processes more inclusive...

What difficulties or challenges has Wikitoki encountered along the way?

I think the difficulties have been the challenges that have arisen from our interest from the beginning—almost an obsession—to do things ethically and to always be consistent with our way of thinking. So, I think the difficulties have arisen more when we've thought about how we're progressing, how we're growing, what happens when new people enter the group that weren't there from the beginning, how these people are integrated into the group, what happens when suddenly we get funding and there's money, how do we manage that money, what happens when there's not enough time to handle all the tasks that are emerging within Wikitoki ... I think the difficulties are coming up more in how we self-manage than how we think people see us. Other difficulties would be more stuff related to what we talked about before, our connection to the neighborhood. But they're difficulties or challenges that arise as the project is working and we approach them calmly, with the assurance that it's a project that takes time, that it's a laboratory and that if the first experiment goes badly then we'll have to keep on doing experiments. More than difficulties there are emerging challenges that we try to solve ... no, not even solve ... they're challenges that are moving us forward to see how we're going to grow, although growth isn't the word now that we're talking more and more about degrowth. But how we advance. Yeah, advance would be the word. So, ultimately, the difficulties are to see which challenges arise and how we move forward through these challenges and how we try to build that breakthrough together. That would be more or less the main difficulty, that is, a core thing.

What are the challenges of a horizontal structure?

Many people, all in the same position, ultimately creates many voices, many opinions, many different feelings and perhaps the difficulty or the great challenge is to figure out how to do what we're doing here in the monthly assemblies. In Wikitoki every month there's an assembly. In the beginning it was every three weeks, and then we changed it to every four weeks. One of the challenges is making sure that everyone in that assembly has a voice and finding what tools we can use to make that happen. Every month there are two people who support and streamline the assembly and their challenge is to make sure everyone has a voice and that no one voice stands out more than another. We assign roles in every assembly. There's "the equalizer," who tries to limit the extent that some voices are heard more than others. There are people who control speaking times, so no one takes advantage of having the mic. It's basically about everyone being heard. That's one of the big challenges. And now that everyone agrees on that, it's more of a goal that we often achieve and sometimes don't than a challenge. I think it's the challenge of all collective processes and of all processes that include different voices because, as I said before, despite being, on a physical level or visual level, a very homogeneous group, there are very diverse feelings. Right now, it's working. Also, and this is a personal opinion, I think everything is based on trust, meaning that people often confuse horizontal processes, or processes where everyone has a voice, with ones where everyone has to have a voice all the time and ultimately that makes everything last forever and tires everyone out and create a ton of problems that make you doubt if this is even the best way to work. So, there's an important part that I think is the issue of trust and if you have less energy one day and other people have more energy, as long as their progress doesn't create more work for everyone else, it's good to trust others, as long as you're being transparent with the group. That's why I think, and this is a personal opinion, that in these collective and horizontal projects you have exercise trust and let yourself get swept up a bit and if you aren't a part of something, it's not a problem because other people will do it in the best way possible and even if you believe that you are indispensable, well, ultimately nobody is indispensable and, at the same time, nobody is dispensable. I mean, we all have to be there, but none of us have to control everything. The biggest difficulty would be that, how to not make the processes last forever and get stuck in those loops. I think we're learning to minimize that because if we have a lot of stuff going on and we don't have a lot of time and we want to de-grow and we make the processes go on and on, well that doesn't fit with what we're doing.

What links do you see between 15M and the rapidly increasing number of movements and groups like Wikitoki?

I really don't believe that the 15M was the starting point of all these collective movements but rather it was a point on the timeline and maybe a formalization of something that happened a few years before. I think there are collectives, like I said, that have been around for fifteen, twenty years, and there are people who have been activists since they started working and here in Bilbao there are a lot of people who are now part of Wikitoki and who, as I mentioned, had been working on this for twenty years and they came before 15M and the crisis. I think the boom or the explosion of the collectives was when the crisis officially began. The official dates would be like 2008, although people began to notice in 2007, and 2009, 2010 was the big explosion. After those first two years of crisis where a lot of people were shocked or paralyzed waiting for the crisis to pass and then go back to their lives as they were. And then there were other people who saw that it wasn't really a crisis

per se because it wasn't something that started and ended but a crisis of the system and the model, and either something had to be done or things couldn't go back to how they were before. In fact, people thought going back to how things were was absurd because that would just create another crisis. So, at that point, realizing that the crisis was bigger than it seemed, is when the collective boom began, I think. And then in 2011 when the whole, let's say *informal* movement was happening, that's when 15M came about and maybe it was what made that movement more visible and yes, maybe that was one more step in the organization or formalization of those movements, but the origin came earlier. Thinking about Wikitoki, I don't know if I would link it with the 15M; I'm sure many of the groups that are part of Wikitoki experienced some turning point in that moment, but since I wasn't there at the inception of the project I find it hard to see the direct connection to that particular moment. Yes, I see that connection to the general moment of explosion of the collectives, with that moment of awareness that you, a plural collective "you", you self-manage things and you're not gonna get things to happen with certain types of practices. I think all that does influence the emergence of Wikitoki but maybe someone who was here from the beginning could say the opposite and that all this came directly out of 15M.

How important is playfulness in a project like Wikitoki?

I think we try to filter everything through playfulness, in fact that doll we saw when we were coming in is part of a project that included that puppet as a fun part of their presentation. I think so, in fact I think there's no other way to do it. Either you have a good time or things don't work. So, in almost everything we do collectively, we encourage people to interact with each other more and in a more playful way. For example, since last year there's been another tool to promote relationships between the people at Wikitoki, which is the "little lottery", where, once a week, two people have to eat lunch at a restaurant nearby. There are a lot of conversations here, but you speak differently when you're in front of the computer than when you're on a break or eating somewhere that's totally foreign to a work space. So there's that, in terms of relationships. And then, well, every time we have presentations, we try to add a playful related element or something relating to food or music. Whenever we have an event or activity at Wikitoki, we intend for there to be that fun, relationship-building, celebratory part. For example, when Urbanbat does its festival it always ends with a party; the groups or networks which we're a part of, as collective architectures, end up defining ourselves as a network of warm relationships and a fun collective. So yes, I think that playfulness is always present and in fact we make an effort to make it present because the work and the processes tire you out and that piece of gratification or celebration keeps you going so that things keep progressing.

How do you maintain hope in these times of political discontent?

There was a phrase that someone told me one day, I don't remember who, but it was something like "You magnify what you gratify" when we were talking about how important it is to celebrate everything. So, if the assembly went well we can celebrate, or if someone shares the good news that they managed to create a successful project, it's very important to celebrate that and, actually, I think, even though this might be a little absurd, you have to force yourself to have fun. If you change the word "force" to "encourage" it sounds a little less taxing. On a personal level, in the type of work that I do, we always try to make sure that fun part is present and that we celebrate everything, right down to the smallest success and advances. We have to celebrate because, ultimately, people don't really see these

practices within this context and even though we might not mean to make these practices invisible, we're talking about practices that are foreign to the vast majority of people, even to your family. Often times you don't even know how to explain what you're doing to your family because it's an invisible job. It's also exhausting because you're always on the "the other side," always facing something bigger. So, if you alleviate all that fatigue with fun, playfulness, celebration, affection, I think that's the only way to not end up a bitter person who just complains about everything.

What does growth mean for Wikitoki in non-capitalist terms?

Actually, this topic of growth is what we were talking about in our last work sessions, in the last Auzolan. Auzolan is a word in Basque that means shared work. It's like when a group puts their heads together to solve something or to take on a challenge and it's a word that we use in Wikitoki for these specific work sessions we have on key topics or the backbone of the project. One of those is, precisely, our growth or how we can advance and decrease in structure, in the sense that we decrease the demands that the Wikitoki project places on the people that are a part of it. So, the immediate future is going to be a lot of work on how to reduce the machinery of the projects to be simpler, more accessible and require fewer resources, especially time wise, because, ultimately, the thing that Wikitoki takes the most of from its members is time. And, on the other hand, we're working on being able to share more resources among the collectives that are part of Wikitoki. I think our next challenge might be that, how to share more, how to integrate between each other more. We're in a context where collaboration occurs naturally because we're sharing a space, but how to go one step further and how to make it so that Wikitoki can make more projects like Wikitoki, I mean as in, the bigger collective of Wikitoki, not just collaborations between agents. That would be a scenario in the immediate future, growing in terms of time demands and sharing more. Actually, I think those are things that are going to need to exist for the survival of this project, because you can tell that after these three or four years, there are people who are already feeling tired. You can see the diversity in Wikitoki in terms of energy levels too. There are people that have been in the movement for a long time and all of a sudden they get burnt out and are maybe not compatible with people who just got here and have a lot of energy. Or, just the opposite, there are people who have been doing this for so long that it comes easily to them, and that might not be compatible with people who have just started and have a harder time knowing where to begin. All these differences have brought on some fatigue and challenges to overcome as far as adapting the demands of the job to everyone's capabilities and making sure that Wikitoki is isn't creating burnout or becoming a difficult task but rather something that has more pros than cons, so to speak. That belonging to Wikitoki is seen as something positive and not as an added workload and something tedious that you don't feel like doing. It would be a failure to get to a point where Wikitoki is simply an obligation, so our challenge for the future is how to make Wikitoki easier, something less burdensome, something lighter to carry.

Argos. Proyectos Educativos





Constellation
of the Commons

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Who are you and what type of work do you do?

My name is Ana Velazquez and I am an environmental educator. I work in a company called "Argos Educational Projects." Within that company I am training to be a professor, with a concentration in the area of environmental education. I am licensed in Geography and Modern and Contemporary History and I have been in an ecological group since I was sixteen years old. I was in an environmental group in my hometown and it was very connected to the ecological world and we started to get closer to environmental education almost without knowing it; all of a sudden I discovered that I wanted to fulfill my calling here, so coming from the area of social sciences, environmental education has come to me very easily. It has affected me in a different way than biology or environmental studies would have.

When and how did ARGOS originate?

The origin of ARGOS is a co-op founded more than 25 years ago that assembles resources for environmental education in Granada that is called the Molino of Lecrin. Of that original co-op there were many people in a resource assembly group in the mountains of Cazalla and other than a small group of jobs in charge of the administration that makes up the structure of Argos in 2001. That is the origin and from there it continues to evolve.

What relation, if any, exists between the project that you represent and the 15M?

I am not at all a mythomaniac with the 15M, frankly; I think it's importance is relative. The 15M does not seem more or less important than the anti-globalization movement in its peak moment nor than other movements throughout history. In that sense, it does not seem to me that its influence reaches as many places. I believe that it has stayed in an area that does not seem to have roots deep enough for transformation and change. To me, what seemed interesting and what I do believe has had an influence is the way of working and the way of analyzing reality, which is ultimately part of my job. That is what the 15M has been good for, that is to say, that way of looking at reality differently, of connecting people with each other, of relating to each other, of looking at what surrounds us. That does seem curious to me and I believe that it is important to incorporate it into our reality as workers of environmental education; then there are other questions that seem superficial even to me. We did not develop from 15M, we have been working since much before.

Can you explain the name of the project “Argos”?

Argos is the vessel of the argonauts and has an adventurous and risky origin of embarking on things that they could transform, that they don't know where they are going.

What does it mean to be an “environmental educator” and what is “environmental education”?

An environmental educator for me would be something like an island that allows people to situate themselves and have anchor points to analyze reality in another way and be able to build a new diagram that allows us to live in a more sustainable way on this planet. It would be something like a tool to analyze reality in another way and to be able to build a different paradigm to live in this world.

In environmental education, not only in Argos, since 20-25 years ago I worked a lot directly with children in the grade school environment. In the Andalusian framework, the program of excellence in environmental education is the Aldea program that frames many different projects. Twenty-five years ago when I was working in Aldea, because it is a very old program, the educators worked directly with the boys and girls in the classroom. At the curricular level, environmental education is still confused with the teaching of experimental sciences and there is no relation between the two. You as an educator need a methodological base, a conceptual basis and an ethical basis. You are shaping the ethical basis. I am sure, I ended up in environmental education not by chance, but because I come from the environmental world, that places me in a certain field.

It is interesting what you point out because it seems that if you do not take the path of activism, for any of the areas that are currently being implemented at a social level, you can not finish as an environmental educator. Just because you graduate from University you will not reach that scope of education. Activism is fulfilling an important function in some way, right?

Of course, very important.

What is the objective of this Project?

Argos has a social objective that would be the social transformation from different branches of intervention, one is environmental education, another is participation, another is the teaching of science and the dissemination of science and we move within those lines more or less. What we normally do is teacher training, methodological guidance and material editing.

What activities are developed by this project?

On one side there would be environmental education that is its origin and has developed a lot, which has always been linked to our activity. On the other hand there is participation and on the other the research and teaching of science and scientific dissemination. Within that scenario where we intervene most is at the science fair that is an event that is held here annually and we carry that secretariat. It is an event where children explain sciences to other children. It is an internal experiment in that sense

Does Argos receive any kind of economic benefits or institutional support?

Yes, sometimes public institutions and other times private entities. Our fundamental finance comes from the public administration. We work with private collectives, but very little. From the budget that we can manage the majority is public and comes from the administration. Our fundamental relationship is with the Committee of Andalusia and fundamentally with the Ministry of Education and with the Ministry of the environment, as well. The collaboration of those two ministries give the benefit the higher environmental education program of the community. It's with those two entities that we fundamentally work with, but we also have worked with the City Hall depending a lot on the political party of the town. We had a pilot experience that was very interesting and the first that was made here in Seville, not exempt of scarcity, but as a pilot experience it wasn't bad, that was a project of educational pathways and was made with the previous socialist government. Then, there was an important break with the government of the popular party, and now we are resuming some kind of collaboration, but very slowly because for a little more than a year the level of funds have basically stopped increasing for environmental education.

What relationship, if any, does Argos have with the University?

Argos has a very close relationship with the university because, in fact, our educational experiences put them together to be researched and the Youth Parliament (Parlamento Joven) that has been a project that we are developing also a long time ago has been objective of many investigations. We have a decent amount of contact with the university, with close foundations to the university. We do the History Party (Fiesta de la Historia) which is linked to the university but we don't do teacher training at the university.

What would you say that are the tools or qualities that define to the project Argos?

For us is important to work in an environmental education that goes to the roots of the environmental problems, it is one of the premises of our work. I do not believe that is exclusive of Argos but I do believe there are many entities or companies that don't practice that premise. We think that is fundamental, if we want to change the reality and move towards another paradigm, we make people understand where the dysfunctions of this system are and why the system doesn't work. Therefore, it is inevitable to go to the origin and to the root of the environmental problems. Another characteristic would be to work the environmental issues in a global form, trying to come up with the method of how it is, a system of socio-environmental relationships required to understand that reality that is complex. Those two characteristics define us in the things we do. Then, to the level of methodology, we work with the research and the participative action. We believe that this defines quite well the type of project we tend to develop: eco-scholar, youth parliament or this type of initiative.

Can you explain to us what the Young Parliament is?

The young parliament is a project that finances the council of Seville and we have developed the secretary of parliament every year except one. Right now we are developing a methodology of research based on apprenticeships and support services. It intends to elaborate collectively a panel where, other than the methodology of apprenticeship and services, each local government designs the project that they want to develop in their local government and the boys and girls develop it. They are

boys and girls in highschool of their first stage of ESO and they are in collaboration with a teacher at their school and in collaboration with the ADJ (the agent of youth revitalization) of their town. They design a project based on a panel and they put it in motion. They have a small funding, they have to analyze what it is that their city needs, like the city council could collaborate, how they as a social entity can contribute and develop the project. The fundamental revitalization is of ADJ and what the teacher in that moment does fundamentally is not allow their part to be given to other matters. That can seem like nonsense but that is not so and like it is in school right now. In some cases that have taken advantage of sources of apprenticeship and there have been teachers that could have taken advantage and of those, simply, they have allowed to make that not seem like a small matter.

How would you define the Argos philosophy?

It is similar to searching for ways to walk together.

What does it mean to you to educate from the perspective of Argos?

To search for a different way to be in agreeance. For me, education is something that comes from the inside out, not from the outside in. Something that you have to break from the person that starts to connect distinct strands that were loose and all of a sudden you understand. And you have to understand only to arrive at this conviction. It is the opposite to indoctrinate that going from the outside in; it is something like you do not know anything and I am giving you everything. My role would be to facilitate that the person establishes the necessary connections to understand first the reality and what happens and try, in the measurement of their possibilities, to be able to modify it without flagellating oneself. And clearly, that necessarily is a collective act. The finality of that education is to generate more colectivity because at the end the only way to leave the predicament is to empower it with other people. There is only the possibility to change if we are capable of connecting with each other and to generate the necessary synergies for change. That I believe is my role as an educator.

What would you say are the most important shortages in education in our time?

In public schools, in which I am most familiar with the Andalusian field, there is first a fundamental shortage and this is an important administrative problem. We are before an entity with too much bureaucratic weight and a bureaucratic mechanism that we have generated to resolve situations and problems and that, in the end, hinders education in school and creates obstacles.

Of course, it is an institution based on keeping the market functioning. Everything is thought and structured, from school hours to what is taught and how it is taught, so that the machinery continues to function. It is a fundamental element of the system; but part of this system would go adrift. Another important criticism is teacher training. I think that in teacher training there are many deficiencies and not only because it is not a permanent formation but because initially it is not a training that responds to the world we are in right now. In other words, the school is not being taught, the children are not being trained to face and confront with a little resistance what comes our way and what we already have. That is like a separate reality, as they are like two parallel realities. So what is happening in schools today is that they are turning their backs on everything that happens in the world. In that

case, it would be on one hand a problem of training, a problem of bureaucracy and functioning and that does not respond to the needs that we have today.

And, of course, a problem of finalities and purposes.

Of course, and of purpose. The purpose is not the transformation of reality to be better in this world, but the opposite, that all this continues as before.

16:50 How do you get the intervention of Argos in the teaching centers?

Sometimes there are people who receive it with aggression because this questions what you do not do. When you do a lot of things and you have someone in front of you who, by whatever circumstances, does not do things, even being aware, you are somehow putting in front of everything that person does not do and arouses suspicion and awakens aggressiveness. Somehow you have to be very psychologist-like to deal with according to which groups because you have to be very tactful with those things. And then you also meet great people who want to do many things, that you suppose an oxygen cylinder because suddenly they are in very hostile environments or in very closed cloisters that do not have active dynamics and for that person to fry you suppose that she is not alone in the world and she is very grateful for anything. But the situation of the faculties in the schools is very lamentable and in some cases very depressing. No longer individually, but the negative synergies that we will try to build among all of us. Then when you come across centers that, due to the circumstances, a powerful human group has been generated, I come to my house happy because it is not the norm.

If someone wanted to train me as an environmental educator, what steps would I have to take?

That is a very interesting question. Today I have seen a course for 90 euros developed by a magnificent group of biologist where they taught us all the types of amphibians very well. (Ana laughs when she's saying this). That is the other workhorse

The training of the environmental educator and the quality of what is done, is very important. Right now I believe that the Masters and the UNED postgraduate are still being done, which I find very interesting; there are several doctorates that have dropped out, there was one very good here that was an intern university doctorate.

The environmental education must try many disciplines, because it can be reached from many different places. I came from the area of social sciences, I have been training in environmental issues as I have needed to have certain information. And then I knew that it was important to train in participation because I believe that participation is a fundamental element for pro-environmental action. I have been trained in mythologies because I believed that I also had lacked that. It's important, not so much where you get it from, as knowing what you lack to go around in different places. In that sense, ARGOS is very good because it is a very interdisciplinary group and the fact of working with people who come from environmental sciences or biology and also working with anthropology or journalists, is very interesting.

What relationship exists between Ecologists in Action and the environmental education tools?

I am an ecologist from Sevilla and I even started to work in Ecologists (in Action), therefore I have a personal bond with this group. Ecologists in Action and the environmental education have not always got along. Ecologists in Action is an activist group, militant of the social ecology, who have not always understood that the environmental education is a tool for the transformation. In fact, it depends a lot on the site of the state in which we place ourselves. In Madrid, for example, if it was understood, by the people who were there, who educated her was important. In Andalusia and Seville, which is the reality of ecologists that I know best, environmental education has not been the complaint. That is why it has happened to us many times that we have had to uncomfortably leave the sites precisely because of not doing environmental education. Because sometimes if the complaint does not match it with other types of strategies, then you do not connect with certain social realities.

Ecologists in Action is a puzzle of thousands of groups at different scales, and that is its richness, that diversity, means that we are not talking about the same ecologists according to where we place ourselves. Here in Andalusia the conservationist vision has prevailed because Ecologists in action in Andalusia is one of the great groups that was here.

That was the CEPA and who was a coordinator of conservation groups. Then, that vision of the average has been established in Ecologists in Action in Andalucía for a long time. It was a vision very centered on the reporting, on the direct intervention, on the protests and making waves is fundamental and forms part of something very necessary but environmental education has not been understood until now. In fact, notice that it's odd that since three days ago me and three people were talking through email to see if we could put together at one time the commission of ecologic education here in Seville. Part of the bad environmental press in Andalusia is the result of not being able to know how to use other strategies like the environmental education.

Is it possible to find online tools and methods that have been developed?

Well look, that is our big pending course. From that we have to learn about the collectives that are born from 15M. That is what we have a lot to work on. The topic of broadcasting and communication is a pending question in Argos. Not because we feel like it but because sometimes what is urgent takes over what is important and you end up in a whirlpool and you are not able to finish everything. There is a blog, that is from Josetxu, one of the people that is a part of Argos and one of the pioneers, in fact. He is very active online and also through his blog, he broadcasts everything that we do. But like Argos, it costs us to do it. All of the materials in which we participate, he posts them and broadcasts and some materials in which we feel very proud of have been downloaded many times.

How many people work in Argos and from what type of profile are we talking about?

We have a number of various people and we have changed. Around 2008 we had fourteen people which for a small company like ours and for an environmental education company is a lot of people. With the crisis there was an important decline and now in turn we are around eight to ten people, of which more than half are contracted indefinitely and there is another important group, the rest, that are in the

work service. They don't work all year but practically nine or ten months of the year. For me, a fundamental element is that the profile of the people that just formed part of Argos are profiles of educators and educators distinctly of the environment. I cut off the idea that whoever has this profile of educator or who breathes in it can form in distinct fields, not only in the environmental or in the social participation. Or of someone that has that profile can line up in different themes and give options and work in different projects. For me one of the potentials of my company is that we are capable of developing ourselves in order to work in different projects. So one of the things that I like most is that I do not get bored ever because I have constant training that also has a lot to do with my personal interests. That is possible because the people that started this project of Argos have been capable of generating that singularity and I am very thankful because you are able to leave your worries behind, your desires, your wants and make it possible for those things emerge. Clearly, there is a person whose function is that, to make all of these things possible, to search for means of finance.

For things to go away, if not, there is no other way to do it. I, for example, am a lover of reading, I like reading a lot and I have always believed that reading animation is a pending issue in the education system and I found a project in that line interesting. Well, we have been able to generate within Argos, although it was not his fundamental line of work, a project in that question of animation to the reading in the schools. What do I want to say? Well that has been possible because it has connected my interests with the ability of the company to put it into operation and that is possible because we train people to make that happen. I am not a specialist in this question of reading but I spent three years training in that question because I think that I have the basic tools and the rest of the team too. In other words, we are a team of educators that start with a good support (system) to make a basket and then, if it does not make the company much stronger because if you specialize in one single issue, in situations like the one we are living, because the decline is much greater. However, if a team of people who are able to work on different issues from the field of education, which is what we work, it makes us stronger.

How does the concept of work change in the context of this?

Today we had the final meeting that we usually have at this time of year, because it is very important in the end to celebrate what we have worked on, it has gone well, that it has gone wrong, it is not about evaluating but celebrating.

And at the meeting we were discussing how the year had gone and where we were and where one of the things that has come out most in participating in a company is that you care so much. There is no name for this type of company because it would not be social responsibility, it would be something like a friendly company. We are very proud to participate in a friendly company because we are a company, and we do not understand that the word company has any negative connotation, and we take great care of ourselves and know how to take good care of ourselves without any protocol and that is very important and I think it has that to be with our social objective, with which we ask a lot of the people that work with us and that in the end end up being part of the team and with an important thing is trust. We work based on trust; A significant number of people who join work from home and that is done after you trust the other person's work. And there is a lot of flexibility, for example, there is no established schedule and each person regulates the schedules as he wants and that makes it compatible with your personal life, in my case I have two children. Which that said, there are many reasons that make the company a friendly company and a deal is

generated between us an unwritten agreement to take care of ourselves at work. I have met many people in this course, who I did not know before and who have joined the company now, it has been nice because, today in the meeting everyone has highlighted how good it has been in an environment that was unknown to them, how well they have felt taken care of and in the relationship based on trust. In the end it is curious but when you give the other people confidence in the end people feel more willing to contribute and contribute that if the relationship is more follow-up, surveillance or control because you end up self-regulating yourself without anyone telling you. So in the end people want to contribute that environment because you care, of course

Why do you think that in the imaginary collective doesn't associate the company's model with possible transformation tools?

Because it's very associated with the thoughts of the left that idea of the company is an element of abuse or that it can be an element of exploration and abuse. We have associated a lot in our little heads that, in fact I live with an union member with which even more, but I don't have that image. What I know of course isn't like that. We, in fact, in many occasions we lose money and we don't have benefits of that type. Our fundamental objective takes precedence, on top of any other interest or from the economic interest, the social interest. One thing that I know is important is that we have one common pocketbook. There are projects that we know lose money and there are projects we know win money but all are part from the same pocketbook so that the projects seem balance out to a social level because you know that for a project to work not just the numbers have to fit in with, other things must fit in. The numbers must fit in because if they don't fit in you don't eat, but in addition the project has to bring in and you have put in features of quality to the project and that is time of people and resources. Therefore, if a project is creating a loss, and you already know it there's no other way of compensating it off anyway, so there is unique funding of projects and of common economic funds. When a project needs (money) it is compensated from the other side. We usually give priority to that, and we don't have benefits practically as a company, but it maintains that we can live, which is the idea.

How does the elution maintains itself in times of political indifference?

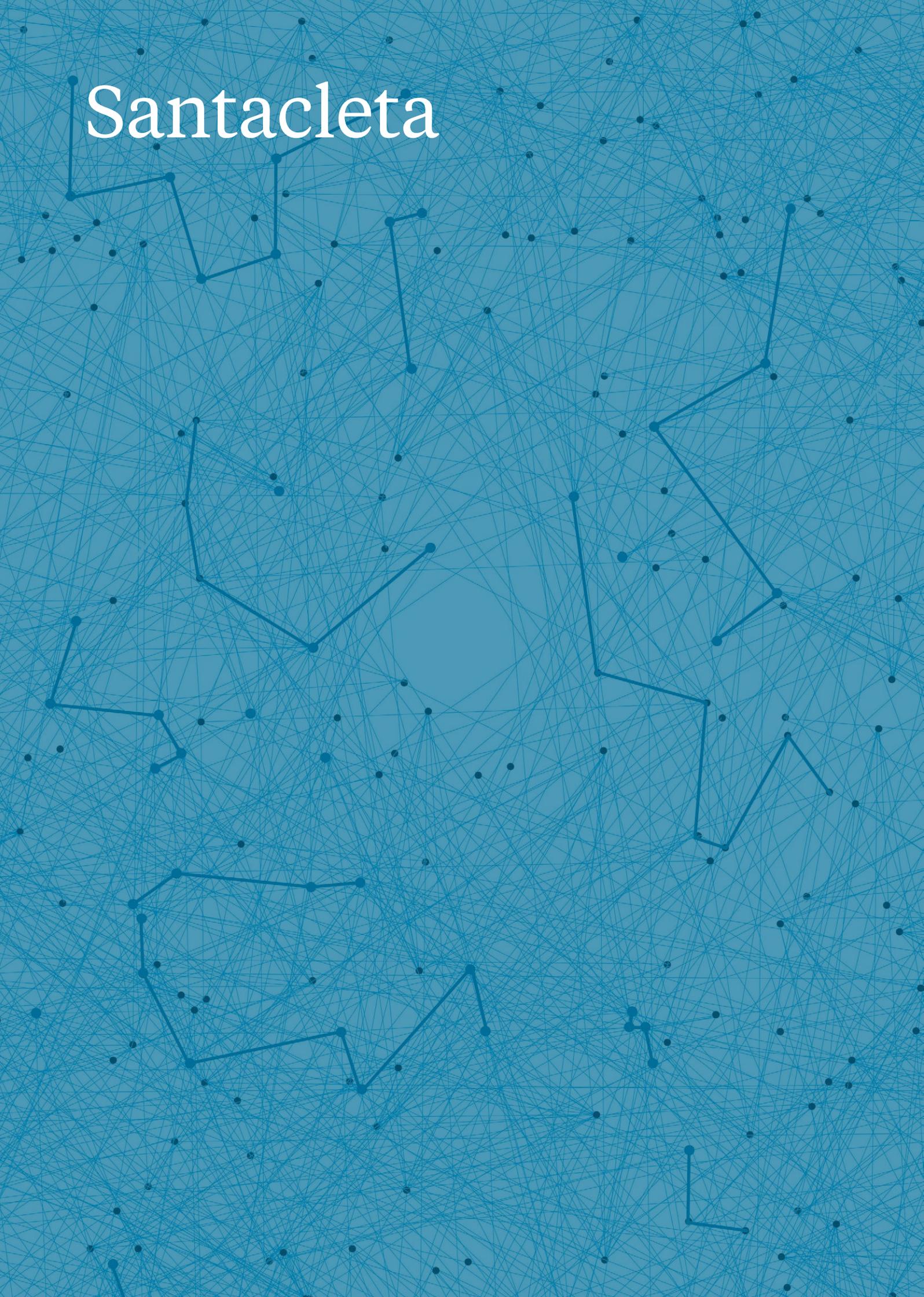
I am very lucky, for sure, I consider myself a very fortunate person because I have a lot of feedback from the people, and that is important. There are people with whom I don't work only as a punctual form, but it's people to whom we have been working with for ten years in the project eco-scholar, because from those people you receive all the information, what works and what doesn't work, but what does work they tell you. So, when you have participated in a course, and you have seen a group of people, and have seen something being generated, and then that human group has taken their own collective or their own company, or have been organized and have done a field of voluntarily or have participated in the science fair, and you see them in the event explaining the climate change when before I had explained it to them, there are many times when I had received feedback from the people I work with. So, I feel there's a chain of supplying and I know to transform the reality many things are missing, and I know that my area is not enough, many other areas are missing, but it's the important just the same, of course.

What does it mean to Argos or to you to grow?

We are the growth that we measure in the capacity to generate work. After seeing us around so many brave people with very powerful minds that did not have the possibility to work and to do things to transform their reality, I like that we are capable of generating jobs and making it possible for these people to be able to work. To me that seems fundamental. I do not know if that is to grow in capitalists terms or not but that seems important to me. Later it seems important to generate synergies in the things that we do and going to do in relation to what you asked me earlier. When we see that the experimental or pilot questions put us in movement in places and that finally reproduces in another place or all of a sudden you connect with someone who tells you about someone else, in other words, to see those connections and those synergies generating in other spaces and other places, so it seems to me that that is also growing, also to make that change possible. And later for me something very important in environmental education is to maintain, to have a place in environmental education, to be capable of continuing to contribute and to continue having hope in spite of the environmental education being punished and the public budget that decides it is crap and we are lucky here in Andalusia because in other communities it has been devastating. For me, that is to grow in terms that are not capitalistic.



Santacleeta





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
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Location
Sevilla, Spain

Collective's name
Santa Cleta

Name of the interviewees
**Isabel Porras and
Fernando Martinez**

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Who are you and what is your relationship to this project?

Isabel: I'm Isabel Porras. This is the cooperative project Santa Cleta, which is an urban cycling center and mobility school.

Fernando: And I'm Fernando Martinez and I'm a member-worker of the cooperative.

Isabel: We're partners and we're responsible for all work that's done here.

Why is this project called "Santa Cleta?"

Isabel: Well, Santa Cleta is the second part of the word "bici-cleta" and it relates it to "Saint Bicycle" you know? Like all the good that the bicycles do. So we decided to play with that idea because, well, we're in a very Catholic country, and in a very Catholic city. And everything that is holy is good, so we wanted to relate that to the bike a little bit. It was more a joke than a deserved faith, but there's also another part that... here in the plazas, the plazas are named Santa or Santo, and the places have are named Santo or Santa. So calling it the "Santa Cleta" is like a place that you go to. You go to the Plaza de Santa Marta for example, and here you come to the Plaza de Santa Cleta, to the bicycle. So it's also a play on words where we play with what's a cyclist's space.

Can you explain how you function as a cooperative work system?

Isabel: Well, in Spain, the cooperative work system is that the people who are members of the company are the employees. So, this is a cooperative of three member-workers, where we're partners, and we've built this, we work. And other than that, it's a non-profit and social purpose cooperative, which would be in English, a "nonprofit organization." So we organize the partners, we do everything horizontally and openly, and we all have a voice and vote and we decide everything together. And there is also an employee for the workshop and we have several projects with different people as self-employed collaborators. For example, Vicente's project with bicycle repair at the university. So... that's it. The organization has social goals, so what we do always has to have a payback to society. Profit is reinvested in the company, and the people here are a part of it. This is our job but it's also personal because it's our project. So it's a little bit that all comes together. So here the decisions simply... well, we've talked to each other and decided them all.

Is there any relationship between this project and 15M?

Isabel: Actually, we have no relation because it's not something that arose from a concrete political movement. But it's true that we met at a 15M protest. That coincides, that day we met...

Fernando: We were in the streets.

Isabel: We were in the streets in a protest. So there's that coincidence.

Fernando: And well, it's affected us, that era of social dismantling.

Are you linked to other groups?

Fernando: Well, yes, yes we're always pretty informed of the... of the counter-politics of networks and social groups.

Isabel: We're in environments that are sensitive to and environments that are related to social movements and we always try to support initiatives of social movements... Because bicycles and encouraging bicycle use are closely linked to the whole environmental movement, the environmental movement, and the reduction of CO2. So everything that's within those issues, we try to be involved. When there is a commission in the town hall that tries to promote bicycle use, or a meeting of social movements, we also go to see what is happening. Now, for example, there has been a downturn in the use, so we try to be present, to put pressure and to be an agent that serves as a bit of voice for people who bike.

For Santa Cleta, what would be an effective tool in the development of citizen empowerment?

Fernando: Yes, training, one of the branches of Santa Cleta is training and from there empowerment emerges because many of the students who have come here, now, are professionally dedicated to bike repair or to bikes as a field. And many of those people who come, come for that reason. And so, within the field of mechanics, they find a job. So then, I don't know, there are some 400 students who have come, who have come through Santa Cleta and have learned to ride a bike. And that's a very important fact because there really is a change at the urban and social level because of people who end up moving differently throughout the city. They're more independent, it's linked to health, it's linked to the space that is occupied if you're using the private vehicle and, yeah, it always provides security and empowerment in a different way ...

Fernando: With the mechanics courses, there are two levels: the advanced level that's more linked to professional mechanics and the basic mechanics course that's also that. It's to have confidence about your vehicle, your bicycle, to create that culture of a useful tool that you know how to handle and that you trust.

Can you tell us a bit about the relation of this project to the process of public recovery of public spaces?

Isabel: We believe that the more people, the more pedestrians there are in the street, the more people live in the public space. So with the bicycle something similar happens—the more bicycles and the more people that bike in the streets, the more public space is taken up by people, you know? And the cities don't turn into those cities



where everyone has to be inside a car and where you can't live your surroundings. So we believe that through the process of training, teaching people to ride a bike, to make routes, how to fix your bicycle, people are empowered because they learn something, they're enabled and also, they start to live their city in another way, you know?

What is the profile of the people who are approaching this project?

Isabel: Well, there is a little everything. We should say that the bicycle sector as a means of transport is very masculinized. So, we... we're fortunate that we have many women cyclists. There is a profile of a strong woman, a lot of clients, many women who come to learn or repair their bike. I don't think anyone in Seville has that usage statistic, right? Of having so many women. For example, our Facebook when we opened and started to have activities, only men came. After five years of focusing on activities that are also for women, 60% of the visits to our Facebook are women. Which, on a Facebook page related to bicycles in Spain is a lot. It has nothing to do with other social networks of other groups related to bikes. So, we've dedicated a lot to gender equality in the city sector, transport, bicycle use in the urban sector. And our typical customer actually, between services, varies a lot because it depends on the activities they do. We do workshops for children to teach them how to ride a bike and so that they learn how to repair a bike. Workshops for women, workshops... for people who want to be professional mechanics. In the end there is a pretty broad profile.

In Seville, 35% of bicycle users are women. So, it's a percentage lower than 50%. We have not reached equality in the bike use. In Spain this is the issue... I believe that in European, Mediterranean, Latin countries you can tell the difference, you know? The gender gap is wider, and well, statistics tell you. So, there is a problem in the bicycle use by women. Why in Spain? Well, it's a social, cultural, educational issue. Let's say... there are many women from previous generations who did not had the opportunity to learn, right? Their father said "This isn't for girls," or there was no bicycle at home. So it gets worse, you know? 85% of people who don't know how to ride a bike are women. So we find that there is also a training problem. And that's exacerbated by gender. So there's an inheritance, there's an inheritance that, although there are now women in their 20s and 30s, there are also women who don't know how to ride a bike. So we see that, that the bicycle, which is a useful tool for movement, the patriarchy has kept it locked up more for men, as is the case with many other tools. So with the bike it's very simple to see. Like a woman when she was little, she was told, don't get dirty, don't take the bike, don't do this, don't do this or that, and having grown up, they haven't learned to ride a bike. And when she's 30 or 40 she sees everyone riding their bike on the bike path of their city and says "Why don't I do it?" She learns, and that is the moment of empowerment. So these are the stories we're seeing here. And it really is an issue of education, it's a social and educational issue... It's an unresolved issue that we're improving a lot, but that there is a lot to do and it doesn't have public investment.

Fernando: In the courses, men attend more than women, but with social media we publicize the gender issue more. And it's true that we're getting more women to do bicycle mechanics workshops and there are always some women in the workshops.

Isabel: Before, five years ago, when we opened and started offering workshops on how to repair your bike, 100% of the people were men. And from a base of putting out information, of posting pictures of women repairing their bike on Facebook... by being an organization where there are also women, we've achieved that in the repair activities, where it seems that the mechanics are more for men, women also come.

Is the migrant community represented among the users of the project?

Isabel: As customers, as a client, for example—in the shop-workshop or in the self-workshop space where people come to repair their own bikes—not really because we're linked to a downtown neighborhood. So we're very centric, and in the center there's no immigrant population living here. It's more neighbors from the area that come. The immigrant population lives in more peripheral areas living, so they'll go to their neighborhood workshop to repair their bikes. So, as far as the shop-workshop customer, no. But, for example, we've done activities focused on working with immigrant populations. We had, for example, workshops with immigrant women who didn't know how to ride a bike. They learn to ride a bike, and then we have a fundraiser to buy bikes and give them away. So we've done small activities related to reaching other groups that are more complex when it comes to improving their mobility and learning to live the city in a different way.

In your experience, how does a person's view of themselves and of the city change by biking?

Fernando: That's very interesting. Well, I think... there's the social economy too, right? It's very... very important because that person, their radius of action expands them and they discover another city too. They discover that they are able to reach a different place, whereas before they had to rely on a bus or practically no transit. So staying with a family member or a friend for breakfast is very easy to do as long as you have a bike. Whereas before it was a very sporadic thing.

Isabel: We've taught women to ride bikes who were walking everywhere, who lived in a peripheral neighborhood and were walking an hour to their appointments. A woman, for example, who cleans houses and has a very small budget and she travels by bus when she has money and, if not, at the end of the month, she walks. So, when they learn to ride a bike and with there's bike lane in a city where almost all the routes are no more than 8 or 10 kilometers, that completely changes her possibilities. So, that type of woman, it really does change her mobility within her area, all the factors are in favor. So there we've seen specific cases of people who have included biking in their lives, and it's eased their daily circumstances. And women who might have an economic situation, even better, right? Who have their job...

Fernando: (Isabel: Like Teresa) Yes, like Teresa, or for example, I remember a woman who, at the age of 60, separated from her husband, who had always taken her in the car everywhere. And she learned to ride a bike at age 60 and, since learning how to bike (now 2 years ago), visited us here, she has not stopped biking. Every day she rides a bike. And in her case, Teresa lives in a peripheral area and goes to Triana to have breakfast with her mother. Whereas before, it had to be a Sunday or... So she feels more agile, more secure, more beautiful because she's in shape. So it's really changed her life, from the moment she started biking.

Isabel: And these are the cases that we remember, like people that we know it's really been a tool for. And people who didn't know how to ride a bike. That is, we started from scratch: there was no bicycle in their house and they had never thought about biking and when they became adults they decided. But after that, there's a lot more activities. There's also people who don't have a bike integrated into their lives and you can at least make them think. Also, there is another type of client that comes to an event, or a route, or a chat. And they begin to think, "Ah well, maybe I can take my bike." So,

these are like the most extreme cases; that is, someone who didn't know how to ride a bike, who learns at 50, 60 years, and suddenly starts to bike everywhere and it makes life easier. And they say, "How have not I done this before?" And then there are other cases who simply, well, are coming to the space and begin to change their habits by understanding that it's something more positive than we thought and more important.

Considering all the advantages associated with bicycle culture, why do you think we're not educated in the culture?

Fernando: Well, because it's a culture that hasn't spread. Yesterday watching TV, I don't have a TV in the house, but it struck me that there were five car commercials in a row, they were five to watch. So, of course, the normal, common thing is the car. Since the 60s, the car has been the common element of mobility in Spain. And in other countries, however, because they've made policies around bike use, it's something normal for the whole family and at all ages it's the bicycle. It's an element, that is, it's directly linked to policy. Creating culture is a challenge...

Isabel: Still, in the cities I don't know, it's still costing a lot. In Spain, there's a lot of car industry. Particularly in certain cities it's a very powerful industry. It provides a lot of work in times of crisis, it provides a lot of money. But really, even though the change is necessary, the change in the city's metabolism, and even though we need to do that taking of space and remove some cars and find alternative modes of transport, all that change is very expensive. So that behavior change not just at the individual level, but rather at the political level. It's a very slow thing, is it not?

Santa Cleta is a community in defense of sustainable mobility. What other agents participate with you in this position?

Isabel: We participate, we'll say, within the entire cycling community. We're not alone. It's not just Santa Cleta, like a point, a little reference to fix your bike, learn to ride a bike and other stuff. For example, we work with A Contra Mano which is the Seville Cycling Association with more than 100 members. So there are other agents, also in defense of sustainable mobility. And well, punctual people, environmental consultants or people even within institutions that want to promote the bike use. So we try to work together, go to meetings. If you have to do a protest, well they go... And more or less what we try to do is be a little to be loud speaker of what's happening to raise awareness. To be an agent. An agent that moves the situation a little...

Fernando: Yes to add ...

Isabel: Our community, when you have a physical space in a neighborhood it also generates a lot of social connection and neighborhood connection. People get to know your face, people get to know you. So, a lot of people come in here every day. So within that local, close space, a lot of people also come that are just asking questions, right? I've had my bike stolen, what do I do...

Is Santa Cleta an assembly space for the people of the neighborhood?

Isabel: Yes, to come to have conversations, or to debate. And we've done many dialogues. We've done debates, activities. We'll say, intellectually put into value what the situation of the bike here. But then, there are other ways, say, a little more related to social movements or lobbying. We don't do that alone. We join with other associations.

How do you teach a person to ride a bike?

Isabel: It's very simple. The courses we do are 6 hours. So I do three sessions, 2 hours each day. The first session I remove the pedals so the person walks first. Then they don't take the risk of having to pedal. It's all very progressive, very slow. And we follow the process that the person wants. So, I, when she is walking and then she is picking up her feet, becoming aware of where the brakes are, how the bike rotates. When I see that she has some confidence, we put the pedals back on. I explain a little bit of the mechanism of your first ride and important things like that you have to look at the horizon, set your gaze, because balance is in the gaze. Then, align your body with the bicycle, you have to try not to move your body, you don't have to grab the handlebars too much support them. Then I follow giving little pieces of advice and I just accompany the person. But I let her alone do everything. Because that's the process, right? A lot of people come and say "I went out with my husband and I took the trailer from behind..." And so if they take you, you don't learn to pedal.

Fernando: And there are many people who fall. They came, learned years ago to ride and fell. And it's true, one of the key things Isa says is that the bicycle brakes when you want. There are the brakes and it's you who brakes, and the bicycle does not take you by itself. Then, when a person is aware of that, that when they want to stop, they says, "Okay, this is something that I control."

Isabel: From there things start to change.

Fernando: And that's an important step.

Isabel: So, it's true that it's like progressively developing that domain and that you, say, set the pace, right? Not to come and say, "Okay! By the first hour you have to pedal. By the second hour, I want to see you pedaling." So, up to 6 hours, depending on how you look at it and how the person evolves, because I give different types of advice. The result: 100% of people learn.

Fernando: Doesn't matter what age.

Isabel: It doesn't matter what age. At 60, at 70, they learn. Another thing is that they decide to change their habits, right? They decide whether to integrate it into their lives.

Isabel: The kids that come... What usually happens is that for kids it's really easy. So the parents teach them. The kids who come here have the most difficulty with blocking, you know? Overall, more intellectual children, who have more trouble with bikes, so they look at it like...

Fernando: Yes, and it's true that another strategy with the children is that Isa asks the parents to leave. When the parents leave, the kids don't have so much authority...

Isabel: And they do what they want. Then it's simply a matter of accompanying them.

What kind of courses do you offer?

I have several categories because there are women for whom it's really an effort to pay for a workshop or to pay the immigrant collective. So, along with the association A Contra Mano, we offer free workshops. And besides that I

also have paid workshops that cost 50 euros to learn how to ride a bike. So, there are women who prefer the paid classes, that are on weekends, with a few more times offered. And then there are other women who come to the free courses. So, a little bit of everything for all the communities.

Why did you think of the bicycle as a tool for this project?

Fernando: Other than that it's necessary, it's a good invention, it's looking out for the common good... it's a mobility tool. It's very logical and very natural when you want to move through a space like a city. Even if you have a car or a motorcycle or you travel by bus, separate from that is the bicycle. I think it's smart to ride bikes. Because walking takes longer, cars take longer and the bike is positive. And besides that it's not linked to a social class—the stuff with its ideology we could discuss—but I think it's smart to ride bikes.

Isabel: I believe that, in my case, the bicycle found me. And as I was investigating, I realized that cycling was a very useful and effective tool to change the world and to change many of the problems that we experience in cities. Then, little by little, I became aware that a simple tool, something as simple as a bike can fight the global problems and structural problems that we have in cities. And it can be a tool to put in your two cents against climate change, to put in your two cents against pollution and against a lot of things because bike, I always say they work on three very important fronts. First: they work on the personal front—you take it with you and you feel good doing it, which empowers you. They work in the environmental front—they take care of the city, take care of the environment. And then other than that, they work in an educational way, right? It's like, it's an example for others and it's a way of working with education. With that, I think it has everything.

Can you tell us about your relationship with the reality of institutions?

Fernando: Well, as far as grants go we've not seen one in five, six years? Everything has been self-managed, with our resources.

Isabel: Everything has been independent, we opened almost without any money. Then we're able to have the size that we have and the movement of bills that we have because it's the capacity of staff that we have. And we haven't received any aid, we haven't received grants, there is no support, in economic matters, there is no support from any public entity. And it should also be said that in the last six years, in this city there has been an investment in mobility policies related to the bicycle of 0 euros. So we're going through a desert that is hopefully going to end at some point. And really, we won't have to get a grant, but we hope they actually realize that we really need to invest in cities from the point of view of promoting bikes.

This is an educational project. Do you have a relationship with educational institutions, for example, colleges and universities?

Isabel: Yes, we've done, well, we've done for example many workshops for kids mechanics in schools. We've worked with groups of kids that have more conflicts, right? Kids who have more school problems like truancy, problems with the law, we try to get them to learn other kinds of technical skills like the mechanics of the bicycle. That has worked very well.

Fernando: Kids who were in juvenile detention centers, and we've also done mechanics courses with people in social exclusion and at risk of social exclusion.

Isabel: With young boys who, later between themselves set up a workshop. They were able to set up a small workshop after we taught them. They are there, instead of being on the street, they are fixing bikes.

Fernando: They've created a neighborhood association so they can work legally.

Isabel: And we've had successful experiences. We've also worked with the university, we have an agreement with them. So the university students get a discount so that they use bikes. We won a bid and we do the bike repair for the bikes at the University of Seville. So, we try to be in relationship with the educational system to the extent that's possible.

Fernando: We also work with some institutes.

Isabel: We work with institutes and schools. Mechanics workshops, lectures...

What media coverage has this project had and how has it been achieved?

Isabel: I, before working here and putting this together, (I am a journalist) worked a lot in relation to the media and in the cabinet. So, when I've had an activity that I think is appealing, I have sent a press release, I have phoned people. And, yeah, on several occasions we've got it, because we've gotten on television, we've been in the newspapers. Everything has to come from you, logically, so that they know you. But when there is a continued relationship with the media, in the end, you get visibility. And yeah there is some sensitivity as to the promotion of bikes, as much as possible, right?

Thinking about the process of opening and developing this project can you talk about the difficulties you have faced?

Fernando: Well, a bit on the management issue, Santa Cleta has rather been leading us. Instead of us being in control. It's a company and we're not entrepreneurs. So, we've been learning as we stumble along.

Isabel: And the money issue is very important, you know? Because you want to make it a non-profit but you need an initial investment. That initial investment really, you need a lot of initial investment. You have to have the ability to rent a space, be able to buy bikes, be able to train, to offer courses and so on. All that for one person is a really a very big investment. You have to make a deal with yourself to say, "Everything I've saved from my life, I'm putting it here. And if I lose it, I lose it." But it was a bit like that, you know? So we put what we had, what we had saved from our previous jobs and that's been the capacity we have. But a lot of people don't have that option. So it's true that you have to have capital and you have to have a time of investment that is practically 5 years. Because it's cost us, you know, to have some stability, so that everything moves continuously, that's 5 years of work. Going through many deserts, through precariousness, through months of not charging, so you have to have...

Fernando: And work a ton every day.

Isabel: And work a lot.



Fernando: That's why teamwork is also interesting. The cooperative has the advantage that it's not just one person that invests or is one that loses everything. We've all invested a little and if we lose, we all lose a little, we don't lose everything.

What is the political-ideological background of the project?

Fernando: Well, the ideological background, to which I referred before is that there is an underlying concept of the common good. A person who uses the bicycle not only looks for themselves, for their own interest, but, consciously or unconsciously, they look out for the interest of others. So there is a culture of the common good, that ideological part of the common good. That someone who uses their car, it's because their interest and they occupy the space that the car occupies and they generate smoke and it's about their interest. But using a bike, consciously or unconsciously, also improves the lives of others. Whether you're driving or you're the pedestrian or another cyclist. So, that's why I think there's an underlying ideology.

Isabel: For us, it's an environmental responsibility tool, you know? A personal empowerment tool and too to care for your space and to care for yourself. So, it has everything.

How does your conception of work change as working partners of an activist cooperative?

Fernando: Well, working is doing, you know? It's changing, it's doing something. And I think that, yeah, we work a lot here and... well, what's the difference between having another position in a company that isn't a cooperative? The work is the result. There is a direct result of what we do in our work.

Isabel: I think the key is that the people who work here are members of the space. Which means that you're the master of what you do. And you make the decisions of what happens here, you know? There is no one telling you what you have to do. So that makes you personally involved in the project and makes you work in a different way. I've been asked a bunch of times, "In your work, what's is the personal part and the professional part?" And for me it's united. So, what I have to do is put limits on the work schedule to dedicate space to my family, dedicate space to my daughter. But, I really think that when I'm here, it's my life. So there's a lot of personal stake.

Fernando: It's true that between colleagues, there is no competitiveness. There is cooperativism, there's cooperation. So it's in my interest that Isabel does well, that her work is very good and it's in her interest that she helps me with my work when she can. There is no competition in the collective field.

Isabel: That's true. That's very noticeable. Because we've all worked before in spaces, at paid jobs, where there was a company and a work team. And it's true, that was one of the things that was the most... exhausting, you know? It occupies your mind day to day, it's the competitiveness of colleagues who want to stand out, etc. And here sometimes we're five, sometimes we're four, or six people, but there is never any competition. There is cooperativism. We need this to succeed as a joint venture.

Fernando: And we all care about our work going well.

Isabel: And in fact, I think we can say that it's one of the privileges of our daily

work. You come here and your colleague is someone who is your companion.

Fernando: And also you become more responsible. You don't leave the responsibility in the hands of another person. We're each responsible. So, well... that's important. It's different. It's true that that's different from other jobs, different from a normal or conventional company.

Do you think that cooperativism is an effective way to break down hierarchies?

Fernando: Yes, yes, yes, it is. And when there has been a hired worker, we always try to make it so that we have one more partner. But we've had experiences where there's been a mechanic that was working, salaried, with a contract, that he feels like a worker and even though you don't want to be the boss, he feels like a worker. And it's a strange feeling because you don't want to be the boss.

Isabel: Because we have no interest in that.

Fernando: Sure, I don't want to be anybody's boss. And it's weird for the worker and it's weird for you. So it's important to understand that concept a little bit.

Isabel: Right now, for example, there is a woman who works as hired mechanic in the workshop. And, well, it's working well in part because she's a colleague and has adapted well to that, to be more a companion. We've had other situations where there was a bit of that relationship. And in the end what happens is that it seems like you have to assign the work, like you are responsible for the work of the someone else. And here it's not like that, here everyone is responsible for their work and for making sure other people's work is easy for them.

Fernando: Of course. And when someone comes, we want you to put your workspace to your liking. Don't adapt your space to our environment, but rather adapt your working environment to you. And if you don't understand that concept it's weird. It's weird for the new member and it's weird for... It creates a strange situation. But, I guess, it's also the culture of work that we have.

What tools have you created to promote the mobility for everyone?

Isabel: Well, the inventor, the person who's tried to invent things has been Fernando.

Fernando: We've done some stuff, yes, some stuff... Well, once we made a four-wheeled tandem bike. It was a tricycle with another bike behind for a person who had a disability. So his father dragged him along with him. And we have this machine-bike that will grind the household organic waste for the compost, for a park here in the neighborhood.

Isabel: And the cargo-bike you welded ...

Fernando: And a cargo-bike too.

Isabel: So, some little things, and Fernando is the inventor...

Fernando: And also another of our things we're working on is bike parking.



Isabel: Yeah, that's interesting.

Fernando: We also invent customized products and things according to the needs of each case...

Isabel: Because with this social change in the city, where there are suddenly a ton of bike, the city doesn't have much infrastructure. And people have problems when it comes to bike parking. But not only on the street but inside the house, there is no safe space for parking bikes. So we try to teach you how to park a bike. Fernando knows how to weld, so, if necessary, we weld the parts, the parking lots to be able to padlock a bike inside the house.

Fernando: And we're looking for solutions, because in garage spaces, or in disused corners in the communities, because we find ways—four fit over there, three fit over here—because we also think that sooner or later the empty spaces of neighborhood communities must be used to store bike safely.

Isabel: It's just that in Seville we have a small problem with bike theft. So, of course, awareness of bike care and how to lock it and that there are spaces to keep it, it's fundamental for people to use bikes. So the city, let's say it has this bike lane, but having cycling infrastructure means a lot more. It means having infrastructure in your house, at school, at work... So still this phase has yet to reach the city.

What kind of political project is Santa Cleta?

Fernando: Well, politics is everything, right? When you make a decision, it's a political decision: at the local level, at the neighborhood level, at the management level. So, it may... be linked to politics, to social policy.

Isabel: I think ideology, an ideological background... everything has an ideological background. Well, here we stand for a set of things and that set of things directly conflicts with a series of economic interests. Like the car industry. But, we operate under a set of ethics, under an honesty that, in the end, has kept this going for five years without economic support of any kind.

Fernando: And trust is also important. Like, it's true that we're not good salesmen and customers come here, and they'll ask us stuff. And we try to find a solution that is in their best interest. Supposedly, it would be in my best interest to sell more. Sometimes giving a customer a response or finding a solution to their problem without making a profit also has a profit, which is a social benefit or, at least, the benefit of honesty. That also makes the customers feel a basis of trust. Many people in the neighborhood, many customers come simply because they trust us.

Isabel: In fact, as everyone has a bit of prejudice against the workshops, right? They want to see if they're going to get charged more, etc... So because of these prejudices of the workshops, since here we have that ethical social background, the reality is that many people come to repair their bike here because they know we believe in bikes. So they know that you are going to try to fix their bike well. And the workshop since we opened, have been very successful.

What does "growth" mean to Santa Cleta in non-capitalist terms?

Isabel: For us, progress is progressing in social impact. For me, progress is having more students. I got an average of one hundred people learning to ride a bike this year, so let's see if the next year we can get more, you know? I get... two hundred students who learn to ride a bike every year. Then those two hundred more people in the city that possibly ride bikes. So that's definitely growth. And, of course, I want more bikes sold, more workshops, more bikes on the streets. Why? Because the more bikes there are, the more alternatives there are to the car and the less CO2 impact there is in the city. So that's another very important impact when it comes to quantifying what we're doing. So, growing for us is decreasing in other senses. Really, if you grow in all your areas of work, you also grow economically, right? That goes hand in hand. You grow in volume, but the interesting thing is to grow in social impact.

Fernando: Sure, and with training, that happens. With people coming to do advanced mechanics courses in order to set up a workshop, a shop or something, that also adds up. That's not competition but rather is an inertia that is created because out of the store or the workshop, people are going to leave as bike users and that will create a little more culture.

In times of political disaffection what keeps you inspired?

Fernando: I think it can be a way of life, but I think it's also the path ahead. Whether you're an ecologist or not, environmentalism is the path to be on, you know? So in the cities the path ahead, the future, whether we like it or not, has to be changing our current model. And in this country, in Mediterranean cities, we have to change how we use space. And bikes are the solution. Or part of the solution.

Isabel: I think we're very excited about it. Because we're excited about being able to help change the mobility of a woman's or a person's area. Know that every day we're making a social return. There is direct action and you see it. So that gives us a lot of encouragement. It's working on the ground, it's working in the neighborhood, it's working with people. So it's not paperwork in an office, is it? We know that locally and punctually, we're doing something that internationally and the European Union is supporting. And we're working on the base. Making people find support to get more of the bike in the city. So with this, then, we're deluded. We would like it to be a little better financially, but socially it has a very high return to society. Because we see that it does, it does. Not that you're in a job, working long hours, getting a salary, but you see that you're really not doing anything for society. That you are simply living and passing. Here is different. Here what we want is that the people who work here can work because it really does have a social return for the city.

Zemos98





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
Zemos98

Name of the interviewees
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What are your names and what is your relationship to this project?

Pedro: I'm Pedro Jiménez, and this is Lucas Tello. We're from Zemos98. Since 1998, we've been working on activism, culture, and education mainly in Seville, Spain, but we're also working in different international contexts and throughout the country.

Lucas: I'm Lucas. I've been working at ZEMOS98 for about five and a half years. I've been around for four editions of the ZEMOS98 festival. I joined at a time when the budget had been declining during those years of crisis, and in a way, it became clear that the festival couldn't remain sustainable for much longer. So I'm like in the second or third generation of this model.

Why the name Zemos98?

Zemos98 is part of a play on words from the legal name of the collective that is "Comencemos, empecemos," and it's a play on words because the "ZEMOS," the "Z" itself, is a very concrete aspect of Sevillian speech. It's not correct to write "comenzemos" with a "z," but we write it with the "Z" for the aspect of a joke, play, youth....And '98 for the year in which we began. In that era, it was fashionable to put the year in the name, and yes it's true that it has served us for a long time, being a name that no one can figure out, as an invented word, as having a kind of brand that has continued resonating.

What legal form have you adopted and why?

Lucas: Well, Zemos98 started as a cultural association as a legal entity in '98. It was in 2004 that this first generation finished university and had the debate of whether to become professional in any way through the activity that was going on in ZEMOS. Then a limited liability company was established that was closed a year or so ago. And then the third legal entity that we've had has been an Andalusian Cooperative Society (Sociedad Cooperativa Andaluza)(SCA) that was established three years ago, and that is now the main legal entity through which we carry out our different projects, although we maintain the cultural association ...

Pedro: But basically the governance model has not changed throughout those three legal entities. We function as a kind of group-coordinated assembly composed of a series of people who have been getting involved. It can be called an assembly, but they're like meetings in a coordination space, almost daily, now of four people. We have worked with many other people who have been entering or leaving different processes and who are making decisions according to the responsibilities they take for each project, for each job. Legal formulas have been an

important thing in our way of organizing, but as a collective we have always had the fundamental characteristic that our work is professional. That is to say, we are like a company that has its workers and generates its taxes, but at the level of governance it functions as an activist collective organized by different, more democratic processes. In fact, the cooperative framework is the one that seems to better respond to the legal and juridical form in which we operate because the cooperative requires taking ownership of the entity, taking ownership of its profit, but also its errors, and all its things always are collective. So yes, that's a bit of the way we work.

What defines the activity of Zemos98?

Lucas: I believe that this is a question that we've been asking ourselves starting with a process that began last summer to rethink ourselves and to see how we'll face the coming years. It's a strategy that we've laid out for three years. It's a difficult question to answer because what has happened basically in recent years with Zemos98 is that, with the onset of the crisis and with the different crises we've lived through, we have had to greatly diversify the type of work we were doing. We've done many different projects such as book publications, event organization, web creation, etc., They've been projects of many types, and as a result, the type of public we direct ourselves to has diversified a lot. I believe that the work done by Zemos98 appeals to different communities: to education and the non-formal education model, to those groups and to those communities that work in new audiovisual narratives, to the activist groups more focused on issues of explicit social transformation, and in recent years, it also appeals to international communities working on social transformation. I believe that the idea of audiences is a question that we always have with us, because the fact of having worked on many things makes us known for different things, and it's very difficult to delimit the people who we address.

Pedro: I believe that in all these communities we are identified with an understanding of culture as a tool of social activation and the activation of participation, culture not as a spectacle but rather as a process. I believe that we are identified with a more active and alive cultural politics. We, less and less, are doing less things that can be identified with what we normally know as "art and culture". There is a very rich debate because the question is not "what is the crisis of culture?," but rather what can we do from culture to combat the crisis. We are more involved in that second question.

What opinion does Zemos98 have of institutional cultural policies?

Pedro: In the last two years we've been working in contexts of rethinking public policies around culture. We've realized that, since the democratic transition (in Spain) until the entry of the new municipalities with new sensibilities, policies have always been built from the logic of he who claims, and he who claims is always from a sector. There is the cinema sector, the audiovisual arts sector, the literature sector, etc. They are isolated sectors that function as lobbies that make demands only for their personal interests or their sectoral interests. And we understood that in order to think about the complexity of the city, we had to abandon the idea of the sector or at least to understand that the sector is a tool that is there but that it is not the only interlocutor. Especially because there are things that we always forget when we talk about sectors and it's that sectors are not chosen democratically. That is to say, the sector that represents the performing arts halls of the city is a sector created purely by a business logic belonging to the people who can have a theater in the city. So they can't speak for all the performing arts of the city but only for their concrete project. So that logic, that of the lobby, is very

difficult because in political negotiation it is very difficult to understand that he who has traditionally been a representative now is just one more- not that he is left out, but that he has the same importance as he who has until now been unrepresented. So then, in this logic of de-representation, we talk about the lobbies. There are very graphic and very obvious examples that we've suffered though in our processes of cultural activism; for example, the lobby of the creators, or authors, of the SGAE, or the copyright lobby. This lobby is very strong and now is seen as something that has really had and continues to have a lot of power and that clearly has changed laws or has induced the change of democratically elected laws. It has worked for its interests to be met on a very high level. Let's not forget that cables between the US government and the incorporation have come out on Wikileaks, or no, on the blacklist of copyright. They are true lobbies that have fought for a vision of culture that we do not share.

Seen a bit with perspective, it's not really about understanding the sector as something negative but about being able to understand that the sector can be a great place to access privileged and real information of what happens to the sector itself. I'm thinking, for example, of the audiovisual technicians sector in film. There is not going to be anyone better than that collective to know what the working conditions of all the film technicians in a country are, but that does not mean that everything the film technicians say should be law, but rather that you have to be able to have an active listening process in that transversal vision.

Then there is our vision of appealing to communities, and so what is our sector? We come from the audiovisual field, but we have also done things about education, so I think that 15M has also taught us that transversal claims are what really matter. We are in this logic of transversality, not so much in the logic of a specific sector, and from that transversality, we try to limit this issue of lobbying.

What would it take to guarantee citizen participation in public cultural policies?

Pedro: For us this question is linked to another: "who really is interested in having a process of participation?" Because normally the represented sector does not want a participation process. What they want is a process of direct dialogue with whoever has the power. Because they feel represented to take power, that is, to have influence on power. Another question is that if there are, in this case at the level of ability in the municipalities, areas that are dedicated to promoting citizen participation, "who should start it?" "Should the organized sector start it, or should it start from the area of citizen participation of all cities? What is normally done is to say: "We are going to have a process of participation. We call on those representatives that have already told us that they represent everyone, and we forget about real citizen participation." That's where the question takes us. That is to say, to guarantee a real, more democratic and open citizen participation that really responds to other criteria than doing it just to do it, we must understand that we can participate not just from those places of representation.

One of the most important tools of Zemos98 was its festival. After 16 editions, can you explain why it stopped being organized?

Lucas: The reason why it ended or why we decided to stop doing the festival has to do with the loss of institutional support at the local and regional level. I think that is one of the fundamental reasons. But I also believe that there were at least a couple other reasons, being the personal situations of the people in Zemos98. There came a time in which to endure the precariousness of organizing a festival with very few resources

made precarious our own personal life situations. So we couldn't continue to hold up with the personal lives of most people who are in Zemos98, or were at that time, the organization of a festival in which for 3, 4, or 5 months each person had to work 10, 12 hours a day. It was impossible. Because it was around the time that some of the people who are in Zemos98 started having children, and it was simply unsustainable. If there had been more economic resources, or resources of another kind, it could probably have been done in another way, but perhaps the outcome would have been the same. But on the other hand it is also true that another one of the reasons that made us end the festival was to consider that the festival had impact for a week in the city, and this impact could be positive, but we wanted to somehow transcend the temporary approach, that is, the organization of events that, for a week, unfold on a site and then no longer have a trace. Our intuition was to end the festival and start some process of producing some kind of cultural creation in some space of the city. That, up until now, has not yet happened. But it's not ruled out yet, so we continue with the idea of finding some space where we can continuously produce things throughout the year in the city.

So, on the one hand, there was a lack of institutional, local and regional support, which in recent years was partially compensated with support at the European level but not with enough sustainability to continue producing festival editions. And, on the other hand, there were the personal circumstances of the members of Zemos98 and of the organization at the moment in which it was decided to stop having the festival. And also the promise to do sustained and stable cultural creation in the city throughout the year.

Pedro: Yes, and also because of the deviation of the festival itself. We have to explain that the Zemos98 festival has not always involved screenings, concerts, and invitations to people- a type of encounter of events relating to culture. In the last 6 or 7 years, the Zemos98 festival was already considering its own survival as a format. We started as a festival and that was how it remained. I think that, in my opinion, it was an interesting strategy because having a festival allowed us to have an institutional dialogue, since they're the ones that work within the logic of events and media headlines. Following that formula allowed us to get support for the festival, but we've been mutating the festival. That is to say, it's a logical mutation to end the festival in order to think about doing something else. If the first year there were screenings and concerts, the last year there was a residence, a Hackathon and public conference spaces. I mean to say that the concept of a festival made us condense a lot of activity into a week, but the dynamics and processes that we were working with were no longer within the bounds of any festival.

For us, the mechanism of a "festival" has transformed over many years into our guide as a collective on what to be thinking about collectively. That is to say, although each one of us has our individuality more or less defined, in the end as a group we had a single voice and that voice was the production of a festival. That voice has usually been translated into publications, books, videos, or documentation that have generated a discourse and a story about the issues that were discussing through the festival, not around the festival itself. This has allowed us to understand that, for example, when you talk about education, it didn't make sense that the format was not connected to the education of which you were talking about. Or when you talk about care or attention to feminist issues and practices, it doesn't make sense to continue with a productivist logic of a festival in which all you want is media attention. Maybe it's self-sabotage, but I see it as something positive and natural. Obviously, it was hard and difficult to make a decision to stop doing something

that we have been doing for 17 years, and above all it was what had allowed us to stay together for 17 years. But we also believe that it was about valuing all that we discussed before about participation, of all that we have talked about regarding what we have been doing in relation to public policies, cultural policies. Because there we were denouncing things that we see continuing to happen today, that continue to generate job instability for cultural workers and that remain unsolved.

We killed the festival before it died by itself, but the multi-format presence—for example, that a conference can also be a text in a collected volume, a video, and a workshop—we continue to use in different contexts. Using different traditional formats that, in their combination, generate an event that is different that allows us to reach the ultimate moment that we have always dedicated to the festival: documenting process and public communication. In other words, there is a responsibility with respect to this investigative process. Traditionally, the investigative process is very concerned with the investigation itself, with the facts, the authors, etc., and with generating a discourse, but it scarcely communicates the investigation or makes it public or shares it, when perhaps this process has been done with public resources: scholarships, etc. We understood that, even if it's exhausting, the process of public communication, the process of putting all the materials online, of organizing all the types of documentation and materials, it was almost like an ethical responsibility with the resources and with the processes. This turns out to connect well with processes of free culture or free software or other fields that work within the ethic of open knowledge. In that sense we have been learning all the time, unlearning, doing and re-doing.

Could we say that the festival was a kind of citizen's laboratory?

Pedro: More or less. We've never used those exact words, "citizen's laboratory," but yes.

Lucas: It was a learning space for us. When the theme of each year was chosen, the festival was a very intense process of learning for us even though we already had an idea of the theme. It was very valuable. The festival is something I think we should find a replacement for. The festival also allowed us to work together, because now we are dispersed between many projects and we can't find common time.

Why do you think there was no institutional support to continue the activity of the festival?

Pedro: We were just asking ourselves that same question here today, we probably have never asked it to anyone at a negotiation table because they don't even listen to you. These days you speak to different politicians responsible for institutions and they don't listen to you. They're just thinking: "I have 6,000 euros to give to Zemos98" or "I have 10,000" or "I have 4,000," and, "if they complain a lot, well, maybe we'll give them 2,000 euros more." In that dialogue, there is a real lack of genuine conversational partners within the Institutions that understand cultural processes as we understand them. This is the reality and it hasn't changed. So, it's more due to this lack of dialogue than any other reason. In fact, it would have been fine even if there had been political reasons. For example, if they had told us: "You're talking about things that don't appeal to us." But they didn't even listen to what we were saying enough to be able to form an opinion and be able to say: "We don't support Zemos98."

What characterizes the activity of Zemos98 after the closing of the festival?

Pedro: We have gone from being a space for creating our own content to being an entity that provides services to entities that could pay for these types of projects. There is an important variety of educational institutions that call on you to do facilitation projects around expanded education or around media education; processes more about consulting with public entities. Then there are projects of pure mediation between activists, institutions, foundations. In a way, this is what we've been doing since the festival is no longer our priority. And, in a way, it was something that was hard for us at the beginning and continues to be hard for us today. The fact of knowing that ultimately you're working for someone else and not on your own project. There is also the question of what brand you are left to work with, and according to what people for your own project. The desire to build something to replace the festival is there, but it is also there in a quiet way. That is, there's no pressure, we're not putting pressure on ourselves to have to give an answer to that question of what it is that we are. It's curious that in this two year period many people have thought that since we no longer do the festival, we no longer exist. There are also people who haven't realized that during the festival years, what we really lived through was not the festival but this other kind of work. That is to say, we have deactivated the festival that was the shiniest focus, and now we see that there are other kinds of things that are growing, some come to fruition, others fall off, others are in process. And, above all, we see that if there is one thing that consistently characterizes us it is this ability to evolve (and if this interview were to be done in ten years from now, we would say the same). We are changing and adapting to the processes within which we live. It's not surprising that things change.

What relation has Zemos98 had with universities?

Pedro: In fact, the relationship that the Zemos98 collective has had with universities—not the individual members of Zemos98 because we're all graduates, we've passed through university and we've had our interests in research—it has been almost a relationship of deafness. Universities have never listened to anything we did, especially local universities. And perhaps we haven't made any effort to introduce things to universities that we were doing. I say this so as not to suggest it's all their fault. We have tried, in fact, for example, we donated to a communications department the media library of all the years of projections of materials that have been projected at the Zemos98 festival. But after the donation we have not really learned what happened with that material. We don't know if it's cataloged, if it's been utilized or if it has simply ended up in the garbage can. I mean that level of deafness. That is to say, we have not had a genuine and interested conversational partner because in universities, at least in the Spanish ones, they are not capable of understanding that we do not want to create a university track. Within the logic of university tracks, as collective things are not permitted, we are not appealing to them. And, in fact, members of Zemos98 who have wanted to get a university degree have had to disconnect from Zemos98 for their own self-interest or by their own decision, and then they have been able to do the university career appealing to Zemos98, very properly. But you are always left with that feeling of being an object of study, because it's true that in the last three or four years universities, through a lot of research projects, come to ask you things. You are an object or subject of study, but you can't be a researcher from the outside, or an interlocutor, for example, to be able to say "maybe for the students of the University of Seville it would be interesting for Zemos98 to teach a course or a subject?" That is unthinkable because it is not in the logic of constant war that exists between the departments, etc. Personally, we are not interested

in having a university track right now. Obviously it is something that is out there because other friends do and it's still interesting that the university keeps learning about this type of thing. But as a collective it is true that we have not had that.

Lucas: The only university with which we have had a relationship is with the international university of Andalusia, with which we continue to have a very good relationship ... and we keep it that way ... it has been a very important entity.

Pedro: Yes, yes, yes, it is a very important entity. But it's a university without students.

Lucas: Of course, it's a university of another kind, very different. I believe that the main difficulty that Zemos98 has had with Academia is the same one it has with public governments or institutionality. It is very difficult to work with the institutional reality because the Institutions, on the one hand, need to self-legitimize constantly reaffirming that they are the only way of doing things, that there is only one way to do things or manage the public. And one of the things that characterizes Zemos98 in some way is our willingness to transverse the knowledge of the Academy, which we do not want to destroy but to go transverse with other things and with other knowledges, and position in relation to other knowledges, with other ways of understanding the world. So, I think that the problem of the local government's understanding of what the Zemos98 festival is about parallels the problem of Academia's understanding of what Zemos98 is. Because ultimately, their incomprehension is because they do not know how to get out of the box of the film industry, of the music industry. And they don't know how to transverse them.

Pedro: "Are you a researcher or are you...?"

Lucas: Of course, they need to know what we can do. And then, in addition, I think Pedro pointed it out as well, another one of the problems we have had with Academia—well, not with Academia in general, but with the model of Academia—is that every 2 or 3 weeks we receive an email asking that we participate in the research of people who are doing their doctorate. And we don't mind doing it, but it's a use of time that we don't know how to get reinvested back into our usual practice. And in another way it's knowledge that, once transmitted, becomes closed off. As soon as the thesis is finished, we can't find that information that we've released, it's automatically privatized within the walls of the institution.

Pedro: And when you tell this to someone who's asking you, they get upset.

Lucas: They get very upset. Sometimes, not always.

One of the tools of Zemos98 is the concept of "expanded education." Can you explain this?

Pedro: We are more interested in understanding ability as abilities that citizens should acquire rather than how the educational system understands it, as teaching the workers of the future. So, in a way, our concept of education draws heavily from informal education or from informal processes surrounding education. But it also speaks directly to other processes that occur within the formal scope of education, for example, project work, active methodologies or everything that it implies. So, for us, expanded education is a multidimensional concept that allows us to operate in different areas. It allows us to use it in an activist

context, but also in an institutional context to call attention to the fact that we have to talk about education and education about the media from a different perspective than the usual, "I'm going to teach how the media works."

I think there's a very interesting logic right now in the concept of "Fake News."

It seems like the media have faced the facts and said: "We understand that there is fake news and now we are going to dedicate ourselves to telling you which is the fake news." Enter, again, a new logic in which the media is the one who has the power to tell you what is true and what is a lie. So, it's a slightly perverse process, obviously it is important in the information processes, but all this trend of hunting down lies is falling back into the pattern of not empowering or not being able to understand that citizenship can be active. It is as if they were saying to us, "follow me, I'm the lie-hunter, and I'm going to tell you what is right and what is wrong." In this stagnation of things, which includes from animated gifs to television series, we try to at least introduce critical thinking. In a way, we do not strive for a technical learning of technology, but for an understanding that tools—audiovisual, digital or of any other kind—must be critically approached and learned.

Can you explain what Zemos98's own mechanisms are?

Pedro: Yes, in relation to your question, it's true that, in order to carry out this work of mediation, in addition to the festival, we've always thought of specific spaces or mechanisms (the word that you use) that would allow this mediation. One of the first mechanisms we were aware of as a quite powerful tool is the "audiovisual source code." It is a tool that we have applied in many contexts and in many ways. In fact, it's even an assignment that we bring up in training courses that we do with teachers to introduce them to the logic of media education. Basically, it's about asking the question, "would you be able to tell your life story using five videos or five fragments of movies, video clips, TV series or other cultural objects: poems, books, songs?" It's to reveal that we are obviously composed of a biological code that is shared but that also there is a shared cultural code and above all there is a cultural code that is remixed. So, it's to understand that we all have a media diet, a cultural code and a way of telling it. This arose, in a way, while doing a proposal to show the audiovisual culture of people that interested us. For example, the first person who did it and who is right now key to the audiovisual activism of this country is Alberto González. We proposed that he tell us "what is his source code of his humor?" "What are the videos that make you laugh?" Then, he made a kind of personal proposal of how he understood humor. We asked the same question to Toni Serra-Abu Ali, another very important person in audiovisual activism. Asking Serra what his source code was to unveil the border or to hack the veil, it interested us because he spoke from within his practice, he has always worked in this way. So it's a very powerful mediation tool, it's a stage format because you force the person to face a scene with a screen, a projector and in front of audience. But at the same time, it's also a tool for relating between people.

In that sense, another similar mechanism that we are also working on and that we're currently strengthening a lot is the mixture of Hackathon and camp. It's what we've called "Hackamp," understanding that we're capable of hacking the traditional process of organizing workshops in which the logic of working together is ultimately lost. Then there's also the idea of a camp, the intensity of 2 or 3 days in which you put a series of people to work to solve a specific challenge. So, this format that emerged in the most recent edition of the festival and that we've developed in recent years

in different contexts also allows you to say that, when we speak about expanded education, we are not talking only about the theory of a more democratic education and so on, etcetera, etcetera, but rather of making it tangible in a facilitation process in which a series of people gather around a series of challenges or work tables and have to present on the third day a prototype of how to solve this challenge. That has led us to do things as powerful as “Commospoly,” and other kinds of prototypes that haven’t gone anywhere. So, the Hackamp is a kind of prototyping or design workshop, or whatever you want to call it. We don’t like to name things from the logic of what it is and what it is not, rather we use a series of things that are connected with other practices and from there we develop productive mechanisms of knowledge, but in those which there are all those concepts of mediation that Lucas discussed. That is to say, they are processes of education but at the same time they are processes in which the documentation of process is important and in which the mediation of facilitators is crucial to understand the development of the methodology, and so on.

I think that in a way the festival has been diverted into a series of mechanisms, I’m not sure if I’m missing one... Thinking about what I said about the documentation, within that logic, for us to document the learning processes is also important. Doing interviews, collecting everything that is produced, organizing the materials, minutes, etc., all this is part of a logic that we also try to introduce into everything we do and even everything we have done for others. Also, this is interesting because it means, for example, understanding that we have a way of understanding the documentation of an assembly that is not simply to set up a camera and that’s it, rather it implies a whole story about that event or happening.

Taking into account the climate of political precariousness and political apathy, can you think of what keeps the motor of hope alive in Zemos98?

Lucas: I don’t know

Pedro: Well, I don’t know; I think that what sustains us, even though it weighs on us at times, is that we have not lost this fever of curiosity. We have not lost that intention to learn new things not only for our own survival but because we are really interested in continuing to learn. And then what has really kept us going all these years is that we have quite a lot of respect for each other as people. A respect that has been built over time and an “*amor*” (love) with an “*H*” to understand that being together in this is also a way to live together in these types of processes and to “*habitar*” (live in), for that reason the “*H*” in a way forms Zemos98. That is not at all exempt from loads of conflict, slumps, personal problems or logic that sometimes goes against what you are really saying or what you really think. Probably what has sustained us is also an instinct for survival. In the end, being an activist is not a secondary activity, rather we live in this type of process and these types of things. Then in this complex diatribe to understand that this is a work process through which you self-construct your self, it’s what we have been fighting for and fight for every day to keep growing as people and to keep sharing. I speak from he who thinks about the specific weight of having been there from the beginning and from since it went from being a secondary activity that later became a professional activity and then later became what it is now, our life. I don’t know if that’s positive or not. But...

Lucas: I believe that we mutually sustain one another, and I also think that, as you have suggested, it ultimately gives us a certain inertia. An inertia is generated that has its positive points, it has a history, its recognition, some products

that it has produced throughout the years, six or seven books, I don't know how many short films...and many materials that are always coming out.

What does it mean for Zemos98 to grow in non-capitalist terms?

Lucas: I'll be happy with Zemos as long as Zemos is a tool to try to interpret the context in which we actually live.

Pedro: I completely agree. I think we've never wanted to be big. Our goal is not to be 30 people working on this but rather to be able to be sustainable because in order to build something big you have to be quite unwavering. So I think that being small has allowed us to always be flexible to change, to be able to listen and understand. And to me it would be a risk for Zemos98 to stop listening to that context and to stop being influenced by it. It's not so much about growing but rather about be able to be stable.

Ecologistas en Acción





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of the Commons

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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewee
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What is your relationship with Environmentalists in Action?

My relationship with Environmentalists in Action (EA) started about fifteen years ago, something like that, more or less. I started out as an activist in a small group of environmentalists in action in Móstoles, the city where I've always lived, which is on the outskirts of Madrid. Then I joined a group in Madrid, and for the last six years I have been the General Coordinator of the organization.

How is Environmentalist in Action structurally organized?

We are formed by federations that, in turn, are formed by groups. In 1998 there were more than 200 environmentalist groups that decided to come together under the same name. They already existed with different names and they all joined together. In Spain, each group is autonomous in its decisions and budget. For example, if you live in Barcelona you are a member of the Barcelona group, and if you live in Madrid you are a member of Madrid. So, all the groups have financial and organizational autonomy. That is how they function at the group level, but to coordinate with each other, we have state structures of coordination. As state coordinators, the three of us coordinate biweekly meetings with other coordinators of three areas of work; the sea, energy and water. And, quarterly, we have a meeting with representatives of the territories who attend the bi-weekly meetings as well as territorial representatives. This is our coordination scheme.

How does Environmentalists in Action make decisions?

It depends on what decision it is. Most decisions of the daily functioning of the association at the state level are decided at the biweekly meetings. If we cannot wait until the biweekly meeting, it is decided by the specific area. For example, if it is the topic of energy, it is decided by the energy area. If it is an issue that does not relate directly to any group, it is decided by the three state Environmentalists in Action coordinators, unless it is a subject linked to a particular place. In this case, the Environmentalists in Action coordinators have no authorization to make territorial decisions, and the decision is made by the specific territorial group.

How do people who associate with Environmentalists in Action participate?

You participate as an activist. Most of the time activists are members of the organization and pay a fee to their group, but no one will ask you to pay the fee. You can participate in Environmentalists in Action if you cannot pay the fee, it is not an absolute requirement. As a

participant, you decide when and how you will contribute to the group in order to organize things in your territory. You participate from where you are in your territory, organizing the activities that are considered necessary in your territory: discussions, protests, talks, etc. And any participant can go join any decision-making group within Environmentalists in Action. However, such groups usually end up being smaller groups of people, as people do not have time to participate in every group.

Environmentalists in Action celebrates 20 years in 2018.

What would you say are their strengths?

Our organization is truly territorial in its implementation. That is one of our great virtues, we are located in all territories. And we are with activist people who dedicate the part of their lives beyond work to the cause. They don't dedicate their working life to it, they dedicate their personal lives by defending the territory they live in. And this really happens in all of the territories of Spain, there are few places where there is no Environmentalists in Action presence. To have been able to maintain autonomy while organizing ourselves is a great virtue because we've been able to join together to forge a very powerful path, in fact we are basically the only environmentalist group that works on social environmentalism. And it's a discourse that is closely linked to forming relationships. Overall, we work directly with social movements. Other environmentalist organizations are much further away from what goes on in the street. Environmentalists in Action is on the street because we use a territorial strategy. This combination of a state-level structure, which generates a powerful discourse, together with having smaller groups scattered around various territories, is a very good format.

What about the difficulties?

Well, in the end, the same things. It's difficult to support all of the groups. Groups work with very little money, making people's time the most needed resource. There are some powerful groups, but there are also groups that have very few people. When smaller groups lose members it's often because someone has to move, or to a generational change. Smaller groups that lose participants are a little helpless when they have to manage a time-consuming project. In these situations, we do have the ability to respond to those situations, but of course it is difficult.

Has working for Environmentalists in Action and being an activist redefined your concept of the working world?

I schedule half of my day to complete work for Environmentalists in Action, but the truth is I end up dedicating a full day, and I do it because I really want to contribute to the organization. Dedicating long hours to complete work is very common in our organization, but also a bit messed up. We hire people to manage structural issues, to work in administration, to look after publications and coordination. We believe that those who are hired should only work for the hours they are paid for, but in the end, the line between activism and work is often blurred. There are people who do not understand that the work of an environmentalist includes being an activist-- we have 9 people employed at the state level, which is very few people for the massive amount of work we are doing, so there is this value of work that is beyond employment. Our concept at Environmentalists in Action is that every employee has the same level of importance and contributes equally in reaching our success. In other words, the person who cleans and organizes the premises in Madrid, which is the state headquarters, earns exactly the same as the General Coordinator

or the Economic Director of Environmentalists in Action, and that is very valuable and difficult to understand. We share the belief that all jobs are equally relevant and that all jobs help to sustain our organization. And if all jobs help to sustain our organization, then everyone should make the same salary. Some organizations have a small range of salary differences, which can be a good solution. For instance, the idea that no employee can ever earn more than twice as much as the employee who gets paid the least amount of money for their work. This takes place in some organizations that are trying to change, but the format we practice is probably unique.

How is taking care of people linked to work in Environmentalists in Action?

The concept of care affects all hired personnel, but it is especially applied to taking care of activists. In fact, in Environmentalists in Action, any activist is considered more important than any hired person, because they really are. They're out there, living like that. So, the hired staff are at the service of the rest of the people. And that's just something present in our work environment, it's not necessary to remember it. All of the activists are well taken care of, so as a result people have a much more expansive view of their work. The needs of working individuals are listened to-- to whatever extent is possible, but much more than in other spaces, of course.

What is social environmentalism?

For us, the key is that environmentalism labeled as "social" has a much broader and ecosystemic perspective of what happens in the world. It doesn't focus exclusively on environmental issues; it also focuses on where the causes arise and why we're in an environmental crisis. And when you look at the causes of the environmental crisis, you find capitalism and you find that structures and system formats are the culprits of this current situation. From a social-environmental perspective, we understand that we need to work on these structural things; that we have to denounce them. We cannot limit ourselves to only reporting on environmental problems and dedicating time to only those sorts of issues. At Environmentalists in Action, you can find yourself at a protest in support of wolves one day, at a demonstration in support of public health the next day, and at a demonstration to support refugees another day. And that is a discourse with a much wider perspective of what is going on in the world and what we have to protect. It is about much more than protecting the planet, much more than protecting ecosystems; it also has to do with our living conditions, health and education.

What connection is there between the Environmentalists in Action and Institutions?

Our path has involved a lot of hitting the streets, but we also do quite a bit of work with institutions. Working to create pressure, to hold meetings and do political lobbying at European institutions, as well as institutions on the state and autonomous level. So, all of the environmentalists do lobbying work with their administrations in order to change things. They often don't listen to us very much but, for example, with the Environmental Ministry we were able to create an action plan with them years ago and at least lay down what our priorities are on the environmental level and sit down to talk with them. In the majority of cases, and with the government of the Popular Party, it is practically impossible, we weren't able to get them to do the things we wished, but at least we have an agenda, we put those things on the table and that work is done. We work very much with the rest of the political parties even if they don't currently hold the presidency, from there you can still generate a lot of pressure. So that is why, at the institutional level, we also do a lot of work talking

to politicians about what it is that we do. For example, in the local government of Madrid we have spent many years reporting on the issue of air quality and the issue of mobility, and while it didn't go anywhere, our work was still out there. We continued insisting year after year until an administration took office that had the ears to listen to this message and there we were. So, many of the measures that the Madrid city government is putting into effect originated with Environmentalists in Action and we had been calling for such measures for years. We've made all of this available to them so, of course, what we want is for them to implement these measures.

And the relationship between Environmentalists in Action with educational institutions?

We have an educational department that which has a pretty good relationship with institutions. Our relationship with the university system is not as strong as we'd like it to be. It's relatively small, in fact, although we do have university professors who are part of our educational commission, for example Jorge Riechmann. We do a lot of work on the topic of what educational curriculums should include. We've done some work with university curriculum, but have primarily worked with secondary and elementary schools, in order to see what kinds of content should be included so that schools teach the things that are truly important to know for life. We have a lot of evidence about this. We have sat down with the Minister of Education, with publishers to present to them what an alternative curriculum would look like, but not at the level of environmental issues, but rather alternatives for math, for literature, for history. We have put ourselves to the task of analyzing the curriculums of all subjects because, really, if they teach you in the subject of environmental studies that pollution is lethal, but in English they are teaching you business vocabulary, it makes no difference. So, we are working from a broader perspective. We have just now put together a network of teachers and it's working really well because it's something that the educational world wants, because these are topics that are very easy to work with when you meet teachers who themselves question things. And well, yes, we organized it this year and we are trying to create regional nodes so that there is one for the area of Barcelona and Valencia, another node in Madrid, and right now we are trying to create one for the area of the Basque country. We make materials available for teachers from there come debates and resources that they can use in the classroom. Our idea is that anyone who would like to get together with other teachers, wherever they are, can set up a teacher network and if they're outside of any network, great. We are going to make those materials available so that even if you're alone and you want to put them into practice, you can. The idea is that you get together with other people nearby to see how you're doing. The idea is to be able to have everyone meet once in a while, but those resources are going to be put on the internet. Our most essential resource is a document that we began making a couple of years ago that is called "99 questions and 99 experiences for a more just and sustainable world". They aren't just 99 questions, they are much more than that, and what they lay out are which questions the educational world needs to ask-- what questions a child should be able to answer once they leave school. It has questions of all types, ranging from why we die to what is your city's ecological footprint.

Taking into account the general deafness to the ongoing environmental crisis, what keeps hope alive in Environmentalists in Action?

Well I think that what keeps the dream alive is knowing that we are right and you have to fight for that because, in the end, the ecological struggle is also a struggle

for justice. What sustains groups who fight for social justice? Well, the importance of their mission, to know that you have to fight for it. And in Environmentalists in Action, what sustains us is the network of people making up our organization. In fact, many times we say that even once all of the environmental problems of the world have been solved, we'll continue meeting on Mondays--which is the day we meet in Madrid--to see one another. We have generated really important relationships of trust, of mutual support. I think that is one thing that sustains Environmentalists in Action, which is perhaps different from other organizations; that you do it from a place of altruism, that is your basis for doing it, because you believe in it deeply; and later, when they tell us we're right, well then we'll have a party.

Community is something that is essential. In fact, in Environmentalists in Action we have created an annual gathering of all of the groups and over two hundred people attend; for all that we are, it's not many people, but compared to the size of similar organizations' gatherings, we have ridiculously high turnout. It is because we are a community. Because you go and know practically everyone there, and we embrace anyone new who comes. The 15M movement was marvelous for us because it was what we had always wanted, people in the street talking about problems that we have spent our whole lives talking about. It's true that 15M 'emptied out' some social movements, but we'd say, "We have to continue working here." "We have to be in 15M, but also have to be at the Environmentalists in Action meetings." And now that 15M is still alive but its working groups no longer exist, Environmentalists in Action is receiving a huge influx of young people. Not only in Madrid-- I have seen it in Madrid because that is what is closest to me-- but I know that there are young people who are coming as a result of the 15M and that, thanks to the social movements we have maintained there, they now have a space to return to where they continue to build on that restlessness that 15M awakened in them. And yes, it is true that during those years leading up to 15M fewer new people joined Environmentalists in Action, because, of course, they went to the 15M. We understood it to be this way, but we could not stop our work in Environmentalists in Action, because this is our work.

What is your definition of progress in social-environmental terms?

Look, a definition of progress would be to actually live under a logic or under a paradigm that focuses on life and doesn't focus on the accumulation of wealth, that doesn't focus on living thanks to others living poorly--regardless of whether they are animals, humans or plants. Progress would be, truly, to find oneself in that way of thinking, of living, of generating what we need from a sense of caring for life and an understanding of eco-dependency and interdependency. That would be our idea of progress, if we could truly arrive at that.

La Selecta





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
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Location
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de Madrid., Spain**

Collective's name
La Selecta

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what is your relationship to La Selecta?

My name is Laura Concuera. I am 37 years old. I live in Sierra al Norte de Madrid where in 2013 we created, through Producciones Indomables (translates literally to "Indomitable Productions"), the cafe and laboratory of arts and sciences *La Selecta* (translates literally to "The Select").

What was La Selecta?

La Selecta was—I speak in the past because we have just concluded this experience—was the concrete manifestation of a series of activities that we brought together in a cultural association, a nonprofit, called *Asociación Producciones Indomables*. It was an association that, to this day, is still functioning, of which I am president and there are partners who can do activities that are related to cultural and artistic practices in a very lax sense. This specific manifestation of La Selecta, in the Sierra Norte de Madrid—in the town Buitrago de Lozoya, which is a medieval town in the north of Madrid—was around for almost two years: 2013 and 2014. In this space, we combined different lines of action. The first was a gastronomic line: we are what we eat and what we drink. Therefore, we created a restaurant with vegetarian and vegan alternatives where the food we offered came from local places, as a political reflection on the food/restaurant industry. So from there we had the main source of income that allowed us then to develop the other lines of work: a more artistic line, a more scientific one, and one of outreach. Also understanding the scientific and research practices in a very broad, expansive way.

So these three lines—the gastronomic, the cultural-artistic, and the cultural-scientific—were combined throughout the whole week. We were closed two days per week because we said that another way of doing business was also possible and then the restaurant started. We offered breakfasts, but mostly lunches and dinners. And in the interstices of these gastronomic services came the cultural activity itself. Gastronomy is already culture, right? But we hosted book presentations, film screenings, debates, performance, plays, dance, and circus shows. There was a marked interest in the performing arts because many of those that are part of Producciones Indomables come from that field, from the performing arts and communications, but we also developed a more scientific part through activities such as astronomical observations outside, because La Selecta was located in an equestrian center. The truth is that this story would make a good movie, a novel or a television series. We were inside an equestrian center, that is, surrounded by almost one hundred horses and tracks, both round and square, where the horses were trained and tamed. La Selecta is constructed on the old cafeteria of this equestrian center. So we made these reflections on gastronomy from inside the

circular track. The circular track, which I called the circular theater of sand, as a tribute to Federico García Lorca and what that inquiry entailed in the “theater of truth.” And then, from that sand, we observed the stars with colleagues who were astronomers.

Afterwards, we also held outreach workshops in the sciences: in the field of nutrition, in the field of biology, in the field of social sciences, especially focusing on the subject of sexual and gender identities. We had a collaboration agreement with the Higher Council for Scientific Research, (CSIC in its Spanish initials), and through that, we also organized a series of scientific outreach activities.

Then, for example, it is interesting to kind of analyze the territory, the place of the Sierra Norte de Madrid which consists of forty-two municipalities, where almost 30,000 people live. They are very small towns that have, on the one hand, their own independent activities, and at the same time, having a unique kind of interdependence. So what we did was offer a series of activities and a meeting space that went beyond the local bar, which is essentially a place of guys, white, sixty-years-old and older, cattle ranchers, who are markedly sexist. An absolutely masculinized space, and as a woman, it was a hostile space. So to suddenly create La Selecta in this environment is to create a meeting space, a space of security, comfort, confidence for a very diverse population that did not have that meeting space.

What was the legal structure and how was La selecta organized in terms of work?

Our legal form was a cultural association. We had registered hospitality as the economic activity, and it was a self-employed project. Three of us lived off of the work we did there. It is true that there was a large amount of volunteer work within the framework of this association, but through a very modest lifestyle the three of us could maintain ourselves with the work we were doing there. That work is, on the one hand, catering—there is a person who was the chef and who coordinated the entire kitchen area. There was another person who did everything involved in managing the bar and service because we had a fairly large bar. And a third one, which was me, working almost as a connecting hinge because I was working in hospitality and also on matters of suppliers. For example, all our suppliers were cooperatives of producers making organic olive oil, salt, pasta, and legumes. Then there was a map of alliances surrounding the kitchen and bar. I worked on that, and I combined that work with all the artistic direction and the programming and production because we also made our own jobs. We had a space that we had created so that artists and activists could use it, but we also used it because we produced our own artistic works. And I also handled design, because all that activity also had to have an image, right? There were posters that were distributed throughout la Sierra, through our website and social media. The truth is that I was not bored.

What type of people came to your cultural activities and how did you finance these events?

People who live in the area and people who come from the city. This was very interesting because, in the end, we managed to change how things work. Normally we have to go to Madrid to see a play, or an alternative theatre, or to attend a concert or the presentation of a book. So what we did was to turn this situation around. With partners like Dealers of Dreams, for example, whose work in book presentations is quite extensive, every time a person went to present a book at Dealers, they then came to the countryside and replicated the activity because they are different groups.

And there were times that the people of the city themselves came to the town. It was very nice to see how La Selecta gathered people from very different backgrounds. From women who are almost eighty-years-old, to boys and girls who came with their parents and mothers, and adolescents from La Sierra depending on what sessions we did. And, for example, with respect to the commercial and material aspect you asked about, we gave the artistic companies that came to present their work 90% of the proceeds of what we called a "support bonus." We call it "support bonus" and not an "entrance fee" because in this country saying "entrance fee" means having to accept the conditions of the General Association of Authorship (the SGAE). So it was a "support bonus" that was voluntary. That is, if someone could not pay three or four euros and wanted to see it, they were able to stay, but it was "support bonus" that served to give the people who came a small remuneration. As we understood it, we already recovered the cost because we sold beers and food, so 90% of those earning went to the artist. What this meant was that when more than 150 people came, the earnings were not bad. Because we did not pay "appearance fees", that is, the programming and showing system is nothing like a public theater, for example.

In particular, which people from the area joined La Selecta?

In La Selecta, some older ladies participated who I did performances with, and with whom I had a very close and beautiful bond, who are Las Thatcher de Braojos. On several occasions they even cooked. We had several evenings during which these older women taught us. For example, we never made "torreznos" (fried pig's skin), we were the only bar in the area that did not do torreznos, but when they came, they made the torrijas (French Toast) and the torreznos. So it was super nice because we were at their disposition, but they were the chefs. Each one made their star dish and that night they were part of the activity. For example, I remember the activity with David Sanz who is a musical anthropologist who's done a lot of work to recover folk music, the oral tradition of towns, not only in Madrid. In the setting of that evening event, where we would hear voices of people, of women singing jotás, well, that day the kitchen was part of the theme. I remember La Mañana, a member of Las Thatcher of Braojos, saying, "I've always wanted to have a restaurant." And, suddenly, they were bringing people and directing the cuisine. They were the protagonists, right? They also came as spectators, participants in debates.

Why situate this activity in a town?

I have been living in the Sierra for three years now. When I went to the Sierra, I was a bit tired of the dynamics of the city. Although I think it is necessary to resist living the everyday and short-circuit those urban dynamics to change them and make a city more livable, I ended up very tired and went to the town with a need for space, living space, work space, which right now in a city is a luxury, right? I live in a house that I could not afford in the city. Living there also means being in contact with nature and leaving a lot of bubbles. I lived in Madrid, Lavapiés, and then, of course, the people who I lived with were quite similar to me. And, suddenly, I'm going to an area where the ideology of the conservative right-wing prevails, sometimes even the extreme right, with a very diverse age range, and also with a flux of interesting migratory movements. Moroccans came to live in Buitrago del Lozoya. Personally, it seemed to me that the political meaning of a space like La Selecta had a much stronger transformative power in the countryside than in the city. In the 90s there were many people in Madrid who went to the towns with work contracts because they started to develop projects that have now been dismantled: centers with public access to the internet, reading spaces, libraries, youth

technicians, and technicians of culture. Then, there was already a movement of people who left and who decided that their first political action was going to be changing “the way of life”—“what life do you want to live?”—and to have their children develop in contact with nature, in other environments that are different from those of the city. So, in that sense, it seemed to me that there was no question about the decision. In fact, I had a debate about this with a colleague from Indomitable Projections because he did not care about the location of the project—it could have been in the neighborhood of Embajadores—and I was like, “No, but the location is vitally important.” In Madrid right now, they’re fortunate enough to have a vibrant mix of cultural spaces that are very diverse, self-managed, recovered spaces...But in the villages, what is there in the villages? The older people and the people who have the power—which is a very traditional power of the Town Council, of the Civil Guard, of the church — would rather have the towns die out than have something change. And deep down, in a broader context, it is to affirm that to observe the world is to observe that the ecological is not a separate part from the rest of everything, but rather that it, the eco-social, affects us. It’s that we need to recover the countryside, look at the countryside from a 21st century point of view, and think that if there is a recovery of livestock and farming activities, why not also rethink the cultural activity in the countryside?

Can you tell us about your experiences with self-managed collectives and the self-employment model?

I come from collective experiences. Almost all my life I have been in collective experiences, self-managed work, and I have worked a lot in Public Administration, but when we founded the newspaper Diagonal as another self-employment project in 2005, I was one of the people employed. So, it does change something when you have work, a salaried job, but it is self-employment, and from an almost anarchistic premise; that is, you employ yourself, self-manage and then you see how you pay for that bit of work, how you share it, who makes the decisions, because there are no bosses; it’s not a vertical structure. It’s an assembly. And it’s an assembly that has its limits, of course. It has its conflicts, its dead ends, because of course assembly governance is not free of conflicts or problems. I think it’s a theme worth discussing in these times: How do we organize ourselves? What forms of deep democracy of community functioning can we invent? What tools can we develop? Based on the observation of the world and from the observation of assembly governance, it sometimes also reproduces structures of power because there is a myth that in assembly governance we are all equal, and it is not true. So, by combining work with activism, you are your own boss and there is a degree of responsibility. It is easier to say, “You tell me what I have to do and that’s it”—following salaried thought. It also has to do with personal empowerment, with saying, “I have the reins of my life and my work life,” because I do not need work. I need money and work because I need money. If we had other ways of procuring income, then we would continue doing the things that we are passionate about, but there is a need to have a stream of income to be able to pay the bills, in order to have social security and have bare material necessities every month. So, combining that of course is complicated because the lines are very fuzzy, right? What is activism and what is your commitment? What is work? What is also your commitment as an employee of this project? And who holds you accountable for your work?

In the context of self-managed projects, is it important to mark out limits?

I think so, limits are very important, it is important to mark them and then, maybe, surpass them. And after this whole experience, personally, I feel as though I learned a

lot, and I realized the amount of errors I made and my mistakes. But the mistakes are part of the learning process. Then the process of interpreting the experience allows one to think about the functioning and the creation of communities and leadership. I have been a leader in this project. And as the leader of this project, well, I have suffered a lot of discomfort; I have made many mistakes in the management of conflicts within the group. For example, I spoke about the limits of assembly; denying that these leaders exist seems to me an error because it is ignoring something that is part of reality. Another thing is to think, "What forms of leadership are there, what are the roles, how do we alternate them?" Because, indeed, it's true that as they say, "you can't do it alone, but you can with friends." This is the case. And I say without shame: "I have led this project, a collective project, community, as far as possible, horizontally." I do not hide it. And before I would have said, "Look, we're all the same." And that has to do with doing your own meditation and a self-reflection, thinking, "To what extent do I want to commit myself, and what limits do I want to cross and what limits don't I?" And, "What are my life circumstances?" I don't have children, I don't have a family that I am responsible for or have to take care of. I don't have any health problems that require certain everyday things. I have a way of being that is my own way of being. So, within the creation of communities are the circumstances of each individual—all of which are legitimate, that is, none is worth more than another—and they have to be put together, being very honest with what, as a starting point, each one can contribute and allow. And I believe that this is a challenge — for collective projects to allow different involvements and commitments and accept that nothing is static and immutable. But it's important to do an exercise of honesty and meditation first. Because, maybe I need to heal myself first to help others. I need to be good first, and this I think is one of the great teachings of feminism: self-care. Then, when this whole Kafka-esque story with La Selecta happened to us—which you know was because of a talk about the "gag law" and police violence that was increasing in intimidation and coercion—we decided that we were not going to keep hitting ourselves against a fascist wall and getting crushed. The people of la Sierra expressed sadness over the lack of La Selecta and expressed their wish that we would reopen another space or to reconfigure it. During these two years, I was telling all these people that they did it because the political guillotine that we suffered had an emotional cost, not only a material cost. And you have to think about how this affects you and what emotional wounds it leaves you with. And how you can process it so that it doesn't become a trauma, and then continue.

Why did La Selecta close down?

The activity of La Selecta lasted a year and a half. It seems that it was much more, and in La Sierra there is also a sense of, "it was only a year and a half?" We accomplished something that I think is very difficult to achieve: a coexistence, a cohabitation with another community, that is the family who owns the equestrian center. This was a family of the village, of right-wing political ideas, managing horses, routes for horses, horse boarding, horseback riding lessons. So we achieved the coexistence with this family from an experimental laboratory. This family trusted me because I had been riding there; that is, there was already a personal relationship and, based on this trust, we signed a contract to transfer the space. We did not pay rent. It was a commercial contract, a lease for which we did not pay rent during the first three years. We paid the electricity and water expenses but not rent because it was understood that in a post-economic crisis context it was hard enough to start everything up: set up a house, set up a cafeteria that was not licensed at the time. The starting point is a very freaky point, because there is a trust between two very different groups and not only in terms of political ideology. But we coexisted. They came to eat at our

site, and it started to be like a dialogue. They eat what we prepare; we invite them to come to see the plays, to the presentations, and there is a coexistence, one that is very odd but real and sincere. Everything changed on July 26, 2014, really three days before that day. So the 23rd, because on 26th, we had scheduled a talk/debate on police violence in the framework of the reform of the Criminal Code of the "Citizen Security Law" or "gag law", and the "Private Security Law." So it was the summer of 2014, and the "gag law" had not yet been approved. The Popular Party government had made all these reforms with a lot of treachery and obscurantism, and we invited the group, Mothers Against Repression, a collective from Madrid, from Vallecas that does a fantastic job of providing advice, support, and legal and psychological assistance for people who have suffered police violence and for their families.

Mothers Against Repression at this time was also leading the Alfon campaign. Alfon is the nephew of one of the chefs at La Selecta. Alfon, who is now in prison, was accused of possession of explosives in the general strike of September 14, 2012. This is a very common thing in this country, Spain. From time to time, the state security forces organize this type of setup as part of what is called "exemplary repression": take a person, or a case, crush them in order to send the message, "Careful, because this is what will happen to you when you do any little dissident thing." So, Alfon was accused—just as Edu Garcia was accused years before in Madrid, in a very similar case—of possession of explosives without evidence. "Finally, it is my word against yours and, since I am the authority, you are going to have to prove that I am lying, because I am the authority." Mothers Against Repression was involved with this campaign, but in 2012, Cristina Cifuentes, who is the current President of the Community of Madrid, was a delegate of the government and had a personal crusade against Alfon, against Mothers Against Repression, and against everything moving in this activist, anti-oppressive circuit. We invited Mothers Against Repression to La Selecta. We also invited Lorena Ruiz Huerta, a criminal lawyer from the group We Are Not A Crime, currently a deputy, who knew the "gag law" by heart that would be approved months later. We also invited rappers from Murcia and Madrid to do some concerts. What happened was that Mothers Against Repression prepared their own informative poster, in addition to what I did for each event and then I distributed it through La Sierra. They make a poster and distributed it throughout Vallecas. They made the grievous error of putting the word "admission" instead of "support bonus" that was five euros and included a sandwich and the bus trip to La Sierra Norte, because the working class does not have cars, nor the ability to pay for gas. So, a bus that could go to La Selecta was organized through Mothers Against Repression and for five euros people got the trip, a sandwich and a beer, right? Three days before July 26, which was the day that the event was scheduled for, the Civil Guard of Buitrago del Lozoya appeared on the premises of La Selecta. And they say it's a routine inspection and they ask us for the papers. I present all the necessary paperwork for La Selecta, which from the beginning, we did very legally, right? I present the papers and they ask me for the license that was being processed by the City Council. When they see that everything is really in order, they take the poster from Vallecas and say, "Here it says 'entry.' This is a problem, you do not have permission to do this here. Mothers Against Repression ... terrorism... you are giving shelter to terrorists." In short, the intimidation and coercion that would last for a month and a half had begun. What happens is that we, coming from social movements, unfortunately already knew what was going on. We did not get intimidated; we told them they could continue, but that the event was still going on, and that we were going to do it. What did the Civil Guard do? He went to the owners and for 5 hours he was in his office showing them the police

files—doing something that is illegal—of Alfon and Ito who was Alfon's aunt, and a participant of La Selecta, and who, once had another case against police violence. She had received some blows from the police. She had defended herself and so she also had an open case. The Civil Guard explains all that to the owners and, basically, tells them that they are harboring terrorists and that they also did not have all their papers in order...that their business was at risk, that there were going to be consequences. Seeing that they couldn't do anything to us, they had gone after the owners. I had a very empathetic reaction with the family that owns the property because for them this was very strong, very violent, very unpleasant, very, very harsh. And I understood what was happening to them. What happened is that the owners went along with with the established power: with the Civil Guard, with political power. Then the message that came to us, that came directly to me, being the person who had signed the contract, was, "You have gone too far with this talk and you have to go." It was not the Civil Guard that had gone too far with their actions; it was us, right? Because we had talked about police violence, and I also told them "Here in La Selecta, we held talks about urban speculation, talks about sexist violence and sexist terrorism and now here are abusers, the speculators in La Sierra, coming to threaten us?" What happened to us embodies exactly the kind of police violence that we are talking about. What happened? Obviously, we did not cancel that event. And on July 26, what we had in La Selecta was a disastrous day filled with people from the Interior Ministry, the National Police, the Civil Guard, controls on all the cars that came, searches, and a lot of tension.

Finally, I had to suspend the concerts with rappers who had come from Murcia and apologize because the tension was unbearable. But we had the discussion and it was at the level of any summer course at the University of El Escorial. It was a flawless talk, in terms of information, of disclosure of what the legal system of the Spanish State is like and the Popular Party's strategy of hardening and repressing rights. After that day everything happened very quickly. We had daily blood alcohol controls at La Selecta; the owners withdrew our title; it was very hard. We stayed like this until October, which was the last part of the programming. So, I put up with all that programming, and in October, we went on vacation, and we did not come back. At that point, we closed, but we started a whole judicial process that has lasted two years. And we have won, because finally, the owners have had to pay us 8 thousand euros, and we achieved it through reconciliation, without reaching a trial. Recognizing that, indeed, they had kicked us out for no reason, right? They even sent us a bureaufax in which they said that our activities were incompatible with those of the equestrian center. But of course, legally speaking, incompatibility means that you are doing an unhealthy, criminal activity. It does not mean that you do not like us projecting a movie that speaks about lesbians or that my ideas clash with your Spanish flag with the eagle inside.

Of course, now when I listen to Cristina Cifuentes, who is the President of the Community of Madrid, who first ended the Ministry of Culture and then makes a complaint in defense of culture, and especially in the territories of La Sierra del Norte, I would like to ask Cristina, "Do you remember La Selecta?" Yes, it is a set of contradictions that are necessary to legitimize a system of repression and control, and it is a disciplinary regime in which you will not have any problems if you do not step outside (of that system of control). We had this problem because we left. If we had not "gone out," we would have continued to be a cool cafeteria of girls that are "red," "lesbian," and other qualifiers that came to us from this very closed, very conservative rural environment, but, in the end, I continue to feel the respect of the people of La Sierra. And I think that it's there, and that most people will tell you,

“What a shame that happened.” Because in the end, in addition, this family is the one that has had to pay the compensation for having thrown us out, which was their decision because they own the place. But the civil guard has been left unscathed.

What does La Selecta mean by “culture”?

We talk about free culture in the countryside. Well, you are culture, you tell me. Culture should be “cultures” in the plural. “Free cultures in the country” are all the practices that may contain a poetic observation of the world that is shared. For me, that could be it. And that can be, “how I caress the mane of a horse” or “how I relate to a horse”; it can also be the compilation of a book, live, open source, that several people create. Culture can be the classroom of the sciences and the arts that we made with the popular university of La Sierra del Norte de Madrid, and of the 15M of Sierra del Norte. Cultures are the lentil dishes and fried yuccas that Tania mixed from El Salvador to Spain. Cultures is when an old lady looks at me and tells me, “Daughter, I wish I were your age and I could do what you do, keep doing it”. Cultures is sharing knowledge that’s poetic, isn’t it? There is a poetic connotation, of beauty. To speak of beauty, I think, is important...that is, to cultivate, because culture is cultivating, right? Then it is something that you take care of and, in this care, there is a poetry and a beauty that moves and that mobilizes and that combines thought and feeling, right? And that somehow gives a sense to our existence, I don’t know...and that binds us together, clearly.

How do theory and application interact at La Selecta?

Well, when you begin doing something, you embody it, and you understand things. If you remain alone in speaking, I believe you won’t get a deep understanding of processes that are very difficult to explain with words. Words have limitations. So you start to dismantle your way of observing the world, because how have we been taught to observe the world? I was recently working with a colleague, an ethnographer, doing a seminar on arts and decoloniality through the body, and we talked about how the first thing is to “observe how we observe the world” to begin to dismantle a series of ideas, schemas that are skewed, binary, and of course racist and hetero-patriarchal, classist, and that respond to what the science system, the world system since the nineteenth century with the circle of Vienna, focuses on. And if you do that genealogy, you can now understand why universities are what they are and why educational processes in normative spaces are what they are. Then you start to dismantle that and by “doing” you realize that it is not, “this is science” and “this is humanities.” You realize that it is not black and white; as Fina Miralles says “it’s white and it’s black.” And that in that multifaceted richness, that is of course non-binarist, there are innumerable possibilities of perception, of relationships, and that is a spiritual, moral, and intellectual wealth, like the riches our colleague Toni Serra spoke about yesterday when he displayed his visual essay at the ALCES XXI conference. And it is also about dismantling the binary idea of who is the scientist and who is not, who is the professor and who is not, the expert and not. In other words, from the time you are born, you are a researcher. You observe, and you have your own body which is your first archive, and everything gets collected there. That’s what you are, a researcher, and you can draw a map and you can create your own tools to realize how your experience, in itself, is a fabulous archive, which is no more or less than other archives, and when put together, it can come to create specific tools for processes of change and transformation. So La Selecta was exactly that.

It was like, “Let’s do it!”...we arrive in the morning; we make coffee. It’s like La

Ingovernable now in Madrid, which is a busy social center. Suddenly, in a matter of days, it has a calendar of activities, a schedule full of contents that, perhaps at a traditional institution, would require the hiring of two technicians of culture and bureaucratic processes. And I say, "No! We have to do it ourselves!" Yes, really, all we need is there. And societal demands and needs exist, and this is also something to dismantle. And it's not like we've been taught, where first I have to study a career, first I have to do this in order to do the following. I say, "No! Do it! What drives you? Then do it." For example, performance practices, for me, show that ease of doing and show the essence of cultural practices that are democratic where you do it and we all do it.

Is there a difference between how Laura Corcuera understands education and the model of normative education?

Fundamentally, I believe that the difference is that in normative education there is a power structure very marked by obedience: either you pass through the hoop or you do not pass. I was a very studious girl, and I had no problems with "getting through the hoop." It was afterwards, as an adult, when I realized what's behind school failure, what happens when you don't accept the system. I was very rebellious but very studious, so I had the privilege of being able to express, and do, outside of class many things that I was allowed to do because I got good grades. There is a very strong, authoritarian and very violent power relationship. So for me education is a transmission of knowledge and understanding, but it is also a multidirectional flow. So for me when an old lady in my town says to me, "oh my daughter, I do not know anything; I'm worthless" and she believes it, I get tears in my eyes, because I think: "But how can you believe this?" In other words, all the wisdom and information that your skin contains, that your cells contain, is invaluable. Another thing is that a normative, educational structure has led people to believe that those forms of knowledge are not what count. I am also referring to Silvia Federici, on the witch-hunts, which entailed as the basis of the accumulation of capital, the accumulation and commodification of knowledge, that is, what is accepted and what is not. So, for me it is important to establish processes of dialogue as equals. When I'm going to give a performance workshop, or I'm going to give a journalism seminar, I'm not saying "I'm the journalist", or "I'm the artist, and I'm in possession of the truth." I say "I am 37 years old. I have this accumulated experience. I want to share it with you. I have come to this series of theories; I have read this list of people. I have seen these videos. I have these references. I share them, and I will transmit what my body and my being contain but, in this transmission, I am receiving as well." Because I'm not going to speak the same if you are these three people or if you are three different people. So my speech-giving process involves first listening, which leads me to think about how you are going to receive a question, a series of questions, a disagreement. So, for me, it is a dialogue, and it's like everything is boiling together continuously.

What do you think has to happen for instituciones to understand this other way of educating?

In Spain, we have, however short, the educational experience of the Second Spanish Republic. In a year and a half, the Second Republic was able to extend, without colonialist or imperialist connotations, other educational forms and to extend and share knowledge and cultures. So, I think that, if in the Second Republic that was done, of course it can be done from a structural reform. But, of course, since I've been conscious, I've been listening to phrases like "state pacts for education," "a transversal reform," but I think there must be a very big change that has to do with a political will. I don't know if the political party Podemos, today, will be

able to do this. Maybe this society needs to mature and bring together different organisms involved in institutional politics and non-institutional politics and make that reversal. Because I want there to be a breeding ground and a framework of tissue, so we have the muscle to be able to turn around what we have today, and be a reference -- even from southern Europe -- for other territories.

What would you say is the motor of hope in moments of political apathy?

It is a pulsing, something very biological; it is a pulsing that has to do with vivacity, with being alive. And with the challenge of continuing to investigate what philosophers call "the meaning of life, the meaning of the world." The philosopher Marina Garcés, when the closure of La Selecta occurred, told me: "Laura, nothing ends and nothing begins, the important things continue." And being told this is great because, effectively, until we die, the important things continue. And I don't know; I think that's something very personal...how one relates to that commitment and to that involvement with the world of which one is a part...and how you intervene there...how you relate to the tree that is next to your house, to the ant, to the bird that wakes you up every morning, or to your neighbor. It is that life is a "great event." And life itself is also political, because the separation of politics from everyday life is another one of the biases resulting from this Western and hetero-patriarchal, classist, racist observation of the world. That is, to identify what is politics, and what is not, I say, "Let's see! What is politics?" For me, living in a town is my first political action. I live in a town with a hundred inhabitants, and I can be there for two weeks, having spent three euros. For me, that is my first political action, and also, if we live in a very materialistic world, very focused on, "I want, I want, I want, I want,"...spasmodic consumption...it is political for me to begin to listen to myself and, suddenly stop producing, and begin to see the capacity of what is here inside me, which is huge, and then you realize many things, you know?

How do you combine leadership with being a woman?

They are combined in resistance—I have a maño (Aragonese) accent—and as a lesbian woman, I'm not even going to tell you...well, I'm white, middle class and have a university education, so that's in your favor. It comes together in resistance with a lot of effort. I believe that, one day, this world will be above money. There will be no money, and it will be above the archetypal and artificial differences that make us people. So, in that sense, someday we will all be queers, I think. But, to this day, being a woman and managing power is very tiresome work because you have to be very alert and create many alliances. But I think that currently there is a rebirth of witches and that, in the end, even the very concept of masculinity is being dealt with in terms of femininity, from trans-feminism in this case. So, then, the values have to be clear, of course. Because we are the ones that are developing a contextualized knowledge, creating alliances, creating frames of sustainability of life, opening the way, turning our heads towards other places, drawing up the alternatives that we have been told do not exist, and creating counter-power, with everything that entails. Costs are high, but today, at least we do not burn at the stake, nor do they put electrodes on us in psychiatric hospitals like they did before.

What is, for Laura Corcuera, progress in non-capitalist terms?

Evolution, it would be an evolutionary question. Beyond Darwinian evolution, but it is a matter of evolution. To evolve. And that has to do with learning, that's what evolving entails.

Numax





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
Numax

Name of the interviewee
Ramiro Ledo

Interviewer
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Who are you and what is Numax?

I'm Ramiro Ledo. Right now I'm the president of the cooperative and I was also in the core group. Numax is a labor project.

How was Numax born?

It was born from a motivating impulse at the moment when the theater centers were disappearing from the center of the city. At that moment, I'm living and working in Barcelona with my partner Irma, who currently works in the book store here, and in Barcelona worked in the bookstore *La Central*. The motivating impulse was sparked from a visit that I made to Santiago, Galicia, when my Aunt Margarita Ledo, who's a professor, film-maker, and works in the university, mentions to me that they've closed all the cinemas of Santiago de Compostela, which is the city where I studied and worked for many years. So my aunt says "Well, we're going to need some place to watch movies," because we'd created the *Cineclub Compostela* ('The Compostela Movie Club' in English) in the university, which is still functioning as a self-managed movie club here in the city, and now the two of us live together. So my aunt tells me, "If you're bold enough to create some place movies can be watched, you can count on my support." I left it at that and didn't consider it important. Then, she brings me to the airport and I said, "But, what are you thinking of? What could be its concrete launch point?" And she tells me, "Nothing, I don't know what it would be either, but there's a need and I would like to help out." I believe that that was the part that made various pieces click. Irma had been invited to make a book store in A Coruña, so she was in an important moment of professional discontent; I was self-employed and there was also this urge to try to do something in a team. The idea that I'm kind of trying to articulate is, from the professionals and friends that I'd met or studied with in the past, people who in that moment were in our thirties at the end of 2013, and each one with a different professional situation (some salaried, some self-employed, others on strike) but we knew our capabilities, and we were capable of doing things. So, I write them a letter to see if they would want to collaborate. The common nexus point was, *there isn't a movie theatre, so let's build one*, and it's only later that you realize, no one builds a theatre, but you say, "There isn't one, so let's create it." The other theatres that had closed were multiplexes of five or six screens, which was a dimension that wasn't conceivable in our everyday life. Not even building a theater was conceivable. But well, it seemed that one screen isn't *as inconceivable* as more. So it was kind of linking a series of work and professional freelance projects surrounding the common nexus that united us, and that was a cultural similarity, from the more professional technical part to the part more about worries and interests that united everyone, literature, art, cinema, and music; now

we have a boy who's also a musician, Noe. And here's where we started. There was an initial contact, and immediately there was a group of people who told me, "Let's try," and I found out about a course on cooperatives, cooperative business plans, from Barcelona. The course was free and what's more, it happened that the course was here in Vigo for a week. They're courses organized, in this case, by the Union of Cooperatives of Social work in Galicia. I registered, a week passed, and from that week on, the project really opened up. One could say that that's where the project was born, because it's where I mapped out the necessary budget, it seemed that the routes to financing, not that they appeared out of nowhere, but that there were paths that we could turn to in order to attempt to finance a project that, for us, required a high budget. We were living day-to-day, and the only management that I knew how to do was my tax returns as a freelancer and a little experience that I had from having worked as a telephone operator doing statements of income. That gives you a distinct perspective on a numerical level, but from home. It's like going from talking about one thousand euros to talking about half a million, which is what it cost us to get the theater going. There they told us about Coop57, which is a financial service cooperative that was started in the late seventies in Barcelona, as a result of dismissals from the Bruguera publishing house. Their workers denounced the dismissals, they won the trial for unfair dismissal some years later, and they decided to capitalize on this compensation and create this credit cooperative that let them themselves get credit to create their new jobs in the social economy. This Coop57, as the years passed -- they're turning thirty in less than two years -- went on to create territorial delegations and it happened that there was one in Galicia. They told us about this source of credit in this course, and it's like the principle source that suddenly let us start talking about the estimated budget. Then there were other sources of financing, with European branches managed by the autonomous communities, which in this case was the Institute of Economic Promotion of the Autonomous Government of Galicia, which also managed the FEDER funds of regional development. But the principle route of financing was Coop57 because, and this connects with the sense of community that you talked to me about before, it lets you get credit, putting in common work and a little capital for the cooperative. We put in eight thousand euros every year, until we get to the 400,000.

How do you get a guarantee from a financial services cooperative like Coop57?

You need to present an economically viable project, a solidly trustworthy one, the same as if you're going to ask a bank, but unlike a bank that asks you for a guarantee, the credit cooperative doesn't ask for collateral, it doesn't ask you for any kind of "official" document, let's say. It's a very strange thing in the world we live in, because it's based on trust, which is something that sounds very rare, you can't even believe it yourself when they tell you, and it's also something difficult to convey because it sounds too utopian. This trust means that you have to be able to convince other people just like you convinced them as a financial credit entity. You have to convince everyone that you want to involve in your project and give them enough confidence that they're willing to, if you go bankrupt, be responsible for you economically. And this is a guarantee that's not jointly liable but rather jointly held. The difference from the banks is that you don't need any report of personal viability, just a paper with the DNI (National Identity Document), not even in front of a notary, where one person writes their information saying that they promise, in the case that Numax goes bankrupt, to cosign some amount. In our case, we asked for between one and five thousand euros per cosigner, which had to reach the sum of three hundred thousand, which was the maximum credit that Coop57 offered. And that's basically how it went, as we -- a group of people who didn't have money -- knew how we could get it, putting in

a lot of shared work to build a movie theater, a bookstore and a graphics and video laboratory. We started out as five people, a core group of three people who created the cooperative in February 2014. We got the credit in September 2014. We started to build in December 2014 and we opened in March 2015. A little more than two and a half years ago. And NUMAX was born in 2013, the principal impulse was in August.

Did the 15M have anything to do with the start of Numax?

It was clearly a moment of change of energy, if you will, where it seemed like fields of possibilities opened that weren't formulated, and that always has a kind of naiveté, but at the same time a lot of sincerity, like a kind of collective impulse. Like all impulses there was a rational part and an emotional part that, evidently, makes you think that many things could be different. And certainly, some part of this has to do with Numax but it's less traceable, it's not very scientifically demonstrable because it could be 15M, but it could also be all the conditions that brought us to 15M, which are an economic crisis of declining living conditions and decreased access to work. I was in Barcelona and I was really struck by how much sense the general strikes made. It was an age, 2011 and 2012, in which there were some workers' strikes in a society where work was increasingly more insecure; the very word "work" was almost in a crisis of definition, so, you could consider the 15M as something that united a series of discomforts and more objective conditions that are at the foundation of Numax. All the people of Numax have specialized professional training, some have a university degree, others a doctorate, some with a masters, and if we had been able to have followed the professional path that we'd chosen, surely, Numax would have either existed earlier or much later because each of us would have had a different form of life.

Is everyone in Numax Galician?

Basically, Galician or around Santiago de Compostela. It's not that we're from Santiago but our university or professional education occurred here. It's a city with which we have a link that goes beyond just saying "we're going to put up a theater and we're going to pick the most favorable location." It wasn't that, the choice was more tied to a place that we always had as a reference, even if we're not from there.

Why that name?

NUMAX is the brand name of a German domestic electronics factory which had its headquarters in Barcelona in the seventies. This factory lived through a series of conflicts that led to a movie called "NUMAX presenta" (*Numax presents*) directed in 1979 by Joaquín Jordá. Basically it's a trial where, during the disciplinary proceedings regarding the regulation of employment and dismissal addressing owners abandoning their factory, the workers decided to resume production, organizing themselves in a form that they themselves had to define; in this, they're similar to us as a process of learning, of building skills, but also of life and emotion within a group of people. They decide to take over the production, the factory, to go with the social movements of the time. That is to say that they find themselves in a moment, and in a very precise historical place and, in two years, they recognize that that doesn't make sense, they're physically unable to continue, and personally, based on what you see in the movie, you see that it wasn't anybody's calling to be tightening screws or building fans, and so they decide once they've made the decision to abandon the self-management, to dedicate the six hundred thousand pesetas that were left in the safe to commission Joaquín Jordá to make a movie about their experience that they themselves would

tell, *Numax presents*. This movie was known by all of us who formed part of the inner core group of Numax, and that's where the name came from. It was another link, like fulfilling how these processes always take a concept from what unites us. Numax united us and now another Numax unites us. It's also beautiful, this idea of recovering.

Why have you chosen the model of Non-Profit Associated Work Cooperative?

On a technical level, between a cooperative and a company, the principal difference is the distribution of profit. The cooperatives in Spain regulate themselves through autonomous legislation. Every autonomy has a law regarding cooperatives, and this law of cooperatives regulates the profit aspect, that is to say, the positive outcome in the end of the financial year isn't distributable between the members of a company. A company has members who normally support with money. A cooperative also has members, but there are distinct types of cooperatives, for example the work cooperative provides capital and work, and Numax is an associative work cooperative. Normally between 15-25%, depending on the autonomous community, of the positive outcome, benefit, or excess, isn't distributable between the members. In a company, this belongs to the owners themselves, which they distribute according to capital contributed. So, this is the first determining factor. In addition, the representation in a cooperative of workers is made according to work contributed, not capital owned. In our case, we have a minimum which is 8,000 € of social capital, but not all the members contribute eight thousand. There are members who have more social capital because there's social capital from volunteering, there are some financial interests that are limited, too, but you can decide to contribute more money than someone else to your company, without this giving you more rights than others get. In the cooperative, representation is done by work, a working member has a vote. Basically, I believe these are the two big differences. Then there's like a difference one step further, which is the model we chose, which is to be nonprofit. Profit, which is, I told you, kind of key, it's everything that defines the Cooperative. Not profit, but the not-profit, defined through absence. This is also interesting to suggest on a conceptual level, because you have to request the title, and they have to give it to you. This seemed kind of absurd to us. There are some requirements, which are: you can't give out any of the excess, that is to say, 100% of the excess or benefit can't be distributed between the members, but rather it must stay in the company; the salaries or cooperative repayment can't exceed 150% of what the collective agreement indicates; the interest generated by the capital contributed can't ever be greater than the legal interest of the money, which is fixed every year, and is limited. This year it was between 3 and 4% and we have it marked as 1.5%. And the executive responsibilities can't be paid. These are the technical requisites that you have to comply with in order to be non-profit. You have to demonstrate to the bosses that your company has a social interest that's going to contribute to the wellbeing of the community which it enters, etc. This is a voluntary decision. We didn't know what a cooperative consisted of before I took that course in 2013. It's something that's in the environment, you hear the word "cooperative," association, NGO, volunteer work, but you don't know. You know it's something that seems different from the classic relationship between owners and workers, but you don't even know if it's different, and this isn't studied in school; on a nominal level it might be familiar, you memorized something, but you don't know what it is.

Does something in the concept of work itself change in developing this work in the context of a cooperative?

Well, the first change, once you refuse profit, is the clearest way of considering salary

-- as a right. This is the first educational function that you need to convey to your close environment. I remember in the creation of the Cineclub de Compostela, which is the association that I created when I came to the university and that continues functioning, showing films every week, which says in the statutes that "executive responsibilities can't be paid because it's a non-profit association," etc. And it seemed like there couldn't be money, that you were never going to be able to pay for work. No one explains this to you but you examine the form and really, if you look for a work model, a non-profit association works just as well as a work cooperative. Because it's not incompatible to have an executive responsibility and not receive payment for it, you can not be paid for being the president of your association, of your cooperative, and at the same time work for the association, your cooperative, and still earn money. And you need to have a positive outcome at the end of the year, and not splitting it up doesn't mean that that doesn't mean that you don't need to be competitive in the market. But this, which is very basic, is necessary to explain to all the institutions and companies that you meet because the first prejudice that there is when you hear the word "cooperative" is a lack of profitability, lack of professionalism, it's an unsustainable economic model and little more than an NGO or a child's toy, or something that someone does who doesn't need the money, who's doing it for the love of the art. This is totally harmful, damaging, and false, at least in our case. You learn from zero and you understand very clearly that you need to be competitive in the market, because we're a company. We have our work positions, our salaries, our indefinite contracts, our business plan, our need to sell more tickets than the competition, to sell all the books we can, to generate all the money that we can to be able to pay all the salaries that we can under the best work conditions that we can, and offer the best-quality services that we can. We're inserted into a market economy because just because you decide voluntarily to organize yourself a little on the edge -- never completely in the margins, but in a distinct way -- it doesn't mean that you don't still have to be in the same world as the rest, with models totally opposite of yours and even aggressive towards yours. But that's our problem. You can say that it's the problem of the world, and that's true, but it's easier to start changing things within your reach than things that come from an unreachable goal. And for us, this educational work was and continues to be very good. We aren't trying to make this into an advertising weapon. We're a theater, a bookstore, a distributor, we're a studio of graphic design, video, web, and communication. Right now, there are twelve of us working. We started as five, and we went on to kind of take this form, we're many things, but our objective is to be trustworthy professionally, to offer the best within our capacities and to be as competitive as the best possible because we need it. If we're not, the first to suffer will be us. This change from exploitation to self-exploitation is another of the stigmas that cooperativism has. To say, "Others don't exploit me, but I exploit myself," and you have to decide if this "but" is worth it, because self-exploitation can sound bad, but it's also saying, "I'm the one responsible for generating my capital gain." Well, this can be a dirty trick, but it depends on you. Then, the position of victim is also kind of confusing because you're the boss and the employee. So, you have to try to pick out the things that make sense.

Can you explain how you operate internally?

Well, by trying to manage the conflicts as well as we can. Right now, we're in the middle of trying to finish drafting a set of internal rules. This takes its time because you don't even know what it involves. You hear "internal rules," which is something very delicate, because there are two sides to everything in the cooperative. Cooperatives really, on a laboral level, aren't regulated by labor legislation, which stays outside collective agreements, and this can be a problem, or not. You have to think almost -- I

won't say from zero, because you have the agreement as a reference, but the part that governs the cooperative is its set of internal rules. And we're a pretty particular case. We're especially complicated because we have a ton of different economic activities, a ton of different collective agreements, we're a single fiscal company so we need to make a lot of balances. And there are cases of workers who live outside the city, cases of members who have a reduction in their workday because of caring for their kids, so there are plenty of case laws that we have to react to strengthen the group, but you respond as things come up. So, we have a board which in practice doesn't meet as a board but more as an assembly of working members. Every Monday we have a two-hour meeting in which we try to manage and plan everything that we notice and that we need to be on a societal level, because even though it's been three years, they're three years of continuous growth and continuous evolution. On a purely numerical level, we started with five members, now we're eight, three more workers and on January first we'll have four more workers, which will bring us up to twelve people. In very little time we've gone from making a net revenue of two hundred thousand euros to this year, which we're going to end with a net revenue closer to six hundred thousand euros. We grow on many levels at once, and because of this, we don't still have the same internal rules. When we started, we said that everyone would be paid the same, because we all do everything. But we can't all do everything. For me it's interesting, as a learning process, to see the possible and necessary pre-conditions of initiating a project, which this is, but to see how these same conditions have to evolve to allow the project to grow. There are some things we're very clear on, for example it's not a model for infinite growth. It prioritizes the construction of decent jobs and having the best possible workplace conditions. Many people are surprised, they say, "It's a cooperative and you pay salaries?" or "How great, to be paid to do what you like." We started with a minimum salary, not since the initial idea or the formation, but since a little before opening. We were already in a rented place, since September 2014, before starting work on the theater, and in December, at the end of 2014, about two years ago, we started to pay before opening because we were already starting to work for external clients. It was a process of starting from zero, and we knew very well how to get from zero to what we are now. Now we're in this moment of maintaining the structure's horizontal nature, because it's a model that in itself doesn't allow much verticality, because representation is personal but we split up tasks and areas of work because there are areas that involve responsibility with people or responsibility for people whose work depends on the work of another person, and in turn the work of that other person depends on everything else working. It's a wheel. Everything relies on everyone doing their job. And this is the eternal discussion, and the one we're stuck in every day because it directly affects us.

How do people come in to participate in NUMAX?

The people come in through the door (laughing), to see a movie, to buy a book or to drink a coffee. All this is enough, in a time when theatres leave the cities and all the little theatres disappear; it's enough to come in off the street and be able to see the billboard of movies in a small city. We're the only private theatre that works only with original versions in a city of less than 100,000 residents in Spain, and with a small screen. In Girona there's another in a city with a similar size to Santiago, it's privately managed, but it's municipal, the Truffaut cinemas. This is an important part of community integration. Another part is the birth of the project itself. It's a project that was 100% born from the community. The local support to get the financial backing, we're talking about 182 people, from all over, but about 70-75% are local people who backed this project and then there are the users, who trust in our values

and in what we were going to do. So, that's the first point. From there, you can be in contact participating in the networks of cooperatives, cultural, professional, and less professional networks, but we do what we can knowing that what we do is limited because it costs a lot to manage our organization. This is like a machine that's always about to crash, that's the sense that I've had these three years; in spite of the fact that from outside people don't have to notice, because what you need is for the people to be able to enjoy themselves, access distinctive content, but all this combined with what can end up in the news. It's about combining the current situation with the enrichment of this situation; it's more your function as an organizer or making the book selections.

Do the people participate in Numax's screening agenda?

Of course, because where do you know the manager of the theater? Where do you go for that? Almost nowhere. It's the positive part and the negative part, if the people like the movie they're going to enjoy it, and if they don't they're going to throw it in your face. You didn't make the movie, and neither do you put only things that you like in the programming, and you explain this, too. It seems like an important process on a community level to announce what a movie theater is about, because no one has any way to know; the first limit, which is half-evident, but not so obvious that you'd stumble upon it, is that normally there's a ticket box separated by a glass, where you can barely talk. You can just say "One ticket. Seven euros or eight euros," and here everything's open, so it's getting tickets for the theatre and having a conversation with people all in one space. It's a different kind of thing. Now you're changing things on an architectural level and you're changing what a cinema is. Then there's other forms of community integration that are more common, like customer loyalty programs, more in company terms, things that sounded a little weird to me, but that help to create links and to get closer to the public, like season passes. It's an economic exchange, a commercial exchange, you pay a quantity per year, 35, 120, 500 € in return for certain commercial advantages and that gives us an extra support.

Is Numax a political project, and if so, what kind of politics are we talking about?

Well, it's a political project in the same way that any self-managing entity can be. It's a political project of self-management in which we as a group dive into the personal political worries that we might have—not on a partisan level, but concerning cosmovisions, or how we understand interpersonal emotional relationships as a group.

What type of activities do you carry out in the laboratory?

Individuals, clients of institutional services, cultural initiatives, music festivals, theatre festivals, all come to the laboratory. We make webs, all kinds of graphic design, poster-making, books for exhibitions, everything done by a graphic design studio that converts itself over time into a communication studio. We provide a comprehensive service, and they're very particular clients, but clients who, as I understand, see Numax as a similar project. I believe that you can see this in the ads we show before the films. We don't have an ad service contracted like Movierecord, which is an advertising agent for the cinema and which offers this service, they give you an economic compensation, and they show announcements before the movie. We try to be selective. I'm not going to say that there's a strict policy of controlling everything because in the end, when you advertise a company, you can't know everything about it. We advertise a festival run by friends, or an exhibit, and they pay. We always try to look for things that have some kind of link with the kind of project and values that we can defend.

Can you talk to us about the distribution work that Numax does?

We're very small. Distribution is kind of a crazy area like the creation of the project itself was, because we didn't know what it involved, and suddenly you see that you have to sign a contract to have rights, and you have those rights in a certain territory, which is the territory of Spain. I remember the first contract that I had, a model contract that I made from looking up a lot of things on the internet, trying to understand things and clauses that didn't have any logic. It was the first time that this happened to me since studying as an adolescent, when you don't understand something because none of the words seem to connect. I wanted to broaden the contract to include Spain and Portugal, and the sales agent asked me if I know theatres in Portugal, and I said no, that I don't know what other distributors there are in Portugal, how many theaters, where they are, what kind of theatre, the media of theatre. And I said, "You're right, it's true, it has to do with territory." Spain in addition to Andorra, Andorra because -- and this we just learned -- because if you sell the movie to television, that television also broadcasts in Andorra, so, if you don't have Andorra it doesn't make sense given Spain-and-Andorra is the standard.

We do distribution for the territory of Spain, and that's the part that lets us really work on the movies, what motivates you, and it has to motivate you a lot because you're going to put a lot of yourself into these movies throughout the year. It's a pretty long process. Given it's not a central part of the cooperative, we don't have personnel exclusively dedicated 100% to distribution. We can permit ourselves the luxury of premiering three or four movies a year and taking care of them and not feeling obligated, at the moment, to screen all kinds of movies one right after the other. Here we can permit ourselves the luxury of making a selection that really motivates us, because of one thing or another.

What selection criteria do you follow to choose the titles for distribution?

There's not much regulated criteria beyond the initial impulse and the kind of weak logic of saying "I'm not going to distribute movies where I know that, as much as I like them, it's almost impossible to get people to see them." We still do that, in some cases, because you also learn to know what that "impossible" is about. But it wasn't evident for any of the movies we distributed that they would turn out well, I think.

Do you believe that there's a culture of original-version film, or auteur film?

I believe you could say that there is and that there isn't. The answer more or less would be no. It's demonstrated by the scarcity of original-version film theaters, the scarcity of auteur film theaters. In Galicia, for example, this theatre is associated with the network of Europe cinemas. It was the first time in Galicia in the twenty or twenty-five years of history of having that network that there was a theatre associated with it, so the answer is no. On a political level, regarding the Law of Theatre, the possibility of creating these measurements is there, but there aren't measurements of support for independent showings, for original-version showings, for helping with the distribution of independent films; they exist, they're important, but it's an independent distribution where the threshold is too high to permit risky operations to access it. Then, there's more culture in the original version, local on the level of small communities, more activist, if you want to understand it that way; a kind of more nostalgic audience that continues to be activists, in some way, like there were activists going to see Pasolini, Bergman, and Fassbinder's movies in the

film clubs in the sixties and seventies. Well, all of these people keep going to see movies, much of our audience is an older audience, but also more experienced, an audience that continues to be open to seeing new things, because it's their tradition.

And in the specific case of this city, there's a festival in November that lasts three weeks, has a thirty-year history, and projects the original versions of all the important films by Kant, Berlin, Venezia, etc. Throughout much of this time, when there wasn't original version film or there were only commercial films, this festival was the only access in the community to this kind of film, it's a great success, and it's really the breeding ground that makes possible a project like Numax, with original version film from small communities, volunteer initiatives, or individuals, because distributors have no motive for showing a movie with subtitles. No motive because it's totally penalized.

What institutional support has Numax had?

Help from the state, zero. We didn't even consider it because the state doesn't consider offering support for projects like ours, not for one-time activities, but ours would be there like any other entity presenting a cultural activity project. There isn't support for independent showings, Spain is the only country in the area that doesn't have a network set apart for the circulation of independent films, call it art and composition, call it auteur film, and the only country that doesn't encourage original version production; due to this, the provider doesn't have any motive for taking the risk, because it's evident you won't have the same turnout as you would with a movie with a big promotion campaign and that generates a lot of interest in people. Not all the movies that have big promotion campaigns turn out well in auteur cinema, nor in smaller scale theatres, nor in larger theatres. And in the same way, a movie won't function because it's good, or because it's bad but has a big promotion campaign. I believe it's more complicated than all this. We also learned, as a distributor, that you can waste the same amount of time on one movie or another and see totally different results. So, we haven't received help on the level of the state nor on the level of autonomous government. In the last two years, we've had a yearly grant that exists for theater productions, cultural productions, attendance in fairs and markets, that allow cultural product distributors to attend, so we kind of sneak in as a distributor, and that's how I'm able to get to Kan, Berlin, Locarna, to festivals to see movies. This past year it was 700 €, and this year it's 1500 €, to give you an idea. I have to say as well that we were very welcomed on an institutional level; since the project was born, it's had a big impact, and we got the Best Cooperative Project of the Year award the year it opened. Last year, we received the Galician Culture Award, which is the national audiovisual award. The Audiovisual Academy of Galicia gave us the 'Mestre Mateo' ('Master Mateo,' in English) award for the best entrepreneurial initiative. In two and a half years of the project, we've won like the three most important awards. Of these three, only one included an economic endowment, which was 5000 €, which was the best cooperative project award. Yes, everyone congratulates us but right now there's no financial assistance. I do a lot of presentations. I try to advocate and put many models and many different forms on the table. In the Basque Country, the institutional model that they apply to film is very interesting, because they're giving very important support to the theatres, to showings in the Basque language. On an institutional level, they have a policy that can serve as a model, not only in communities with their own language, like Galicia, but as a model for the state. In Catalonia there's also at least attempts to consider independent showings and distribution, if less ambitious and at some points more arbitrary. I know that there are communities that are eventually developing slight aid for distribution, I know that the Community of Madrid has a line

of economic supports, I know that Andalusia does as well, but as far as Galicia, the response that we have from the administration is that they're willing to work on it, but at the moment the Galician government hasn't changed anything. There is, or it seems like there's going to be, based on the news that I have, on the level of the provincial council, the council of Coruña in this case, which is the province that corresponds to Santiago, is working on aid to encourage and facilitate premieres in movie theatres made by producers in the province of Coruña, or distributed by distributors in Coruña. So next year, if this appears, we will have contributed to generating an institutional mindfulness that realizes itself in a support that can help not only us, but other distributors, and above all, producers who until now haven't had any support for debuting movies. What happens is that it's linked to the Galician language, it has to be Gallego in the original version, or dubbed in Gallego, or subtitled in Gallego, but this isn't a problem because we subtitle all our movies in Gallego by our own initiative.

We have a little pact that we got with the Galician government, which involves subtitling five movies. We've started a process with the state distributor to translate the subtitles that they incorporate in the master copies that are later premiered in all the theatres, that are passed to the Blu-ray for cultural centers' showings, and when they edit the movie commercially, the DVD comes out with subtitles in Gallego, for five films per year. This is the only institutional support that's like an almost private agreement, that offers us very little money and it's money in return for work and we're content, because we choose the movies over time and one of them was the Carla Simón movie that's pre-selected for the Oscars. We tried to make a catalogue and then bring it to high schools, institutes, ourselves, so that the kids would come see the movies at the theatre in the mornings in return for much more activist work on our part. The support is very minimal, little things like that. And for example, the master-classes that we do are with municipal support. It's a program that we presented to the council and the council financed it. Here's where all kinds of people come, it's a luxury because it's an opportunity, a few times a year, to be with directors that charge for their plane ticket, fees, hotel, meals. It's money. It's an important amount, you can do a free class because you have the council collaborating for this. I work because I like to do it, but I need someone to give me a hand. So, all these links should, with time, strengthen themselves and start getting involved with objectives because we have a ton of things to do, as we're very aware.

What relation does Numax have with the University?

The university isn't really there to support companies. There are a few indirect examples, but that's on other levels. In our case, it's not something we've worked on. This year, we made contact through the cultural extension of the Vice Rectorship, to make them a proposal for a parallel program of movies that would offer a grant for the alumni who came to see a series of movies and later did some work about the series. They accepted this, and it's a series called "Os olles verdes. O Cinema inédito de NUMAX" (Galician for "The Green Pans. Or, The Unpublished Cinema of NUMAX") and here we try to choose movies from festivals that weren't offered in Spain, often not even subtitled, movies that the city won't see, so this should kind of encourage the public university to assist us. Certainly, there are many lines of work that can be taken advantage of with the university.

Unitaria





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
December 14, 2017

Location
**Santiago de
Compostela, Spain**

Collective's name
Unitaria

Name of the interviewee
**Fernando Lerma and
Gonzalo Suarez Castro**

Interviewer
**Christina Tarazi,
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Who are you and how did this project start?

Fernando: I'm Fernando and I'm a graphic designer. I've been a graphic designer for more than twenty years. I've done graphic design studies; I had a t-shirt brand and then a clothing store. I handled communications for several years for a company that works in culture, and during all those periods I also worked as a freelancer.

Gonzalo: I'm Gonzalo and I come from the audiovisual world. I've worked in different companies and I've done a bit of everything. I ended up self-employed, setting up a small production company here — it was very small, it was just me — and the truth was that I was very burnt out with the audiovisual, there wasn't much work and that's why we decided to change it up a little.

When and where did this project start?

Fernando: Our project was born in 2015. After a couple of years of being unemployed, we both began to plan what to do with our lives. In my case, I had been collaborating for almost ten years with the Senunpeso Association from Vedra, an adjoining Town Hall. That happened once a year at the Vedra Audiovisual Laboratory in February. It consisted of ten or twenty workshops, all of them about an audiovisual topic. I realized that there was a lot of desire to learn because you saw that even just that weekend sometimes two hundred people gathered at the institute to learn workshops in a way that Galicia was lacking. There, you couldn't have a workshop for steadycam or color correction or video related things like that. Now there's more supply, but ten years ago it wasn't possible. You had to go to Barcelona or Madrid. And we wanted that training to be in Santiago, on a continuous basis and not only audiovisual but also to touch on various other arts as well. It's something that we said from the beginning, that this boat has no rudder.

Gonzalo: It doesn't have a rudder but it has direction.

Fernando: (laughing) Although sometimes the wind doesn't blow.

Gonzalo: But on purpose, to avoid being pigeonholed into a single thing.

What relationship does this project have, if any, with 15 M or with the field of cultural activism?

Fernando: I don't think we have a specific tie to 15M. We do like to have a relationship with activism, especially cultural activism, but we don't consider ourselves activists. We're simply in our boat, where we do a bit of what we want, with a sort of a pirate attitude.

Gonzalo: We're involved, but we aren't part of any structure; we're where we should be.

Fernando: At the beginning we wanted to put at the entrance of the school some slogan like "forbidden" or "not forbidden", but in the end it was left blank, which is almost better because here, as long as we get along, everything is fine.

Why do you call yourselves "Unitaria?"

Gonzalo: This house, in the 30's of the last century, was a unitary school.

Fernando: Wow, the last century!

Gonzalo: Yes (laughing). The unitary schools were spaces where children of different ages shared only one teacher that taught them in all subjects. This name was kind of to recover the spirit of that unitary school and to use the space again with a similar use, which has a focus on learning, in whatever way that may be, and with people of different ages. We already liked the place a lot, and it already came with a history behind it and...

Gonzalo: ...it rounded out the project.

What legal formula have you chosen?

Gonzalo: We're a Cultural Association ...

Fernando: ... not for profit. But it was a fiscal engineering decision. We, tired of being autonomous, of feeling cheated when paying taxes, came to the conclusion that we embarked on this ship without a helm, but if it didn't work, then what would happen? The only way to be protected was to be, fiscally, an association and for that association to hire us. If in a year or two it goes wrong, we would have unemployment [the right to collect unemployment benefit]. If we had remained autonomous, we would be helpless in the event that the ship failed. I think that was why we made that decision.

Gonzalo: Yes, and in fact, the name of the association is very clear in that regard. It's "Association of friends yes, but the cow must be paid for what it's worth," which is a Galician saying that means yes, we are friends, but the cow has a price and must be paid.

What have you learned in the process of constituting as a non-profit?

Fernando: It's going to sound bad on camera but I'll say it anyway- I almost encourage cheating, because the system seems to be designed for an entrepreneur to get into trouble. I have had four small businesses, and the system seems designed for you to go bankrupt because it's impossible for you to make money. To earn a thousand dollars, being autonomous, you had to bill two thousand dollars every month, and you say "but hey, it is what it is!" It's like you're both being pushed into cheating and now whoever sets the rules is doing what they do... Well you have to cheat until you get the money.

What does it mean to work in the context of a non-profit association?

Fernando: It means that the decisions, for better or worse, are made by you. When you work for another person, you leave work at the time they tell you, if

you work by the hour and not by goals, then you leave and have your beer and don't have headaches. Here, like any self-employed person or entrepreneur, you work all day, night, all weekend, on vacation. People call you and don't understand limits. It's a very bad part of social networks; they think you're available 24 hours, but you aren't. Even social networks seem to penalize you if you don't answer quickly and if you're not proactive with your clients, but...

Gonzalo: But we are...

Fernando: When communicating we're sometimes pretty direct, not insulting, but saying, "okay, give us a break..."

Gonzalo: Yes, and we always leave clear messages when we're on vacation so that we're not bothered.

Fernando: Always with a humorous tone.

Gonzalo: Of course, but we're just two people, and in two and a half years we've done 300 events. It's a volume that requires a lot of work. We work towards goals, so if I don't work today, then I'll work tomorrow.

Fernando: And we work together very well. For example, at the beginning, both of us were working all the time, but we realized that it was a crazy amount of work.

Gonzalo: It was sort of necessary to get it started.

Fernando: Yes, at first for us to both figure out where something was missing and how to fix it. Now we have a protocol that we both follow. So when there's a workshop one weekend, one person does it and then they rest on Monday, and the next weekend, well the other person does it.

Is Unitaria a political project?

Fernando: We know what we don't want. When people knock at the door with a proposal that we think doesn't fit, then we don't accept it. But we don't have a clear political thread...

Gonzalo: Maybe we do in an unconscious way, but it's not deliberate. Yes, we avoid the far right, or the right in general, but we're not married to anything.

Fernando: No, because the left, including the "mareas" have also disappointed me, and that has to be said.

What kind of culture does Unitaria defend?

Fernando: Well, everything that the Ministry of Education doesn't give access to. It's also a struggle with Hacienda to provide the training that we provide and still not be affected by the VAT (Value Added Tax). It's said that the training is "without VAT" but regulated training is without VAT, and it's the regulated training that the Ministry provides in some of its centers. Gonzalo is in charge of finding out where there's similar training to what we provide.

Gonzalo: More than anything else so that it's accessible to anyone who wants to come. We always try to make it as cheap as possible.

Fernando: Accessible and so that both parties, both us and the instructors, make money. Because if they take away 20% of the registration fee that each person pays, then we're not getting paid for the work we put in. There's a big difference between making 50/50 and making 40/40, which is what we do. What I was saying before about the Ministry, for example. We had a dildo-making workshop, well we bill it as artisanal or as a sculpting workshop, or else it would be 21% as a luxury item.

Gonzalo: And in reality, people leave with a dildo from here, something plastic, artistic.

Fernando: It's a molding workshop, a workshop for casting, latex, etc.

Gonzalo: So, you can't bill it as it's named, "Dildo it yourself;" you have to call it "Artistic molding," but it's not for no reason, it's because a lot of people who come to workshops like this come for the training. They're instructors and they come here to train and bring these skills to a regulated school.

Fernando: Yes, yeah, to an official school.

Gonzalo: Because there they don't have the option to be trained.

Do you have some kind of relationship with the field of formal education?

Fernando: A relationship doesn't exist, because formal education is a big, slow apparatus that hasn't moved. With educators that have had the same syllabus for three-thousand years. And in this world, what you learn today in many fields won't be worth a thing within six months... think about it. We've never done a workshop on social marketing precisely for that reason, because within six months it wouldn't have any value.

How do you define culture?

Fernando: Culture is, I don't know.... It's a lot of things. It's language, it's neighborliness, it's even the way that you talk, dress, the music that you listen to. It's the sum of everything that's around you, it's even what you eat.

What kind of workshops does Unitaria organize, and for whom?

Gonzalo: We've done comic workshops, workshops for drawing, video games, artistry, ceramics, porcelain...

Fernando: A lot for video and new technologies, sort of the industry we're in, because we have more contact with it.

Gonzalo: We have workshops for robotics, festival planning, cultural management, Chinese...

Fernando: The participants we see are between 25 and 45 years old, and there are more women than men.

What's distinct about the Unitaria School?

Fernando: The coffee and the break treats, which we're very grateful for. It's silly, but when people go on break here and they're about to leave, they're surprised to see that there's coffee. People love it. It's our trademark (laughing).

Gonzalo: And we systematically ask about it.

Fernando: Yeah, we have a closing questionnaire and the last question is if the coffee was good.

Gonzalo: And usually they say that it is, so we're doing it right.

Fernando: And the person who says no wanted tea (laughs).

Gonzalo: But we also have tea (laughs).

Fernando: I don't know what our special touch is. Doing everything with care, in the way that you yourself would want to be treated, that's all.

Gonzalo: Treating people well.

Fernando: Making sure that everything's going well, that when people come everything's ready, and that's it. It's not a science.

How do you program your workshops?

Gonzalo: We always try to have instructors that are very good at what they do, and up to date.

Fernando: That are professional.

Gonzalo: We're not looking for people who teach the same subject with the same syllabus for thirty years. That person must know a lot, but you bring them out to the real world and they don't know which way the wind blows.

Fernando: For example, here in the Communications Department, they're using Betacam cameras [surprised] and they come here to use DSLR cameras.

Gonzalo: We're looking for active professionals that are up to date and know how to transmit their knowledge. It's complicated, but it's true that people from the Communications Department and people from trade schools come here to train.

Fernando: In the Communications Department, the people who have to learn to edit and use cameras come here to learn it.

Gonzalo: What we want is for people to learn. In fact, that's our motto, "You'll learn."

Fernando: It's our slogan.

Gonzalo: We avoid Creditocracy. If what you want is a degree, well, go somewhere else, but if you want to learn then come here. I'm not saying that you don't learn at other places. Here, if we give you a diploma, it's very funny, and you'll learn.

Fernando: These days, resumes don't tell you much. You can have a very extensive resume but in two hours of work you don't show it, well... We're pretty anti-degree for that reason. We give ours out to sort of make fun of it.

What kind of relationships do you have to other projects similar to this one?

Fernando: We build some relationships through this network, because when you're connected to this project you end up meeting people who are doing other similar projects in other cities, and maybe you visit their project or they come here because we're doing something that interests them. They're relationships on a personal level, not on an organizational level. You share an interest and you end up coming together because that's what magnets do.

What does growth look like for Unitaria?

Fernando: Unitaria isn't very interested in growth. We've talked about it a lot, Gonzalo and I. There are projects that grow every year and have less and less money and grow more and more. They end up using cultural volunteers to cover parts of the event that they can't pay for. And I ask myself, do you really want that? I think that if I was given double the money to do this event that we're doing right now, then I'd do less, but better paid, or I'd do the same amount of work but better paid. I don't know, I don't want it to be bigger nor do I want it to be a couple days longer, nor do I want it to be in more places around the city. I want it to be better paid.

What institutional support does Unitaria receive?

Fernando: Specifically for this event, we received help from the City Government to give out memory cards. We don't keep the money. It makes me angry, and I try not to go to the meetings because I know that I get upset. I don't understand why, because some political complications, they can't pay us for organizing the event. They can pay for the memory cards, but they can't pay for the organization. So, could someone please explain to me how they think these events happen? If you, as the City Government, support it because you think that the city deserves to have this event, then it has to be organized and that's what you should pay for. There's an idea that you don't pay and you can't pay, for example, for the organization of events, and it dumbfounds me. On a part of the invoice you put that for organizing you want to charge however much, and it can't be done. They'll pay for other parts, the artists' memory cards, and they can pay for that because by category it's allowed. I don't understand it.

I get really angry every time I talk with friends about grants. I tell them that if they can find me someone who can get me a grant, I'll pay them or give them half of the grant. When you find a grant that you're interested in, it's for an LLC or for a cooperative. For grants that are available to you as an Association, it turns out that you don't meet all the requirements or, even worse, you have to ask for credit for them to give you the grant, or pay some percent of what the project costs, and I don't understand it. I've never gotten a grant and we've fought for some, but it's a waste of time; you need to have an additional staff member who just does that kind of thing.

How do you keep hope alive in times of political disaffection?

Fernando: Well, I'll read you a message that we got yesterday, for example. I sent it to Gonzalo and I told him, "I'm sending it to you because it's to you too." The message says: "I don't know about you, but today I was wrapped up in a blanket and listening to people writing things and laughing, nice and warm,"-they were here in school doing yoga, there weren't in bed- "and I thought about some of the good things that Unitaria does for the people come. Thank you for sharing it, I would've never thought of it." So these kinds of things, they sort of give you goosebumps, they're the things that motivate you to keep on. Because if you think about the taxes and all the obstacles that the Administration puts in your way to have a place like this, well, you'll despair. I think that a lot of things still have to change for places like this to be comfortable and at peace.



La Escalera





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
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Collective's name
La Escalera

Name of the interviewee
Rosa Jiménez

Interviewer
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Website
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Translated by
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Reviewed by
Emily Bruel



Who are you and what is your relation to this adventure of La Escalera (“The Staircase”)?

I'm Rosa Jiménez. I'm from Seville and my background is in the field of caregiving. A few years ago I worked in direct care and currently I work in the design and coordination of social intervention projects.

When, where, and why was La Escalera born?

The original idea for the project La Escalera was born three years ago in a research group in the caregiving field, a work group that had been in Medialab Prado. Medialab Prado gives grants for interventions and research, and so the grantees were doing intervention projects in the cultural center of Medialab and also later each worked on their research and had a series of work hours to develop it. As part of her research grant, Lorena Ruiz Marcos had different work groups in the caregiving field, in one of which I began working three years ago. One day, in this work group, we were having a meeting and were theorizing about caregiving, imaginaries, responsibility, and commitment, and then Charo showed up, who is the oldest of the group and who worked in centers for seniors. That week, there was sadly recurring news of elderly people found dead in their homes one week, two weeks, seven months later. Charo was really affected by this and then slammed a fist down on the table, but with love, and said, “What are you doing here with these theoretical matters? What needs to be done is to end this reality.” And I remember that, with anger, she said that what needed to be done was to hold the community chairpeople accountable for what happens in their community. It wasn't a soothing proposal or measure, it was more like an outburst, but I left that meeting turning the issue over in my mind until I sort of changed the question from, “What can be asked of someone who occupies the chair of a community?” to “What can be asked of a neighborhood community?” That same night, I made the first draft of La Escalera. I presented it as a Medialab project. At that time, I thought that the best thing to bring to La Escalera was the perspective of sociological research in order to be able to record everything well and at some point that the fruits of this experiment, uncertain at that time because we didn't know at all where it would lead, that at some point it would have a part or the whole thing be replicable, scalable, or adaptable to different environments and objectives. So it was approved in July of the past year, something that I couldn't believe, and September 1st of 2016 is when the project of La Escalera actually started, from September until the 31st of March. We gave it a timeline of seven months. During the first two months I was principally interviewing chairpeople of the community, property managers, caregivers, and residents. And later the public part of La Escalera began: posters, stickers, outreach, and the search for participation. We wanted to work with five communities, we didn't even think it would be

possible, in fact we thought it would be quite difficult, but it was very easy to do five and even many more and that's where the project of La Escalera really took off.

What's the legal structure of La Escalera?

In legal terms, it's a non-profit association. It wasn't that to begin with; when it got started in August of 2016, the *association* of La Escalera didn't exist. It was due to the social and mediatic impact that it had and the offers and demands for talks, workshops, ect.- that's what made me decide that we needed to give it a legal form and the one we chose was basically the most economic and sustainable choice because I didn't really know why I was doing what I was doing. I knew at the time that it seemed to be the most desirable option, but I didn't know what it was going to lead to.

Right now, we're playing with various entities to carry out the projects we're working on. La Escalera, which I head, and two other entities, the sociological research cooperative "Indaga" ("Investigate") and the society of communal work "Andecha." Here in Spain, the legal process kind of drives you to be a non-profit association; well, it's the solution for many projects that are starting up. Later, it's common to convert into a Limited Liability Company or a Corporation or a cooperative, but it's very common to start with the non-profit association because it has less costs and less requirements.

Today this triangle that we form with Indaga, Andecha, and La Escalera has to do with the fact that when the project La Escalera started in Medialab, Indaga was the cooperative that supported me. The process of investigation and evaluation is always present in the way I think about projects. I think about a project as I go along, I don't think about it as something external rather I think about it from within the project itself, which is how Carlos worked, becoming a part of the project La Escalera and not coming from the outside. So we continue with that commitment and that team because it worked well. When La Escalera began to grow and we were only two people behind all of it, and what's more Carlos worked part-time, the cooperative of communal work and participation Andecha began to support us. That's when we saw that this could become a project about intervention and that it could wear different hats: ethical, sustainable, and ecological consumption, mental health, or attention to the vulnerability of old age. Andecha began to support us first freely, with the prospect of future investment, and we began to try to give shape to what had been that first Medialab phase of La Escalera. We gave it shape and began to work through the three different entities, and we obtained a funded project, and all three entities have worked on the project of getting funded. We're still looking for other funding projects, the three entities each doing their part.

What does an "escalera" (in the sense of this project) consist of?

I think there are many types of *escaleras*, but in its day, the original La Escalera consisted of first broadcasting the project on social media, because we didn't have any other means of communication during that phase. Then, someone would contact us at La Escalera through social media, email, or telephone and say, "I want to start up this experiment in my area." Every story is personal, for example, there was someone who wanted to do it because their building was being taken up by AirBnB apartments and this person wanted to see if any other residents were left and how to share this problem with them; there were people who had lived in the same property for five years and only knew one of their neighbors and were like, "How is that possible?!" It's easy to get attached to what La Escalera proposes, at least here in Spain, because

people who are in their thirties, many of us in a way grew up in an *escalera*. A neighbor taking care of you in the 80's and 90's was very common. So then it's very easy to have some story that one wants to get out there and nostalgia easily arises and I think this provokes a lot of attachment to La Escalera. So, as I was saying, we would contact the person and either Carlos or I would go and have a coffee with them; we'd chat for no less than an hour because we were striking up a kind of neighborly relationship with this resident who was inviting us to their community and opening the doors of their community to us. It's been proven to us that this idea of the door to a community, the door to someone's private space, is one of the determining agents of what happens or doesn't happen in a neighborhood community, so it was very meaningful to us that someone would invite us into their community. We'd sit down with them and figure out why they wanted to participate or why they stopped wanting to participate, we'd address their doubts and fears with assurances or without them; for example, "Do we have to get permission from the chair of the community?" Well, I'd say that it's not necessary to get permission because we've made sure that the proposal is innocuous, but that's not to guarantee that it won't raise some suspicion. We've always let or encouraged the resident that invite us to gauge what end they wanted to accomplish, so if they didn't want to get permission they have our support and if they did want to get permission, well they also have our support. Our job was to strike up a relationship and get to know the community, get to know the resident who had invited us and then accompany the whole process, responding to things ourselves but also making it communal. We made an email list including all the people who had participated in La Escalera, as long as they gave their permission. The list ended up including 30 different communities. For example, in this group we talked about how upsetting it is when your poster is torn down, something that happens in 30% of cases, and in group we've discussed whether to put them back up. Everything was figured out in the email group where everyone would share their worries, joys, or frustrations.

When I say that in reality I don't know if this counts as an *escalera* or if it's something else, I say it because in all the months of the adventure that is this project, many people have written us simply saying, "I'm not inspired to start up this project because I'm not at home much, but I went to talk to a woman who lives downstairs who, since I've moved here, I've thought has maybe been in a difficult situation, and I had never been moved to talk to her before because the situation seemed very delicate, but with this project I was inspired and I had coffee with her and it made me very happy." Or, for example, there are stories like that of Pesecín that went viral here in Spain. Pesecín's story is that there was a girl who was 14-years-old, I think, and was going on vacation with her parents for a week, and she had a pet fish, Pesecín. She didn't have anyone to leave the fish with and she had the idea to leave the fish bowl directly in the doorway with a sign that said, "Hi, I'm Pesecín, I will be here for only a week; this is my food schedule and here is the food. Please, if you change my water or feed me, write a note so that nobody repeats in the same day." I'm convinced that if a community had been brought the issue of Pesecín to a property owners' meeting then it would have refused to take care of Pesecín, I doubt if even one person would've said yes. But in this way, this community changed Pesecín's water more times than were necessary as was instructed on the sign. They bought him more food and they left notes about Pesecín. This coincided with the movement of La Escalera and other news about neighborhood processes; to me, all of these are ways to make an *escalera*. At the beginning La Escalera consisted of putting up a poster and some stickers in the community that were going to serve as an excuse to initiate the conversation and that were going to be the grease that allows contact with the people that are near us but that remain "others" to be less invasive, and in that way to have a vehicle that makes it easier and that

sort of gives the push that maybe a person hasn't found through anything else. Also it's about enabling the nostalgia, the longing and about how we want things to be.

Thinking about 15M, for many collectives/ projects (including those that existed before 15M) that movement was a moment of reorganization, of reinvention, of strengthening. What did that moment mean to La Escalera?

La Escalera existed before 15M. I, for example, have never been an activist, I mean I've known many people who are from those backgrounds, who are activists and have always been, but I've never done that. I've always been peripheral. I wouldn't say it had a direct impact more than that I believe that for people of my generation, a historic event like 15M that moved us, it has taught us, has proposed things to us, and has given us tools.

I believe that for all of us who have been or are receptive to what 15M proposed, it moved us. When 15M was happening, I was working in a cinema from 3:30 in the afternoon until 1 in the morning and the schedule for participating in 15M wasn't very compatible with the service sector, and even the form that some activist environments took wasn't very compatible with the service sector. So I didn't have the opportunity to participate but I doubt very much that I'll forget at least two of those four years that are considered to be 15M for the rest of my life. I think that it moved us and that that fact is necessarily reflected. I think that, in general, we need to have experiences that allow us to see possibilities that we've never seen to be possible before. I'd never thought it possible that this project could be developed, let alone proposed, let alone approved, let alone that this would have anything to do with me, but that changed through the people that I knew in the environment of 15M or the people that I knew in Medialab, which shares a certain overlap with 15M. There are small events or large events like 15M that move you, opening you up to new horizons and showing you a different perspective.

What relationship has La Escalera had with public institutions?

Well, the first institution that La Escalera had a relationship with was Medialab Prado. In Medialab Prado we had people that greatly supported us and helped us a lot, like Lorena Ruiz Marcos, who was the lab coordinator of Medialab Prado. Medialab Prado has an open and horizontal style but I believe that when the world is neither open nor horizontal, nothing can be completely open nor horizontal, even if that's your aim. So Medialab hosts projects that are put into motion, but it doesn't assist very much. For example, the funding isn't directly from Medialab, in our case it was from the participation branch of the City Hall of Madrid, and Medialab doesn't have assistance programs for its projects like other institutions do. So, Medialab for me has been a framework that has made the project possible, but it's not an institution with which there's been any shared day-to-day work. It was an open space for me to go to and work if I wanted to organize groups and meetings there, but La Escalera has developed through *escaleras*, so there hasn't been a day-to-day relationship with Medialab. Also, when the project had been around for seven months, one possibility would've been to continue La Escalera through Medialab itself, but Medialab has a methodology of two weeks of prototyping; that is to say that the type of project that they most support is two weeks of intensive work that results in the prototype for something. A seven-month project isn't common in Medialab, it was a strange thing to see in Medialab, and in fact, what I saw in that seven-month point of La Escalera was that if we wanted to continue to set up *escaleras* we needed a project of at least a year. We couldn't

derail an *escalera* after only three months after its start, although it's never completely derailed because it takes on a life of its own, but without support you leave it without assistance and you stop giving it structure. The City Halls of Madrid, Bilbao, Barcelona, and Valencia have all at some point shown interest in using La Escalera or adapting it in some way. The government here in Spain has a lot of trouble helping projects launch nominally, as would be the case for La Escalera. Needless to say, these tools for control are advisable, necessary, and something to be grateful for because if they didn't exist then there wouldn't be public convocations. But it means that sometimes a project is no longer supported because they choose others. The legal forms that exist to allow for a continuous relationship are used very little, among other things, I suppose, because they're budgeted and this budgeting is subject to political contingencies that don't have a lot to do with administration. It's been very difficult because to me it seems terrific to influence public policy and for public policies to promote neighborhood communities as resources that are not only to be extracted from but that also should be sustained and supported. The neighborhood community as a resource should be conceived of in that way and if it were, I would withdraw and hope that it would permeate and the public institutions would promote it in that way. But we haven't been able to do that because we were going to go to five communities and in the end we went to thirty, and we were going to do unseen work but it ended up having all this impact and then the doors opened and we would've liked to continue passing on the work because what's more we haven't found that the neighborhood communities have done anything completely on their own. This approach is difficult to pass on. The legal format for an agreement with a specific entity, which I think would be the appropriate format in this case, isn't easy to achieve honestly, that is to say, without nepotism. We need legal innovation and to search for other forms of support. We're talking a lot here in Spain about the hybridization of the public and social sectors, well we need to actually make the means for this because if we don't it'll become something extractive.

How did La Escalera maintain itself once its funding was cut off after seven months?

We kept working, in my case, through personal loans. I've been out of work because on March 31st, my contract that has been financing this ended, and until October 2nd when I'll be contracted with Andecha, I won't have any other work. La Escalera heavily depends on me and if I go out to look for a full-time job, well, this adventure will end. So that means that I've been living off of my 600 euros from unemployment and a monthly loan from a friend who has become a sponsor. Since September we've been working in a frustrating state of precarity because there are 30 communities that we were working with and we can't just abruptly stop accompanying them and end what they've been doing. The media, universities, and municipalities continue to contact us and we've kept going. In the end, the work that we've done has been compensated; I have a humble job in a cooperative involved in community work and we have another project that's financed by the health department of the City Government of Madrid to work on community health. Carlos also is a part of this project. So something has come of these months of work and effort and that's where we are right now.

What could La Escalera have turned into, and what has it actually become?

It could have put into motion very interesting projects of mediation in neighborhood communities, because there weren't any large conflicts. The people who had done La Escalera didn't have huge conflicts, we haven't gotten involved in neighborhood communities where there are issues of social integration. We've had a participant profile of thirty-somethings college graduates that are on social media. That's been

our profile. So there haven't been huge conflicts, but there have been opportunities to propose very beautiful group processes in communities that we haven't been able to advance them because we were just two people sustaining it all. What we've done is more responding to needs that were arising in communities, above all responding to doubts and fears. As we have a means of investigation and we have in mind the whole umbrella of La Escalera and we know what's going on in other *escaleras* and we receive a ton of emails with stories, well, we're learning from everyone else in our position as coordinators of these *escaleras*. This allows us to transmit what we're learning and start other things, organize meetings, organize gatherings with all the neighbors and stuff like that. But La Escalera could've been a lot more than what it has been. In every case of accompaniment we came up against the same problems that you come up against as a neighbor trying to improve your neighborhood relationships: the lack of a space, the lack of time, the lack of a certain culture, that there aren't meetings, that there are only property owners. You come up against the same exact things. For that reason I say that a pilot of La Escalera of real accompaniment for *escaleras* would need to be a year long and include a team that can be dedicated to making dynamic a space that has been hushed, silent, immutable, and dark. If you want to develop the potential that a community already has and encourage it to make the *escalera* its own, well you need time and a team, because it's going against everything that we usually do.

What is it about our current society that necessitates the development of a project like La Escalera to facilitate contact between people?

The horizontal property law is what rules here in Spain in terms of issues that arise in a neighborhood. The other laws that could've applied all have to do with noise pollution or smog and are scattered throughout other regulations. The horizontal property law establishes that every community needs to have at least one annual meeting of property owners that has to do with budgeting and that only property owners can go to, and in the case that a tenant wants to come they would have to get authorization from a property owner and even then they'd only be able to share their opinion about certain things. I don't know if the egg or the chicken came first, but undoubtedly it seems to me that if this structure emanates something, it's not community. I think that that is precisely the key. I don't know if it's so much about them regulating someone or preventing someone from doing something, that will have to depend on if each person prefers mediation through the state or outside the state, but, obviously, the formal meeting space for residents of a community is a meeting of property owners, not a meeting of neighbors, and it's to talk about finances, budgets, issues of property and not of neighborly coexistence. It's like that, and I think that it permeates into what happens in the meetings of neighbors. In addition, although by law the community chair is supposed to rotate annually, you'll often find the same community chair who has worked with the same property administrator for 15 years and who isn't even from the neighborhood or the community. In another phase of La Escalera we're working with public institutions and social organizations for a framework of understanding the community of residents as a community that's fragmented, seeing as residents don't control the components of their community.

We've been doing a series of participatory workshops and the proposal that repeatedly came up the most was to end the property owner meetings and create resident meetings and a chair committee of various residents, rather than one singular chairperson, because it's good to have a body that has a general perspective that can organize and coordinate, but it doesn't have to be one man or one woman that

fills that role, it can be a committee. Why does it have to be a property administrator or a company as the entity that comes here to organize and moderate the session? I believe that La Escalera has a role there to promote other ways of doing it.

You've talked about the existence of 30 *escaleras* working throughout the Community of Madrid. Are you personally keeping up with every *escalera*?

Hardly at all anymore. The *escaleras* that have things in motion are very independent and those that don't have as strong of a group engine or simply don't have a courtyard in which to work have become stagnant. There are communities where if there had been a space for the two people who were motivated to organize things to meet, well then in that courtyard things could've happened. But nothing has happened because of the conditions. So there are communities in which a ton of things are going on and there are communities that have remained stalled. What's going on is that, again, there is a particularity of La Escalera that makes it hard to measure quantitatively. I wouldn't dare to say that La Escalera is finished in any of these 30 communities and to me it's not necessary to have that poster there or have those stickers there. What I believe is necessary is that there are people who wanted to do La Escalera who saw themselves traversed by a change in their perspective when they passed through its doorway and that those people are still there and have had conversations with or without La Escalera and that this process isn't dependent on us anymore, but I wouldn't say that La Escalera is finished there.

Is this a political project? And if so, what kind of politics are we talking about?

Well, to me, yes it is. I suppose that the category that La Escalera falls under is micropolitics. La Escalera is a domestic, private space. It's where we've developed upon so many important and fundamental things at the political level, everything that has to do with caregiving, for example. Let's call it micropolitics. I suppose that we could come up with other ways to call it subject to how we do things in other ways.

What do you mean when you talk about "cuidados," caregiving?

When I say caregiving I mean sustaining life in that which is not seen, in that which is not produced immediately and doesn't have an immediate, quantitative effect- that which is reproductive. It's the person who writes the book, the person who makes them soup. Caregiving, to me, is that which allows for everything else. Allowing for things to be reproduced and sustained. Also "cuidados" is a word that we've been using a lot in recent years. I remember that the other day I was in the Cultural Center Matadero and I saw that they were calling the bathroom the "salón de cuidados íntimos" (room for taking care of intimate things) or something like that, and so "cuidados" is becoming a trend, it's emptied of meaning or filled with whatever meanings we want it to be. In reality it's about the care and attention to life.

Regarding your personal experience, what have you been thinking about through this process of creating "escaleras"?

I could talk a lot about my personal growth because for me it's been an adventure that has transformed me a lot, in part because I was coming from working in the tertiary sector of services or in the health sector and from that level of social and laboral status and, all of a sudden, people want to interview me. I could talk for a long time about that but I don't think that that would

be the most interesting thing to a general audience. It has transformed me, changed me, taught me many things about who I am and what I can do.

What has the process of La Escalera taught the residents who participate in it?

It's not so much teach as uncover, activate. La Escalera isn't proposing anything new at all but rather pointing out something that you've stopped looking at for a while; something as simple as whether or not you're satisfied with the way that you live in your neighborhood community, which isn't usually a question you ask yourself, or how could you be more satisfied. So for me the most transformative part of La Escalera is about that, but it's not an education that La Escalera gives you, it's a uncovering, an activation, a stirring, a provocation, an estrangement from the habits you have so ingrained... Yeah, it's making you sort of ask yourself if you want something else.

What inspired you in making the kit for La Escalera?

For me, the choice of the stickers was based on the reality that they evoke. The one that says, "I'll take your shopping bags up for you" ("Te subo las bolsas de la compra") speaks to me about situations of vulnerability; I'll share wifi ("Comparto wifi") was simply a little nod to the public to which we clearly speak to. The one that says "I'll water your plants" ("Te riego las plantas") is about the issue of property, the issue of what's private, and the issue of trust, because for someone to water your plants you have to give them your keys. And the sticker that says "Let's get coffee" ("Tomamos un café") notes that the paradigm isn't that of exchange but rather that of interdependence. I think they were very subtle issues that nobody else was taking note of. The stickers are chosen for that reason, not for the exchange that they propose, in fact, the stickers are an excuse. It wasn't seeking to make these specific interactions happen, in fact many of these interactions haven't happened, the stickers have been talked about and it has been made relational and brought from one place or another. In fact, as far as I know, nobody has watered anyone else's plants. I do know of a community that's sharing a washing machine and that conversation arose from some stickers; for that reason I say that it's completely an excuse. Actually, the kit comes with a fifth box of blank stickers for you to write whatever you want. We needed a vehicle to come into the communities through and promote the initiative, the proposal, and stir things up with, which was the initial objective. The poster with the stickers has been that vehicle, but the intention was to open up this meeting space, this contact, and from these relationships other things would arise.

From the perspective of La Escalera, what are some of the outstanding subjects of the neoliberal model of society?

Well, I don't know when this idea of self-sufficiency and autonomy started. I don't like to think of La Escalera as a tool to modify individual attitudes because I think that personal attitude only leads to a relatively small change in your neighborhood community. You don't become rotten because yes, I think that coming home exhausted from insane work days and not having meeting places in the street can lead to that. It can't fall all on the shoulders of the community. For example, when I was young, people in my neighborhood would organize ourselves to clean our common staircase, and that's how we met; and out front there was a small convenience store that prepared orders for two elderly women who cleaned the stairwell and one of the neighbors would always pick up their order on their way home from work or we'd pick it up on our way home from school and bring it to the women. We had a

garden in the back full of cats and trees and plants which was also another meeting space. Right now, to ask for a change from a community in a neighborhood that as its only meeting place has a giant 24-hour lot isn't logical and can't be blamed on anyone's individual attitude. Of course, to learn how to ask for help and let oneself help is an amazing political act, but we're missing certain conditions, and right now the conditions that allow for personal contact, collective development, mutual support, solidarity, and cooperation are beyond threatened everywhere.

Has there been any relationship between this project and the environment of school and university?

There's a woman on Twitter who's a high school professor, and she's brought La Escalera to the classrooms and she's doing an experiment with her kids, for example, they're walking each other home, and this has been effective against bullying, as a preventative action it can be really good. It's another of the roles that La Escalera could take on, that it would be good to use as a tool, an excuse to open a space that lets you look where you're not otherwise looking and find yourself with people you're not otherwise meeting, and you can bring that aspect into an educational setting. It would give me a lot of hope to bring this to a senior center, or a daycare center because the focus there is on giving aid, and they don't let the people there do very much themselves. As far as the universities, Carlos will know a little more about that. We've found investigations strictly about the ecosystems of neighborhood communities, but not specifically about unity. Similarly, we haven't found really any initiatives for intervention although we've found a few, and we know that there's interest that we haven't been able to tap into yet, but it would be incredibly cool to mark out a few theses about neighborhood communities and what obstacles or difficulties keep them from being different.

If someone wanted to start an *escalera* in their community, what steps should they take?

You have to download the materials and print them out for yourself. We've found that the best results happen when you add a handwritten personal note to the poster explaining why you're starting this and where you're at and offering that if someone wants to know why you're doing it or if they have any questions or complaints they should come to you. That's the first step that already drives away a lot of people because you're already asking for a minimum level of responsibility. I think that it's best if you're not the only person who's doing it and that you do it with at least the approval or the shared interest of one of your neighbors who also wants to do it. Why? Well because what the *escalera* does is open up meeting spaces so then if in the elevator where people generally look at their phone or at the floor, you and your neighbor talk about La Escalera, great. So, it's useful to add a personalized note and do it with other neighbors, to think of a meeting place and overcome your fear of knocking on doors. It's no big deal to knock on someone's door. You put up a poster and stickers by the mailboxes, you put stickers on your own mailbox, and you put up your personalized note and also it's great if you focus on needs because people respond more to needs than to offers. Offers make people smile but that's all. And when you see that more of your neighbors have put up some stickers, well, go schedule a coffee with someone, knock on a door, or put a note in someone's mailbox if you're shy about knocking, but these people are telling you that they're with you in this adventure up to a certain point. Find out what that limit is and don't get frustrated if only one person joins in, because that's normal, and now you have someone to leave the keys of your

house with. From there, it's a matter of practicality, but for me it's not about that.

Would you say that the majority of people that have contacted you to start an *escalera* are female?

Yes, also the people who are on our social media are mostly women, and the journalists who have interviewed us are mostly women, so it's very marked by gender.

What does growth look like for La Escalera?

For me it has two tracks. It's like we've made a pilot for direct intervention, like a hypodermic needle, in 30 communities and then we've had the opportunity to do another pilot, which we're currently finishing up, to ask ourselves along with institutions and social organizations how we can incorporate this paradigm into our operation, strategies, and actions. I'd really like to have the opportunity to do a complete pilot, I mean, spend a year really installing *escaleras*, but instead of doing it alone, doing it with other important actors in the neighborhood and really create a network. I would really love to do that kind of pilot. I don't think it would be a pilot that would need to be repeated 80 million more times, but I think that there's more learning we can do from this format and that there are very valuable lessons. I don't know if that would be possible because it takes time and therefore it takes money and it's a fairly big ask, but it's one of the things we're trying to see happen. So since I'm kind of resigned to the fact that this possibility won't be realized, it's true that when I now think of growth, I think of at least continuing to do these types of projects that we've been doing now with the Health Center so that it's the social organizations and institutions themselves that borrow this paradigm and develop it within their own experiences and their own techniques, that would be stupendous. Then it would also be fantastic to have either sufficient time to continue feeding these social networks and make them in other languages and that the self-management of *escaleras* can continue, because I almost never tweet or go on Facebook, or a group of people that would do that work; I just don't have the time for that. And it pains me that we have half-finished translations from people who were volunteering to do translations to English, French, Italian, Portuguese. I'd love to be able to keep growing the social networks and the materials enough to keep spreading, to keep planting the seed of this thing and for the people to make La Escalera their own without me even knowing where it's popping up. Those are the two dimensions of growth that are most exciting to me.

Keeping in mind the climate of precarity and political alienation, what keeps the engine of your hope or energy alive?

The issue of political alienation is a heavy one since the height of 15M. The appearance of Podemos (a progressive political party) was a high for some people and not for others, and already the fall has been pretty intense. Even so, I think that La Escalera would give hope to almost anyone because we haven't had a single response that hasn't been beautiful, not even on social media platforms like Twitter where if you use the inclusive language that I use on social media the usual is for people to insult you multiple times a day. La Escalera has only ever received affection, excited messages and emotional messages and also some sad messages about suspicion of child abuse or domestic abuse in that household. I've cried a few times at the end of a project with La Escalera, but it was all good and beautiful, in the sense that it's all human, that it's full of relationships that are human and alive. And I think that it's hard not to have hope with La Escalera because what you're getting from all around you is

hope. It's been a very gratifying experience. It's been very difficult in terms of the work because we thought there would be 5 communities and there have been 30, and on top of that the media, and on top of that the institutions, including universities, it was unmanageable. Since November 24th in 2016 when I published the materials, I've had the sensation of never being able to rest, although I've been able to take off work for two days in a row. It's 24/7 in my head, though. It's run me over, but run me over very happily because everything we've received has been a brutal recognition and I think that it has even been more than what was deserved because, I really believe, it's nothing new; yes, I do believe that it has been able to strike a common chord for many people and that's no small thing. The impact has been large and the response, marvellous. So it has been difficult, hard, stressful, precarious, but the response is so beautiful that I think that holding onto hope has been very easy.



Medialab

Prado





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of the Commons

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Who are you and what's your role in this cultural center?

I'm Marcos García, director of MediaLab. MediaLab is a cultural center in the city of Madrid. I've been the director since 2014, but I've been working here since 2003 in various capacities.

Why the name "MediaLab"?

The name was clearly inspired by MIT'S MediaLab, and also it was during a time when the term "medialab" was used a lot in many other places. It was a very generic name, it's basically a word that refers to a classroom with computers and the internet.

On the website it says, "It's a program of the government department of Culture and Sports of the City of Madrid". When, where, and why was the MediaLab created?

The project began in 2000 when Juan Carrete, who had been the director of National Calcography, was named the director of Conde Duque. In Calcography he had already been thinking about the relationship between art and technology, digital prints, and he had created a work space in calcography, and he came with the idea of also introducing digital technologies to the space of a cultural center like Conde Duque. That's where the work started to initiate a project, and finally in 2002 with Karin Ohlenschlaeger and Luis Rico they started what they called MediaLab Madrid through an exhibition called "Dinámicas fluidas," or fluid dynamics, which connected concepts coming from science but also related to the social science with culture, like the very idea of fluid dynamics. So from there MediaLab Madrid was created through a series of work focused on the mechanism, training, research, and production with some convocations for artists in residence and projects in residence.

The MediaLab website states: "At a time of great change, there are many actors that promote other models of institutions in which citizenship is an active part. MediaLab Prado is placed in this context and wants to play a role in the transformation of cultural institutions. Why locate a citizen's laboratory inside of a City Hall?"

I think that it's a very important question about what a citizen lab brings to a municipal government. I think that the public policies and public institutions that we've inherited are mostly created as service providers, and I think that citizens have a number of gaps that need to be filled, but very few places like ours allow citizens themselves to organize and develop their own ability to create their own solutions. So, I think citizen labs come to revitalize the public through the idea that the common

good refers to people having always been able to organize themselves around a resource, taking care of it and designing rules so that they can maintain it and make sustainable resources for themselves and the community. These are traditional forms that have existed throughout the history of humanity and it's true that they've been lost, especially in urban contexts where the conditions of community are very different. Now the opportunity has come, with the help of digital networks, to activate other forms of operating even in the context of crowded cities. The internet is a laboratory where many forms of cooperation are surfacing that were previously impossible. I would also say that, in general, the public policies of the last 30 years have been established mainly with regard to what is public and what is private, forgetting this third area that has more to do with the self-organized public that has the capacity to generate a kind of social wealth that can't be generated by the state alone and much less by the market. We now have a huge opportunity to explore other forms and models of institutions that people can feel like they're an active part of.

On the website's information on MediaLab, it says that "it's a citizen laboratory that functions as a meeting place for the production of open cultural projects." Can you expand on this definition and explain what MediaLab understands as a "citizen laboratory"?

A citizen laboratory is a place where we can work together on projects and experiments, where mistakes are possible and it's okay to have experiments go poorly; it's a form of learning and a place where we can talk about these experiments with other people. At the same time that we're making this project, or prototype, we're experimenting with a community of practice, learning, and knowledge, and we think that that itself has great value because there aren't public places where we can connect with people we don't know and create projects together.

What was the timeline of creating this citizen laboratory?

In September 2006, our directors Karin Ohlenshalfger and Luis Rico left, and we didn't know what would happen with MediaLab. This coincided with the start of Intermediae, which seemed like it was going to be integrated with Matadero. The future of the project wasn't very certain, and we suggested, based on that experience, that the idea of applying a workshop model made it simpler to connect people and their ideas to collaborators who wanted to carry them out. That became MediaLab. We gave up a little of the exhibition part of bringing in outside projects and focused on MediaLab as a space for experimentation and collaborative production. Years later, we agreed on this aspect and decided we wanted to call it a "citizen's lab," meaning a place where people can come together to do projects. When we refer to "people" we mean everyone. Anyone can participate, regardless of their level of specialization or their field of work. These people can come and develop their own skills in projects that improve our life together. All of these projects are documented and shared with free licenses, which are replicable. This is what creates the network, different local experiences that have an impact in other contexts. Also, it should be noted that this process began under the government when Alvarez del Manzano was the mayor (1991-2003), then it was Alberto Ruiz Gallardón (2003-2011), and now Manuela Carmena (2015-2019). In other words, it's the result of a very long process and we can't forget that with respect to design, the implementation of an institutional model takes a long time. Before we felt as though we were prototyping, and now this citizen lab doesn't have a manager and we don't have another option because it's not a social center. There are people who see characteristics of a self-organized social center, but obviously it's not because

it's a public institution. We also have a great dialogue with libraries that are also thinking about being not only reading spaces but also places for producing knowledge. I think that the designation 'citizen lab' isn't bad, but it's still a work in progress.

What's the role of the digital field in this citizen laboratory?

There's an opportunity to look for other ways to assemble different levels of specialization, experience, and knowledges, and I think the opportunity is not just because there are tools. For example, in our case, when we post an ad for "Image and Technology" or "Collective Intelligence for Democracy", we're looking for people from very different fields and from anywhere in the world. Previously it was very difficult to make such an open, cross-cutting and interdisciplinary call. The channels of communication that existed, above all, were for very specific areas and fields. So, if you wanted to do something international, the system was connected through universities, especially through professional colleges. So now technology simply allows us to have a much greater reach and achieve that diversity. That's one of the aspects, but I also think it's incorporated as a source of inspiration and metaphor. For example, all of a sudden, we're talking about "wiki-constitution", or City 2.0 and Humanism P2P. These metaphors suddenly change the way we think it's possible to do things that, perhaps, weren't possible before for technical reasons. I almost see the potential more in the cultural dimension because suddenly there are a number of practices and values that you want to put into play in a much more active way.

It's unusual to find a citizen laboratory in the institutional field. Why do you think there is such a disconnect between institutions and people?

I think anyone would agree that one of the biggest problems of our time is the distance between people and institutions, which largely occurs by design. For example, cultural policies state that our mission is to bring culture closer to citizens, but whoever announces this, usually the assigned politician or the cultural manager, is already in this announcement creating distance in the name of which they attribute a function or a challenge that needs to be overcome. If we come from another perspective, the idea that culture is a collective issue where everyone participates in one form or another, then the format of the institutional model changes.

Of course, speaking about the process of collective intelligence or culture as a collective matter doesn't imply that all of the contributions are equal. We can also value cultural assets that are necessary to conserve. It's not to say that everything is valued the same, it simply adds much more complexity. Also, it's important to think about how the cultural assets that we consider masterpieces and what not are produced in specific contexts and that many times we don't pay much attention to those contexts and how they motivate someone to be able to carry out the project. So, cultural policies, and not only #232 / Constellation of the cultural majority of MediaLab Prado but cultural policies in general, have tried to identify where talent is in individual people rather than thinking about cooperation or ecosystems. And I understand that this is done so as to simplify things, but now we have the opportunity to address problems with a much higher level of complexity.

The people that participate in the self-organized public use public resources and public institutions such as - I don't know - public transportation, health services, street cleaning. We're all more or less actively using these public services. It's true that in respect to culture there are other issues at play, and that there are some

people that prefer to remain on the margins because they don't want to legitimize certain policies by participating in institutional cultural projects. They feel that their participation would be contributing to the reinforcement of certain policies, and I think that's understandable. There are other people that think that the public has many dimensions and internal tensions, and one way to change it is to take advantage of spaces that are trying to utilize other models and modes of operating.

Has your understanding of “work” changed because of your experience at MediaLab?

I think so. I can speak for myself and from what I've perceived from my peers, but what I've come to realize is that the people we work with at MediaLab are involved in building something positive for this city, which is beneficial and gives us a lot of satisfaction. There are also some contradictions in this job. Often, the dedication is excessive, and I have no time for anything other than work. This creates tensions with other facets of my life. We're all learning. It's important to note that MediaLab exists within a much larger municipal structure that's municipal company called Destination Madrid: Culture, Tourism, and Business. It's a stock corporation, a municipal company that manages all cultural centers and also conference spaces and tourism.

How are decisions made at MediaLab?

In reality, the structure is totally hierarchical and there's an organizational structure that's given to us much like any other organization. It's not a horizontal organization, and it's true that there are people that start working at MediaLab who think that because we promote ourselves as a grassroots cultural space that we also organize our team that way, but we can't do that because we're not a collective that collectively decided to start this project, rather we're just simply hired.

Before, you asked me how it all fits within the public administration. Well, using internet metaphors, MediaLab Prado is not like Wikipedia, which is a self-organizing community, there's a community that's organized and a whole system for making decisions, the Wikimedia Foundation. MediaLab works more like a 2.0 platform, but public, as if it were YouTube, facilitating processes of self-organizing because anyone can upload a video, but as an organization it has a more or less traditional structure. It's true that we try to create spaces where we can think about the projects collectively, that the people in charge of the different parts have a certain autonomy to propose things. I think that it's a space that has certain freedom to propose things and, to the extent that we can, we facilitate that. But I don't think it's that different from other organizations in that sense.

For many collectives, 15M has represented a moment of reorganization, reinvention, or strengthening. Has 15M had any impact on Medialab, or vice versa?

Yes, I think 15M is a very large and complex process where tons of initiatives and trends already present before 15M came together. But what's certain is that many of the people who participated in Medialab's activities participated actively in 15M, and people who became active in 15M ended up in Medialab. So there's a strong connection. You can read 15M various ways, I like the idea that suddenly a lot of us saw that we had the capability to organize ourselves and generate resources, networks of collaboration, networks of support that allowed us to improve our collective lives and also impact the Institutions. So, in that sense, we could say Medialab is part of an ecosystem, of course, from a public initiative and with all its limitations. There's a

part of 15M that has to do with thinking about our rights in common and new ways of managing these rights, of project licenses, a part that was one of the detonating elements that led to 15M's development. Another part had to do with self-organized social centers like El Patio Maravillas (Marvelous Playground), above all there was a strong connection with Tabacalera regarding its origin as an experiment in public projects, in a public structure created for people to be able to organize themselves and build their own social center. Initiatives that have been applying these models of culture for a long time, like Traficantes de Sueños (Dream Traffickers) which for me is a clear example because it's a combination of many things, it's not just a publishing house, it's also a group of activists and investigation. It's a clear example of how to work on the relationship between knowledge and politics and coexistence, and that's exactly what we're trying to do. Think of other ways of working on the relationship between the production of knowledge and of experience and of community, and that's something that the Institutions that we've inherited tend to separate.

I've observed that in this laboratory, people meet in a community of learning to test out prototypes and practices in a process of trial and error. Is this process of experimentation key to a citizen's laboratory project?

I think that on the one hand, it's one of the problems, but also one of its virtues; that's why it's a laboratory. That is, you do the experiment, you want that to happen, and sustainability is going to depend on that group or other people wanting to continue the project. It's going to depend, too, on our capacity in Medialab to motivate and facilitate connections with other spaces that can give it continuity, to allow the project to become sustainable. But from experience I'd say that the key and the real potential lie more in experimenting in community, in the relationships established and the projects that then reach beyond the laboratory, than in thinking, "Through this experiment, we're going to reach a specific objective" that might be, for example, creating a sustainable company. I think that that's one of the principal weaknesses of the project because many people ask, "What happens with the prototypes," and yes, a lot of them have an impact, but we insist on Medialab being a place for experimentation... not guaranteeing an impact that's going to go further than the laboratory but rather just trying to build it and recognizing that this is a really slow process. And I think this is the difference between this and other public politics, particularly since the crisis, which are oriented towards entrepreneurship, towards generating companies, finding entrepreneurs, and I think that the results they've obtained, in terms of sustainable companies having an impact, are very limited and many times these projects are defended as spaces of learning where people also have to learn to fail, etc. If those are the virtues of the politics of entrepreneurship, I think the place to generate more communities, more learning, more experimentation, and a place for failure is in the two citizen laboratories where we directly recognize that learning from error is the goal, and it's not about putting all our resources towards an entrepreneur because they're going to build a sustainable company and that's going to generate employment. It's a very direct way to tackle problems that are really complex; so we prefer not to promise impact with indicators of whether it's a success, and paradoxically, we think that that's one of the keys to be able to eventually produce something innovative, impactful. So more than putting an emphasis on innovation and transformative capacity, we're emphasizing experimentation and that, I believe, generates a more comfortable space for the participants who don't feel pressured. Of course, people feel pressure because they're in a visible, public space, and they want to give their best, but from an institutional framework, we try not to have that pressure.

Medialab has said that “Activity is structured in work groups, open convocations for the production of projects, collaborative investigation, and communities of learning regarding a great diversity of topics.” Can any project fit in Medialab? Do you have any selection criteria?

Above all, the projects have to be open, that is, their design itself should be open to connection between different worlds, that's important to us. If they're projects that fit very clearly in one specific environment or discipline, we think there are already many Institutions that correspond to that area.

The website says the following: “Any person can make a proposal or join others to carry out projects in a collaborative way.” In your experience, can any kind of person really join and propose projects?

We always say here that even if something is supposedly open or presents itself as open, that doesn't mean that it's effectively accessible to anyone. There are a ton of barriers of every type: physical and symbolic ones that make people who don't feel like the messaging is directed at them and don't feel welcome to enter a space like this one. So that's where what we call “mediation” is necessary, and this means actively trying to eliminate these barriers so that effectively any person can feel welcome and want to participate. It's a really long process, I don't think any Institution will ever fully accomplish that idea. It's more like a goal, a horizon that we should strive towards. It's a fiction exactly like the supposed universality of public services, so we try to first recognize the limitation and then put mechanisms in place to solve that problem. Mediation is everything that has to do with generating contexts of hospitality, of listening, of translation, of connection, of seeking out the adequate language to be able to communicate with certain people, etc. So that's a very large learning process, but I think it's important to recognize that there's a problem and try to put mechanisms in place to fix it.

“From this context, we can see that it's necessary to face the challenges of our time with a multiplicity of perspectives and knowledge, and that we need to build spaces of coexistence, debate, and action among a diverse range of people.” What challenges is Medialab talking about?

The first one is the challenge of social cohesion, of models of Institution where people are a part of them and can contribute, and how Institutions can incorporate the value of users and citizens. I think this doesn't just happen in public Institutions, any organization in these times is thinking about their relationship between the internal and the external and how to generate intermediary spaces between them, which is essential. Of course, we're also facing other challenges with a good amount of care, like climate change, unemployment, poverty. In this case, sometimes we introduce them as content in workshops, for example, thinking about human rights or inequality or the issue of mobility; we introduce them carefully and not so much as problems that we're going to resolve, but rather as spaces to inhabit. And also because they're spaces, if you inhabit them, of creativity, we bring that in. I would also like to add that there are subjects we want to tackle that aren't about resolving real problems or specific subjects, but rather generating questions, and that too is the potential of the cultural sphere. So, working with the more artistic part of everything, for example, fiction or critical design, everything that at times, as a citizen laboratory, we've separated, and I think that's a problem. In reality, if we think about it, our description of the citizen laboratory as a space of experimentation comes

close to the anthropological definition of culture as an environment that helps us learn to live together, creating tools of communication and relation, but also more in the sense of culture as a combination of cultural goods including fiction.

What potential relationship do you see between the concept of citizen laboratories and the institutional system of formal education?

We think that the education system and educational Institutions, schools and universities, could incorporate citizen laboratories as a way to connect with the outside world. To learn through doing, with others who aren't the same as us, because in the classroom we're normally always with people who are the same age, etc. It's not about exchanging one model for another, it's about amplifying it and complementing it, so that a part of learning is given intergenerationally, with other disciplines, in projects that have to do with a more personal context, with the neighborhood, and I think that's the principal contribution possible, [] to be able to experiment with that model. There are some universities where they've tried that, for example in the University of Salamanca, which launched a Medialab, but also now for example in the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey (Technological Institute of Monterrey) with that whole project Openlab, the "Citizens who learn" workshop where they're exploring how to introduce the methodology of citizen laboratories into the educational system itself. There are many traditions behind projects like this, like service learning, work in communities, that is, I don't want to say there was nothing before, but I believe that working with a place and an interface like this, which really facilitates connections between different worlds, has a massive potential. The connection with the educational sphere is almost the primary one, for me that's the clearest one because fundamentally, creating spaces of experimentation and play is creating spaces of learning.

What does "to educate" mean in the context of Medialab?

I think that we prefer to use the word "learning" rather than "education" because "education" assumes that there's an educator transmitting information, and here everyone learns as they go; the act of doing something together implies learning something together. That's the primary lesson: learning to do something together and learning to cooperate, which is something that isn't usually practiced within the formal education system. In that system, everything is based on individual learning. What would those lessons in cooperation be? Well, they have to do more with empathy, with knowing how to listen, learning how to articulate your contributions, learning how to criticize, to receive criticism, to have a suggestion rejected, learning to have a suggestion integrated, learning to give credit, to know what contributions each person made. There's another challenge, I say 'challenge' because we still haven't reached it completely, and it has to do with documentation, with how we ensure the learning is shared and it helps the networks of cooperation go beyond the work group that's making that particular prototype. That's what suddenly generates connections with the outside world, and we don't know what will happen through the network, maybe suddenly someone contacts us from Medellín because they're interested in that project and thanks to that, the project can reactivate. That part of the documentation is something that projects do very well, but in general, there are some lessons that would be very good to make systematic, for example, in the university. It's a habit, a practice that you don't just learn in a quick prototyping workshop. And I think that that's really something that isn't usually in the educational programs, but I do see it, I'm thinking about it now, that it could be a good core subject for everyone, because in reality it's a basic tool to eventually learn to learn.

After reading about the project, I think that these would be some of the key concepts of Medialab; can you explain them to us? “Prototyped,” “Free Culture,” “Procomún” (Pro-Commons), “Transversality”

Prototyped

Well, the idea is to bring an idea into the practical sphere, to build it, not to stay in the stage of designing what we’re going to do but to start to build it. It’s the first phase of construction for a project where not all the parts need to work, the most experimental phase, the phase that invites future contributions and changes. So, that’s what we refer to when we say “prototype.”

Free Culture

Free culture is a concept that comes from the Anglo-Saxon world, coined by Lawrence Lessig, particularly from the use of free licenses, which came from the environment of free software to be applied to cultural goods, above all the creative commons license. It comes from this technical definition of free culture as something involved with free licenses that gives users a series of permissions to be able to transform, use, and disseminate content, etc. I think that it’s also a change in focus regarding how to tackle the question of cultural goods. We can say that all culture is free and that it’s always been that way and that it’s not a recent issue, and that limitations that make a certain amount of sense regarding printing and ways to supposedly incite creation have come to disincentivize it. So, if we emphasize the freedom all people have to receive and recreate any cultural good internally, culture will always be free. The conversations, the parodies, the jokes that freely circulate where you don’t even know who created them. Really, we have to realize that the private part is a very small part and it’s really important because many times it’s the cultural goods with the most dissemination, the most presence, that influence all our lives, but that also allow us to critically analyze the so-called creative industries. It’s also true that sustainability, for people who traditionally have dedicated themselves to culture, writing or composing songs, doesn’t clearly lie in the free culture sphere. So that’s something to think about too, something that can’t just be resolved easily.

Procomún (Pro-Commons)

Procomún, the common networks, refers to organizational methods a group or community uses regarding a resource, or how they’ve been able to design guidelines that make that resource sustainable: a forest, pasture, an aquifer, but also the community itself. That’s where you get a really interesting relationship between the knowledge that has to be developed for that resource to be sustainable over time and also the coexistence needed for it to be the community itself, and there’s another layer too, which is the economy, the economy of survival; so, in these moments, that’s where the greatest source of inspiration to rethink public institutions and forms of market economy is.

Transversality

I think we’ve inherited an institutional and organizational system of knowledge and experienced based on the metaphor of a tree, where everything has its place. We find that metaphor in the University and also in the ways of organizing the government in a council and in the state, and in practice we can see that it’s difficult for two

departments in different places to collaborate, or for someone from one area of the government to do something that goes beyond their field of expertise, it's really complicated, it causes problems. Leaving your area is a problem. That's where we get the idea of transversality, of how to design tools that facilitate cooperation between different worlds and that is really something necessary to tackle problems as complex as global warming, migration, poverty, you can't do it with just the efforts of poorly coordinated politicians. So I think that that hyperspecialized model has had its moment but now we need to work in a way where all those knowledges can come together, and that's where citizen laboratories can offer a space of connection in that sense. That would be one thing, and then transversality in the sense of what's outside the organization and within it, the incorporation of users that we mentioned before.

What have you learned through developing this laboratory?

Well, I hope we've learned practices of mediation, of listening, of connection, of translation, of hospitality; certainly, that's what we try to make Medialab about.

What have this laboratory's references been?

I'd like to mention the whole hacker and free software movement, which has been so important for the development of the internet and that have also been laboratory spaces for experimentation with open technology and totally open forms of organization and meeting in festivals like the hack meetings where anyone can suggest anything for the schedule and there's no defined schedule from above by anyone, but rather it's done in a self-organized way. So, that's a clear source of inspiration. Also for the models of documentation, of how to manage communities online and how to translate that to real life, the idea of fast prototyping, everything that's continued to be a part of 'maker' culture. From the educational sphere, theories that have accumulated more than 100 years experience in project-based or community-based learning, constructivist theories, I think right now we have the opportunity to bring a lot of those theories into practice, as well as many digital tools. I'd also like to remember the critical vision that hacker culture offers toward technologies, that's also key I think, not falling into technological solutionism. Then, in self-organized spaces like Social Centers, that's also been a source of inspiration. Spaces more for artists, for collectives that have worked in Madrid. Then we've learned a lot from people like the Foro de Vida Independiente (Forum of Independent Life) when we've worked with themes like functional diversity. Also the project was possible thanks to many people, academics who have dedicated a lot of time to contribute to what happens in Medialab to think of it from the investigation standpoint and who have connected it with other genealogies and traditions, for example, like literature and science fairs. We can also think about precedents that we've discovered later and that have helped us learn, for example, moments when suddenly an Institution appears that hadn't existed before, and it suddenly becomes popular and seems like it's always existed, but that's not how it is, for example the appearance of cafes in the 17th century is something that's really useful to study as spaces of discussion. In Oxford, they called them penny universities where anyone could talk and where hierarchies were dissolved. There's also the emergence of networks of public libraries, public parks, and how the industrial city responds to the necessity of generating meeting places, places where you can breathe, and sometimes those are decisions made from the top down, not everything has to happen from the bottom up. Now we're hearing a lot about from the bottom up, the whole workers' movement, and the emergence of the Atheneums and networks of mutual support, everything

with libertarian anarchism, which is an enormous source of inspiration; and all the people who are studying the issue of the pro-commons and are already thinking about the digital aspect, how to learn about those spaces of self-organization.

Considering the climate of political discontent and insecurity, how do you maintain hope and energy at Medialab?

Of course, the satisfaction of project participants, from users, collaborators, or promoters of the project. I believe these people really highly value Medialab. We always say that Medialab is its community, it's nothing more than the community of people who actively participate in the projects, and that's what sustains it. For example, in 2014 I believe, they announced that Telefónica was going to take this space, and it was clearly the community who reacted and in a few days, that plan stopped moving forward. And that's what moves us, to see that it has an impact on so many people and such a large potential.

What does 'growth' mean for Medialab?

To be part of a wider network. I believe the phase we're in is not so much prototyping a citizen laboratory, which is still there, but thinking more about what happens around it, in the ecosystem. Of course, that has to do with not only institutional design but more almost with city projects or public policy. We're promoting the creation of a network of citizen laboratories in their own districts and the contribution to many of the Institutions that already exist like the network of libraries, the network of cultural centers, the Madrid Salud (Madrid Health) Centers, in the schools. We want there to be citizen laboratories in every neighborhood, places where you can do projects because it can have a transformative effect from a cultural perspective. We want everyone to leave space in their lives to learn, to collaborate with others, and to value that. That's what I'm referring to when I say a cultural change, and I think it's already happening on a smaller level but growing, and that can change as the designs for institutional models change.

La Tremenda





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
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Collective's name
La Tremenda

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you, and how are you involved with La Tremenda (literally, 'The Great One')?

I'm Mireia Mora, I'm a partner-worker of La Tremenda, a cooperative that was born relatively recently, about a year ago. I define my position as a cultural communicator, although I come from a combination of disciplines; I'm a social educator, I previously did a postgraduate degree in youth politics, and I spent many years working with adolescents in a work environment and ten years later I did a masters in cultural management to be able to incorporate myself into another field. I've been working in the cultural sphere the last seven years, and now with a few colleagues we decided to build the cooperative.

La Tremenda was born in Barcelona, and there are two people from Girona and one who's Basque, but anyway, we fit the pattern of white women between 24 and 35.

When, where, and why was La Tremenda started?

I don't think it was started because of one specific thing; it was born through many processes, some personal and others collective. Of the people currently involved in the project, I'm the only one who was there in the first moment and in my case there's a personal history of a very important loss, which was of my father, and this made me rethink everything. I didn't want to keep working where I was working, and I wanted to investigate what an independent project would be like where you mark out the values and the red lines that define what you do. But that's my history, and if you join it with that of the others, I think it's a political process which has occurred in these last five or six years and that, as a result of 15M, many windows were opened into discussions and suddenly, things that seemed static could be deconstructed and new, different things could be proposed in their place. There was a social permeability that allowed a lot of people to live through processes that we hadn't lived through before; others, like me, had been politically organized when we were adolescents and got pretty disillusioned, so 15M gave us hope again. There were also the citizen movements,¹ the one focused on culture failed spectacularly, it was horrible. My critique is that we did a trade-union speech, we talked from the sector and for the sector, so there wasn't the possibility of citizens considering that it was their own thing, like the school or the hospital was. And it didn't get farther than that, but it's true that many other things emerged. And there are many cooperative-based projects that have their origins there.

¹ The term used here, *Mareas ciudadanas*, translates literally to 'citizen wave' or 'citizen tide' and refers to movements springing from 15M centered on water rights, housing, public health, etc

Why this name?

Well, listen, the process of finding a name was really fun and enriching. We worked with Metromuster, actually, another cooperative that's an audiovisual producer, and it came up while we were playing around with laying out what was our DNA, what were the words that defined us, including colors, songs, anything to help generate an identity. From there, we brainstormed words, concepts, and adjectives and this one appeared and it seemed like it had a lot of power. That we were a cooperative of women and at the same time it evoked something fun, because this is something you say to children. It seemed sexy to us.

This is a non-profit feminist cooperative for cultural and social processes. Why have you chosen the cooperative as a legal structure?

Well that's also a bit of engineering, we had the luck that as we came to the social economy when there were already a lot of people who had done similar things, we had learned from them and we hadn't made the same mistakes. There wasn't any doubt that we would be a cooperative in the sense that what we were interested in was seeing how we could organize ourselves to manage the work and how we would share the responsibility of developing the project and generating horizontal spaces of decision-making along the way. And regarding being nonprofit, the truth is that it kind of had to do with being able to choose to access public resources or help managing the space or developing projects. It was a super practical decision.

In the description of your cooperative, you talk about working from a "feminist, antiracist, cooperative perspective in order to act as a multiplier of these values in the realities in which we intervene."

What activities are these perspectives concentrated on?

It's not so much about choosing projects according our characteristics but rather that these characteristics can imprint themselves on any of the projects or processes we undertake. This already gives you a sense of the red lines that we were talking about before, for example, I'm not going to manage the social networks of a music festival where there's just one woman in fifteen scheduled groups because you're not reflecting reality. We're fifty one percent of the global population, and you're not reflecting our life. And in respect to the other topic, that is, how to go about imprinting these values? Well, it depends. Although communication seems like one thing, all the projects have such different natures that we go along inventing new methodologies for each case. We're deeply dedicated to giving visibility to women and searching for that intersectionality we mentioned before. We always keep this in mind so that other voices and other realities can emerge because in the end, the media always repeats the same things, and it's really tiring.

What realities do you want to intervene in?

We're most interested in what has to do with communities, with participation, with breaking the fourth wall. We're interested in participating in projects that break all that logic of cultural goods as consumerism, and that doesn't mean that suddenly we can get involved in something that's more in the vein of a festival or something like that. Right now, we're working in Decidim Barcelona ("We, Barcelona, decide" in Catalan) (<https://www.decidim.barcelona>) which is a tool of the Barcelona Council for direct digital or face-to-face participation. We're also working on a project with

the council of Prat which intervenes in the culture, education, and socio-educational fabric of the city. They share creative and artistic disciplines in the social centers, but they make these entities with a grassroots local citizen base, so it's a very interesting combo. We're participating in that, and for example as part of this we proposed a participatory plan to start up the whole communication plan. So we've done a series of activities with those involved in all these entities and schools including the administration itself to decide the name, to make the line graphic.

Would you define your work as an act of facilitation and mediation in the sphere of communication?

I like to think so, because what's more I have the dual experience of working as a social educator and a communicator. In fact, we describe ourselves as generating communities that collaborate in and recognize cultural projects. Without the communities that sustain us, we're nothing, we're no one.

In a published interview, the article contextualizes you within the network of the Catalonia social economy. Can you explain the relationship between the cooperative and this model of economic organization?

Here in Catalonia, the social economy is a very important and well-organized network, because it's clearly articulated. There are various super-organizations that bring together all of that. As we're a recently created cooperative, we aren't formally part of these structures but the Network of Solidarity-based Economy (XES in its Catalan abbreviation) which is like a model, and all of us thriving actors are a part of that, or we should be. What's more, it's sectorized, you can work in your specific environment, but then there are cross-curricular meeting points. Right now, we're undergoing the process to incorporate ourselves into XES. What we're already doing is cooperating with other actors. Three or four days ago, we put on a presentation ceremony of Leticia Dolera's book, for example, and we did it with two other cooperatives: a bookstore in Sans, and Critic, which is a digital media communications agency. The good thing is that we're able to reinvent ourselves as we like, and we resist being pigeonholed. It's about getting rid of the rigid structure of assigned functions. We're here to break down boundaries.

How many salaried people are there? How are salaries maintained?

There are three of us workers, and four collaborators. These collaborators, what they do is temporary work in certain moments. It's important because being seven people seems like an entire empire, but it's not. Some of us still have other jobs on the side. Just right now, it's time to cover the regular salaries of us workers, and we're facing what many cooperatives have faced, which is financial insecurity. We generate projects in order to be independent and autonomous and not depend on someone else exploiting you for their own enrichment. But first of all you haven't thought about structure, there are always things that escape you and you never think about the hidden cost there; suddenly, there are taxes that you didn't know unless you're coming from an entrepreneurial or economic career. Given all of that, we've had a pretty good start, we're generating enough income and we have decent salaries, given the circumstances. Our salaries would be the minimum in the private market, but we're content. And yes, I know I'm working more hours than before, but it's also true that I'm more content than before.

**What does “work” mean in a feminist cooperative?
What philosophy of labor do you practice?**

I think it's not so much the type of work but rather two important things. On one side, the fact that when we leave work, we take on all the reproductive work among us and we assume that all of us do it all outside the house. None of us are mothers in our own homes yet, but we're already practicing this work. Ultimately, I've seen a lot of confusion because when you talk about reproductive work, suddenly there's the idea of maternity, but I care for my mother and I have a partner and we have a house and I have two cats that I also take care of. All of that has to be added into a consideration of work, which has to translate into shorter work days to be able to make work compatible with life and not just caretaking roles but also time for enjoyment, studying something, going dancing, whatever it is. I think that's important, and the other red lines that we've drawn and that are inalienable are that we don't work with financial entities. The Caixa (a bank) has a marvelous foundation with many resources, but we're going to try by any means not to have to use any of them because for us, they're part of the problem and although it's a respectable thing to redirect resources that come from the problem in order to do good, we don't want to do it.

How is work split up? How are decisions made?

We have a weekly team meeting which doesn't necessarily correspond to the one outlined in our statutes. According to our internal rules, we have a plenary meeting that's independent and delegates the general council to make decisions, but we also have a meeting that's focused on the real work regarding each project. Additionally, it's true that because of our management needs, one other person and I are responsible for a more general financial view, a view of the billing situation or of numbers and for example another of us is responsible for our social media strategy. There are things that demand immediate attention and others go to the margins. As we have our strategy marked out, there's confidence that everyone will do their job well. Then we have a Telegram group that goes like crazy, they run through a lot of data and make decisions really quickly.

Does La Tremenda receive any institutional support?

They've supported us from Coòpolis, which is a project that was started a little over a year ago, and it's an Athenaeum Cooperative of Barcelona located in Can Battló in Sants, and it's managed by the Sants cooperatives, which is a neighborhood with a really rich web of things like this. The space is sustained through public subsidies, so in a way we have had support in that sense. But we don't receive subsidies yet, and I say “yet” because we don't have any problem with getting public money. What happens is that we don't receive public subsidies but a lot of the projects that we work on are for Public Administration; for example, we work a good amount for the Council of Barcelona. At least in four projects, we worked for the Council of Prat, which is an institution, and this July we're working on a project for a dance festival on the street in Figueras. The project isn't public, but they receive a ton of public money and some of that gets to us through them. But that's normal in the field of culture, because all the private structures get public money because culture is considered a common good, it doesn't necessarily get developed as such but as it's a common good; we put everyone's money into it.

15M indicated the beginning of an important cultural paradigm-shift. For many collectives, it represented the beginning of community organization and for others, a space for rethinking themselves. What has it meant for this cooperative?

I think we could say that we consider ourselves children of 15M, we participated in it, we believed in it, but so many years have passed since that moment, it hasn't had an immediate reaction effect. It's true that a series of events have occurred, movements, various explosions, that certainly it's led to the making of a kind of nurturing broth that's allowed us and many other people to dare to start up self-managed projects. There was a rupture, like a blow to the head or something like that. For me personally it was a feeling of "Okay, this really can happen." It was "the possibility of." I was pretty disenchanted in an age where I didn't find any comfortable political place, and the 15M was really hope-inspiring.

You wrote on your webpage that "La Tremenda" is a cooperative that has as an objective cultural and social management and communication." What kind of cultural and social management are we talking about?

Cultural management is an expression that we got from the academic sphere, probably. I did a Master's in what was called "Official Master's in Cultural Management." I presented myself as a cultural agent and I'd eliminated that phrase from my vocabulary because I didn't feel comfortable with it, it seemed like too technocratic of a word. It's evident that we can coordinate a project, equipment, we can lead conferences, and of course management implies all these things that we like, but we've been eliminating the word "management." What happens is that when you print out rules and you register yourself and get notarized, which is worth money, that's your cover letter for a ton of things, among which are being able to receive subsidies, enter public contests, etc. In the private sphere, no one ever asks for the Statutes but in the public sphere they do. So we needed a wide and understandable synopsis because everything was too coded and it wasn't useful to work with.

Why work on a cultural management project when we already have institutional cultural management?

Well, first of all because it's clear that the institutions aren't following through on a series of objectives, and there's a critical mass of us who believe that they should be, and that someone has to respond to these needs; and then because on a personal level I've drifted to this, because really the institutions are all there is until we organize ourselves and manage our resources, reappropriating them because they're ours and we can create a different network. But it's clear that this is a long path because there's still a long way to go, nothing's immediate.

You said that La Tremenda "was born with the purpose of generating a meeting point between cooperativism and the world of culture." What culture are we talking about?

When we talk about this meeting between the social economy and culture, ultimately we're talking about "new cultural economies," and I always have to say that we're not new. We're different from capitalism, but we're not new. In fact, if we look at our history, for example, in the dramatic arts many companies were cooperatives and not only cooperatives but also, at other points in time and with other theoretical tools, they also appealed to forms of coexistence and forms of affection and caring that came from the idea of the common. We have the Comediants (Catalan for

comedians) who have this shared space where they live, so we're not new, the thing is that we're not hegemonic so it seems like we're strange or we're inventing things. We're making the change of putting our lives and ourselves as the central priority, not economic gain, and we're trying to generate spaces where the thing that happened with the "Red Tide²" doesn't happen to us, where the citizens said "It's your project and your reclamation; it's very good, I can share it or not, but I'm not a part of it."

You wrote, "We want for this to be a mechanism that lets us investigate new forms of relationships among the people who accept it and the projects in which it takes part. In the agency, we base our contribution on the idea of cultural ecosystems, in the certainty that cultural experiences can't exist without the communities that sustain them." Why is it important to talk about cultural ecosystems?

Well, because it's true that we come from having worked a long time on culture and when you're there, the story is, "culture is this one thing and these people make it, and then there's these other people who consume it and there's an institution that gives it a little money." That's not the truth. We have a thousand layers, a thousand realities, in every neighborhood there's surely twenty five different cultural ecosystems; with the emergence of technology, suddenly we're all producers of content and it's opened the debate about licenses and up to what point you have to cover rights for the author for something made twenty five years ago. In a sense, that's everyone's, and you've already been covered for your work, so yes, it seems to us like there are a lot of ecosystems. And regarding the term mechanism, that's a word that I love and that I reclaim a lot. It has to do with not being rigid and saying that we can make or do things that they didn't just give us because of what we are.

You explain, "We believe that in a horizontally, democratically based culture dedicated to egalitarian access, allowing for the development of a critical worldview and being able to generate emancipatory thought." For many collectives and cooperatives, horizontality represents a challenge that in some cases has made them question its viability. What does it mean for you to aim for a horizontally based culture?

I think that we still haven't had much time to reflect because we haven't lived through the things that they've lived through. It's true that projects need leadership and even being shared, there's always someone with a particular weight or visibility that the others don't have, or a certain award, fair or unfair depending on a thousand variables. It's true. When we talk about horizontal culture, we're referring to this phrase, this leitmotif, that we all share, which is, "culture is a right," but what right? I turn to the fact that there are various rights relating to culture: access to it, of course; and also a training in understanding this right (from childhood on) because it is the key that allows us to reach other objectives. But it's also the right to create, not only to see or consume or enter the theatre. Similarly, if what you like to do is go onstage, what tools are we facilitating the use of for this? There's also the right to think together of what kinds of cultural needs a community has in a specific neighborhood or city, or the right to have spaces critical of politics. In this case, in Barcelona, the Barcelona Institute of Culture has been complicit throughout many years in the processes of gentrification and expulsion of locals from neighborhoods, and there's not a space, I won't say a space of shared governance because that's super revolutionary and they'd knock me down for it,

² Referring here to an activist movement against unemployment emerging from 15M

but a space where you're able to criticize what's happening. So there are a lot of rights, and that's the sense we're talking about when we talk about horizontality.

And when you talk about “emancipatory thought,” I wondered, in respect to what, and in what direction?

Well, as we do everything as a contribution to a wider movement, not only economic but also political, we want people trained and empowered and capable of being critical and constructive. When we say “emancipatory,” above all we're referring to being protagonists and sovereigns of our own lives.

Is La Tremenda a political project? If so, what kind of politics are we talking about?

This is interesting because the rhythms of activism and knowledge, including on a theoretical level, are different among us. We haven't gone through the same routes and journeys. We don't function from a theoretical standpoint as much as by laying broad foundations where we can all be comfortable. And I'm going to return to putting reproductive work on the table because it's certainly something relevant for us because of this day and age, because of our desires or vital realities. We want to really focus on this, on how to incorporate something that's going to happen no matter what, which is caretaking, in the project we're working on.

What would some of the hallmarks of La Tremenda be?

I know that now that feminism has made the leap into the mainstream, it seems opportunistic, but I do believe that it's an essential word for us and that it defines us on a personal and collective level. I think that another thing that defines us is talking about what we were talking about before regarding the rights of culture, this wide perspective, distancing ourselves from consumer goods and not getting bogged down in something kind of old. Yes, it's a right, but what right, and how many, and how, and how many resources do we devote to protecting these rights. I would like to think that at some point we'll do a direct intervention relating to what you said about how we can intervene. And another hallmark is intercooperation, that's another important word. Although we're new, we've done that from the first minute. From the beginning, one of the first things was to talk to everyone and listen to their stories and see where your work starts, where mine ends, in what moments we can overlap, where we can collaborate, all of this really interests us, and we continually keep it in mind.

What does growth mean for La Tremenda in non-capitalistic terms?

To grow, I hope, means to be happier. In the end, all we do, we do to be happier. We'll see how this is going to work out in terms of hours, salaries, and responsibilities. The objective of all of this was not to depend on people who couldn't guarantee us happiness and who were going to try to get more and more money for themselves, not us.

How does La Tremenda maintain hope in times of political discontent and insecurity?

Our hope is sustained by the fact that we're a project that works. It's really common to say that but it's true, you get a lot of satisfaction when you have a plan and you try it out and all the steps you'd laid out happen as planned, and you face problems

and conflicts and you resolve them, and you get an email or a call about proposing a new project and you see what you've done. For me, it's made me super content, but that's because I've never worked freelance, but now, if we don't do it, there's no one who's going to save it, or explain it, or put money towards solving it. And when you see that there's no one else and you do it and it goes well and people are content, I guess there's a mix of endorphins, ego, to think that we're doing something that in that moment could be kind of historic. When I say historic, I'm referring to the idea that we're planting seeds that are going to germinate and change things.

In a year of life with La Tremenda, what have you learned about your cooperative process? What have been the most important challenges?

Firstly, that it's an important effort that you have to believe in and really want, because there are moments where you might give out, and I've learned what we talked about in the beginning about how error makes up part of the process. We already know this, but you make mistakes. I'm the only person left of the three of us who started out here initially, and to manage on an emotional and laboural level has been hard, and it's made me strong. I think that yes, I think that I was more vulnerable a year ago, certainly, because I didn't have this workspace where I feel good and cared for and kept company by my colleagues. I would say that yes, it's made me strong.

Metromuster





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what is your relation to the Project Metromuster?

Xavi: We're speaking on behalf of Metromuster, which is a cooperative that's a few years old now. I'm Xavi Artigas and I have a background in sociology. I've been getting by for a long time in various trades, and I finally turned to the audiovisual world pretty late, exactly 10 years ago, and since then we've been forging this project. I started this project and immediately Xapo joined, and this project was mixed with 15M which was a really important movement that occurred throughout all of Spain, and especially in Barcelona. Since then we've begun to work on this project that has now become a cooperative...

Xapo: I'm Xapo Ortega, and I have a background in architecture, graphic design, and photography, and at one point, I got involved in social movements in Barcelona about 15 years ago. From there, I connected with 15M and met Xavi during the audiovisual commission, we began gathering everything that was happening surrounding 15M, in the camping plaza as well as outside of it: protests, actions, etc. All of this was mixed into the first project we made together, *Ciutat Morta*, that originated in 15M and that we've worked on for four years until now, when we've built the cooperative from other audiovisual projects.

When, where, and why was Metromuster created?

Xavi: Metromuster was created as an artistic project of mine around the year 2000. We made an important audiovisual project in 2008 with the specific objective of making a collaborative documentary called *No Res*. This documentary made its debut in 2011, at the same time as 15M which was also when Xapo and I met. From that moment on, Metromuster took the renewed power that was generated in the 15M movement. In 2012, we began working on *Ciutat Morta*, which is the most well known project that we've done.

Why the name "Metromuster"?

Xavi: Metromuster is a name that comes from a personal experience in which I had a failed artistic project in the context of a social movement that occurred in Paris. It was called "Anti pup" they were people who protested against publicity and dedicated their time to staging interventions on big advertisements in the Paris metro. In that context and inspired by their movement, I decided to make my personal project tearing down parts of those big publicity billboards that were in the Paris metro. And once they were torn down and put on metal sheets of quite a large size, they were totally decontextualized from their purpose of advertising a product, but it ended up just as background noise (In Paris, the metro advertisements

are pretty impressive) and from there I would make artworks with black ink stencils or engravings. The name is a play on words. I have a degree in sociology from Germany and the word for this design in German is *muster* and since it came from the metro it became "Metromuster." It's been a long time since the name has stopped making sense and as Xapo says it has already become absorbed into language and has a connotation for what our project is that has nothing to do with the original Paris project.

Why did you choose to have a legal entity of a cooperative for this project?

Xapo: Because we thought that beyond the fact that our work transforms outwardly, that is to say, our audiovisual projects try to have a social impact that changes things in society that we don't like in order to get closer to a model of social justice that today we're very far from... well, when we were forming ourselves as a business, because that's what we still were, we thought that transformation shouldn't only be outward but should also have impacts on our lives and be relevant to us in work settings in a way that's different than how it's been all of our lives and should also transform our habits of work and respect. We're in a precarious position, but there are some things that are different from the outside working world: the way we relate to each other, the horizontality of the work, how decisions are made... all of that is important.

There's talk of Metromuster becoming an independent audiovisual producer and I wonder, independent from what and whom?

Xavi: We have this slogan that we like a lot which is "deconstructing the codes of activism, audiovisual cultures." The label of independent firm is given to us, I imagine, because we're not a big production company that depends on the usual channels to make themselves lucrative in this business, like Mediapro or other big production companies that focus on documentaries do. We don't forget that in lowering the subsidization of the audiovisual world, in this country the documentary has become very fashionable, which is great, but many big production companies who were dedicated to making fiction have gone ahead with documentaries because it is possible to make a better documentary with less resources. We think it's a good thing, but this automatically makes us have to compete with big business, and then the idea of being independent pays more in this sense. We always have to be very imaginative when it comes to financing. For example, we're pioneers in crowdfunding, which today seems totally normal and obvious, but we can say with pride that we were the first production company that created a documentary with the strategy of crowdfunding. We continue to be very creative and we've creatively met the large economic necessities of making audiovisual projects, so we also consider ourselves independent in this.

There are six paid employees working in the cooperative. How do you finance this type of work?

Xapo: We're in a process of change right now, we're developing the business's economic plan. We've spent a little more than two years as a cooperative, and part of the finances comes from the direct work that we do, meaning commissions that we get to develop a creative idea and execute an audiovisual work, whether it's a political campaign or related to a social movement. That's one part of the income and since a year or so, we started to finance ourselves in other ways. Through the public finance of ICA (Cultural Institute of Spain) and ICED, and the foundations that are in the social field and would be interested in our project, and we work to find where we could capture those revenues. We're sort of in

a transition in which we're no longer doing certain types of commissions that don't do much for us other than make a little money and instead trying to dedicate ourselves to making big projects with private and public funding.

What does “work” mean in the context of this cooperative?

Xavi: To be a cooperative doesn't necessarily mean that the work is different. In fact, a criticism that we have in this country is that there are many cooperatives that function like any other business. There are many fake cooperatives that make their workers become cooperative members so that they can't unionize. It's supposed that when you're in a cooperative, everyone is the owner, therefore you don't have a boss because everyone is the boss. If done right and within the logic of what we call a social and solidarity-based economy, cooperatives can be a great tool to get rid of hierarchies between workers, which is complicated because in a world where there's so much specialization, it's not easy to form these work relations in a totally horizontal manner. We're learning, but we deeply believe that if it is done right, the results can lead to the kind of working life which is much more relaxed, in principle, without the pressure that comes from a hierarchy. Instead, work is voluntary, which is also dangerous because when someone has complete motivation and identification with the project, it can lead to infinite self-exploitation. We're in a learning process, I think we're still not doing everything yet, but I'm confident that it's going to end up well and be worth it – even though our salaries are lower than an average wage. It's true that the structure that we created is much more resilient, and this is evident in the fluctuations in the market. We have very slow growth, but when we reach a standard that will allow us to live well, and I think that we're not that far away, I think we're going to be quite resistant to any threat and, above all, what we're learning in terms of human relationships is priceless.

Xapo: I would add that in our case, in Metromuster, we're a non-profit cooperative; that is to say that all of the economic surplus of each year aren't handed out to working members, although we could raise the salary for next year. Being “nonprofit” means that we devote a series of human resources (which we try to measure and manage) to projects that don't have funding. That's in the statutes of the cooperative. We try to lend a hand, in terms of communication and video, to projects that we feel implicated in politically but that we know aren't funded because there are no resources to fund these projects.

What criteria do you have for which commissions you accept?

Xapo: There's a shared political consciousness in the cooperative. It's very diverse because each of us come from a different place and we try to do projects that are politically compatible with everyone. Every Tuesday we have an assembly where we put on the table the projects that we could do and between all of us we try to decide which ones are politically compatible with our interests.

What's the relationship between Metromuster and 15M?

Xapo: Metromuster was just Xavi, and when we met through 15M it took on a different dimension. Also it took on another dimension in terms of how we relate to social movements because it opened the door for us to get to know many projects. 15M arose in the plaza and it was very visible at that time; later, it transformed into many other projects which were born from it. 15M allowed us to build relationships with other social movements in a very fluid way, with a lot of trust between us.

Xavi: I think that there were some basic theoretical principles that were already defined in Metromuster 2008 or 2009, which are basically three principle: cultural freedom, the will to create social change, and communal cinema. So it was very difficult to start projects with just that, above all because we didn't have the contacts or the connections to social movements that formed during and after 15M. Therefore, in a way, I think that 15M was a catalyst for principles that were already there but that couldn't quite take off until this movement took place. In that sense, for me it was magical to meet Xapo and a lot of other people and to be able to do all these things that were on paper but were much more complicated to bring to life.

The work that Metromuster has done tends to be referred to as “video-activism,” can you explain this concept to us?

Xapo: It's complicated. Video-activism, supposedly, when we first came together, meant a form of video with a strong and defined character. Before 15M, there was a notion that any video that was focused on motivation counted as such, especially if it held a focus on our values. With the 15M movement taking place, that was broken down and we realized that beyond doing it badly, we could introduce aspects of marketing and publicity in order to use them against capitalism or what we thought wasn't working in it. And 15M broke the norm that existed before it, that anything, even something poorly done can be interpreted by anyone and can mean something. So one of the things that I think we learned from 15M and that we've tried to develop is first, how to make high quality audiovisual productions, both in the artistic and technical sense, and second, how to break from the self-referential codes of activism. The break from the type of self-referential language that isn't understood outside of the movements themselves in order to reach more people. This brought us lots of criticism from and many discussions with people who had been working in the field for a long time during 15M, but I think that little by little it has become understood that we can reach common people with a message that's just as radical, just changing the language.

Thinking about Metromuster's projects like *Termitas*, *Tarajal*, *Ciutat Morta* and now *Idrissa*, we're talking about the tools that you use to join the battle for collective imagination. After studying your materials, I have come to the conclusion that Metromuster has placed a great focus on the following processes: 1) constructing a denunciation of the foundational power structures of modern Western societies: colonialism, capitalism, and discrimination of sex, class and race; 2) transforming of public opinion and the collective imagination with the purpose of revealing how hegemonic powers use the media; 3) supporting changing the current cultural paradigm; 4) cultivating citizens' critical consciousness and faith in transformation during a time of capitalism and a crisis of trust. Would you add anything else?

I think you've said it all. Without ever writing it down or reflecting on it in that way, I completely identify with your analysis. I would only add, well it's sort of implicit, that for us the fight goes beyond what we can record with our cameras and show through the screens of the cinema or your laptop. In other words, I think that we have become experts in making a kind of documentary mechanism that has the will to transform reality while at the same time documenting real life. So I think that some of our products are characterized by doing certain campaigns that, with the justification of wanting to do a documentary, have made something happen. We have a very good, recent example in the documentary *Idrissa* that we've been doing for a while, more than three years. Unexpected things have happened but they've happened because of the fact that we were making a documentary; if we hadn't been, they wouldn't have

happened. One of the things that happened was that Idrissa Diallo's family found out about the death of their family member; the fact that now we'll be able to repatriate the remains and that they'll be able to have a proper ceremony is an act of reparation. Also it's very probable that they'll change the name of the plaza "Antonio López," where just yesterday they removed a statue because it has a history involved in slavery, they'll change the name to "Idrissa Diallo," and it's not a coincidence that that's the protagonist of the documentary that we've been working on for a long time. So, there's a truly activist labor, not only video-activist, but it's about the will to make videos and to tell all of these stories in a documentary that will have an impact but, in the end, the documentary is the least of it. The most important thing is all that we've done to get there. I think that that's something that we, Metromuster as a project, contribute.

In many ways, Metromuster does work regarding awareness and informal education that seems to be absent from institutional agendas and formal education. It seems like with public subsidies, the cooperative fulfills a pending need in democratic institutional agendas. Don't you find this situation paradoxical?

Xapo: Yes, and it's very bad, but we also believe that there's a certain attempt to change since 15M, especially if we're talking about institutions such as, for example, public television, which is where we can be reflected the most. In the case of *Ciutat Morta*, of 4F, or of cases like Esther Quintana's, we believe that the work that's been done, whether it's audiovisual like ours or journalistic or investigative, has penetrated the journalistic consciousness, in some cases though not in all, they're more sensitive to certain issues. So, it's more effort for those in power to cover them up or just focus on other things. For example, in the case of Esther Quintana (who is the tenth person to have lost an eye because of a rubber bullet), they tried to do the usual thing, that is, to blame the victim, to blame the social movements. But this time it didn't work out well for those who hold the power, and public opinion, after having experienced 15M, clearly positioned itself as critical against the police forces of the Spanish state and against those in power at the time. We believe this is something that's happening here. Right now, even after October 1st, many people who weren't mobilized, people who normally weren't out in the streets before, are positioning themselves as critical of power and abuse much more because of the violence suffered at the hands of police forces.

Xavi: Yes, it's interesting that you've mentioned education and one thing that we always talk about is that what we do-- beyond artistic quality, which is very important to us-- we always want to engage with pedagogy. It's interesting that we deal with many issues that aren't being talked about in departments of pedagogy. And so the State, in its public function of educating the people, doesn't take into account a whole series of things that we, humbly and from our little place, are putting out there. And it's a shame, really, that we're so praised for this when in reality it should be an obligation that other spheres provide this. This says a lot about our society and what it lacks.

What relationship does Metromuster have with the university environment? Are you perceived as a valid contributors?

Xavi: They invite us once in a while as some sort of exotic group, like an example of people that are really invested in their work, but the schools never incorporate our ideals into anything and there's never been a stable collaboration, it's very sporadic. Something that always puts us in a really bad mood is when they tell us, "You're very important," or "What you do is great, keep it up." It's infuriating because a critical spirit should be everywhere, especially in schools and the faculty,

and not just delegated to people who are big activists and really involved and who sacrifice their lives, earning a precarious living in a cooperative, and then someone comes and gives you a pat on the back and says, “You’re very important.”

Is it possible to transform a political reality through culture?

Xapo: I suppose so – that’s why we do what we do. Yes, I think so. Culture is very broad, it’s not just what we’re working on at the critical level. There are many people who make culture without such an explicit declaration, culture that is high quality and transformative in other fields. We’re specialized in the denunciation of impunity, of abuse, of corruption and of torture, but on other levels, culture is made that’s also very transformative, very necessary yet without this radical message of denunciation.

Xavi: Backing up a little, the question is whether culture can transform reality, if it has that ability. I would correct the affirmation a little and would say that culture forms reality. It’s said that our cultural reality, which is ultimately reality itself, is completely shaped by culture. In that sense, I don’t know if the logic is to change reality through denouncing it, but rather that culture must be reappropriated in order to be able to make a more just reality. So, I think that a denunciation is something preliminary, it’s something necessary, something that must be shouted loudly in urgent times – like when they took an eye from Roger Español, for example, a few months ago. We have to shout with rage and give space for people to be loud. But later there’s work that must be more stable that must be done by agents like us, which is to make a kind of culture that can shape our reality – the kind of culture that’s now considered “sub-culture” (that ugly word that implies being below culture) but that one day ends up being hegemonic, meaning that we can one day shape a different reality, one with more just principles: feminist principles, anti-racist principles and principles with the goal of cultivating a critical consciousness that right now is totally nonexistent. Therefore, I think that they’re two different things. I mean, political resistance has to be part of it too, but it’s not only cultural work that we’re doing all the time. We have to invent a new, better world in a healthy, creative way and let this work end up shaping reality.

How is the work of Metromuster disseminated beyond the activist circle?

Xapo: This is one of Metromuster’s challenges, especially with work relating to 15M, to go beyond the margins of activism, to transcend them. We did that with *Ciutat Morta*, in which in some way, more or less intuitively, we came up with a mechanism within our reach because it didn’t require an economic investment or a force beyond our personal work. I’m referring to generating communities from the start of the project and not only when it was finished. Xavi explained it before, this whole process ends up generating a bigger and bigger community. And it’s the community itself that is the spokesperson for the project. When we got to premiere *Ciutat Morta* on TV, we had already been making so much noise that we already had a complaint asking that movie not be released, because of the effect it provoked and because of the community behind it that wouldn’t quiet down. It wasn’t just the two of us anymore, rather it was a big community that spread the news of the film’s broadcast on television, and it had a record independent audience. That’s important when we don’t have the economic capacity to finance a publicity campaign, but it’s much more interesting because, as Xavi said earlier, the documentary is the excuse; the political campaign already is assembled and there are many politically aware people who are going to spread this project and this idea.

Have you had problems with the kind of work you're doing?

Xapo: First of all, with *Ciutat Morta*, they threw us out of the institution where we had a job documenting popular festivals; later we returned but, as we said before, we're independent for that reason-- we're able to criticize and continue living off other means. I think there's a risk because we know that if we criticize those who have hired us then they can fire us or search our homes or do any other dirty trick through the institution. However, it has not given us any problems other than an occasional unpleasant experience.

Xavi: Yes, I believe that someday this will have to be charted on a graph. The moment you're a little bit problematic, they reject you everywhere, and that's a problem (and in fact for a long time with the audio-visual commissions, we wanted to be anonymous and never sign things because the consequences that it could have were real). So, if you're a growing problem, they throw you out of places, they don't want you, nobody wants to collaborate with you, you have lots of problems; however, once you're very problematic, the tables turn and they prefer to have you at their side rather than against them. I think that that's where we're at right now because, for example, TV3, which always deeply hated us, suddenly wants to collaborate with us on lots of stuff. The issue of grants has been going rather well lately, although we have not given up a millimeter of our radical proposals or our vision about what to tell and how to do it. I believe that, thinking about repression, visibility and having a presence and defending what you do in a very clear way and having support makes it all calmer. And it's now been a while since we've been afraid, but we used to be.

How do you work on the type of issues that you do in a country where a Gag Law exists?

Xapo: The Gag Law does not affect us, although in any moment we can receive a complaint for something. The truth is that with *Ciutat Morta*, we had a fine of ninety thousand euros that we managed to avoid through tricking the person who made the complaint in negotiations. We made him believe that *Ciutat Morta* had two copies, a blue and a red, and that one of them included five minutes where this person came on and the other didn't. We were negotiating until the last day, and in the end they signed an agreement that they weren't going to file a complaint if we didn't put out the copy that included this person. What they didn't know was that we were already going to take out those five minutes. We're always at the edge and without even knowing it because of the arbitrariness of the Gag Law. At any moment they can accuse you of having taken a photo that you didn't actually take, or writing a tweet, or mentioning someone in ... The Gag Law leads to great arbitrariness and impunity for those who hold the power, but we've been playing this game for a long time and we know that if someone tries to censure or report us, it's almost better for us.

How has the reception of your work on television and in cinemas been?

Xavi: Well, with television, we talked about before how with TV3 we're gone from being a principle enemy to being an ally. Now, in just in a couple of weeks, we'll also premiere a documentary with TV3 that they bought from us, and later is *Idrissa*, the big project that we're working on that TV3 has already pre-purchased. So, I think that it's kind of what I was telling you before, that they prefer to have us on their side instead of against them because we're also very good at campaigning through our networks, and they know it can all turn against them. With cinema... the problem with this country is

that the distribution of films is controlled by a few distributors that distribute through pack system which is difficult for producers like us to enter. Also, people going to the cinema are looking for a type of film with a spectacularism that we don't offer, and so we aspire to a type of cinematographic distribution to small theaters– art houses – which are also flourishing and it's very beautiful because they exist all over the country as well as the rest of Europe. They're presenting a type of programming that is very focused on the subsequent debate that can be generated. That's something that we have always valued because cinema should be an excuse to meet up with lots of people and talk. The truth is that there's a surprisingly large amount of cinemas that have closed and that have been taken over by the workers (just yesterday we were at CineBaix here in Prat, and also there are the Zoco Cinemas in Madrid or the Numax Cinema in Galicia, CineCiutat in Mallorca). There are more and more projects of this kind, and it's rediscovering a certain audience who is rediscovering cinema as a collective space. I think that this is our future and one that we have to bet on.

Metromuster believes in the free distribution of its work. Where are we able to find your work?

Xapo: It's all online, we're always committed to open licencing and, of course, we strategically reserve time to be able to be at festivals or in cinemas, but our work always ends up online. And also, thanks to our network, this community that we are always talking about, someone always volunteers to help when it isn't economically possible for us to translate the subtitles of movies, and we try to have the movies up on the web in four or five languages. It's very interesting because, apart from the collaboration, there's an absolute respect for the license. That is to say, we released *Ciutat Morta* in 2013 and while we started to circulate DVDs in order to finance the showings until 2015 when it would be broadcasted on television, nobody posted it on the internet. So, the "Creative Commons" license was respected when we asked that it not be made public until we were able to show it at a series of festivals that would amplify our voice and get it onto television. We thought that an "open license" means people take works for free, but in fact it's the reverse, it's copyrighting that provokes pirating because they are prohibiting you from it, and therefore, when there is free distribution it doesn't become a problem.

How does archive material get obtained in this country?

Xavi: It's completely pirated. In the era of the culture of remix, we do what the majority of young creators do and recycle material from the internet. We do this too, we've always done it. Like Xapo says, lately it's been a problem because when your work has the most impact and has to go through more official channels like public television, well obviously they ask if you have the rights over this material. We sometimes protect ourselves with what's called "the right to cite," which is based on a legal battle that Godard won many years ago when he wanted to do a series of documentaries about the story of cinema in which he said, "If I don't show examples of cinema this story can't be told," and nobody has the economic ability to purchase rights to 500 Hollywood films. Thanks to this case, a jurisprudence was created which is still in use today, and it's precarious and susceptible to interpretation, but if what I'm doing has the intention of explaining something in a pedagogical sense, I can protect myself with this right. It's tolerated as long as short fragments are used, sometimes if it's a recording of something that's on television then it's tolerated more, etc. In practice, we've never had any problems and we hope to not have any. But yes, in the end we try to take precautions because we also know that we have enemies,

and getting legal help is extremely expensive and most of the time unaffordable.

Xapo: And, then there's another issue, which is when we use archives from our equals (people who live off of audiovisual work), obviously we try to economically compensate them or ask for permission, or collaborate with them in another way. In the case of *Ciutat morta*, we used a ton of archives from TV3, which is public television, and we did it consciously, precisely because we believe that material from public television needs to be public and free. We, as producers and as a business, never try to profit once a piece is finished, rather we're looking for the work that we do during production to be well paid. Once the movie is released, we don't seek to exploit the work in a lucrative way. We believe that public television, which is financed by all of us and everything that they've done has already been paid for, can obviously hold onto the images for a month or two so that they can sell them to other channels, but after some time has passed, which shouldn't be more than 6 months, all of the material from public television should be made to be publicly accessible, accessible to all and free. Whenever we've asked for materials, TV3 has asked us for 1000 euros per minute. But we believe that something that we've already paid for shouldn't have to be paid for a second time. That's why the material of *Ciutat morta* was searched. We wanted them to tell us that we hadn't paid for those images so that we could start a campaign that the material of public television should be public.

Is Metromuster a political project? If so, what kind of politics are we talking about?

Xavi: We're based in the assumption that everything we do is political. There's this idea that we think is wrong, which is that politics are done in the parliament, in institutions, in political parties. For us, any day to day act is political; our way of being in the world is political, and from that point of view, everything that is done here has a political intention. In our case, it's not something accidental; from the moment we walked through that door, we've had the intention that whatever happens here will have a political impact. Going back to the previous question about why we're a cooperative, well, we always think that before we can change the world, we must change ourselves and that starts with the way we relate to one another. In that sense, everything that is done in Metromuster is political.

How do you maintain hope as a driving force in your work?

Xapo: I suppose that one day leads to the next -- and when you're focused on a case, a complaint, for example, in the case of *Idrissa*, we have been involved at a personal level with the family and with a lot of people that are behind the report filed against the CIES (Centers of Internment of Foreigners). This pushes you to commit personally, which goes beyond the committing through work or political intention, and that makes you keep going.

And, how do you deal with helplessness?

Xavi: Helplessness is a lot more than what one imagines. I think that this isn't for everyone. You have to really be prepared to deal with failure because we live in a world in which you don't win, and that's something that we've known for a while. But we can, at least, establish precedents that perhaps in a couple of generations will be picked up, similar to the way we're continuing with the work that other people started hundreds of years ago. So we have to be prepared for that and take care of each other and assume that we haven't come here to win.

What does it mean for Metromuster to grow in a non-capitalistic way?

Xapo: We're working on knowing what growth actually means. Surely growth means building a stable structure that will allow us to not risk so much in our economic precariousness and to keep the project going for a long time. It's a balance between making a more or less solid structure that can take on large quantities of work and ensuring that this work doesn't make the structure grow. It's a very delicate equilibrium.

From Metromuster's perspective, what are pending unresolved issues in our current model of society?

Xavi: For me, it's very clearly about visual analysis. I think that we're in a society that is based more and more on visual stimuli, yet doesn't educate children to analyze or to be critical of them. We're very vulnerable, and we will become even more vulnerable, and thus easier to manipulate. So for me an urgent issue is the critical analysis of the visual and audiovisual reality and having a critical spirit in general. We need to stop teaching kids content that they can find on Wikipedia and instead ignite their curiosity, which to me is the base of all activism. Awaken curiosity in people that later causes them to express their own disagreement or nonconformity if they see that things aren't going well. The first thing that they must do is to look beyond what they see on a screen, and that means analyzing and being critical.

Xapo: For me, it's organization. I mean, we live in a liberal world in which even we ourselves can be seen as an example of entrepreneurs, and it's completely the opposite. We are what we are because we're around people who are organized and we mutually support each other. It's important to break the myth that anyone can be whatever they want, because it's a lie; in reality, it's just sugar-coating the liberal society that makes you believe that "you can be someone" when in reality, you'll just be another person. We need to break away from individualism in our society that tells us that an individual can get anywhere. In reality, when we transform society is when we organize ourselves as a group- we become super strong, and then that's when we scare people.

Enmedio





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
Colectivo Enmedio

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what is your relationship with the collective Enmedio?

Well my name is Leonidas Martin and I'm part of the collective Enmedio; I'm sort of a jack of all trades, I do a little bit of everything, just like everyone else in the organization.

When, where, and why was Enmedio created?

Well, Enmedio was created for a very concrete reason: the members of the collective were not happy with what we found outside of it, with the destiny that neoliberalism offered us. We finished our studies and we didn't feel right about it. The photographer didn't want to work her entire life taking photos for agencies and magazines; the designers didn't want to design for evil corporations their whole lives; the artists could not find a space in the maze of galleries and museums; so we decided to open another space, a space '*en medio*' (in between) everything and nothing. And from there, we tried to think through our practices and carry them out in a way that seemed apt. This was in 2007. Some current members of the collective came from decades of previous experiences with other names like the agencies, or Yomango, or other experiences like that.

Why the name Enmedio?

Enmedio (literally, *inbetween*) is named precisely for that-- for not having a 'place' or for rejecting the place where it seems like we're destined to go, and therefore being left without a certain place. As a result we feel like we're a little bit 'in between.' It's a place that's still undefined, always in motion.

Your group has described itself in the following way: "It's a group of visual professionals (designers, photographers, film makers, artists) who, unsatisfied with the lack of connections between art and political action, have decided to abandon our usual territory of work and situate ourselves in the *in-between*, nowhere in particular and everywhere at the same time." Is this a volunteer working group?

No, it doesn't have anything to do with volunteering, nor is it anything forced, it's not forced labor. It's the search for a space where what you know and what you like to do can fit in with your understanding of existence, of life, of being here. So it doesn't have anything to do with the relationship you can establish with NGOs or similar spaces that do operate more through volunteer work, because volunteering, in a way, is always connected with spare time: "What should I dedicate my extra time to, the part that's not productive but where I still have energy to be able to contribute something

to society?" That's not what this work is because this is where we put most of our time, this is what we dedicate ourselves to in a way. We're a collective.

Does the collective have salaried personnel?

No. The most political work Enmedio does is actually in its internal management and how it shares its wealth, which is not just economic wealth, which only represents a small percentage of Enmedio, but also the wealth of relationships created between the people that share this group. How can such wealth be shared when we're talking about a wealth that is so immaterial, so intangible, and so hard to classify? Well, discussing and talking about it as equals. The wealth that is shared can be funding, for example, or it can come from attending a conference, or it can be the visual capital someone acquires by presenting at a conference, etc. All of this is discussed. As the years have gone by we've been discussing it less, as we already know each other so well that we more or less know what to do. We have a way of doing things and wealth is typically shared in the same way. It includes thinking about the conditions of each person in the collective, what they're going through in that moment, who is more in need of money at that time and who isn't. Usually the wealth for a given project falls to the person with the most need, regardless of who did the actual work that acquired that money.

Our core membership consists of 6 people, this is the group of people taking care of the daily tasks for the organizations, the most basic and constant tasks. This core group gives continuity to the entire project, but Enmedio creates many processes that incorporate a lot of other people. In that sense, Enmedio is more like a network of people for a given process or intervention. These processes could include political actions, thought processes, or extended seminars where lot of people are involved. When these happen the group of 6 dissolves into larger groups.

How are decisions made in this group?

We're not very dogmatic about our assembly practices; we've shared many years together, so we have our own tools, our own way of being together. We don't apply very many formal tools to our discussions or meetings because it's more like a continuous meeting. It's being and living together. It's a space where, truly, the boundaries between the personal and public, between friendship and group camaraderie, are dissolved. What we've ended up creating amongst ourselves is like another way of life.

You're a nonprofit cultural association-- why have you chosen to take this legal form?

I think that for the projects we started out doing, the not-for-profit group structure worked really well, so we settled on it without many complications. In fact, we're now discussing removing the not-for-profit designation if we keep getting work, as we don't need it very much.

Why didn't you choose to take the form of a cooperative?

A cooperative, in that moment, was much more difficult to establish, to complete all the paperwork for. It seemed very tedious and we didn't want to get into it. Another reason is that we have a very vague bureaucratic structure-- this has always been one of the collective's shortfalls, though I'm not sure if it's a shortfall or a good quality.

Nobody in the organization wants to do the bureaucratic paperwork, we're too much of the artistic type for that kind of work, so as a result it's usually not well maintained.

How are your activities financed? Do you receive help from public institutions?

We're not well-financed. It's a complicated issue for Enmedio with various factors. We get some of our financing from giving classes and conferences, participating in seminars-- the more academic and cultural side of things. This includes participating in art festivals, university museum expositions, and in many other social centers, cultural centers of all types. We've also done some crowdfunding campaigns for specific projects, like our festival called "Cómo acabar con el mal" (How to stop evil). The following two versions we did were also partially crowdfunded. At other times we've organized an event as a fundraiser, such as a huge party. And that's how we get our funding done, more or less.

We don't receive grants, we have received very few and normally it's because some other collective has put us down as a partner and worked on it themselves. We're truly very vague when it comes to administrative and bureaucratic work, we don't like it very much. We have a Kafka-esque aversion to it, we read Kafka as youths and still believe that "the process is the punishment," so we don't get involved in those types of processes very often. We're poor, as you can imagine, but all of us in Enmedio maintain our work, that's something that we have established over the years. The photographer keeps working as a photographer, the video artist is still making their videos and projects, the designers continue working as designers. I'm a professor and that's what I do, I teach classes. We haven't stopped doing what we do. Precisely because we never had the desire to stop, because we know that stopping would be tied to a series of other concessions regarding Enmedio that we haven't wanted to make.

The climate that has arisen along with 15M indicates that there is an important cultural paradigm shift occurring. For many collectives it means the beginning of self-organization and for others it means a space for rethinking oneself. What has it meant for Enmedio?

At this point we've had a central location in Barcelona set up for the past six or seven years, where we've organized a lot of things, and that's how in one way or another, a network was formed around Enmedio. So when we saw the explosion of 15M, for us it was like the culmination of a lot of that we had been chasing and experiencing for a while. For example, the entire "V de Vivienda" (V for Vivienda, or Housing) movement that we were such active participants in was something we had already thought about in the same terms, we had experienced in that same way, it highlighted a lot of questions that, in the wake of 15M, would be brought out in a much more expansive way, including way more people. 15M and its wake was a very productive time for us, a time of a lot of development, interventions, actions, experiments, and proposals, because we already had all those things in the works, but we were finally applying them.

How is Enmedio as a collective connected with the sphere of image creation?

We're not so much focused on the creation of the image in itself, we're more concerned with what happens before an image is created and what happens to it afterwards. We view an image as a discourse that accompanies aesthetic thought,

raising the basic question of aesthetics, "What is there in what we see? What is that which we see?" This question is irresolvable, it's a question that's always there for you.

What always motivates us is the question, "How do we create an image together?" In the process of constructing an image an experience is already being created that surpasses the image itself. That's a question that we've wrestled with, and the act of building an image together, does in itself produce an experience that goes beyond the image in terms of representation, and it opens something up that we're really interested in, which is the exploration of the communal, of "being together," of starting to share a view of the world and things. Then that image comes to be, and it exists here, and that's what someone else will perceive, without the experience of its formation, without the social experience that built that image. So, there's a problem here that we're trying to solve, which is precisely how to live the experience of building an image together and perceive that you're "living the image," and to take this experience of building an image together and open it to a wider audience as a community, political, and social experience. Then there's the problem of representation, the experience represented by the image is never the same as the one that created it, because it's a representation and not the experience itself, but it's what the viewer of that image is going to receive. So we try to think of how we can introduce a part of that experience that we lived into the image, because there are people who are more interested in living out the experience, and don't really care about the image itself.

There is a historical undercurrent in artistic and political thought that maintains the perspective that experience is more important than representation-- that one should live the experience and disregard all types of representation. We, however, work with representations because we're artists. As a result, there is this issue of "living the image" and the question of the image in itself; what image remains and what does it mean for the viewer? And whether the image, in some way, is capable of transmitting part of what brought it to life. Does the image contain part of that experience and, if so, how does it do so? Does it pervert the experience or convert it into something completely different? We're always a little bit involved in these discourses.

Studying the work that you've been doing in the area of cultural projection, it seems to me that a sense of humor, playfulness, and celebration are central elements to your creative process. Do you think this differentiates you from the work of dismantling hegemonic relations that other collectives are doing?

If we take a look at our works and the things we've been doing over the years, we see that there is a ton of humor in all of them. Why do we work with humor? Well, I suppose that's because humor is based on two simple things: pain and truth, the truth behind a situation that you're representing or communicating about in that moment. Those two subjects are what we work with. When creating work in cultural production spaces, which are spaces that have to do with what we could call more social or political spaces, you're immediately going to encounter pain. The next thing you will explore is the truth behind those situations, or at least an attempt to create a truth for that painful situation. So, pain and truth. To approach these ideas, we have always used comedy as a major tool.

Oscar Wilde said, "If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, or else they'll kill you..." Well, we also want to avoid people killing us, so we also use humor in that sense. But the way we set out to use humor isn't so much a theoretical approach. Everything I'm telling you I'm saying in a reflective way, observing our own

experience. And I suppose that what brought us to this style or manner of doing things was also just a part of our personality, in how we relate to each other, in how we approach and view the world and how a group viewpoint is put together, and our viewpoint is full of humor. I think that it's a very spontaneous survival mechanism.

Frequently people ask you about the concrete effect of activist work in the political reality. What is your interpretation of that question?

The question regarding the 'real' effects is curious, we're always asked it at conferences-- "You've done a lot, but what have you accomplished?" That "What have you accomplished?" piece is difficult. The question is complicated because there are many different ways to understand it. You can have an experiential appreciation of your work, meaning the fact that we have managed to do this together, we've managed to create a space for friendship, a meeting space, a space that sustains us from day to day. When someone needs it, there it is, it separates us a little from the solitude it seems we're predestined to, it keeps us company. That's a big achievement, isn't it? However, normally those questions are referring to a different type of social effectiveness. "But what have you *really* done?" "Have you brought mortgages to an end or no?" Well, in that sense, for example, if you look at all the work that we did as part of the "V de Vivienda" movement or everything we designed for the "No vas a tener casa en la puta vida" campaign (You're never getting a house in your fucking life), or the world record-breaking number of people shouting, "¡No vas a tener casa en la puta vida!" in that protest, and if you observe the housing situation in cities like Barcelona or Madrid, you could say the situation is more or less the same. In that sense, the result would be a letdown, and you'd conclude we haven't accomplished anything from all of that. But we don't interpret it that way.

For example, before making a series of artistic and political interventions and experiments in the V de Vivienda movement, the problem of rent and living situation was a an individualized problem, it was your problem because that's how all problems in neoliberalism tend to exist-- the victories are of the system but the defeats are exclusively yours, your own consequences. It's you. *You* have failed, it's your responsibility. The issue of housing was a clear example of this. People experienced their housing problems as a personal problem, related to a personal failure and, of course, there wasn't a socio-political space in 2007 where you could share that concern. There were personal spaces, like among your friends or your family, where you would hear things like, "I'm worried, I don't think I can make it to the end of the month, they might evict me because I'm not paying the mortgage," but then if you went to a social assembly of any type there was no space for that. I think that our social and artistic experimentation opened up the imaginary in such a way that radically transformed how people related to the housing crisis. Ever since then the housing crisis became a *social* conflict and there was no doubt about that. And something that was previously understood as the personal failure of having lived above one's means, for example, people started to understand differently, as being caused partially by the political policies enacted throughout a large part of the world, brought about by a series of decision-making that had been previously understood as freely-made but were actually not. And that is a very important subjective change. When I say "subjective" I'm not taking away any practicality or materiality away from it. Once we start thinking about these issues in a new way, there has already been an effective change. Rents are just as high, yes, but you can't measure the world only by that materiality because in order for things to change, we (at least us at Enmedio) are convinced that, now more than ever, subjective changes must come first and foremost.

It's necessary to look at and feel the world in a different way. And I think that the types of experiences that I've told you about succeeded at pushing in that direction.

From your perspective, what is the best path for creating collective imaginaries that are alternative to the liberal hegemonic imaginary?

We think that collective imaginaries are created all the time, it's the result of sharing time together. If you spend time with someone you will start to share a view of the world-- you will both start to understand how to view the world and have a shared image of the world. Has anyone ever seen the world? No one has, we've only shared it in our conversations, we've talked about it and shared images of the world, but has it been the whole world? Has anyone seen everything in the world? Does anyone know how the world is as a whole? The world is nothing more than what we say it is. So, how should we talk about this world? How do we inhabit the idea that we're transmitting the world? That is the question that we ask ourselves.

Today, for example, the world is made up by a great force -- the mass media. It's a constant cycle of exhibition of the world, and it's one way of viewing the world that has a large influence on how the world is shared. People see it and maybe share its view, or if they're critical they may question it, but, in principle, it's a method of sharing the world and creating a common world. In Enmedio, we think the world is best shared without media interference, when the body of it is somehow present. Therefore we try to make sure the images we create are accompanied by a presence. We want to make sure that what we create is related to what we have experienced firsthand or directly affects whoever is putting together the image, intervention, video, or whatever it is. We believe that when people inhabit an idea, conversation, or way of viewing the world, but they themselves aren't personally connected to that world, it still does create a world. But that world is a little messed up, it's the same world that's surrounding us all the time, which increasingly puts us into a more mental relationship with the world.

For many centuries we had a spiritual relationship with the world, we had soul. This changed when we started having reason and a rational relationship with the world. We believed that by understanding the world's physical aspects and combining certain elements would lead to the kind of world we wanted to have. Today we're doing away with this worldview, in large measure due to critical work in the humanities that dismantles it, but also because centuries of rational imposition over the world has caused us great pain, so we have changed to having a more intellectual level. That is to say, reason has been exchanged for an intellectual relationship with the world. As a result, each individual lives in the world from their own subjectivity and their own way of interpreting the world in a concrete moment. So people are no longer interested in representing a shared world, as for example the Apollo expedition did during the moon operation, taking that famous photograph of the 'blue marble.' The person that took that photo was interested in capturing an image where everyone was present together... it was like saying, "I've seen the world from the moon and this is what we are, this is the world, a blue marble floating in the middle of nothingness."

Some years ago, in a similar operation, an astronaut used their iPhone to take a selfie on the moon. In this case, this person was the one primarily living that experience. Within the photo he is an interlocutor who aims to show that photograph, his experience, to someone else. That is, the experience is something that he has personally had, but the viewer has not had. It's a little bit like saying, "Look at this little piece of experience I'm having now. I'm here, floating with the world behind

me.” The person receiving that image enters the mental relation I mentioned earlier of that person with that experience. Upon viewing the photo, they may say, “Damn, I would love to be in that situation,” or “I would never go there,” or whatever other reaction, but the photograph doesn’t open a shared experience or space for viewing the world. I suppose that if the astronaut and I were in space together and afterwards we returned to Earth and talked about our respective experiences, as he would have had one specific experience and I would have had another one, we would be creating a more shared representation of that experience. I think that this happens because of a kind of ‘presence’ which has been completely lost from our relation with the world. Today we’re always corporeally separated even when we’re situated close together in supermarket check-out line or a train car. We inhabit spaces that are closer than anyone can imagine, but mentally we’re always very far away. That relationship interests us a lot in Enmedio, and we try to break apart that relationship using our shared experiences, because when we do a new, common imaginary can be created. A common imaginary can also be opened up by that which is ‘other.’ In this kind of imaginary, each person has their own experience that is incompatible with that of others, and this forms a world, or rather forms the image of a world-- this is the world. Well, in Enmedio we’re not primarily interested in the image itself, so we ask, “In order to not arrive at the same result of an image, how can we proceed?” and from there we invent things, saying, “Hey, we’re here right now, being present, let’s try this!” Or maybe it’s not leaving the issue until the moment you have the image, but rather inhabiting that image before and after it exists... these are experiments we have to carry out.

Thinking about some of your interventions and symbols-- the designs in the escraches, the “No somos números (We’re not numbers)” campaign, the party in Bankia, the party in INEM, the “Discongreso,” The Reflectors... How do you delimit the realities that you want to resignify?

Well look, we have a sort of interior voice that tells us to act only upon what personally affects us, what affects us in first person, and never try to approach experiences that don’t relate to ours or affect us. We’re not about making a campaign about hunger in India, we’re more along the lines of being in our studio one day and saying “Fuck, I can’t pay rent and I’m have a lot of problems with this,” or “This is the third time I’m moving in four months,” and saying, “Can we do anything with this situation? Let’s try!”

Who are the people that participate in your interventions?

We use methods that we inherited from experiences prior to Enmedio. Our process is simple, it’s usually the same each time. We make a decision about an intervention/project we want to do, we say, “Let’s try to do something with this specific subject,” and from there we open a collective space and make announcements using social media, our web page, and the weekly meetings in our space. We open the idea to others and then people who feel a connection to that conflict or feel the need to do something about it join us. That’s why the people that come to Enmedio are such a diverse group, because the conflicts we tackle affect many distinct groups of people. For that reason I think it’s always a little suspicious when you see a cultural project that always deals with the same subject. So, we try to keep that diversity alive, which requires a lot of work and attention, because cultural channels tend to pigeonhole organizations into very delimited sectors, as if they only belong to one sector. To counteract that, we like to think of tools that can be worked on in different places not limited to the cultural spaces that we already tend towards occupying as western, white people with university degrees who are interested in culture. I’ll give you an

example, for the “Mundo Valla” (global fence) research project that we’ve started working on we had various options. We had, for example, the option of putting the result of our research into an essay format and publishing it in a book or a magazine that would circulate in cultural spaces. We didn’t do that, instead we made an effort to design a newspaper in 6 parts. Each part contained a large photograph and when broken up and put back together again, they came together make up an exhibition.

What are those newspapers useful for? Well they help us talk about the “Mundo Valla” project in many different sites and put tools in our hands that allow us to communicate in a more unconventional manner and in any space; we’ve presented our work in many different spaces, as a result. We’ve gone to high schools with 14-year-old kids, we’ve gone to internment centers to work with imprisoned immigrants, we’ve gone to cultural centers and museums, we’ve done it in universities, alternative spaces, and in social spaces for squatters, as well as in the street for different events, and it works. It works because its nature of being dismantled, creating a puzzle from the different pages, opens a corporeality and a corporeal relation with the conceptual experience that we were providing, and this opened the possibility for a different way of communicating about the project that was much more transversal, that could reach many more people. That is where formal experimentation comes in to play and why it’s so necessary. I’m kind of sick of hearing the complaining that happens in many cultural circles about the fact that their work has little to no repercussions outside of their circles. Complaining won’t accomplish anything; perhaps the challenge you’re confronting requires you to rethink the format you’re working in. The challenge necessitates, above all, thinking about the form your work takes and what those forms mean and what codes are intrinsic to them, if those codes are decipherable or not, if they’re decoded or not, if they’re accessible or not, and if so to who. These are really important questions for us in Enmedio. That’s where design comes in, and that’s where the art of thinking about the form comes in as well.

Thinking about your interventions, have you ever had to face any kind of complaint or legal problem?

We typically don’t give the legal aspect of our processes a lot of importance so it doesn’t consume the entire process, because you know legal things can consume you and leave you full of worry and if you’re working on a conflict that affects that you, you could end up not having any impact on that conflict and just making yourself even more fearful. It’s important to be careful with the legal aspect of things, but it’s good to include it. What it does it mean to us to include it? Well it means that as part of our creative process we put together a text describing what we’re prepared to do, what risks we intend to run, and which ones we don’t; this is discussed and decided upon collectively, then we do some research so that we have an idea of how to conduct ourselves going forward. People participate in these processes knowing the risks and making a responsible decision for themselves, meaning they know what constraints they should be working within. Normally we decide to not take too many risks, we always aim more for enjoyment than punishment. What do I mean by that? I mean that we force ourselves to think about our actions with a creative weight so much so that we’re able to transmit the ideas that we want and create the experience that we want, without there being a punitive response.

And also, when you take a bit of the weight off of such a serious matter in activism and in all thought of social transformation and the materiality of the world, this changes. A lot of political action, we could call it ‘illegal’ to put it one way, believes a

lot in the materiality of the world, that the world is the material world that you see. However, we in Enmedio give materiality a more relative importance, giving more importance to the intangible world, or knowing that when you touch something, what you're perceiving even with the sense of touch is something that you already had in your mind. So, as we're more involved at the intangible level, related to the image, concepts, and writing, we don't often get involved in very illegal matters because legality is very related to the material world, that is to say, it has to do with what you can take or not, what you can touch or not, where you can enter or not. But when you're more involved in the intellectual path or the path towards the immaterial transformation of the world, through image, through words, through everything intangible, you get into illegal territory less, although it does happen, just look at that kid who went to jail for singing a song, right? It can happen. What I've said doesn't negate the fact that power has a great materiality in the world today that is inscribed primarily in infrastructures and macro-infrastructures that manage and are needed in the flow of capitalism, and if you notice, our actions usually involve occupying, being present in the materiality of the world.

That's why I asked the question, because hanging up a poster in Congress or entering into a branch of INEM to throw confetti is entering into that materiality and that can have legal consequences.

Yes, we can't avoid this issue, our work is very interrelated with that materiality, but we don't only think about it in those terms. We're not like those people who think that burning a bank puts an end to that bank. You've burned a bank, but you haven't finished it off; in fact, if you look at recent bank offices, they're increasingly dematerialized, every time there's less there. Not long ago I entered a bank, and there was no one there, no bank teller or anything; it was basically the conceptual experience of going to a bank. This is an example of the interiorization of the experience of capitalism. You end up without the material aspect, you enter a very incorporeal, intangible space, and we do a lot of work with that.

You write the following about the Enmedio center: "This center and its constant program of courses and workshops has a clear objective: make creation a form of action; a form of direct action." Can you tell us more about the activity and function of this center?

We gave it the name Enmedio, *in-between*, because we were trying to be even more "in the middle," in the center of the center. The Enmedio center is an attempt to, above all, relate with learning and sharing knowledge in a way radically different to what we find in the world outside. Some of us are professors so we know the existing situation of learning and education very well, we live it every day, and we don't like it. To summarize it briefly, education and learning mirror neoliberalism 1-to-1, they have the aim of transforming all human experience into an economic benefit. This condition provokes a tension in the arts, whether in teaching or education, and produces an anti-ethical movement. As a result there are movements in two opposite directions, on the one hand that of education itself, but on the other hand a movement that goes completely counter to education. For example, there are people who push for education to be more efficient and productive, so they create a set of productive educational guidelines in order to educate the populace faster and better. Such guidelines are present in all education today, but it accomplishes is the complete opposite of increasing productivity. It gets rid of the experience of learning in itself because learning requires contemplative time, it

requires time spent absorbing the world and this happens through contemplation. Only after a moment of meditation is transmission of that learning possible.

So the introduction of productive guidelines into learning processes completely erases what education had been up until now. Many questions arise as a result -- What is education going to be like moving forward? What will be obtained by the new set of learning processes? It seems that production, even when understood in economic and capitalist terms, requires a space for contemplation-- they're investigating this because it provides measurable, beneficial results. However, we think that things will be terrible for learning as we know it if things continue in this direction. So, Enmedio tries to escape from that understanding of learning, and instead open a space and time for the reception and exchange of different knowledge, in order to see what we're capable of doing, and what results are obtained.

What kinds of people attend your workshops and activities?

The same sorts of people that attend university or go to other places, because there are no other people. It was very curious, during the 15M movement some people would ask, "Where have these people been all this time?" Well it's very simple, they've been next to you in line at the grocery store, or together with you on the subway. They're the same people, there are no other people. It's not like we've brought new people to occupy the town square now, it's not that there are new people that can come to our center. We're the same bodies as always, but inhabiting different places, that's what we try to create by opening a different kind of space for knowledge, for example. Enmedio is most commonly visited by the people most represented by Enmedio's geographic area, as I told you before we're largely white, western university students, with an interest in culture-- that's going to attract some people more than others. But we have something that we called "Enmedio moves," which is one of the center's practices that involves breaking down the zonal limits that the group is situated within. We break with these limits by moving-- as the name implies, we go to other places and adapt our seminars and workshops to other languages and practices. We think of new design and artistic tools that will help us talk in new ways. We try to go to other places inhabited by different languages and different ways of relating to the world, but that are still affected the exact same way as us in terms of a specific idea when we're putting together an intervention. With "Enmedio moves" we've been to small, peripheral high schools, entertainment centers, immigrant camps, refugee camps, neighborhood associations, and low-income housing. It's a practice that we hope to keep alive as long as we can with the spirit of breaking with our own assigned place in the world, because in such places, you only find yourself or others similar to you all the time, people that make you think, "this person thinks is the same way that I do, they're me."

And in a way, technological development, in contrast from in the 90's when some of us associated technological development with a space for freedom because the internet was a space where, for example, if you were a gay adolescent in a small town in Oklahoma, and your ability to relate with people close to you who understood your sexuality was very limited, then with the arrival of the internet these limits are kind of broken, right? The internet let you have contact with people that weren't in your town but had similar feelings to you, giving you an experience of freedom. This was a possibility that some people pursued in that era. Today things seem to have gone in the complete opposite direction. New digital communication technologies impose the absolute opposite logic. Social networks create an image designed to be just like the person receiving it. You find yourself alone with other people that think

like you, you share information only with those who feel similarly to you, right? The only people who are accepted are those who fit within your sensibility. You get rid of everyone else; in many instances you actively physically eliminate them, you're a part of the censorship eliminating them, erasing them from your friends, other times it's simply a technical matter, you're not aware of it-- simply because you've never interacted with those that are different from you, they disappear. As a result, social networks increasingly give you a simple reflection of yourself. In terms of one's mental relationship with the world, you begin to understand the world that way, as well. When you have your frustrations with the world, you might say, for example, "How can they vote for Trump? Where did those voters come from?" Well, they weren't on your Facebook wall, just like you wouldn't encounter them at the parties you host, places where the only information present overlaps completely with you. But did you really never think that the world isn't only made up of the things and people that coincide with your worldview? Because it isn't. That's just what you've made of the world. So, in Enmedio we try whenever we can to get out of our own world, to not get stuck there, to look for ways not to simply replicate ourselves.

Do you think that, in some way, Enmedio is involved with informal education?

In order to answer that, there's a fundamental element that I should mention. Those of us that have been professors for many years in universities all know that university has transformed into a business, a lot more difference has been established between what is formal and informal, into what enters or or doesn't enter into the realm of formal education. Accessibility to knowledge has become much more rigid because it's being defined more by economic matters. This changes a lot of things-- for example, the students stop being students and instead become clients; the relation they have with a professor is that of a client: "I've paid, this is what I want. I'm not receiving what I want, so I'm complaining because I've paid." At the same time we're inhabiting a broken world where we have these images of the past, like broken junk in a forgotten attic, and we return to these images all the time but they aren't helpful for what's happening to us. What do I mean to say with this? Well, for example, when you think about the dichotomy between private school and public school, it's actually more complicated than that. At the university where I work, how many times per day do I encounter practices that are private or privatizing? Every day! People are constantly behaving in a private manner even if it says public school on the door; what kinds of behavior goes on inside? Well, completely private behavior. They've internalized the spirit of privatization and the private sphere, but they use the name "public school. Well, if you are one, show it. *We're a public school, but you can't come if you're not registered*, okay, so erase the "public" part. *We're a public school, but I'm in an individualized desk whose very body language indicates a separation with the other.* "These notes are mine, for my personal use, and those are yours, for your personal use." We're entering a system of competence where that childish "don't copy me" applies everywhere because in the end, we're going to vie for the same grants. As a result, if I understand this, how do I understand education as a whole? Well, as something completely private, so I don't care whether they get rid of public education. Going out to protest for the public sphere and all that, is all well and good, but I'm much more interested in the work of thinking about this issue of how the spirit of the private has gotten into us and has monopolized everything in education, even though you continue thinking you're in the public sector. In reality, what's happening is that we're inhabiting a privatized space, not to mention all the academic responsibilities of the professors, all of the publications, all of the credit, with all of that vocabulary extracted from the economy: "credit" and all that.

Everyone is in their own personal space, managing their own life in a private way, and the property that is being exchanged is knowledge.

None of that interests us in Enmedio. I'm a professor and it's my way to make a living. At the university, I try to break down everything I can from the inside, but then there's the nature of what we call "the mechanisms," because in the mechanism we call the university, the subjective and immaterial aspects we discussed before are articulated fully by the material. The desk that I mentioned before was designed with the subjective viewpoint of privatization, which says, "Here there is only one body, fragmented, separated from the other bodies receiving and acquiring private information that they will later manage." The same goes for the hallways, the classrooms, the departmental offices, and interpersonal relations that are established in that materiality, in that architectural conglomerate that may or may not be a campus. All of this is united in the spirit of neoliberalism, if you want to call it that. We in Enmedio, from our very humble position without resources and with very limited power, try to create a different type of space in the world, where we can experiment with a different sort of exchange of knowledge; where we can exchange with one another, teach each other, and learn in a different way; where we're not ruled by rivalry, competition, and privatization of knowledge. Privatization only happens because of competition, without that it wouldn't happen. And that is a little bit of what we try to do with the Enmedio center -- what would depress us more than anything is if our existence were ruled by privatization -- how depressing! If that's going to be part of my experience, then ok, we'll have to see how long it lasts and how it goes, and I'll try see where I can set limitations against it. But, of course, I'll try to do things in a different way.

As a professor, how do you deal with that paradox?

Well, badly. At work, they have demoted me. That's what they call it, even the term ("degradar," which can mean either to demote or to degrade or humiliate) is funny. I've been a professor at the university for 18 or 19 years. I started out as an assistant professor, but I managed to become an associate professor, which I was for 5 years, but when the crisis occurred they returned me to assistant. I don't have anything to lose. If I'm being honest with you, I'm not in the university for money, in fact these hours might be consuming time for me that could be economically beneficial. I'm dedicated to trying to open a space in my classes that is completely different from all of that logic. It's difficult because first there's the physical mechanism in itself, then there is the Kafkaesque bureaucratic mechanism, all the bureaucratic structure, which the Bologna Plan has accentuated so rapidly that it completely nullifies any other possibilities. After that there's a psychic barrier, which is to say, you find yourself and others in a structural framework where the only reigning logic is that of competition and privatization: "I've paid to receive a series of resources that I'll use individually in order to get a job for myself." That's what I frequently encounter in philosophy, art, and design spaces -- in spaces where, in principle, it should not be that way. So there is a series of barriers ranging from the most tangible to the most intangible; from the external, material mechanisms to the most internal --that is to say, all of the psychic structure made by neoliberalism that is very difficult to tackle.

Because these mechanisms are so difficult to tackle, I don't have grand aspirations like "I'm going to go in there and change all of that." Instead there are smaller aspirations, for example, "Today, instead of competing, they have been sharing; today we have been able to open a space for sharing that wasn't related to private interests, and

has broken with the logic of what is 'useful,' entering into a different dynamic. Today we've diverged from some physical structures, we've instead experienced things in more human terms. Today it's been a few years that a past student has been my friend, a friend I can count on for life and who counts on me. These barriers have been surpassed." When you have these small successes it's very satisfying because they show you something very important. Has neoliberal capitalism expanded to everything? Yes, more or less. Has it occupied all aspects of existence? Yes, more or less, although I kind of disagree with that perception. But, and this is very important, it doesn't totalize everything. It's not totalizing. As soon as you start thinking it's totalizing, when you believe it, you're lost, because then things like sexuality, speech, and humility lose their human dimensions, hosting a friend in your house is transformed into Airbnb. Of course, you're free to see things that way, but you can't forget the active capacity you have in doing so. In every moment, whatever the circumstance, you can replicate circumstances of mistreatment and injustice or you can promote justice and solidarity with others. In any place you can understand knowledge as something private or you can open a space for sharing that's separate from that privatization as long as you're with another person and is re-created when you're together again later. And it's not just that. In my class there are bodies together every day but they're light years apart. So one of my objectives is to say "I'm going to try this year to shorten that distance between bodies." Not physical distance, because they're seated close together, but the mental distance that we maintain inside ourselves.

What would growth look like for this collective?

We're not very concerned with growth, instead we're more focused on how we are, which is different from growth. We believe that the idea of rational progress is still a part of the humanities, even though people say it's been gotten rid of. It's always there and it's necessary to remove it. Instead, you can enter into a plane of relation that isn't projectional. Instead of saying, "Now I'm like this but things will be different if I manage to do X, Y, and Z," you can say, "Now I'm here," which is different.

These are some intervention tools created by Enmedio, can you explain them to us?

1. Apptivismo (Apptivism)

Apptivismo is a workshop that one of the members of Enmedio coordinates, David Proto. It's a space for experimentation with programming for apps. Basic app programming primarily for mobile devices is learned and combined with its possible uses outside of the ordinary. It can be applied to a wide range of matters, above all confronting social conflicts.

2. Acti-FI

This is activism and fiction. It's a workshop that I coordinate dedicated to newly exploring, in a hybrid environment, the basic tools of fiction-- constructing characters, storytelling, etc.-- with the intention of applying them in a new way to create experiences that can confront conflicts and discomfort.

3. Bellas Vallas (Beautiful Fences)

This is a workshop dedicated to exploring and understanding the new application of urban design in cities, especially in what we call "brand cities." Brand cities are cities

that live from producing, distributing, and selling their own image. What makes up the images of these brand cities are the people that live in them. So, we explore their material and microphysical conditions, as well as their elements of hostile urbanism, and analyze the spirit present in these elements. If the spirit of neoliberalism was being applied previously to a student's desk, then here we're seeing the same thing. Tons of mechanisms are placed throughout the world that restrict, delimit, distribute, and direct the mobility of the bodies in the cities. How do they do this? Well, with aesthetics. They may build fences, for example, but they have a pleasing aesthetic factor. Why? Because otherwise they would be viewed negatively, it would be counterproductive for the creation of a brand city. So they need to be camouflaged. How can these structures be aesthetically camouflaged? Well in a thousand ways. Beautiful fences are really entertaining in that sense-- they make them plants with thorns, benches that are divided so that people can't sit down. In short, there are material and physical elements that structure the periods of rest that bodies in a city can have and direct their mobility.

So, it makes you wonder, "But where are we going? Where is our mobility being directed?" Well, this mobility is understood only in productive terms of consumption. The body has to be an active agent in the production and consumption of these cities and their existence is reduced to just that. In this workshop, our task is to study these physical and material elements. If the environment we're working in is more of a theater, then we do performances or actions that make the original, camouflaged meaning of those elements visible. When we work in environments that are more related to design or architecture, like I'm now going to do for a workshop in Sweden, we propose counter-designs, that is, we apply a hacker-like design attitude to use the existing elements to make something else, to incorporate a different spirit, a spirit that doesn't correspond to production and consumption but rather other things like contemplating the world, sitting down to rest and enjoy for a while, etc.

How do you keep up your hopes in times of political discontent and overall insecurity?

I think the problem of keeping up one's spirits is more a problem on the other side, they have to ask themselves, "Now, after centuries of trying to convert hope and aspiration into the desire to consume, how do we keep up our spirits?" That's a question that they have to ask, I'm not very worried by it. I'm more worried about the question of energy, that is to say, how we sustain the energy to not automatically replicate the capitalist system and find the energy to experience something else. We also need the energy to relate to others beyond the usual, comfortable way, the way with its own built in infrastructure and logic, so that this relationship comes about naturally. And that requires energy.

How do you charge your batteries with that energy?

That's a good question. It's true that some energy comes from youth, that's why there's so much desire for change in those years, and that energy eventually expires. And that's a problem for neoliberal capitalism, because it's been discovered, above all since the '40s and '50s, that young energy enriches capitalism because it can be transformed into exacerbated consumption. Capitalism exploits those years and tries to extend that youth, with surgical operations, face lifts, and a denial of the fact that time passes and that we lose that energy. The modern idea of revolution relied on the same thing-- young bodies that wanted to change the world with all their energy, putting an end to the old, weak world and ending up with a new one. That's

how the bourgeois revolution went, followed by the modern revolutions afterwards. From marxists to Nazis, they all had that in common. A large part of activism relies on this, that's why there is that over-simplistic critique that "when you're no longer young, you'll be done with activism and you'll truly understand the world." So the question of energy is a big one. You might ask, "Is there another concept of energy that's not this relationship between youth and aging?" and I think there is. For example, one feels more energized when they have an unexpected experience with something. There is a loss of energy in the contemporary capitalist world that comes from what is already known, that's why it relies so much on what is new, but in reality it's a masquerade trying to camouflage what is really happening, that there really is nothing new. This loss of energy is an economic conflict for capitalism.

The energizing nature of an unexpected experience, that's why you and I are so interested in fiction, because at its core fiction energizes. So, how do we produce that? How do we do things differently? How do we avoid doing the same thing all the time? If that's what my job as a professor means, in that structure we explained a moment ago, what happens if I do something new and unexpected? That's where a constantly renewed energy comes from that is independent from age and is always experienced with vitality. So I think art is a good tool, if you want to call it that, to try to provoke that unexpectedness. That's why a book can make you change or a film can move you, and you go into it with one spirit and you leave with another. That's why when a conversation enters the terrain of the unknown, which tends to be the realm of the unexpected, an energy is created independent of age and it's fantastic. I don't know if I'm just saying it because I'm getting older, but I truly believe that there is another type of energy. And I think thinking about this type of thing has always been closely related with the arts.

Sure, it's an unexpected encounter with the other.

Léonidas: Yes, and it's an encounter with the world, in a new way. Art is nothing more than looking after the world, looking after it until you manage to see it. Seeing the world is seeing it in a different way from how you usually see it when you're not looking after it. And every time that experience happens to you, it's the experience of creation, contemplation, attention, and apprehending the world, and that energizes you, it makes you want to experience it again and it makes you want others to experience it, as well. You want to communicate that experience, the desire to transmit a creation comes from that experience. So exploring it is infinite, it doesn't dry up with age, and that gives us hope.

OVNI





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
Barcelona, Spain

Collective's name
**OVNI (Observatorio de
Video no Identificado)**

Name of the interviewee
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Who are you, and what's your relationship with the OVNI collective?

Joan: I'm Joan, and there are four or five of us, aren't there?

Toni: ... we're various roots, we're a rhizome of people. Also Xavi, Deedee, at one time.

Joan: It's been many years, 25 I think.

Toni: I'm Toni-Abu and I'm also part of the crew of this ship. This is a river that keeps running, searching, asking questions or gathering questions that are in the air, outside the organization or within it. The four or five of us are more or less permanent, but the truth is that it's difficult to put a fixed number. Even the very name, Observatorio de Video no Identificado (Observatory of Unidentified Video), sort of explains from the outset who we are. Boundaries aren't our thing, even the boundaries of our collective, because they're unstable.

When, where and why was OVNI conceived? At the time, what was the source of inspiration?

Joan: We got together in 1992, after the Olympics in Barcelona. In the realm of video, there weren't many outlets. We got together a group of people to start to do things, in order to share what we did and also to create a type of platform to teach things, a place for sharing. It was also a way to try to look for ways to get our videos out there because, at that time, there wasn't the advanced technology of today. It was very difficult. And each one of us came from very different worlds. For example, I was one of the youngest back then.

Toni: That's right, and some of us were coming back from spending time abroad. I believe that what basically brought us together was misery, the feeling of misery. That is, you come back here and, regarding video, you don't see what you want to see, you can't do what you want to do, you can't show what you want to show. You have to enter into a very strict discipline with one or two main curators. So a few of us decided to get together in a very informal way, and the group of people kept changing. We also couldn't do more than talk, basically, so we were just a group of people interested in images talking together. But while we talked, many things started to happen and we started getting closer and from there, at one particular moment in time, we came up with our first program and we did it in the Metrònom in Barcelona, which was closed then, and reopening was also an important task. It made us really happy but we didn't know what to do next, and then the possibility arose of being part of the Contemporary Cultural Center that had been recently created.

Suddenly, there was a Contemporary Cultural Center and a Museum of Contemporary Art. Everyone was fighting over the Museum of Contemporary Art while the cultural center, whose director was a philosopher, ended up with a lot of open space. At the time I was just returning from New York, and the idea of the malaise in the cities became very clear to me there. So I put together a cycle called Malaise in the Cities and we decided to hold it at the cultural center. That's the way it started. Basically this was the origin of OVNI, a feeling of misery and a wealth of questions. Also the initial desire was, given the limited vision of what video creation was, to open up the world of video, get rid of the idea that it's a novelty and say, "This is a language that's been around for many years; it's mature and it can think, feel, open itself up, lose itself and find itself in the things that surround us in this world, etc." So upon opening it up, immediately we started to find a lot of people who were interested.

Is OVNI a collective? What is your legal structure?

Joan: Being a collective in legal terms was the easiest. There was a moment when we thought about becoming a foundation but that was complicated.

Toni: And the cooperative too. We weren't too clear about anything and we didn't know what we were going to do or that it would last. We didn't know that we would be around for 25 years.

Joan: There were a lot of people at this time, a lot more people. It wasn't in 1992 but in '93 when we got together for the first time. In fact, I don't remember it very well, but a lot of people came for the Olympics and then stayed after, it was like a country-wide 'population hangover.'

Toni: Yes, right after that everything started. There were also a lot of people interested in audio.

Are there any salaried employees in the collective?

Toni: We were never able to do that because we decided to dedicate our resources, which took us a long time to get since we didn't have anything more than a working space, we dedicated them to subtitling. (English wasn't so present back then). We also invested in paying the authors and then in making DVDs and doing the archives. There has always been a small amount of money, but we never felt like we were poor victims or anything. It is what it is.

How does a collective that's been around for 25 years perceive a historical event like the 15M movement?

Toni: You were abroad at the time, weren't you, Joan?

Joan: Yes, I was away.

Toni: It was a big surprise, because I remember that a few weeks before I went to a manifestation related to the war in the Middle East or to something in Italy, I don't remember but it was an important issue, and there were very few people. This was just before the 15M movement. And then suddenly, I remember going to the 15M protests the first and second day, and I noticed that there was an energy of *bam, bam, bam!* It was like giant steps. Suddenly the first weekend was like,

something important is happening here, then the second weekend the energy was incredible. There were also a lot of questions that were floating around at that time, due to the amount of energy in the air. Questions like “What was the Spanish revolution? Who was Democracia Ya? (Democracy Now?). It was so beautiful, what was happening, that everybody decided to get involved. For me one of the most beautiful images was a graffiti message that said “Don’t give it a name,” and I think that was a condition for it to be successful. There were no banners for political parties or for ideas that weren’t related to problems about concrete things.

**We have here an “Observatory of Unidentified Videos.”
Why aren’t these videos identified?**

Toni: This terminology about the “unidentified” was in the air during the early years when, perhaps due to the pressure of the art industry, people started talking about a cultural industry here, I think it was Andrés Morte, which sparked a brief period of happiness and then shortly afterwards, one of enormous sadness because an industry normally doesn’t normally bring happiness. As a result of the pressure from the cultural industry, there was a categorizing of terms that sprung up. So the part about being “unidentified” referred to the fact that we didn’t really care about whether or not some was art, fiction or if it went beyond fiction and was archeology, land arts, performing arts or something along these lines. And of course, since everything is connected in an involuntary way, it has to do with the fact that we had never had the desire to identify the collective ideologically.

Joan: Nor did we want to identify it as a medium because in the beginning, the eighties, video art was something very monolithic. It was a like a big box in which people put everything in video format and all this was called video art. It was institutionalized and, in this sense, it was identified as something artistic without taking into account that it was a medium that actually allowed very diverse uses. In fact, ever since video started being used, the purposes were diverse.

Toni: In this sense, the idea of not identifying ourselves with video art instead of distancing ourselves took us to the very origin of video art, which was somewhat of a hybrid and very free. But I think it was also interesting, the fact that there was no desire to do politics or not politics but rather we were following this river in which we were learning with our work as authors, with our work as readers, with whatever we were receiving in each year and suddenly, to our surprise, we were entering in the political realm. Some years, we even organized OVNI events that were very radical, and I don’t know if we could do that now. However, we didn’t do this from an ideological perspective but rather from one of concern.

Joan: I remember the first time I saw *Gringo in Mañanaland* by DeeDee Halleck where she used images taken from archives. During that period we were really into archived materials and there was a whole new world there, thanks to DeeDee...

Toni: ...And because in 1999 there was Seattle, and then in 2000, Genoa.

Joan: Yes and because this video by DeeDee had very strong implications that went beyond the actual medium...

Toni: Some political issues started coming up that brought us to a pretty strong radicalness. They didn’t originate from previous ideological positions or from a desire

to express something in this way, but rather they appeared due to our own life experiences, what was happening in our cities and in our lives and what we received from other people. This really affected us, when the protests in Seattle with DeeDee Halleck occurred and the manifestations in Genoa, New York...And also the oppression that we increasingly started experiencing in Spain... September 2001 with the Torres twins and suddenly seeing that everything was changing. At the same time, we were already investigating in the archeological realm, the internet was already there and it offered a lot of resources. Then we started going into activist websites because until then they were really boring, and in a matter of months the online activist networks of the U.S. and England, which were the most advanced with regard to music, were very attractive. There was a whole series of things that brought us to this point.

OVNI's activity covers different areas: 1) The maintenance of a video-activist observatory "anarchive"; 2) Biannual meetings; 3) A website with a range of content, including "intro-texts" where you explain an idea in a hybrid format with showings, talks, shared reflections, etc., and the research blog. Why did you choose the format of an "anarchive" (anarchivo) and how is it different than an archive?

Toni: At one point, after the OVNI gathering of "Resistance" which was very powerful, we decided to get into the question, "what is the origin was of the immense malaise that's overwhelming us and making us not want to continue along a video-activism path just because?" So we decided to look into the source of some of the discontent that we were seeing. So this took us to the OVNI gathering of "The Colonial Dream" in 2006 and this led us to consulting archives and these archives were impossible to consult, incredibly difficult. There were hundreds of steps that were needed to access many of them. Those that we could access were through back channels, thanks to Lewanne Jones (that's a secret). And the film libraries here in Catalonia and Madrid were impossible, as were television stations. So we were naïve, not realizing that the idea of accessing archives was fundamentally linked to power and constructing narratives. And we saw that each document had a value, especially those that could be accessed, which were as valuable as the statue here in the city of Antonio López, and have now been un-archived or 'anarchived' (the same wordplay with "archive" and "anarchy" exists in Spanish). So the things that we were trying to gather were totally the opposite, they weren't monuments but the archeology of people's lives; it wasn't the macro but the micro, it wasn't from one source but gathered from a thousand sources. That's another reason OVNI is about the unidentified and without borders, OVNI is this whole net, all those authors, because there are many ways to work as a group and one way of working as a group is when people send you a video and you spend years thinking about it.

Who sends OVNI their works? What type of work have you gathered?

Joan: There have been different periods. There have been periods when we received a bunch of material, but now not as much, now it's not through solicitations or by anonymous sources but through direct contact with people.

Toni: That's exactly right. At the beginning it was through following our interests and gathering everything we had seen that interested us and then investigating further in those directions. Each author is like a thread, you start tugging at it and it takes you to the root, which are also the same works that are submitted when we have a call out, so it becomes one in the same. So at one point we would put a call for submissions out and we'd receive a lot of material. The lens that we see through now

is a product of this period. It was really a full table and at the same time it was like a scanner of thousands of eyes, all over the place, contradictory, subjective, micro-worlds, and there was also a lot of knowledge behind our reading. We followed this and upon following it and seeing that there were really waves of worries or hopes, dreams or nightmares, we went deeper into something that we had never abandoned, which was that fundamental search. And this is the path that we've been following, as Joan says, and it has been getting more and more powerful since the OVNI "Colonial" gathering up to the OVNI "Resistance." The one on Resistance had a lot of reading, and from there, it became a combination of searching and receiving, and it's become more and more of a search. This year, last year...

Joan: A 22-year old girl who has been helping us was asking me, and I was explaining to her that before, we had to ask for tape, watch them, etc. before there was internet. And now with the social networks available you can do a lot, like Youtube. It's fascinating! It's a place that doesn't have any borders, and you can go from seeing information from one extreme to the other in a matter of seconds. So having an archive, doing what we do now as OVNI and as people who do things, like Xapo and Xavi, is very powerful because it's a process of weeding out...

Toni: At first you do have the feeling that you can weed things out, but it's gotten so big that in the end you realize that any kind of process of selection is going to actually be just a small part. You aren't really filtering everything, just your personal search experience. At the beginning, you were, though. What we don't do, and in fact what we never did, I believe, except maybe once or twice but with little conviction, was participate in European festivals. Not because there aren't interesting things going on, because there are, but because once you go that route you can become a franchise without realizing it.

Joan: Well and also because it's really based on novelty, and on the latest trends, on what shines the most and is repeated from one festival to the next. The big hits, you know? And I'm not saying that the big hits aren't good, but there are more things.

How would you explain the OVNI gathering to a person who has never attended one?

Joan: Well this has also changed over the years because at the beginning, in the 90's, the individual screen didn't exist and now I think the need to share space and get together is more important. I believe that there was a change for the last OVNI gathering, it was the first time that this contact was almost more important than the screen. It had already started with "Resistance." The screen was there, but "Resistance" was an OVNI where a lot of people attended. There was a power from the people there that was almost more powerful than the screen. And this year was like that.

Toni: Definitely, there have been moments when we've said, "Wow, we have a ton of incredible information from many places, let's create stories in order to show them." Later, we increasingly said, "It's important for there to be parallel projects to ours that aren't just videos but also texts," and at that time in 2005 there was Autonomedia... the kinds of things that they were publishing were also part of that simultaneous search for the political, the poetic, the personal, the collective... in different levels of reality... Then this also brought us to where we would do a mix of things, we'd have people come speak at the showings, and also a very important part of all of this is having the sensation that a community is being formed; it was as if a group of people, instead of being a town in one geographic

space, existed together just at that time and we would meet every X months or years and you saw people who you wouldn't have seen again, where there was an affinity, sometimes a deep concern, sometimes pain, sometimes happiness, and it was for a few days. And this community was there already, and suddenly somebody would come up to you and say, "Thank you because I used to think this was the way things were, and now everything's much bigger." So this construction of a community, of a town, of a village in time, has always been really beautiful. With regard to everything else, more than a response to a plan or project, OVNI was a response to a life experience. Each year, each period of time, things happen to all of us, they happen to us in smaller communities, as a collective and on the personal level, on the outside and inside and then all of this is reflected. And even the periods of closeness or of distance between us, doubts, tensions, all of this, during the moments when we aren't doing well, it's no big deal, and when we're good, we understand that this is what makes it wonderful. So these doubts, these dizzy spells, these moments of not knowing, not understanding, all of this makes up part of the rich experience of OVNI. Normally this is the part of all the projects that is castrated, it's cut, it's not productive, it doesn't turn out well, doesn't produce anything, it's not clean or polished. So to leave it there even if you don't want to, like the essence of life... these are friendships that have lasted for a long time, and it's almost like becoming brothers and sisters, it's wonderful.

How can a reality that is sustained by images be transformed with images?

Toni: Yes, this is a very good question, Palmar. I would say that I've only recently started imagining something that perhaps in the past I sensed and then forgot or lost. What I sense now is that there are images, which are like wallpaper, like production, products, projects, and then there are visions. For this reason for this OVNI gathering we're using visions. And this is also very connected to the fact that visions don't come from a dialogue of images, or from superimposing images, but rather they come from silence. They come from emptiness, you never know when they're going to appear. They take us more than we take them, maybe even including the authors. They don't always tell you what you want to see, in fact many times they tell you the opposite of what you want to see and they provoke empty space. They're the children of silence, of darkness and they provoke space and light. At this time I don't know more but I would like to look into all of this. I think it goes back to the ancient notion that visions were a form of healing. A lot has been said about the relationship between sound and healing and with visions it's very difficult because this is what they are, because there's a piece of wallpaper, there's this layer of images that covers reality so sometimes I don't even see you. I see a person from a certain place, of a certain gender, race, ideology and I create something that covers you or covers me, and visions can perforate this. It could be like that.

Joan: I've never thought in these terms but the sensation that I have is that I've used a camera since I met Maya, my partner, and I have the feeling that images speak to me. You take some photos or film something and they speak to you. I've always had that sensation. And things happen by themselves, and I believe that there's an experience with images that has something to do with healing. It's something that helps you take your first step, because these images really speak to you. When did that change, I have the sense that it started in this moment, when you see kids with videos on youtube with a million views, and what they're doing is copying each other. And that makes you think, "What is this thing that you're doing?"

Could you talk about your work incorporating text and blogs?

Toni: The text comes from the desire for us to understand an issue or to get other people to participate in this. The blogs come from the strategy of saying, "We've created something that's gotten big, and everything big always brings problems, so let's create some specific entries so that you can have a specific resource to consult." It's a matter of tools.

What relationship is there between OVNI and Observatorio Sur?

Toni: Jorgelina Barrera was in Barcelona making a documentary called *Can Masdeu*. She was having difficulties finding an editing team and we started to collaborate. She's an Argentinian from Córdoba. At one point the concern about her having to return home came up, she worried about what she was going to do and we told her, "Why don't you do this, you can take part in this," and she proposed opening an OVNI over there, but we said, "No, be independent and we'll collaborate."

Can you explain what it means to work and live "rhizomatically"?

Toni: Life isn't a project, life is a rhizome. Abel is a small root over there, and you, and surely you have friends, and then through you and Susana, Joan just talked to Maya, and Maya is at the university. Really, reality is rhizomatic," it's not like you have to do a "rhizomatic" project. Many times what you have to do is do very little. I think sometimes people do too much. It's a more a matter of taking out rather than putting in, of undoing rather than doing. Just being aware of this, we're suddenly recognizing that between all of us there's an incredible richness, and not only among the people who work in the area of culture but among people in general there's an amazing amount of access to information. For example, if you come to a square, it would be better if you pay attention to the interconnectedness that you're a part of instead of being isolated in an office and working as a public servant without considering the needs of the people who live in the area. You see this in the MACBA building. There's no library, no room for events, the boiler room has been converted to an auditorium. Now where we are, in the Antic theatre of CCCB, they're building a new theater, they're making an auditorium and painting it white. Everybody knows that an auditorium can't be white and that the entry door can't be next to the screen. But of course, when we do things removed from the rhizome of information and its uses, etc. It's not only them; we ourselves have personal examples of having done something similar. So the rhizome would be this, reality.

Toni: Right, and also the rhizome can be cut and it continues to live. It's not like a root from a tree..

What relationship do you have as a collective with the reality of public institutions?

Joan: In the 90's there seemed to be a more rhizomatic energy with the CCCB. There was a period when the energy there was strong. Then when it was over, I wouldn't know when exactly, but it was notable. In the CCCB, some really nice things happened.

Toni: That's right. It would be interesting to write something about it and do a study because the CCCB opened as a space that wasn't so centralized around power; there was a growing autonomous movement in the CCCB. The autonomous part existed very rhizomatically with the CCCB. I think that ended, in part, due to the tendency

to restructure that all collectives and institutions have, to become crystalized and bind together, and also in part, curiously, when more money came in. I believe that when more money came in, it was one of our worst periods. Now that we're poor again we're doing better. The CCCB started having money, remodeling, hiring more people and it started to become a very powerful machine that needed rules. And then it suffered; instead of investing in autonomy, it became more centralized, more strict, created different branches, offices, territories and Alpha males and even if there were really good intentions, things got difficult. And, in fact, it's something that has happened in many places and in the case of the CCCB it's a shame because originally it was a different institution. This takes us to an issue that you brought up with your question, and it has to do with public entities. To what extent is it public? The public sector seems to be taken over by powerful lobbies, whether they're political, bureaucratic, clans or interest groups. So it doesn't feel like "public" is really public because many times in public institutions you don't see the will of the people. "Public" means that it's open, that it's rhizomatic. If you close it and you start to think that people have to pay to enter.... This has been a discussion that we've had many times. We're asked, "Why don't you charge people?" and we reply, "People are already paying." We ask, "Where is your salary coming from?" and "The money that we're given, where does it come from?" It comes from here. So, is it public or not? But look how the plazas have already stopped being public spaces, either because they've been sold as spaces or terraces for tourists or because they've become restricted to the point where you can't even sit on the curb, literally, without somebody asking you for an ID. So where are the public spaces?

How does OVNI see its mission in a country where there's a gag law?

Joan: This is a big issue. I remember that there were moments, at the beginning, things, topics, situations that were also delicate but I think it's different now. Now you can really have problems.

Toni: It's a feeling like a shadow, like when birds see a shadow that is taller than them, they suddenly get scared. You don't really know.

Joan: There was tolerance at that time and a desire to understand. I remember a video by Annie Spinkle (Maria Beatty, 1992) when we talked with Josep Ramoneda (the first director of the CCCB), and we said, "Well, what do we do with this video?" and he said, "Well, that's how it is, right? It's no problem."

Toni: There was a form of asking questions that was one on one, not like asking for permission. Now it seems much more difficult, but to be honest, I think it's good not to think too much about this because if you do, you'll see the shadow. Because the shadow works because of censorship itself and because of the limits on speech and the shadow of those limits. This means that the strongest part of this censorship is the degree of self-censorship. So, if you're paying attention to this, you're going to censor yourself more than others will censor you. So it's like saying, "I see this clearly, and I'll stop here." We haven't gotten to this stopping point ever since I've had a true ideological position. No, we simply think, I see this and that, there's brutal suffering here, they're calling something out over there, so it's common sense to report it. Afterwards, well, we're also an observatory. Here they identified us pretty quickly.

Joan: There have been some moments with Ciudad Morta, and with Fuera Tal Vergonia and with the letter in El País.

Toni: With issues related to Palestine we attracted the attention of the Zionist Lobby and here the CCCB, after this period had past, didn't take a good stance, they didn't come out directly in our defense. Like something that they didn't like and that bothered them. So you begin to discover all the lobbies. It surprised us because they named us in La Vanguardia Digital (Spanish newspaper) many years ago. We're very certain that, and we say this jokingly, that OVNI will be completely erased from history, there isn't going to be any name remaining, and this is a relief because there isn't going to be anything left of us anyway. You can see it because it's been a long time now and you start seeing video anthologies in Spain, and there isn't anything. At first you feel a little bad, then you get sad and then you start thinking that this is kind of interesting. Jokingly we say that we'll be more of a legend...

Joan: Getting back to the gag law, you go online and get on youtube and there you have everything. Censorship doesn't exist, does it? I don't think so, because it doesn't matter anymore, now there's so much...

Toni: But now there's Pablo Hasél, rappers who are in jail right now, right? Or the puppeteers in Madrid.

Joan: Whatever suits them. One thing is there and perhaps now it's not of interest but tomorrow it is, and they come after you. It's very strange. For example, what just happened with ARCO recently. There is a lot of money involved, both on the part of the fair and the gallery. In other words, it's complicated and it's not easy to talk about this, because what's really happening?

Toni: But there is a tendency. It's also true that power uses certain representative cases for publicity as a way to cause alarm. But I can sense that there's a systematic tendency lately because there are a lot of cases one after the other.

After 25 years working on this nomadic rhizome, what sustains OVNI's energy?

Joan: Everything. Nothing in particular. It's the desire to continue doing things.

Toni: Since OVNI isn't a project but rather our life and we feel alive, it comes naturally, there's no effort in this sense. But then of course there's effort involved later.

Joan: And human curiosity and human conscience. The natural curiosity to see how far the conscience will take us and everything around it. Anything else would be a waste. For this reason the name of this year's OVNI gathering, "Camino de retorno" (The Way Back), is beautiful, it always makes me think of Boaventura and "unlearning", which is kind of like this, in a way.

Toni: And it's also this, following the river... The river continues to flow... as a friend of ours said, Tere Recarens, the river continues to flow, we continue with the river because we like life and when the river reaches the ocean, *alhamdulillah*, praise God, we'll be there, right?

This most recent OVNI event named for a ritual, a rite of passage: "The Way Back." Why return to the ritual?

Toni: I believe that's the issue. Here you have a lot to say because it's a one of your big interests. So it's not a coincidence that we give thanks to you in the program.

Actually it's a way of doing what was already in the previous OVNI's because the programs never worked like a catalog. They worked like a river. A journey in which your mood would change as you travelled through a series of landscapes. When we take this to the area of the in-between world, that of life and death, etc., this need became more apparent. For example, who should we invite to speak? You say, "This is going to be a supermarket of options,"... so, "Who should we invite?" "Well, let's invite silence," because, besides the fact that it's economical, it's really going to give us space so that everything else resonates. This is very nice. This happened a lot with Joan speaking, this need for silence. And also, it's sound that provokes the sound that provokes silence. It's also the silence of darkness where the images are born that aren't part of this veil that we talked about before. They are really related to silence. And here, in this journey that we normally do, we can go further and get into an area that we really don't know. We arrive with a lot of doubts, very conscious of our limitations, at least me personally, and our blunders, and we say, "Let's get involved in something that we don't know in order to learn."

What's there is a will, an inquiry, because for me what differentiates images from visions would be that visions come from an act of humility in which you see yourself in need. I need and I ask for. In this request, it's either granted or not granted and if not, it's just as well. I think this OVNI gathering is like this, it's the most open, honest, attentive and careful way to convene this force that is so powerful. Yesterday I was talking with a friend and just now I found out that she's not doing well, and it makes you realize. She's a person that people like a lot and she always says, "it's another dream, another dream has started." So of course, knowing that this force is constantly present and that reality also consists of things that are absent. Hopefully it goes well for the people and for us, and today now that we know that some people who come are sick, it increases the importance because death is a spectacle in our society, it's maimed, lacking, robbed of everything that is real. When death brings reality to life, death makes life real by converting it into a dream as well. It's interesting, isn't it? It's like an incredible game of paradoxes and here we are...we'll see.

Antic Teatre Espai de Creació





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and what is your relationship with this project?

I am Semolina Tomic, which is my artistic name, my birth name is Julijana Tomic Fajdetic. I was born in Yugoslavia, present day Croatia, but I have lived here in Barcelona since 1985. The Antic Teatre, Creation Space was founded in 2003 and it is a project with a license to function as a social and cultural center and includes a theater, bar and garden. The main objective of our activity is to provide support and resources to modern theatrical art or performances and varying multidisciplinary expressions. For us this is very important to understand because we are one of the spaces that politically fights against concepts of culture introduced by neoliberalism. Specifically, we think that the basis of the neoliberal plan is the sectorization of art that is divided into music, dance, theater, circus, plastic arts, visual arts, etc. Currently in Barcelona, politically speaking, we have reached an unfortunate situation due to a European cultural political strategy that comes from Brussels and from Margaret Thatcher. Normally in England, there were community spaces that existed but were systematically destroyed when they were bought or closed down. From there this idea of designated areas for artists to pursue excellence began. What does this mean? Well, a person without talent cannot practice art. We fight against all these concepts and approaches because we think that people do not understand them. In addition to that, the main idea is that after taking all the industries and factories out of Europe and moving them to poor countries or to where labor is cheap, these vacant spaces then remain empty. From here comes the idea that creative European cities with factories of creation are engines of cultural industry, where an artist does not earn money and thus has no interest. The Antic Theatre is fighting against all of this because we defend the concept of independent space.

What is an independent space?

The independent space is difficult to find when you arrive at a situation how it is currently in Barcelona, where we have 11 factories of creation directed, controlled, and are part of the Administration, of the Institution, of the governments that are in the City Council of Barcelona and the Generalitat, the autonomous government of Catalonia. All of our resources for culture are few in comparison to that of France and other northern European countries – in southern Europe there is no investment in culture. It is like we are in the middle ages here when it comes to multidisciplinary, contemporary art. In Spain, you are in a country where an "Artist Statute" does not exist. "Statute of an artist" means that the artist is a worker with the right to social security, medical leave, maternity leave, and retirement pensions. All of this, in this country does not exist. This means that being an artist in this country is a joke, not a job.

This is why many people in this country do not want to pay artists. There is a cultural and artistic precariousness at brutal levels, while the cultural elite are the institutions. We have reached, at least in Barcelona, almost an institutional totalitarian control of culture and art. It is the institution that controls all of this and we are one of the fighting flags that opposes this. We think that citizens are the ones who make culture, the culture is for those who work for it; it's the citizens who make films, movies, texts, songs, videos and shows. We are the ones who pay taxes and we want the resources of our taxes to go directly to the street, to the public. This does not happen. In Barcelona, with this new government, the issue of culture has been the worst because for these people, culture was not important. They have made a pact with another party, the Partido Socialista (PSC) or Socialist Party, which was here for 32 years until 2011. In 2011 the government shifted to *Covergència y Unió* (CiU – Convergence and Union), the right-wing nationalist party, and in 2015 Barcelona en Comú took control, which is to say, the “popular left”. For us this has been the worst government for the cultural sector... Normally in a socialist, communist, left-wing country – like Yugoslavia where I lived until I was 18 – culture and art are the backbone of social and cultural development at all levels. This means that art is within an obligatory education program. By the time you are three, you have already practiced art mandatorily. Here you are in a country where even today, in 2018, there is no artistic practice in public schools. In Spain we live in a fascist country, the same ones who won the civil war in 1939 are still in power. There was the Transition, the switch to democracy in 1975, but when you see the real power – the companies, the banks, the church – they are the same people or their descendants. There has not been any change. I have been here 30 years and I fight for the “Artist Statute” and I think I will die without seeing it because this type of control is brutal. These people know that art and culture form a human being, develops their dignity, their will and development. Art serves this purpose, and it is not a material thing -- it does not serve your material wealth. You go to see a show, a play and what happens? Well it can make you think critically. This does not interest a fascist country. Culture is practiced very little; 20% of all citizens of Spain practice culture but the majority is bullfights and folklore. We are dedicated to contemporary theater, but do not even get me started about it! This means that without culture you have uncultured people because culture is cultivated at childhood. I am talking to you about all this so that it is understood what this whole Antic Theater project means. All of what I am talking about: education, art, culture, community projects with older people, etc., everything is at the center of what we practice. We have many parallel projects, like a tree with many branches. We have been established for 15 years and since the first day we have dedicated ourselves to this. What does a cultural center within a neighborhood mean? You cannot be a secluded group, a space of exclusiveness only for an elite. We have worked in this area from day one. We are part of neighborhood associations; we are pioneers and we are continually proposing neighborhood projects. For example, our neighbors who live in front of the theater and are older, dance on stage... When you talk about politics and art for us this is what we mean: that my neighbor, who lives across the street, dances on a stage that we have here. We make art, which in this country is still called “alternative”, “off”, “irregular”, “underground” and we fight against all these labels because we are not an alternative to anything except, that we practice the same art that is created in the rest of Europe. If the Antic Theater program was done in France, it would be in the National Theater. Here in Spain, the National Theater and the majority of the theater circuit is for classical, conventional theater. They dedicate themselves to the reinterpretation of works by other people. The Institutional Theater is the replica of this. I tell people, “If you want your child to study art, you have to go outside of Spain”. Most of the people who work at the Antic Theater are people who studied in Holland,

Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, France, etc. They returned and work in the Antic and in very few other spaces throughout the county, but 90% of their work flourishes in Europe. This is very significant to understand the state of the county in which we live. Contemporary art is not supported, not only theater but any art, and you can see this with all the censorship and repression we experience in this country for song lyrics and some books. They have put a “gag law” that prohibits manifestation; some people even think this period is worse than during Franco’s time. With this comfort they have, they have yet to realize the importance of art. It is the pensioners who fight the most in the streets for a decent pension; they are not young people. The hypnotization of our youth, with all the technological artillery is brutal, we see it in our struggle to get them to come and see some theater. On the other hand, if as a child you have not been taken to the theater, you will not go to the theater. Every month as a child, my school took me on a bus to a children’s theater. In this city there are no public, state-supported theaters for children. And I am not talking about a dramaturgy school but about an actual theater. There also aren’t any programs on culture and art on Catalanian TV yet. What about the rest of the country? If they take you as a child to the theater, to exhibitions, to auditoriums you grow up differently. If they take you to see, not to consume because culture is not consumed, it is enjoyed, and then you think and reflect on it. I have had to write theses, texts, defended them in my school, debated them, fought for them and that is where you build yourself as a critical being in the society in which you live. All this does not exist here.

What type of programming does the Antic Theater offer?

We have at least 80 different shows, sometimes in a season we have three weeks of the same show when the artist is spectacular, but normally there are various artists in the same week. It is dynamic and we work with all disciplines; we have worked so hard for it to not be an exclusive space. This sectorization of art is so tremendous that a photographer is not going to see a show, someone from the theater is hardly going to an exposition of the visual arts, someone from a circus does not know if he is going to see a dance, or a person from literature or publishing might not be interested in theater. What we do is what they call new dramaturgies, it is a theater where there are no characters. We do not use dead playwrights, neither Shakespeare, nor Brecht, nor any of these. They have to be an individual creation. We fight against the repetition of the known techniques and methods. This is the essence of our work. This is what we intend to explain when people come to propose a show. We try to meet artists from all over the world to internationalize ourselves, because here there is no circuit of this kind of art, unlike France where a production by Antic Theater would tour several theaters. That does not exist in this country. All this art is “do it yourself”, we do it for ourselves and fight for it. What exists is fought for by the people who carry out and fight for the projects. We have names and last names; we are not a mass of people.

How do you support an independent theater?

We must remember that we pay taxes to the government and that institutional money is simply money from our taxes that they manage. The government does not think, create, or produce anything for us. There are people like us who are already doing this here – and there are people who do festivals, etc. – but they do not support it. There are some subsidies and grants that are available, which are legitimate, and we apply for them in order to pay artists for their production, but they don’t give us anything. We have some small subsidies. Meanwhile, all the money goes to the creation factories, other spaces or art institutions. But all the artists who are from Catalonia have left these

places, for example, Conde de Torrefiel, Pere Faura, Aimar Pérez... A ton of people who are working throughout Europe have started here in Catalonia. When a young person wants to start a project, no one in this city will help them. An abyss exists between school and reality. Where are you going to work creating shows and productions? And I am not even talking about creating a tour. Where is the management? All of this is missing, it is not here. There are two or three managers who actually work, and the kids have to do the rest of the work by themselves. All our productions start here, we look for collaborations with other independent spaces and we also collaborate with those factories. We take advantage that some people are there doing some type of residency and together we do co-productions. Regarding the sustainability of an independent space, well you need money for such a project. How do you do it? You have to have an income equivalent to that of the Antic Theater's total budget, this can vary between 250 and 350 thousand Euros. That is a bullshit budget if you have a theater with daily programming! In our case, 70% of our budget is from our own income and we get it from the bar, which is the main source of income for cultural activity of the Antic Theater. This appears on a plaque at the bar. It was made by the same person who makes the website, posters, flyers, awning, and the posters of the artists. We make an effort to make the issue of sustainability visible because people do not even think about us, or do not even know there is a theater inside. We think it is very important to create a source of income, which can be anything – a restaurant or catering, like in Germany, you cannot expect to only get money from public aid or subsidy to carry out an independent project. We see that, for example, in the US, money for public culture is almost non-existent, it is companies, banks... and surely you have to fulfill the obligations these patrons ask you to do for a cultural project. In Spain, we do not have patronage policies, for example a company could deduct contributions to a collective, cultural association, etc. In Spain, we do not have them, it is brutal. The current fascist government of the People's Party (Partido Popular) does not want to put it in place, we have had problems with taxes, VAT, etc. As of 2007, 2008 came the economic crisis. Until 2007 there was a good level of production, independent people with their own space, who managed to get by with their own tour. But in 2012 in Catalonia, the government cuts subsidies to independent artists and a lot of companies and artists began to disappear, and the Antic Theater survived all of this just because we have a bar and we think this is the purpose of the institution. The government wants to annihilate spaces like our theater, they want to control us, they have been dedicated to taking over projects that work well. And currently in Barcelona there remain few places that are independent outside the squatter world. When we talk about an independent space, we mean artistic work at a professional level, we live off art.

What is the mission of the Antic Theater?

What is very important for us is our community art project which currently is called "Beauty: Our Neighbors". This started because we thought, what is going on in this neighborhood? What are the problems here? Community projects are also in style. Now, the new city council wants community projects, everything is for the common good, but people are paid, we absorb something and that is not a community project. We have been working on a project for seven years, a weekly job that changed the lives of our neighbors. If you watch videos of our project, they are the ones who explain the process and the work that is being done. Then there are shows made not only here. This project began because when we arrived, we thought- what is the big problem in our neighborhood? And we realized that it's the elderly people who lived all alone. So, we thought, with our tiny world, how can we change something? Then we decided to go look for the neighbors, we sent them personal invitations to their homes,

and a large group has signed up. There is even an independent group that works alone and is very important to the neighborhood. Once a year we have a barbecue where we invite all the neighbors to come eat, about 150-200 people get together to eat at the Antic Theater. We have various "open door" acts aside from the almost daily schedule of the theater with the most radical works. You have to see it to understand it because there are no characters, there is no representation, people explain an idea, a concept of a search or their own language. I don't even talk about new languages anymore.

From your perspective, what is the situation with artist practice in Spain?

This culture is characterized, for example, by a public space, that can be a creation factory like the ones I mentioned before and that have had millions of Euros invested in them. There they give you small rooms, rented for the use of the artist, in order to play music, or write plays and they get charged for it. What we say, speaking of political strategy, is that it is good that they make this available, but the access should be free, because we have already paid for it, this is done with our money. We want people to work and give service to the public. I talk about the cultural industry in the sense of the commercialization of the culture. Everything is done for money. Now, the theater in Catalonia is a commercial theater, like musicals. It is pure entertainment and we are against the culture of entertainment. The culture that exists everywhere has to be a reflection of the human being. Even the circus has to have meaning. The why, the how and for what are the most important questions in art. Therefore, there is a lot of thought that is done before you make the creation. The commercial theater, or independent cultural industry does not even function - Virgin functions without subsidies and does very well - here that does not even exist, nor does there exist a musical stamp of this type. All of the cultural industry is subsidized, like cars! That is the problem, that we pay for it, either it's commercial culture or it is subsidized. A cultural industry has to have the ability to generate money and survive on its own. We are against the subsidized cultural industry and this art because it takes famous actors from "mindless television series", they get paid a lot of money, 10 to 30 thousand Euros per month, to rehearse in one of these theaters and then they run the play for a month and the theater is packed. And the actors keep saying "nonsense" on stage and that is what I criticize. The majority of the culture is this. And how does this change? Well, with the cultural programs, let the kids have their space and begin to create.

How is the work of the Antic Theatre linked to the critical formation of people?

For example, we have projects in high schools. We have made artistic residencies in high schools. One of our artists works in a high school on the outskirts of town and started to work with a class that did not know anything about theater, now we have brought the class to the Antic Theater to see some things and to see what they think... And when they first see the beginning, it was like they fell from Mars. The only way to bring this to the people is through education and inviting them to participate and it is not only for the money. Our prices are very affordable.

Are there other initiatives similar to the Antic Theater in Barcelona?

Yes, we are not the only ones, but before there were many more. We do not have a public theater that is dedicated to contemporary theater production and exhibitions. In Madrid, there is a theater, El Matadero, "Naves Matadero-International Center of Live Arts" which is currently directed by Mateo Feijóo. Have you seen the controversy that has come from these ships? These elite actors of the bourgeoisie, from the television

series, have been thrown on these people, even complaining to the president. What do we do in this situation? Now, our resources and our money only go to the spaces of the elite theater of the Catalan bourgeoisie. We are a strange thing for them, and they put up with us because what we do is so good. They know that our artists are touring in Europe, but they don't want to schedule them in public theaters and those theaters are ours. I am against how the Institution operates but the Institutions are ours, "open them, leave us". They spend 100,000 euros working in two days. Do you know what I do with 100,000 euros in the Antic Theater? Why don't they give it to us if it's ours?

What has to change so that the independent theater is supported by institutional cultural policy?

Well, cultural policy has to change; a political party or people have to come who really care about culture. We thought that Ada Colau (the Mayor of Barcelona) would appoint someone who is dedicated to culture and give them command. She has not done it. She has made a pact with the PSC (Socialist Party of Catalonia) and we have had the same people who have built the cultural policy that I have spoken to you about. After the application of Article 155, Ada Colau broke the pact with PSC and now they have named professor Joan Subirats as commissioner of culture. But, ask yourself, does this man know the Antic Theater exists? I don't know if Joan Subirats knows and he is who we have to talk to and pay his salary. He knows what the Antic Theater is, what we do, what we produce, what impact we have, and who works here. Is he going to give us the resources in order to make this work? I do not know if this person knows. He might know about the Antic but that is the problem, that in cultural policy there is no vision, there is no ten or fifteen-year program and things are not done overnight. To build things you need changes in education; to put a mandatory artistic program in schools you need a law. This means that all the artists around would have work teaching in schools instead of dying of starvation. Because here artists do not only work on this, but also have other responsibilities. You need a party in the government that chooses people who want to change this and want the resources to reach the city. In Madrid they have this. Manuela Carmena (the Mayor of Madrid) has chosen the dancer and lawyer Getsemaní San Marcos. We are friends, I ask her how she does it and she said it took two years to change the subsidy plan. Resources are the most important. You can see in the full videos how she fights against PP, PSOE, etc. that do not support the idea that money has to reach the street, the creator, the citizen. In Madrid they didn't even have public subsidies, she has had to create everything from scratch. It took two years but today people go to Madrid. Today, Barcelona is an artistic joke. Things happen in Madrid, in the theater of the Canal with director Alex Rigola, with a program with the most important and groundbreaking companies in all of Europe. All of the little theaters like the Antic in Madrid have been given money to plan. That is what I ask for in Barcelona. Why don't they give it to us? If they know we exist, and we are a reference to an international benchmark. In Madrid, she has made the Institution work for the citizens, not the other way around.

How do you put pressure on the described situation in order to change it?

I am part of a group of 150 independent artists who do not want to be a part of anything, neither an association nor platform, we call ourselves an independent collective. We do not want to belong to any current association because none of these Associations represent us because they do not fight. Their first objective should be for "The Statute of the Artist" because it is good for all. Look at the fight between the Intermittents of France. In France, the Statute has existed since 1934 and here we are

in 2018, and we still do not have that, nor a patronage policy. In order to achieve this goal, I have fought since I have been here; I speak at conferences, attend debates, but it does not move forwards because there is no union. Since there is no labor union, you cannot fight, and it seems that nobody wants a union for all of the Associations because all live off of public subsidies. They are the ones that introduce the political culture that is imposed by the city council of Barcelona. I think that, given the circumstances, existing is an act of resistance. It is like being in the trenches as a way of resistance. We have done things with collectives of the city, they have done things within the space and it is a very dynamic, super rich collaboration. All of the artists and collectives that come through here, each do their activities in their own way. Also, there are debates. Things are done but while they do not have enough impact to make a real change, everything works. This is what gives me strength to keep moving forward, working, managing, creating international or local networks. I don't want to form part of an association that is an act of protest; we do not want to give ourselves a legal form where the Institution dictates who will be a representative. Yes, we want to reach these things, because we are powerful artists and we move the fight our way...Let's see...

Why is this project unique?

This project started because we are artists that began the work on it. I am an artist, I worked 10 years in La Fura dels Baus (a Catalan theatrical group) as a creator and artist. Then I had my own company and in the Antic we brought people together who were looking for a space to rehearse. No one thought we would ever perform, nor have a bar or anything. We worked and traveled throughout all the world doing our shows, but we have arrived here, and this was our demise, we have arrived at a dump. I think that the potential of the project is that it is an independent project that was born out of real necessity. If this necessity does not exist, the project will not be powerful. We are not going to make a factory of creation, putting in money, in order to create container without content. How does the institution make this content? Well, it closes the independent spaces and forces us to go there but the artist does not do it because they are obliged to pay residency in the factories of creation. Even the concept of artistic residence is distorted. In an artistic residence you go to the space that chooses you, that gives you money for your work, for food, for room and board and you stay there for a while. But you cannot call the artistic residence a place to rent. So, this necessity to have a space to create is what has motivated us to create this project. This project has grown this way, very spontaneous, but we faced the city council in 2005 because they wanted to close it. But in 2004 they gave me a very important prize in Barcelona for recovering an abandoned civic center and transforming it into the contemporary scene, and they give us a prize for the most innovative programming in Spain at the international festival of Huesca, to a space like ours, self-managed and no money! From the start this was super powerful. When the city council wanted to close us, it was because we were a dump. We found a space from the 17th century without updated installation so we did the electricity ourselves, but due to the safety regulation of the city council's technical service, they wanted to close us. And there we began our political struggle for this space, which has some statutes from 1879 when it was founded by the architect Joan Martorell to bring culture to the people. After he disappeared in the 70's, we were lucky that a politician, Carles Martí of the PSC, listened to me when I went to talk to him about the need to reform this space. We need to reform it because in Barcelona there are many spaces like that of the Antic from the Second Republic, spaces that bring culture closer to citizenship, but they must be reformed. I don't know why, but this gentleman decided to reform the Antic Theater and it was there when we started

the process of reforming the theater. The whole process has lasted 10 years, we have had to get almost a million euros, and we have done it. We got help from the public for the reform and in 2014 we obtained a definitive license for our activity as theater - bar. It has been very difficult. On top of all this, in the late 2000s, Itziar González, governor of the Ciutat Vella district of Barcelona, which was the PSC, discovers the corruption of the technical services in Ciutat Vella, the same ones who wanted to close us. Her party did not support it and stepped down as a politician, at the same time the corruption of the Palau de la Música (a Catalan concert hall) is discovered... In this country we live in, there is so much to talk about! The problem of the government we have here is that they favor the market, neoliberalism. A pro-citizen ideological thought would be based on the public, but it is nonexistent. Why is there not a public bank? We do not have any, all the banks are private. Is it so difficult to create a public bank? The people have created things like Coop57, other cooperatives, etc. but they are all citizens' initiatives, more like private initiatives and not at the political level.

What is the situation of art schools in Spain?

Politically, we do not have parties that work in favor for citizenship. Go to Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Holland, why are the best schools in the world there? They are schools of reference for the Antic, we even work with them, we invite them. A school of research where the creation is learned, how to read and write are not improvisations. Why are the best schools there and we do not even have one here? I tell people that it is a waste of time to attend an art school in this country. They have bad education, bad techniques, old things, and why is it like this in Europe? Forty years have passed, everybody blames the dictator...etc... but I am going to grow old here and say, what is happening? Why can they not make those changes in this country?

What do you mean when you talk about education?

When I talk about education, I don't think only of art education, that is very important because drawing, touching is what makes you learn math or physics. Because overall human beings are creative, but the schools kill the creativity in us. Why in other countries, Sweden, for example, does half of your salary go to the State?... But I have mandatory services, nursery, free education, decent residence, where I will not be only annoying as an older person, with all the social assistant services. Why are 80% of the buildings in Sweden public? You can buy a house and it does not become private property. You can pay for it for fifty years, but it is still not your property, like it is here. Why does it work in these countries but here we are in 2018 without the minimum of what they have, living in the same hemisphere? There is currently a big change in Portugal, but no one talks about it here. Our communication networks are engaged in the service of repression policy. In Portugal, the left has won and are making huge changes, but we have to look for that information on the internet, although even the internet is controlled. Google is like a joke. It is very difficult to gather information, which is knowledge, and to have the right to access information for all. This is controlled. The neutrality of the network, the free culture, is not real, everything is increasingly controlled. What is the first information Google offers, about anything we want to know? The same is happening here, next door, in Portugal. Here in Catalonia, one hundred million euros of our public money goes to the Opus Dei schools that still segregate by gender in 2018! These are real problems, and nothing happens. It cannot be understood. When will we take money from Opus Dei? Why are we financing the Church? It has always happened, but it will not change. We can cut this money and we put it in healthcare, which

is getting worse, because they want to privatize. We all have private insurance because if you don't, you will have to wait half a year. This is the reality in Spain.

What is the relation with this city council of change and Barcelona en Comú?

Since this problem is so profound in all of these sectors and our lives, they have focused on the social and housing aspect. So, the current struggle to live is case by case. The city council wants to do things but cannot do much, because laws are changed in Madrid. All the laws that the Catalan parliament has wanted to change or implement, at least 30, have all been denied by the Constitutional Court, and that is why people are fed up. We do not want fracking, but they say yes to fracking, and so on. It is a powerful problem. They in the City Council have wanted to do things, have done them, but ideologically they do not have much clarity, and it is very confusing personally.

How do you think public institutions perceive a space like the Antic Theater?

Everything that is on the street for them is private. It cannot be that citizens, the collective of people who do things, take us as private projects. It cannot be that a project like the Antic Theater, or the Arcadia school, as the Focus, which is a commercial theater, cultural industry company in Catalonia, which has a brutal monopoly - because a mafia has been here for 30 years. These are our real problems. When those from Barcelona enter Comú, you think of a project like the Antic, self-managed, with their own resources, that invest in you fully, you are going to be supported, but where is the money? The theater is an expense. The theater does not earn money, it is an expense if you want good work. And it does not all have to be rentable, but they want it all to be rentable and it is impossible. In order to maintain this theater, we earn money from the bar, it is self-managed. So, the Antic will have to be one of the first examples of the solitary, public economy... but for those who are private, they see us as a private project.

What do institutions call public theater?

What they call public theater is a publicly owned property, which is from the city council. The building of the Antic has a private owner that owns the entire building. When we found it, the Barcelona Circle of San José had been here since the 1930s. The president of this association passed this very old contract to our collective and we continue with this, but we have a lot of problems. The owner that we made this contract with has died and his son wanted us to pay the facade of the Antic and we have not paid it. He denounced us and we have had a judicial process. This is the typical example of cruel capitalism. When there is a building in a poor condition, people enter, renovate it, continue to carry out a project, but the owner enters and wants to keep the building, and many do. In our case, he has lost justice and we are in a very tense process, and the city council knows it. Until now all of the city council members, of the left and of the right have supported the project, because if not we, will not have money to reform it. Why has Barcelona en Comú not supported it? We have no idea. The most logical reason would be that the city council made a deal with the owner and bought this building so that it would be public. Whoever manages it after those who manage it, we will still be there. We are fighting so that the Antic will stay as a cultural space for the city and yes, if you have to buy it, you have to do it publicly. We are not against public spaces but in a public space you have to leave management to the public. The problem is the management of the spaces, public or private. Here there are a ton of mafias, shady companies that you

cannot even imagine and with subsidies. But we are very transparent, very political. Yesterday, there was a video recording for Valtonyc and Hasél, these rappers, for the Fariña book. We had 200 or 300 artists from 11 to 6 in the afternoon and each artist was recorded with lyrics from these boys' rap. This was made in the Antic Theater, not in other theaters. In the current political culture, people do not want to lose their subsidies and do not want to lose their friendships and since we are like that, we are the most political and radical, I think they are afraid of us.

When you talk about the Antic Teatre as a political project, what policy are we talking about?

When political things happen, we are always involved, we carry the fight on.... On Wednesday you have a press conference from the people of No Callem, here, in this space where all the activism comes from. Our political project is anti-capitalism, it is very clear.

Thinking about your experience, what characterized the cultural field from the 1980s to the present in Spain?

I arrived in 1985, 10 years after Franco, from Yugoslavia. You should know that culturally then there was talk about the vanguard of Yugoslavia. I came from this cultural country and here was a cultural desert. When I talk of the counterculture in society, I talk about the social, political or cultural movements created from people. For example, industrial music, created by Einstürzende Neubauten, people from Berlin who in the late 1970s were in leather, on the highway, breaking everything that they found, and out of this they created music, they became famous because they broke a car with an ax. All this movement is about a philosophy, they had written texts, magazines, and made television programs. I arrived here and did not know they existed. I could tell you about Noise (rock) music, about avant-garde music, punk, etc... that music was very powerful. In art, we have the performances, which they did not even know about here. Like... Viennese Actionism (Wiener Aktionismus) ...some of the origins of performance...Hermann Nitsch... but today they do not even know that it exists.

Here we have the Fura dels Baus, which I saw their first show in 1984/ 1985 when I came here. Their first show was called "Accions" and they named after Viennese Actionism (Wiener Aktionismus)! Everything that Fura dels Baus did in their show was never done before, because we were living in a country so uncultured that no one realized it. Marcel·lí Antúnez, the first director of it, I worked with him during the 90s only for money. I discussed with him because he was the boss, and the only one who finished Bellas Artes, who knew what Acció was..., the rest did not even know that it existed. He was the only one who knew that there was the Archaos circus, the first world circus in France that changed the world.

None of this existed, there were no magazines, information, sites, bars, clubs, nothing. Here it was "do it yourself", even the t-shirts, I hand painted the t-shirts for Negazione and Dr. No - which I still have saved. If you wanted certain shoes you had to go to London, but it was "do it yourself". For me it was very hard.

What is the Antic's collaboration with other collectives like?

What we have created with this project is very important. The Antic theatre is an international model for all the work that our community has put into this project and so

it is transparent and is encompassing. Here there are many projects happening at the same time, which means there is a person responsible for this project. I am responsible for the Antic Theater because I had to sign, but then realized it was not only symbolic. I realized this during the legal problems. Each person is responsible for something in the Antic... the bar, the theater, the subsidies, communication, programming. It is a community effort. These people have total liberty to carry out these activities and their work. We work together and talk, but we talk more about strategies. I give my opinion and say what I think, but I do not enter the work of the artist, Marta Galán -- of the community project. We speak more about how it goes day-to-day, about working on the strategy of the project, and the big problem that independent projects have with visibility, because the communication is only mainstream. So, how are you going to get to know our artists? There has been a website since 2009 -- Teatron -- that is our only channel on the internet for conceptual communication and you can be a user and communicate. There is not much else for social media. Communication and advertising work are some of the most expensive work. If you do not have money, you cannot pay for advertisements, so we have even stopped press conferences. We invited them to eat and they all came, but afterwards, almost nothing was written in the media. So, we do not do advertisements anymore and also as an act of protest. But because we have such good shows, our artists go everywhere.

La Troca





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
La Troca

Name of the interviewee
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What is your name and what is your relation to this project?

My name is Elena Zamora and I'm part of the La Troca project, which is the community school for continuing professional training in the Sants neighborhoods.

In your particular case, what has prepared you to take charge of this project?

I believe that it's a little of everything: the grassroot movements really provide a good base of preparation. We should put it in the curriculum. Along with many friends who've been career counselors, we said that really, the activist curriculum is almost the one that gives you the most competency, because you work in a team, you're constantly in connection with social spaces, and because it helps you constantly question what you're doing individually and collectively and plan new goals and objectives. So I do think it's an important part of what we've done in social movements, and another important part is educational training for adults and for new pedagogies (to constantly be informing yourself of what new and interesting pedagogic models there are).

Why did you abandon your previous job as a career counselor to join this project?

I'd been working for five years doing career counseling. Before, I worked with young children, and I really got tripped up a little because of those things that life throws at you, and it really is an area that has always seemed very hostile. I wasn't content doing career counseling either. I was kind of overwhelmed because it's kind of like you're defending a job market that's horrible, so antisocial, and you find yourself around people that need to find work so badly that they will do anything. You have to live with this reality every day, which I did not enjoy. It was easy for us to quit our jobs, that is to say, the three of us working here now knew that we were leaving our jobs to jump into a pool without knowing how much water was in it. But I also believe that just knowing that it's a powerful project that we like, that doesn't make us contradict ourselves, but on the contrary lets us grow a ton, working with other people and learning so much together. We have an advisory team that we're learning a lot from.

Where is this project located?

Right now La Troca is located at the Lleialtat Santsenca, which is a fairly new setup that is managed by a platform of entities with a model of civic management. It's owned by the Barcelona Town Hall, but it's granted to these entities with with this model of civic management.

We're temporarily here, but we plan to make our permanent location in Can Batlló which is a local, self managed space. We plan to relocate there because we think it's a place where lots of synergies can be created with different projects that are currently being developed in this space alongside this project. La Troca is in the Sants neighborhoods, which is traditionally a working-class area, and we put ourselves here because the people that have driven this organization are from these neighborhoods. There's a rich social fabric in this neighborhood, but there's also a lack of certain resources, such as adult schools (there are no adult schools in the neighborhoods). There was one some years ago, but it ended up disappearing, and there are currently very few adult education projects. There are actually plenty of adult education projects, but they are very poorly articulated, with basically nothing in terms of academic training. We believe that it's a necessity for adults that live here.

When and how did this project start?

La Troca started in 2015 when a group of people working in different areas of adult education began to notice the need for such a project in the poorer neighborhoods. It was a new idea that helped us to try and innovate a bit, and include both participation as well as pedagogy. That was when we started to create the project, and from there we began to present our idea to the administration, to present it in the neighborhoods, and to push forward. In 2016, we received a democratic quality prize from the city hall of Barcelona that helped us make the first part of the project, which was a participative process. Although we had our basic idea, we wanted it to be the members of the community who specified their needs and how the project should be. So, we started a participatory process throughout 2017, diagnosing the people's needs and using a combination of statistics, interviews, and participatory sessions throughout October. These sessions covered four distinct categories: diagnosis of needs, necessary skills adults should know, pedagogy, and managing/networking in the area. At these sessions, everyone from the neighborhoods were called, as much neighbors as people working in socio-educational entities, in human resources, in administration, etc. With these sessions, we hoped to finish the project in November, and we finished it by December, after all groups had been heard. It was December because we realized that immigrants, for example, weren't coming to the session, so we held special focus groups to hear the needs of those specific groups. Then, in January, we began the first test run of the project, and asked for another grant to help carry out the pilot test, and the doors opened on January 15 offering basic education in new and early literacy, and we currently have a group of 21 people. We have two levels of initial Castilian Spanish, with another group of 20 people in the second level. We also have two levels of computer classes where we go over domestic economy, social networks, technological devices, and anything that came out of the participatory process that seemed innovative and important. It's a network of knowledge exchange, with topics proposed by some people who wanted to receive certain types of training.

Why did you choose the name "La Troca"?

Sants is a neighborhood whose past is strongly related to the textile industry, so we were looking for a name that would represent this. We always imagined that it would be a project very ingrained in the territory, operating within the community network, because we didn't want it to be isolated like a lot of other adult schools. Instead, we wanted the people to come to get training but also introduce them to other options, like in Can Batlló, they are doing a dressmaking workshop, and maybe the people are interested in that, it could build these kinds of bridges, and the

school won't have to be the only educational place, the entire neighborhood network would be one. In this sense, we wanted a name that would represent all of this, everything woven together. La Troca means a ball of wool, something that could be tangled, unraveled, something very versatile and we loved this idea from the start.

Can you explain how your participatory process has been so far, and what have you done to ensure the inclusion of all types of people?

In fact, one of the objectives that we had with the participatory process was to include a more diverse variety of people. It's often the case that we do a participatory process, but in reality the type of people who come are already at a higher academic level, part of the administration, with sufficient resources and access to the social network. In contrast, often the people you want to come don't, as in our case, we want to reach out to people who needed basic educational training. However, for these types of people who could really benefit from basic academic training, it's much more difficult to come and get involved in the participatory process. So we imagined that it would be harder to reach these people, but we still tried to achieve it with different methods. One of our strategies was to reach out at the start of the year to different entities and socio-educational resources that are often linked to these kinds of people. Then, we contacted them individually by mail and by telephone and we asked them for individual interviews that would help us with the beginning of the process. The other day, we met with a total of thirty-something different socio-educational projects from the area (around the Sants neighborhood district) and we asked for their help in this process. How did this manifest in the participative process? Well, some professionals really pushed the people who came to them to visit us, and others came when we did the participative process. We asked everyone who had come how they found out about the event, and some people put, "my career counselor told me about it," or "my social services reference person." People in some projects even accompanied their clients here. For example, a group of counselors accompanied 15 or 20 people per day to the participative process sessions. That's how it went.

When you see the profile, we had a ton of diverse attendance, but not many immigrants. For example, in a territory that should have had a lot of immigrants, there were not that many. There were certain profiles that were still missing, so what we did was make focus groups searching for people whose profile wasn't being represented. In these groups, which came after the participatory process, we were kind of investigating what these people needed. This is very interesting, because when we did a participatory process session on "what skills do adults need," what came up the most was the desire to learn more about the world around us (such as history, geography, politics, economics...), and skills more related to emotional management, communication, assertiveness, etc. And there was actually very little interest in learning basic academic skills, like literacy. However, this is likely because the type of people that need such skills did not attend the session, in contrast to the focal groups, where the most requested categories were in fact these basic educational needs. We think that in this way, we have actually achieved a lot, although it's still a challenge to reach out to this population of people. Something else that we often notice is that many people simply don't feel capable or empowered enough to attend. The fact of having a weaker academic background or having less experience with discussions and talks and places like this makes many people feel as though their personal opinion isn't important. We think that this is one of the factors that makes it much more difficult for some people to come to events like this. The vocabulary that we use is a bit more advanced, which makes some

people less likely to join in, and makes them feel uncomfortable or unwelcomed. We understand that we haven't been able to reach everyone, but we believe that we've been able to more or less solve this by interviewing professionals who act as a sort of filter, passing on the needs of their clients, in addition to the focus groups.

How have you organized the decision making within the participatory process?

We were advised by a cooperative called Raons Públiques for the sessions and at the beginning we were really overwhelmed with all of that -- "It's three hours, how are we going to do it, how are we going to decide, what tools should we find" -- and in the end, with them, we ended up seeing that we really already had an idea of how to do it. It was easy to put this idea on the table in a completely simple way that any person could understand and, from there, could make suggestions to improve it, what they like, what they don't like, and what they think, and make decisions in that way. So throughout those four days, each element was carried out in a different way, but what we did was, in some sessions, bring a small proposal and seek to make decisions based on elements that anyone could point out, for example starting to put tags on what someone most liked and from that point trying to make smaller groups where it's easier to talk, starting to make decisions there, and finishing making the decisions in the larger group. If you start with a really big group, few people will get involved in change, but if you start with smaller groups and there even was some sessions that we started in pairs, it's easier later to participate as the group grows. We did the last session in November where we gathered and presented the conclusions from the four sessions. We had four tables and four groups, and you could stop by the four spots and for people who weren't in the process, it let them see what was being worked out, and for the people who were there, it let us check in with them to say, "is this good?" and ratify the results and see who wanted to get involved... in fact, this led us to incorporate various things that we had forgotten to gather.

We're in Barcelona, and in this city there's a tradition of working class universities and athenaeum lay workers, libertarians and revolutionaries that arose throughout the country and that challenged the established order. Would you place this project in that tradition?

Yes, in fact I think that the first manifesto that was made in 2015 already already stated that. We see that, with the level of adult education, right now it needs a transformation, and it's true that these are things that have been done already. For example, the aspect of changing the roles isn't new. A professor isn't just a professor that teaches and a student can't just learn, rather all the adults have a need to learn new things and we can teach things simply from having lived, because we already have a 'backpack' of accumulated experience. This idea captivated us from the beginning and we thought that we had to work a lot more on it and we were inspired in part by these spaces, also by this change in roles that we're trying, by the way people come to the class to learn and we always ask them, "and what can you teach?" And a lot of the people are like "What am I going to teach if I came to learn?" ... We believe that it's a source of empowerment too, the ability to say, "Well, not right now, but think about it and if at any point you can lend a hand with something or you can offer training, maybe in cooking from your country or maybe... let us know." In fact, this is already starting to materialize, because someone who's coming for computer classes and works as a dressmaker is offering a class in basic sewing. We're already starting to break through this, and we believed that it was really important as much as a tool to empower ourselves as to change

these roles that we don't think make any sense, and also to make this a more social space. I don't just come to class and leave, we do a little bit of social cohesion among various types of people, and we enrich each other; that's why we're trying to create spaces between the classes that can serve to generate relationships.

Are we in a collective, an association, a cooperative? What legal structure have you chosen for this space and why?

Right now we're an association because it was what we needed to be to ask for grants and it was the most practical, so of course... The thing is that we're in a pilot program for everything, so we're an association because it was the best solution in the moment. What we asked for from the beginning was for this project to be municipal but managed by the community, that is to say, for there to be an agreement with the administration and that from this district, the IMEB or whoever it is from the council, to make an agreement where annually, or every three years or every five years, they dedicate however much money to this project, but the management of the project is still community-run. That is, that the core group -- the team of professionals who are like the human structure of the project -- is made of people engaged in the community, of the network of resources, like for example social services, which has a lot to say because they support many people and note many needs, just as the district and the council are also spaces where technical experts gather a lot of information about prevalent needs. So we believe that the management has to be done by the whole community. On a legal level, we believe we'd have to build a cooperative that would let the people who participate in it form part in it just as much as the people who are part of the structure, who are contracted.

How does the establishment perceive a project like La Troca?

Normally there's a kind of "I'll pass the ball from one department to the other," when a project doesn't fit clearly within established structures, nobody knows who is responsible. There are various areas, and this is an opportunity to pass the ball around. Additionally, the fact that it's a project that doesn't come from them but rather from the people of the neighborhood, their first reaction isn't, "Oh how great, we live in a neighborhood where a demand is made and a plan is also made and they are asking us for help," which is what we have done from the start, we've always looked for ways for them to give us their opinions. No, the first reaction is, "I feel attacked because this was supposed to come from me," so it's hard to get them to recognize the project. They don't recognize it. We have spent more than a year talking and talking, even demonstrating the need for this project, and we still need to continue demonstrating and demonstrating and demonstrating. And after that, there's the quantitative part. We normally want La Troca to be valued in a qualitative way, but we know that the thing that carries the most weight tends to be numbers. If, after the pilot trial, I assist 500 people, then people will surely see me in a better light than if I assist 100.

Why do you think the establishment doesn't embrace this type of project?

I think that there's a policy aspect that doesn't interest them, that it's understood that some people make policies and others accept them. It's very clear that there's an aspect of their philosophy of not wanting things to function like this. On the other hand, there's also a structural aspect; you say that you want a more participative neighborhood, but you make very few participative structures taking into account the community demographics. If you have a large Moroccan population in a specific part

of the neighborhood, maybe you have to get closer to them, to look for someone who can translate, look for a schedule that is best for starting to get acquainted with the community and look for structures that encourage participation. You can't view us as something isolated, like, "how strange that they have come to ask our opinion," but rather as something feeding a participative culture for everyone. Really, we always say that we have a responsibility to create "the culture of learning to participate." Either they generate mechanisms from the institution themselves, or they aren't going to change anything. Where mechanisms really come from is social movements, and they always see that as an attack. And it's also kind of about changing this mentality; don't go against all the proposals that come up, but try to collect them and see how they can be directed, recognizing that you are working for the people, not the other way around.

We're in a city which has a "city council for change." Are these circumstances that favor the inception of this project?

We think that in another city this project already has probably been carried out because Barcelona is one of the few places where adult schools aren't supported by the city but by the Generalitat (Catalonia's regional government). We believe that an educational project has to be municipal and in a lot of towns that's how it is. The projects being municipal, means that it permits a lot more versatility, you can adapt the enrollment much more to the realities of the municipality. In other places it's already happening, in fact in the majority of places it's like that, it's true that we're trying to give it one more try, but there are projects that are already bringing it to a close.

How many people are salaried workers on this project and on who do the salaries of these people depend on?

Right now, three, two full time and one halftime. From the beginning we started to talk with the administration with that idea of the public project with community management, they told us "Yes, okay, but first you'll have to prove that this is a need." We did the participatory process and now we're in the pilot program. For the participatory process, they gave us a grant from the participation sector, and for the pilot test they've given us a grant from Active Barcelona (from the area of the social and solidarity-based economy). So we're doing a pilot test with that money and the people working are covered by that grant. The thing is, we don't know what is going to happen come September. I imagine we'll stay open for now... we haven't been open two months yet, one and a half months, in fact, and already two hundred and thirty people have signed up. They've come to enroll in one course or another or to ask for information or they've been directed here by other resources. So we think that we can't close right now, and the money will come from somewhere.

What does it mean to 'work' in this project?

It's a project that in some way you have created. And apart from the many more hours than you would spend anywhere else, there's an emotional part too, that you likely wouldn't have as much at any other job. Either way, everyone who works with people usually has that stronger link because you're seeing how what you're doing is impacting other people. The people aren't numbers, so that emotional link is already there, and in the project La Troca it's even more prevalent. We see that it's something that, it's not just impacting the quality of life of the people of this neighborhood, it's something transformative that can replicate itself in other places and is really very powerful.

For many collectives and projects (previous and subsequent to the movement), 15M has signified a moment of reorganization, of reinvention, of strengthening, etc. How is La Troca connected to 15M?

I lived abroad during this time. In this neighborhood for example, 15M carried a lot of weight and I think that I would compare it to La Troca because it was a very transversal movement with the goal of taking politics from the bottom up. To the neighbors, La Troca is that too, it's saying, "Hey, education doesn't have to be something elitist, it needs to be within the reach of everyone." Because any neighbor knows how they want to receive this education, they know what they need. They need to have a voice and to be able to go somewhere and say, "Hey, I need a training in computer use, and there aren't any anywhere else, so let's figure out how to make this happen." I think that this parallel is real, this idea of horizontality, of becoming more and more horizontal.

In a way, it seems like La Troca is supplying the function of a public service. Can you talk about how you perceive this reality?

Our reading is that, for example, the training that we do the most right now is the basic education training, very basic; it's an invisible population, a population that has many people in irregular situations. What does this mean? Well, that economically they aren't of interest, it's as if they didn't exist. When we started with diagnosing the educational needs, one of the things that we saw was that in the field of adult education there really is a lot offered in civic centers and associations. Above all, there are a ton of associations (like what we were talking about before about supplying the public sphere). But the institutions aren't taking note of these offers, so we said, "How can it be that the district of Sants doesn't know what training opportunities for adults there are in that very district?"

Palmar: There's a total disconnection between the needs of the population and the public structure.

Yes, so that's what we see, in the field of adult support it's the organizations that are doing the most work. And the administration, what does it do? Well, give subsidies to these entities. Why? Because it's a way to not commit long term, that is to say if there's a need for career guidance in Sants, and the Càritas neighborhood is doing it, I give a grant to Càritas to do this training. I'll give it this year, I won't bind myself to them for future years. In contrast, if a project is put forward by the administration, the connection is already there to do it longer term.

Then there's another issue, which is that there's no importance placed on continued training. It's like we only teach from ages 0 to 16. With luck, the people who go into a professional training or go to college will be taught until they finish, then that's it. It's like we have up to age 30 to develop ourselves. After that, it's like adults don't need to continue with professional training, which is odd because what companies are most asking for from the labor market is for people to be continually trained and well... it's not given importance. One of the jobs that we that we want to do from La Troca is give it importance that it deserves, that absolutely everyone needs to continue training.

Why do you think this type of informal education isn't promoted in school or in public universities?

We always say, there are the kinds of people who are more autonomous and

have higher academic levels that go to some places like universities or spaces of ongoing training, where education is regulated. At the political level, all of that is what's of interest, to have people with a high academic level. In the universities, they aren't offering other kinds of professional training because it's a completely hierarchical institution, although that is trying to be changed (many collectives are trying to change it). Access requirements are in place not only at the academic level but also for enrollment, and each time they are having to pay higher fees. This is to say that it's already a harsh filter: they're saying, "People will be able to attend with an academic level of X, but only people with X economic status." They are perpetuating a hierarchical role that has been going on for years.

When you talk about collective intelligence in La Troca, what are we talking about?

We're talking about, as you mentioned at the beginning, who our references are, what the movements of popular universities are, what the movements of athenaeums are... We want La Troca to have a very strong community aspect. We believe that I can't just decide to mark out the pedagogical path or whichever path, but instead we believe in the collective construction of knowledge, that is to say, we don't want the three of us hired with a salary at La Troca right now to decide its future, but rather we want to take into account the different points of view because, in the end, the more people join, the richer the result of what we want to create is going to be. So this is what we understand by a collective intelligence, where it's all of us who build our goals for the future.

How do you understand the term 'active retirement'?

One of the things that we have seen in our diagnosis is that Sants is a neighborhood with very much an aging population. We were told by some social service professionals and some centers of primary attention that they were finding themselves with a very large problem of older people being more isolated, there's a huge problem of loneliness. So, they're isolated, they're people whose sons or daughters maybe have gone to live far away, they have no community in their environment, and they find themselves every time more disconnected and there's a lot of depression in this age. As we believe that education has to be ongoing in whichever stage of life, in the stage of live in which you retire it seems like when you stop being of interest to the labor market, you stop being of interest to society. And we wanted to turn that around. You stop being of interest in the labor market and you have a lot of free time, so let's see what you invest it in. Some retired people are beginning to collaborate with La Troca, and what they can offer is amazing, they have on their backs a history and life experience that's wider than we may be able to have. And actually there are many groups that are making training for adults, but, like we said, they aren't well known, and we believe that once retired it's important to have a space where you can talk about this stage but also continue addressing concerns and continue educating ourselves. Learning how to find resources, how to learn more, where to find social spaces where maybe they can collaborate on a project... we want to talk about all of this a little and be able to provide resources.

And what are you referring to with the terms transversal and basic instrumental competencies?

When we did the session asking about competencies necessary, we said, "Well, this issue of needed competencies depends on everyone's individual career path, everyone

will understand it differently." As we understand, it's that the transversal competencies that are common for every person, the ones requested in work like taking care of your kids. And the basic academic competences are like the base of academic training, like reading, writing, and language because if I've migrated from another country I'm not going to know the language of my destination country very well, and I'll need to know it. Computer literacy, too, and some basic mathematics. A basic general sense of culture as well. Transversals for example would be communication, not only the more linguistic part but also the "knowing how to be," so if I arrive at a site, I don't just say "hmmm" but "Hello, how are you?" Knowing how to enter into a conversation with another person, knowing to say no if I don't want to do something. Organizing my time, that's a transversal competence. And management of emotions, as much understanding my own as understanding the emotions of others.

How do you understand the term 'the reproductive economy'?

Right now we aren't involved in that. We're making up a part of the domestic economy, but we aren't a part of the reproductive economy. What we did do was a session where we talked about the social economy and also we spoke about the different economic roles every person plays. There's one that is this role of caregiving, reproduction, which doesn't usually have an impact in the labor market. It's as if it didn't have any type of value, and we have to give it value because it really is a sustaining pillar of society. This is really linked to the idea of competencies. For example, women come who have never worked in the job market, instead they've followed a trajectory of caregiving with parents, the house, the children, which leads to a variety of competencies that can later serve you if you want to enter the job market. And it's important to give value to that because many times people tell you, "I've never worked," and I say, "You've worked maybe more hours than I do in my work day!"

What is the profile of the people who come to La Troca?

In La Troca now we have like 2 groups: immigrants that haven't been here for very long, or that have been here for more time but they don't know the language, they aren't literate in the latin alphabet, and there's another pretty prevalent demographic type which is older people. Also there are some people that are looking for work and, for example, they aren't computer literate or they want to improve their computer knowledge in order to be able to look for work and then there are also some people that come to the knowledge exchange network, who are locals interested in something we're doing. Although this is one of our smallest categories of people. Basically we have the profiles that I first mentioned to you, and for us this is a challenge because this is exactly what we wanted to break in La Troca, we didn't want to be a school of adults and immigrants and seniors. Instead we wanted to be a space of social cohesion that these people might come to but so would people who spent a lot of time living in the neighborhood, because we believe that an important part of the school is this social cohesion -- that they get to know the different profiles in the neighborhood and normalize the fact that there are different profiles in a neighborhood, that they understand they can share with each other. What's happening? The thing is, Sants has a strong social fabric and it's difficult to offer trainings that are attractive to all audiences. So, we've started to offer the knowledge exchange network and, really, we've offered super cool classes: an art laboratory, visual, music, and other classes but it's hard for us to bring the different profiles together, and they're pretty small groups. So what we're going to do now is work more through our network, for example if they offer an activity here in La

Lleialtat Santsenca, we'll accompany other people who maybe wouldn't have otherwise gone. For example, they did one around March 8th (International Women's Day) and another about technological sovereignty, and we try to accompany people there. We try to get the people putting these events on to adapt their vocabulary level to be accessible to different demographics. We're going to start working more on this.

At the beginning, attendance was more masculine and we said, "this can't be"; the first week, we had a group of 11 people doing the language class, and they were all men. We said, "What's happening?" And once our information began to spread through word of mouth and reached the school parent associations, each woman brought a ton of women because we really do see that they're much more connected than men many times. And now we have more or less the same number of men and women. There are people with clear roles, people who've just come and aren't regulars, people who are in the process... it depends.

Do these people pay for this training?

One of the basic principles that we have is that we believe that the training has to be free, that is to say, there can't be a barrier like that you have to pay, so at the moment all the training is free. What we do want to make in the future is a system of collaborations. You can become a member of La Troca for zero euros or for 20 euros a year or for 50, to have more of an income of our own.

Is La Troca a political project, and what kind of politics are we talking about?

I do think that it's a political project. Sometimes people say that education has to be completely separate from politics. We think the opposite, that simply to educate people is a political statement, and we think that it's connected to a very basic type of education. In fact, the majority of people that are part of La Troca come from social movements or some organizations and we believe that it's a type of politics that emphasizes the points of view of people and the social sphere, in participation, in transversality, in horizontal structure, and in some way, the political project attempts to be horizontal and encourage participation. It's also hard to find someone that tells you "Look Elena, I don't like how you're doing this." But what we truly want is to encourage a horizontal structure, and that is something political, and it's what we're doing. We're trying to make everything more horizontal so that the people are more empowered, so that everyone participates more, and so that, in some way, we also have an impact on the political structure.

It seems like participation is an issue still to be resolved. What are some other unresolved matters that you observe in society?

Gender is very unresolved, also cross-cultural understanding. The economy... moving towards economic models that are really more socialist. Housing as well. In general, for all of people's basic needs, working so that the norm is that everyone has them covered. The norm can't be hearing every day in one place or another, "They've raised my rent, I can't pay it, they are going to evict me." This can't be the norm. We have to have another norm and make more socialist policies that are more for the people.

What does it mean for La Troca to grow in non-capitalist terms?

For us, to grow means to create more alliances, create synergies, get more projects to know about us so we can join forces and do things together. We need more people to learn about us so they can propose new curriculums. Above all, it's this: alliances, synergies, being well-known, being valued.

What have been the challenges and new insights of working for La Troca?

The challenge has been working with the establishment. You have to arm yourself with patience and know that it's going to be a very long road and that you're constantly going to run into "no, no, no, no." For example, I wasn't used to working with the administration, and it really is a complicated path. I think that has been the biggest challenge. Then, I think the biggest achievement has been the community that we have created. There's a boy here who is taking Castilian Spanish classes that has created a hashtag called "La Troca Familia" (La Troca Family). And it was like "Ah! How beautiful, we're really creating a collective process based on participation, on making it something very open." You end up creating emotional bonds with the people that you work with, for me it was initially the people in the core group and now it's broadening to include everyone who's coming to participate. This is amazing. And then the act of being open to what everyone can contribute, you start to have a ton more ideas than what you'd have if you weren't asking for the opinions of others.

What maintains the energy and hope of the people who work at La Troca?

I think, more than anything, seeing the doors open, seeing every day that people come to sign-up keeps us going. There has not been a day since we opened the doors when there weren't people that came to sign up or when professionals haven't called us to ask for more information. Seeing that this really is a need that's being covered, and that we have the opportunity to help this project put down roots in the neighborhood and that it's starting to change things a little bit, I think that's what gives us the most strength.

La Tribu Sugurú





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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewees
**Iñaki Álvarez and
Ariadna Rodríguez**

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What are your names? What's your relation to the project The Sugurú Tribe?

Iñaki: I'm Iñaki Álvarez, and my educational background is in the fine arts and, from there, fine arts pushed me to learn to look at and analyze things. From there, I launched myself into the visual world, and into working in video, in photography, always very related to the art of action and theatricality. Basically, we're always moving, not in the field of just one thing, but rather, since we were little we've always been sampling different environments. And I'm connected to the Sugurú Tribe in that I'm one of those who initiated the project. A father with an eighteen-month-old daughter at the time, and with an idea of wanting to share her upbringing with other people who at the time had kids of the same age as my kid. And from there, it was like finding the different ingredients needed to be able to realize this project and learn.

Ariadna: I'm Ariadna Rodríguez, and my background is a variety of studies and experiences all my life. My education was in music, professional violin, and then a lot of dance and theatre. So there was a moment in which I started to mix it all together, I went to the US for some years to study and then I returned to continue with a really interdisciplinary work related to new drama, or live arts. Every day we change the name, and I think it's precisely because that's where the key lies, in not defining ourselves. There's something very fluid in that, that I think is important. And, related to this, Iñaki and I started a project called "nyamnyam" (www.nyamnyam.net) that's also about those practices, and that has food as a vehicular element but never the objective, rather it's an excuse to mix things. Just when the "nyamnyam" project was starting, we had our daughter Gal-la. Gal-la was already exposed to the project, because we lived in the house where the project was, and when you think of sharing this child-rearing, first you think about with who, in what way, or with what mechanisms. I think what we were very clear on was that we weren't going to delegate that, and what's more, we weren't going to have her be separated from us.

Iñaki: We wanted to go with her.

Ariadna: And to be present. Later, you talk to other families, and they had a really strong sense of having missed a lot of things.

Why did you choose the name 'The Sugurú Tribe'?

Iñaki: We had to give it a legal form, and from there we asked ourselves what name to put on it.

We said to Gal-la, "Sugurú," and we stuck with that name,

and with the idea of the tribe that was something that we really liked as a concept. Sugurú is the name of a Japanese comic.

Ariadna: It's the name of the anti-hero, of a hero who uses farts to fly. So the name is super casual.

We're in front of a "Cultural association for Collective Child-rearing." Why have you chosen a legal structure? How has your constituent process been? Where are you situated in the project? Do you receive any kind of institutional help or subsidy?

Ariadna: We made an association, and it's good to explain this because the legal forms are a big issue. There isn't a legal form that is really good for this kind of project in Spain, if it exists in other countries, so we're a non-profit cultural association for shared child-rearing, and that's the legal form in which it's registered, but it's not the ideal. We had to establish ourselves officially in order to do a procedure, I don't remember what it was, and that was the legal form that we could manage on an economic level.

Iñaki: The procedure was that we had to sign an agreement for them to give us a space. It was a sports center that depended on the city council, but that was managed by a private company. Before that company started to manage the sporting space, there was another little company that just left us the space and it was by the beach. We always had the idea of generating a nomadic tribe, because we live in a city that allows that: we have a good climate, it doesn't get very cold, we have parks. And the other important thing is that the places that are normally super populated by kids during non-school hours are empty at the times we go. As we understood it, we didn't want to bear the economic burden of renting a place just to be shut up in it and feel like we have to use it. We wondered if we could live without a place like that, and see the city as a place of learning or a school. We also wanted to be as close as possible to nature, and in Barcelona the closest possible thing to nature was to be on the beach, which was the site where we could have a really open space where the kids could have a direct relationship with the environment, and where we didn't have to constantly be present, watching them. What with situating the kids in the beach, we thought that there should be someplace to be able to be, where we wouldn't have to be paying some business. Something like this, like a transfer of space for in case it rains, which is rare, but we'd be able to go in. And on that basis, the first company left us a little space.

Ariadna: This is very interesting: they didn't know how to do it, because they didn't even know what a group for shared child-rearing was. We're talking about a sporting center on that very beach, and in the mornings they didn't have any activity, so they had three empty rooms, and we were requesting one of the three rooms.

Iñaki: Normally they have their activities from April to September.

Ariadna: We're a really good case study at the level of space and institutional or non-institutional connection, or of connection from inside and from outside. The people go to the beach from March, which is when use of the room gets complicated. But you spend all the other months from October, which is when winter starts, using the space. It's a really good combination. What's more, they gave support to disabled people, in other words, they had their floors flat, sinks accessible, that is, suddenly, on the level of infrastructure, it was like the ideal space for children. And another thing that struck me as very interesting about

the relation [with the company], which in other things wasn't very good --

Iñaki: It was good until the other company entered the arrangement.

Ariadna: It doesn't matter... what I want to say is that there would have been great possibilities, because we'd told them from there to generate activities that other groups could come to, including putting together workshops for the parents and mothers, and they never "understood" this because...

Iñaki: Because, where was the profit?

Ariadna: It wasn't for economic gain, it was for sport.

Ariadna: But with the second company, one option was to tell them we would do those activities and in return, the money they generated stayed with them, and we wouldn't pay the € 150 that we normally paid. So this is really important in the Sugurú tribe, because we don't know practically any groups that don't have a rent of some €600-800, which would be almost what a house in Barcelona costs. That is, it's a really high burden for a self-started, self-managed group of shared child-rearing. So that makes it practically impossible to do, meaning these groups can easily just dissolve. So, for us, the space was key because also, we wanted every family to pay something that they were able to pay. That is, we pay the same since five years ago, which is €150 per family. The public preschool costs three hundred something euros, we're talking about double. I say that also because there's a lot of stigma that these groups are privileged groups, people that can afford this. On an economic level, it's not like that, and on a practical level, the only thing you do is organize yourself. Right now, what every family puts in in terms of time, because we're very well organized, is one morning. So okay, maybe I work Saturdays and Sundays, so I have that one morning off work to be with the group. It's not that all the parents are there all the time.

How many families are you, and how are families selected?

Ariadna: Right now we're six families, and we've always been between five and eight.

Iñaki: There's a selection process, but the door is always open.

Ariadna: You couldn't exactly say there's a process of selection...

Iñaki: It's more organic, I believe. First, there has to be an interest in forming a part, like when we formed, we were two families interested in doing something like this. And from there, you try to tell other people about it...

Ariadna: Yes, from the post-partum support group, or the yoga group. Or with the people more or less from the neighborhood, because we're touching three neighborhoods...

Iñaki: What I refer to is that we're four or five families that decide to be together and see what happens, right?

Ariadna: So, very organically, families have been leaving, so a space or two opens up, and new families enter. The size isn't very big. Basically, someone shows interest. For example, a family that has entered this week. They already knew us from some

time ago, and they'd observed what the Sugurú Tribe was like from outside. Basically, it's someone who shows interest and what we tell them is for them to come.

Iñaki: That's why I say that the door is always open, well, because we don't have a door (laughter)

Ariadna: There are things that I believe are important to share about infrastructure, details; we always try to generate a surplus every month because there's a strong possibility that, for example, a family leaves. So it's very important to establish what the commitment of the families is; they don't sign anything, that's how it is, but there's an oral commitment and it's really important that the family that has to go lets us know at least a month before. What we try to do is have the same family, if they can, be in charge of finding someone who could take their place. Because when suddenly two or three families leave, because all these kids the same age happened to turn three and went to P3 (preschool), something like going to school, suddenly you can end up with an empty space, forcing the group to be over, that's what happens all the time. That's what happens, it's the nature of groups here in Barcelona.

What do participating families commit to, and how is the commitment established between the families?

Iñaki: This is why we say that the door is open, and there has to be a mutual interest, because really it isn't easy. Because people come and ask, *where's the location?* Well, there isn't a location. *And what subjects do you teach?* Well we don't have subjects per se, it's the city itself. *And how do you make the food?* Well, each family cooks one day. They're little things that imply comfort for us, but for many people it's not comfortable.

Ariadna: For us it's comfort, and it's also commitment and it's many things.

Iñaki: That's why I say it's a comfort, because for me, all of that doesn't make it less comfortable, but more so. If I bring my child to school and they don't let me in, well, that's discomfort, and, instead, for another person, it's comfortable to leave the kid at 8:00am, pick them up at 7:00, from 7:00 to 8:00 give them food and put them to bed. That's why I say that they're things that you have to live and things that you have to be, and people come, and they are. And when a week has passed, there's a lot of people who wonder if they should keep going or not. Or we could also evaluate and say that both adults have to be present, because only the mom comes.

Ariadna: These things we've learned have gone well, mothers or... because in the group there is diversity... we have the expression "MAPA" which is *madre* (mother), *padre* (father), or whoever accompanies that kid. For example, in one family where only the mom or the dad are sure that they want to do this, and the other person isn't, because this has happened, it ends up being really hard for the family and for the tribe. It's very noticeable if there isn't support from both sides and a structure that believes in what's happening and sometimes gives back, it generates a hole that drains the tribe. Of course, the tribe offers a lot of support; we're doing it from 9:30 to 2:00. When we started we only did it until 12:00 and we've grown, we've extended. For example, right now there are children ages 1,2,3,4, and 5, and we have like a double structure -- the older ones do as they please for two days. There's like a more complex structure that we've been constructing. We've had people from Italy, Greece, Romania, Hungary, Brazil, England, Sweden, there's a mix.

What do the families in the Sugurú Tribe have in common?

Ariadna: We're families who have very little support, the majority are from other countries, or Iñaki's parents live three hours from Barcelona, my parents half an hour away and they work, so they come like one afternoon a week, and that's the only time they're with us. So the Sugurú tribe is our support, these people are the concept of extended family for me, in a very real way.

How do you choose the person who accompanies the children?

Ariadna: We thought it was important when we started for it to be an external person, so that it would be different from the mother-of-the-day projects that have another architecture. So in looking for that caregiver, questions like *What person? What kind of person are they?* are key. That's super important.

Iñaki: Because it's going to influence how the group goes. That person is going to be with them all the time. When we started, we called them the reference person. We don't call them the educator, because they don't educate.

Ariadna: It's Jordi. I called him because he had already done shared child-rearing with his daughter for plenty of years, I called him so he'd help me think, and suddenly he returns my call and tells me "I think that I could do it." I knew Jordi from body weather, a corporal practice that we worked on together, and when he told me this, it surprised me. When we talked with him. he told us that when he did his shared child-rearing project, he developed a relationship with the group but he still wanted to work on social transformation in relation to the project. He's very direct. He does a lot at this level, and also in relation to the city, in relation to the body, and the outdoors. Body weather is a kind of work where they put a lot of importance on how bodies are in the fresh air, it's not only in nature, that is, air is also the city. So he has this very clear line of thought, I mean, regarding politics and social change, and then of course there's the issue of the families, how they all situate themselves [ideologically] is super interesting and complex, because not everyone is the same in those things. On a structural level, Jordi suggested himself and became a pretty key element, because we developed a lot of the details with him.

Is this person who accompanies the kids contracted by the Association?

Ariadna: He is contracted, he wasn't in the beginning but now he is.

Iñaki: He wasn't because the project, because of how we were structured institutionally, legally, and economically, we couldn't.

Ariadna: We were talking with the Integral Catalan Cooperative to see all the ways to contract him, and we were really weighing the possibility. Of course, it didn't exist. On a legal level, these kinds of groups don't exist here like they do in other countries. In other countries, the public structure or the institutional structure recognizes you, and, in some way, facilitates things for you or has mechanisms, for example, for that kind of contracting and things, due to the style [of government]. In other places, there's a record of spaces that can be used, in Barcelona this hasn't developed yet but I think it's going to. The methods that, in the beginning, we were able to use to contract Jordi were methods like that of contracting a house worker. And Jordi said that being contracted as a house worker, he believed that wasn't

what he was doing, and wasn't recognizing his real work, so he preferred not to be contracted. So, he made that decision personally. Before there was this support of the city council of five thousand euros a year, there wasn't a way of contracting him, and now he's contracted as a freelancer, and it doesn't make sense, that is, how a project of this nature has to have a contracted freelancer. But that's what's been easier than the association contracting him, which was the other option.

What's the significance of the caregiver (literally 'figure of accompaniment') in the context of the Sugurú tribe?

Iñaki: When the group started with this idea of learning for ourselves, it was important that caregiver, we really wanted them to also help us understand various things.

Ariadna: We felt we really needed to learn and understand.

Iñaki: And with Jordi we've learned to be with the children and to know in what moment to be there, to help them, etc. His figure is what's marked out how the tribe is, and how we've functioned, which is basically with a more distant view of caregiving. He's helped us not be on top of them under any circumstances, helped us distance ourselves a little from our children, which is something really important. To be with them in the city and only intervene when there's really an important conflict. But they try to mediate their own conflicts too, that is, there aren't objectives that tell you what to teach. So when some families come and ask, "What are your objectives?" and we tell them there aren't any, they say, "How are they going to learn?" And we say, "but what do you want them to learn? They have to learn to be." It also happens that as a companion to Jordi, sometimes you tell him, "But nothing's happening," and Jordi tells you, "But you aren't paying attention. For you nothing's happening because adults get bored and say that nothing's happening, but look what's happening. They're talking, they're playing, they're coexisting, they're taking leaves and bringing them over here. For you that's something you do in one minute, but for them that's a morning, and that morning is where their learning happens."

How do the parents of the project accompany the kids?

Ariadna: Well, when it's your turn to visit as an adult, there's a conversation with the other parents to see what you feel like doing as an adult. So that day, you might feel like going to the beach, and, just like that, you can go to the beach, maybe Tuesday from 9:30am-2:00pm, which sounds like a crazy thing, but you can do it. But once this is decided and you go there, then you have to be able to stay, because a space that might be tiny for you is an entire world for them. Everything that can happen when there aren't physical materials (for education/entertainment). The very beach offers material.

What happens when adults can't accompany the kids because they have an inflexible work schedule?

Ariadna: There's a minimum, which is the visit and that they cook, and that's very important, and then there's a ton of additional work. So there have been people for example, with mothers or fathers who've had schedules where they don't come for the visit, their partner does it, or in another case, aunts have come, that is, someone who empathizes with the structure. Of course, if it's someone who thinks in a very different way, that's hard, and that has happened too. You

have to find people who understand what we do. What does happen is that the parents who can't accompany the children do other kinds of work in the tribe.

How do the children form relationships with other people and places outside of the Sugurú tribe?

Ariadna: when you're outside, you're forming relationships all the time. When we were on the beach, there were some interconnections, for example there's the club of Barceloneta, where all the elderly people go, it's a historic club at the beachside; well, there was a connection there, and they all knew us and came to say hello.

Iñaki: And they themselves watched over the kids too.

Ariadna: Of course, and now that we're there less, sometimes we say that we miss it, but then we also create relationships, for example, on Wednesdays we try to always be in the same neighborhood and there, too, we build friendships. Then we go to the library and the library people know us. That is, a lot of relationships are generated here that we haven't seen when we've visited other projects. Maybe one time you go to a spectacular school, with many toys and other materials, on a mountain, and you spend time there and say, "Wow, nothing more than this ever happens here."

Iñaki: They never cross paths with anyone besides each other, not people or animals, in that idyllic environment.

Ariadna: And for me it's isolation. The present world of course is tentacular, it's hyperconnected and relational. So you realize that projects that are outside, that they're the opposite of the city because they already have that contact with nature, they're replicating the same things as the others, which is, as they have a space, they spend a lot of time in that space, and go out into the woods one day a week, and the rest of the time they're in a not-very-large space because it's hard to heat it, and because they pay for it, they have to use it, and in the afternoons they themselves have to organize things to pay the other half of the rent. So the issue of having a space generates a need to be accountable for payment for it.

What do the people in the tribe eat?

Iñaki: The issue of food was interesting, because suddenly we had to ask ourselves, "And what will they eat?"

Ariadna: Of course, you decide everything. In school they give you a menu, but here...

Iñaki: Well, at that time, they were starting to eat solid foods, and as we didn't know, because some were vegetarian and others... so we invited our nutritionist to come and give us some classes. So the German nutritionist who was like a reference for us came, and we asked her to teach us and tell us what these kids needed to eat. And these sessions that we did showed what the Sugurú tribe could eat, and we decided that the menus would be vegan, because they could eat animal protein in their houses, and because of the issue of transport and conservation of our food. You can't carry around a container of fish for hours in Barcelona in June, and as we don't have a fridge and spend the day moving around, that limits the possible food.

Ariadna: We created a structure that we use, which is a grain and vegetable protein

every day. As a base of this grain and vegetable protein, there's always raw and boiled vegetables. We use each vegetable when it's in season. We have a thermal backpack, and you carry all the food there, and the family that cooks the following day brings it home, prepares the food, and brings it back. That's how we work in terms of food.

Iñaki: Always with the idea that food had to be ecological and local. In our case, we have relationships with food growers less than 20 minutes from Barcelona, and we buy their fruits and vegetables.

Ariadna: In fact, the idea is to organize ourselves in the Sugurú tribe as a group of consumers. So we can talk directly with our suppliers and request a bag of 15 kg of garbanzo beans, and for a group they will allow that, but for a single family, no. So that can serve as a structure for many other things, the way in buying food you can function as a cooperative, a group of consumers. We do it a bit, but it's a lot of work, and we can't extend it to everything.

Iñaki: Regarding the menu, I think it's been established like that, and the new people have had to learn and it's something that's never been debated much because it's been worked on a lot and it's been very clear and concrete. And when new families come, they haven't changed it but accepted it and said that it's a very good system, and they've even integrated it into their own houses.

Ariadna: Of course, they've gone so far as to change the way they eat in their homes, which is something beautiful.

What happens at three years of age when there's the possibility of going to school?

Iñaki: When it comes time to go to school, we look at all the existing possibilities.

Ariadna: We went to all the openhouses, but you go there with a structure like this, and of course, there were two basic things: the ratio of kids that there are for every adult, and the space, which for me is basic. It [the structure] is very strong, but there are more kids, less adults, and conversely, activity is more directed. At first you'd think it's the reverse, because if I have less kids and more adults activity is more directed, but if I have more kids, it's more difficult. So the only way to do it is by giving a lot of directions. So we went to see the projects, and we saw details like that all the kindergartners, from age three, they don't want them to go up stairs because they could get hurt, so they put them in the basements of the schools, that is, in spaces with very little light, and they're always in that space. Gal-la, when she was three, went to look for another girl who went to the school and she was there when they left the building and when she got back to the house, she told us, "The kids are inside, they're shut in, and then they open it and they leave." It left a strong impression on her to see that image of inside and outside. So, seeing that you already have a structure that functions, and that's demanded a lot, if you've put in three years of work in it, you say, "Why don't I continue?"

Iñaki: And apart from the *why don't I continue, of the few schools that could fit us, we couldn't enter any due to zoning, and it was only one that let us enroll anyway.*

Ariadna: It's a school where the people in the neighborhood enter, one in three, by lottery. We don't understand schools that aren't public, so if Gal-la has to go to school, it has to be public. There's starting to be a movement.

We're not here to say that public school isn't working. In three years, we've seen a change and at least three schools have appeared where they do things very similar to how we work. But they're newly created schools, but there continues to be the reality that they're still a closed space, and this still pains me because ours has made itself something very fluid.

What consequences does not putting the kids in school at three years old have, if any?

lñaki: As we're in a system that uses fear to persuade if you don't put your kid in school at P3, you might not have a place [in school] the following year.

Ariadna: That is, the system is created so that the door opens at three years old, and then it shuts, and then the kids spend their p3-p4 or p5 [the next two or three years of school] and then you can enter the beginning of basic education at six years old, but there's not a spot for your situation on the list. I went to a meeting and I told them that they didn't realize that on the sign-up list they only had the categories of "new kids in P3" and "families new to Barcelona." We don't have a spot on the list as someone who's decided to put their kid in the school system later on in their lives. So we're in a system where you can only enter into schools that are in your zone, and in that zone there aren't schools aligned with how we think, but nothing happens because there are people who like their way of understanding school. So one of the things that's been told to the "system" is to get rid of this strict zonification. They're doing experiments where they let the people pick, and it's not always the case that everyone wants to go to the same places, because each person is different. But we continue with this system of them deciding for you because 'you care about having your school be next to your house.' Well, in a city like Barcelona, 'next to' can mean ten minutes away from your house.

What do you think is going to happen when your children turn six?

Ariadna: Well, that's not very far in the future, and we have to see what happens. One option is maybe to live between the city of Barcelona and another place, because we're realizing that the structures that are really being rethought on a real level, educationally, that is to say, paradigms are changing, and many go outside the city because it's a little easier. One example could be rural school, which is a public school but a lot smaller, and as such, it's much easier to change things. Changing large structures, although it is happening here, is a lot slower. So I have the feeling that in five or ten years here we'll have big public schools and structures that will work from another place, but right now what the people who really want change do is go outside the city. Yesterday in the meeting I said that if we were all of us, a group of people with sufficient power to create an elementary school for 6-12 year olds like what we've made already, I would do it, and sometimes I tell myself, "But what are you saying? You're crazy," because it would mean absolute exhaustion and more at my age.

How are decisions made in this tribe?

Ariadna: We meet up in assemblies once a month which for many people is not much time, for me it's not much time because the idea is to do a logistical meeting and a pedagogical meeting every month, which is one meeting every fifteen days. Of course, we need more time and that's always difficult.

What have you learned from being part of the tribe?

Ariadna: For me, it's the feeling of, whether it's a project of child-rearing or a project of collective consumption -- that is, for example, groups of mutual support for the elderly, everyone should or could or would have to, hopefully would have the luck of being in something like this. Because you learn and receive a ton, you give a lot. So the feeling with the tribe is that it requires all the time. Above all because now with the three to five-year-olds you have to plan a lot more.

Iñaki: You recognize that during the day, a lot of the time you're thinking about this, and you're there.

Ariadna: If everyone were in a situation like this, of interconnected families with lot of children, things would change. There's a lot of debate about how with groups this small, you don't get anywhere because you solved the lives of six families but in a class in a school there are twenty five families. And for me, it's exactly the opposite, it's about small but connected projects. It's about not being isolated because if we don't share resources and strategies we're going to fall into the same holes. And for me, the level of social transformation is key because it changes your way of life and of relating with life, of how you consume, of how you form relationships, of what you buy, it's another way of life.

If we think about it, we're looking at a project of informal expanded education that, in some way, is compensating for an unresolved issue in a public service structure. Do you believe that's a real issue? If so, do you believe that it's a reality that's changing in Barcelona?

Ariadna: I believe that it's happening here in Barcelona. From the current city council, and I don't want to talk about all good news because certainly you have examples of the council saying something and not doing what they say, but they're also learning a ton. Many people have gotten into politics who've never done politics and that seems perfect to me. Here when the dictatorship ended, some people entered politics and they didn't have any idea either. Now you hear a lot of "they don't have any idea," well, many people didn't have any idea either in the 80's, and they learned, and they did it. They're learning, so they commit many errors, but it's in their nature to build this kind of society and social connections. So you do notice that there's a little more support from the institution.

For many collectives (established before and after the 15M movement), 15M has signified a moment of reorganization, reinvention, and strengthening. What has this moment meant for this project?

Ariadna: I believe that it's changed the architecture of the city in a very clear way, the politics that we have now have to do with what happened. This party was born from there, like that. I was kind of involved with the cultural commission, and I do find that there were things that the city felt capable of doing, or those that lived in the city, that changed in that moment.

Iñaki: I think we could say that in principle no, at least on a personal level, but that doesn't mean that in a very indirect way a series of paths have been marked out, and have led to a series of things facilitating what others have since been able to do. And if we analyze things a little more, we would realize that a lot of the

things come from there. But on a personal level I would say no. The thing is that indirectly, certainly, yes, because we have united and have moved forward...

Ariadna: Of course, there are important things like just the fact of having been there, having listened to the things that they talked about, I don't know, for me, in relation to the cultural commission, the work that it did regarding key things really made people from different disciplines start thinking, people who weren't in dialogue and who still aren't much in dialogue. But it was one of the biggest operations. For example, the manifesto that ended up being made was based on the cultural commission of the city council of Barcelona, it was based on people who came from the circus, from the theatre, from dance, from literature. That is, the conception of art from a much more expanded culture or vision than what we'd worked with up until that moment.

Is the Sugurú tribe a political project? If so, what kind of politics are we talking about?

Ariadna: On the level of social or political implication, and this is a very important subject, we're on very different levels. And this is what I'm saying now, which I didn't believe a year ago: I believe that this inequality is detrimental to us. Above all, when the project takes form and years go by and you consider doing a project with three- to five-year-olds, the only people still here are those who have a political stake in this. And politics go far beyond what is understood by "politics." There's a belief, an investment, a desire. Yesterday, someone said, "You don't really start to believe in something until this starts making problems for you." Until you start to problematize in some way what surrounds you on the level of what you think, you haven't really believed it. So, there have been meetings where they've said things like, "What I'm interested in is my child, not the project," and I've gone to my house crying. The tribe has different anchors, and it's very important that there's all kinds. It's also true that the political involvement of the project doesn't have to be on everyone's part, some have one role and others different ones, but there does have to be a common frame because if not, it will self-destruct. If you don't have the feeling that you're part of a beautiful pre-school.

From your own experience, what deficiencies do you see in the formal early education system and its child-raising?

Ariadna: Encourage relationships and encouraging knowing how to be in a group, and it isn't doing group work, it doesn't have anything to do with that. It has to do with the body, with movement, and for me that has to have a lot to do with the outdoors. But they tell you that you can't take the children out of the context of the school because the very structure doesn't let them leave. But there are public schools like 'Escola Congr s-Indians'¹ which are leaving campus once a week. Others leave once every three or four months, and this is leaving once a week, which is already a lot. What do they do? Well, they ask parents to see who wants to accompany them, and sometimes the people can. The thing is, we believe that things are one way and we don't change them. For example, for me examining schedules is very important. Everyone's here in Barcelona from 9:00am to 12:30pm and from 3:00pm to 4:00pm. So, you have a gap from 12:30 to 3:00 in the middle where they put a school yard to "not do," as they say, and then to "do" an hour of school. Escola Congr s-Indians schedules all the school until 2, and then until 4:30 you do other things. The schools say that you can't do that, and it's a lie. This school that I'm telling you about is

¹ Catalan for Congress-Indian School

public, it's directly interpellated with the Government of Catalunya, and in the end they have an agreement and they're doing it. This is a thing that all schools can do. You're capitalizing on the children's best time for the things you want to put forward.

Iñaki: Of course, and not at 3:00 when they're half-asleep.

What concrete unresolved issues do you observe?

Ariadna: How to accompany the children, this is the fundamental one. How much to intervene, how to be on their level. This obsession with material, it's as if the material taught you instead of you deciding the material. The [adult-to-child] ratios. Why not mix into the structure of school older people who can spend some time there and who are fully in possession of their faculties? Why can the structure only have educators? What other agents can emerge to accompany the kids, to have better ratios?

Iñaki: Part of it is the secrecy the school maintains, talking with parents who say that they don't know what happens beyond that door when they leave the kids. And we aren't up for that. We had children in order to be with our children, and we've built a life around that.

Ariadna: We put in a lot of physical and economic effort for this to be possible. None of this is easy, it's all the opposite of easy, but it's super gratifying. And we don't realize what we have until you talk to someone and they tell you, for example, that they're missing things that happen with their children. Filling those holes is the urgent issue. There's an enormous potential in those families in relation to the school. The relation of those families with the school is based in the AMPA (Association of Fathers and Mothers in English) which organizes extracurricular activities but it shouldn't be like that. They should be part of the school's structure as collaborators, not enemies. And many of the professors don't understand this, and look at the parents like enemies. I understand that it's not easy to have parents in the classroom if they don't know. They also have to educate themselves. For example, in Congr s-Indians, when they explained the adaption of the three-year-olds to school they showed you a photo with adults because they explained that the adults help in the process. It's understanding the adults as an alliance, also imposing norms and conditions, but of course the way the structure is now, family is one thing and school is another. The neighborhood, the people, the store. How many things can intersect with school?

Based on your experience, what is key to the successful function of this kind of group?

Ariadna: You have to be very organized, so if this works, you have to take down minutes for all the meetings, you have to really take into account what's been said regarding some subject four years ago...

Iñaki: Two years ago, Jordi disappeared [for a day], it was a huge burden and that day nothing worked out. And in contrast now, he can be absent two days and the group functions and everything's the same.

Ariadna: It seems so easy, and that's not the truth. It's very complex. It's a lot easier to throw a ball, for example. You need to know when you have to change dynamics, you have to move before the conflict when you see there's an argument between the

kids. Listening is essential, peripheral glances, open ears, you're counting all the time. There's a ton of things that influence how we are, so that this can be the way we want.

Have you done advising work for other families?

Iñaki: Yes, on a personal level, for many people.

Ariadna: This work has been attempted by the city council. They have done a legal study on groups of shared child-rearing, and we've participated, and many people ask us about things. But we recognize that groups aren't starting, and they aren't starting because there's this very important element of the families, the caregiver, and the economy, which are key. And it's essential from the beginning that someone accompanies you in learning the logistics.

What models have helped you to direct this project?

Ariadna: We've found references later.

Iñaki: Well, because we're self-built, all the work that we're doing needs references, and you realize that you're not alone and that there are a lot of people who have been doing this work for years. It's beautiful when this is part of your life, and it's very important to know that you're not doing anything new. Call it anarchist schools, or schools of...

Ariadna: The sensation, for me, is that this is the oldest thing in the world, the problem is that we've forgotten about it. It's thinking that this already exists, it's always existed, the only unusual thing is that we're disconnected.

Iñaki: Also this expanded idea of family is important.

Ariadna: Because for me as well, the idea of nuclear, blood-related family, if you want to survive, that has to become history. The way things are currently set up, if your blood family isn't close by, there isn't a way to have these empathetic familial connections.

What does it mean for the Sugurú tribe to grow, in non-capitalist terms?

Ariadna: To be part of this group means learning all the time about the meaning of 'un-development' or 'de-growing' ('decrecimiento' in Spanish)...

Iñaki: I believe it goes with our lives, or our manner of understanding our own lives on a familial level, on a personal level; we have to eat, to read, we have to share, and be with other people, doubt things, attend demonstrations, that's what makes us be and grow.

Ariadna: It's the feeling of being in motion and of always rethinking something. We need to be stable but, at the same time, we change things every day. Every day there's a question to resolve, and that's a mechanism of the human being, that if we're able to learn, we're going to be able to re-adapt ourselves, which is one of the most important things for what's to come in the world. And that can only come if you're capable of holding dialogue and making those decisions in a group, it's a meeting-based system where you only come to voting when you can't come to a consensus, which has never happened.

Arcadia





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
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Collective's name
**Escuela Autogestionaria
Arcadia (Arcadia Self-
managed School)**

Name of the interviewee
**Rita, Rocío, Joan, Anuk,
Ana, Noemí, Xenia**

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What is your name? What is your relationship with this project?

Rita: I'm Rita and I'm an elementary school teacher. I am an educator in the Arcadia project.

Rocío: I am Rocío, and I'm also an elementary school teacher. I started working with this project a month ago.

Joan: I'm Joan. I'm a technical advisor on early education. I used to be a manual worker but I was trained in order to enter the collective.

Anuk: I am Anuk, and I work in special education.

Ana: I'm Ana. I studied to be an elementary school teacher. I teach music in a public school, but I've worked on social movements before and now I'm part of the group of Arcadia.

Noemí: I'm Noemí. I am a physical education teacher. I studied many years ago to open a different type of school. I have also worked on the practical side of social movements.

Xenia: I am Xenia. I am an anthropologist. I've been coming here for a month because I am doing a project for my thesis, and I was interested in this project because I've worked in social movements and I'm interested in education. I am trying to learn about the project, and if I can help in any way, great.

How, when and where does this project originate?

Joan: The project was created to address the personal concerns of different people in the collective. There were some like Noemí who knew that they wanted to set up the project, others were interested in the project more through political activism than through an initial pedagogical vision; each has been following a journey. The project emerged in 2009 when we already had a small group capable of supporting the project. We were then able to set up an education conference in the courtyard of the Citadel available to the public. For a year we trained teachers who were graduating from university so one day we could carry out a school the way we think it should be carried out. After this process, which went beautifully, and ended in really good days, the group broke up, and we decided to create a collective with the people who we worked best with and had formed friendships with. In 2011 we became part of the on-site occupation of Can Batlló, and since then we've been working as activists there with the idea of implementing the school.

Why did you choose the name Arcadia?

Ana: We had to name the project, and it was a difficult process because we thought of many different names, and Arcadia was one of the names that was proposed. I do not remember exactly who proposed that name, but Arcadia came up because it was a symbol for the eastern territory of ancient Greece, which was a place of idyllic and horizontal lifestyle where people coexisted with one another. We liked the symbolism, so we chose this name.

Noemí: The origin was a bit utopian, so we wanted to bring that idea to reality.

Can you tell us about the neighborhood where the project Arcadia is located?

Noemí: It has been a very active neighborhood ever since the industrial revolution; since the 90s it's had many squatters groups and has been evolving as well; from there, self-managed cooperatives started to form. That's the framework where those of us who were already activists found ourselves. The 96th Assembly of the Sans neighborhood was also created, and all the groups participated there. Then, with the whole matter of reclaiming of Can Batlló that started in '77, they announced a deadline that we called Can Batlló, and said that on June 11 we would enter, so a day before that the city council came and dropped off the keys.

Joan: Can Batlló is actually a very large precinct. It's 14 hectares and has many shops that we are using. There are libraries, climbing walls, auditoriums, carpentry workshops, iron workshops, beer making workshops, so everything is a self-managing project almost like a self-managed mini-neighborhood. Similarity, at the neighborhood level, we could highlight the Impuls Cooperatiu (Impulse Cooperative in Catalan) that, at the moment, is an association made of all of us cooperatives that tend to be self-managed. The Impuls Cooperatiu also aims to be a secondary structure that provides a collective space where we can collaborate instead of competing with one another. All these things create a very interesting combination. As far as people in direct management of Can Batlló with the collectives, I think there are between 350 and 400 people who are directly involved in its daily management. This means that the social impact is much greater. I am not sure how many cooperatives there are in total at the level of Impuls Cooperatiu. I think maybe 30-something are from this neighborhood.

What legal structure have you given to the project?

Joan: There is economic activity and, since there is economic activity, if you pick an option other than the cooperative, people are no longer equals because the Association has to hire people. The moment when an employment relationship is formed there is the side of the hired and the one who hired along with the rights and privacy that this brings. We don't like the model of the cooperative at a legal level, in fact, we do not like any law but what we do is apply principles of democratic radicalism within the cooperatives. For instance, not having salary scales and that the governing councils can not make decisions unilaterally but instead have to go through general assemblies. All these kinds of mechanisms that involve self-management and that are not regulated by any cooperative law, or law of associations, or anything. In the end, you have to choose a legal framework, and the one for a cooperative is the one that best conforms to our objectives, but it's far from fully reaching them because there are cooperatives that have a governing board that makes unilateral decisions and then have half of the people under

contract. Being a cooperative does not make us immune to anything. It is simply a legal framework that we have to have at a fiscal level in order to be able to carry out a legalized economic activity. Right now, we are not functioning as an educational project and since Arcadia is working right now as the association and cooperative are without economic activity, so there is no one hired here, we're all activists. What we have created is an auxiliary cooperative called CoopNet that will serve as an economic reinforcement to the school project so that the extra money can cover the children who don't have resources and so that the families without resources also have a space to work in. There are two people working in this cooperative, which we started in January, now a third is going to be incorporated. These people are all cooperative members and they are the only ones who are currently legally working.

The 15M has signified a moment of reorganization, (re) invention, strengthening or contribution to the experience of many of the groups with whom I have spoken to. What has the 15M signified for Arcadia?

Noemí: As a collective, it had nothing to do with it. We tried to collaborate with the little experience we had, but it really wasn't much. They were not open to proposals, but we were still supportive.

Joan: The root of the collective is activism, and we have all been acting as activists since we were young.

Noemí: We tried to collaborate in the things we were able to collaborate in, with the little experience we had. The movement was not open to proposals that would take a long time, either. It was creating itself from square one, and we were only a little further than that.

What relationship do you have with the institutional sphere?

Joan: You start the process with one government and then it changes. Another one comes and then it changes again and another one comes. For example, our project was already approved, but the government changes and you have to present it again. The projects endure, but the governors are going through the election process and because of that municipal action is paralyzed. Nothing can be passed, no decision can be made and after six months still nothing gets passed. It is basically a year that the governors get paid without doing any work. We have never had this much contact with the public administration until now, and it's surreal.

Ana: It is surreal and exhausting.

Joan: Of course. You are with one process, and then it changes. I remembered neighborhood activists who would tell you about this stuff, I understood it half way, but now that I've lived through it, I understand. It's unbelievable that you go to present the project and they ask you, "Who are you?" I should ask, "Who are you?"

Ana: "I'm the same person from six months ago, who are you?"

Noemí: Last time we said, "Look, we will tell you out of respect but there is something that you are not doing right, because you don't pass down this information. We have to go through it all again and that paralyzes the whole process."

Ana: “This is the third meeting we are having, and the only ones who are changing are you. We are the same people, you realize that, right?”

Joan: That is the funny part, social projects lasts longer than the government.

Ana: There is something definitely wrong with this picture.

This is a non-formal education project. What type of educational proposal does this project advocate for?

Noemi: What we support is a self-managed proposal, which is neither public nor private. We call it community, self-managed, cooperative. It is a proposal created from the professional needs that we have observed from the process of helping collectives generate their own projects. If there's one thing we've learned it's to respect the proposals that are presented and have realized that things happen for a reason. It is being created with a collective intelligence, and we are bringing one more proposal about what we think we can contribute.

Joan: It is a proposal that emphasizes liberty. We think of this as collective liberty rather than individualistic. It's not, “My freedom ends where yours begins.” No, it's, “My freedom projects yours.” It is a collective process and we interpret it as a capacity that children or people in general have, to be free. Being free simply means being able to make decisions about your life. That's the goal, for children to be autonomous, we understand that it's not that they're born completely free, but we believe they have that capacity and that we can develop it by letting the children make their own decisions, take risks, make mistakes, and start over without a problem. That needs to be done collectively because liberty is a conquest and a conquest is made collectively. No one is given freedom, much less if they are alone in life. This is the vision we have in contrast to some other visions of free education, which we respect deeply, but we don't totally agree with their idea that we need to create a bubble separating a child from society because society corrupts a child that was born free. A creature has little freedom when it can not feed itself or regulate the temperature or anything; in fact, if you let it free, it would die. That is not freedom, we understand freedom as an acquired capacity. That's the central axis. From there you can derive all the values adjacent to freedom. If we believe that it is collective, then everyone has to be free and then there must be equality. You can not understand freedom as something individual, without equality, where each one competes as liberals do. There must be values such as equality, solidarity, and mutual help. These were values that our grandparents used and that are still valid today.

Noemi: On the practical level, we transform it into a learning community. We consider the school as if it were that Arcadia, that micro-society between adults and younger people, and we suggest that with neighborhoods: the children's neighborhood, the primary-school neighborhood, the secondary-school neighborhood and, from here, it is collective management of Arcadia's life from the learning aspect to all the intellectual work, the manual work, the emotional aspect. It is the collective management of our own learning, not only intellectually. It's about learning to be autonomous in our future lives.

Joan: In order to change something, you need to work as a team. There are people who are by themselves that want to change things but a single person does not make a project. A single person against a cloister does not change anything.

Noemí: A project like this is not just a project that requires just a few hours of labor. It is a life-long project that has to have a team willing to work on it for life.

What educational curriculum does Arcadia want to convey?

Noemí: Our goal is for it to be a legalized school, so the content is already given, but we want to further broaden this content by adding the practice and values needed to make it way better. We have created the structure and methodology.

Rocío: It's not as much about the information being taught as the way it's taught.

Joan: The problem with education is not the curriculum itself but the hidden curriculum within that creates this handicap.

How does Arcadia involve families and the community?

Joan: We think of it as a community school where all the context is already incorporated. When we talk about communal education, the first community for us is the children, so they have their own assembly where they can make their own decisions. We then have a board where any agent in education can participate. The families, people of Can Batlló, or anyone from the neighborhood can be part of that board. Lastly, the children have to decide whether the proposals should be accepted and they can even take their own proposals to the board. Ultimately, children are sort of the ones who regulate, and this is the most forgotten aspect of community participation. We work hard to allow them to regulate their needs a bit.

Noemí: I wanted to add, relating to the previous question, that the structure is very complicated. It is impossible to get to know the children individually because the structure does not allow it. So, thinking of this, and of how the critters participate, we understand that things are not always the same for everyone, and that we must look for these mechanisms of participation. We need to ensure that these mechanisms are flexible and that they can be chosen according to the situation of the critters, their families, etc. We do not need to create more rigid structures because we do not want to normalize something that will complicate our flexibility and ability to adapt to the needs of the moment, to what is happening in society.

What's your opinion of formal education as it's laid out?

Joan: I could talk about my experience as a "neither/nor" (meaning I neither work nor study) of this age and what it's like to live that way within the institution. When you come from the working class, you realize that this culture does not mesh with you and you can feel it, you either reject it or it ends up subsuming you. It is the feeling that your kingdom does not belong to that world. When they talk about equality of opportunity in school, they don't explain that equality of opportunity happens because there is a dominant culture that is taking everything. The institutional culture in educational environments is usually middle class, almost bourgeois, where there are certain ways of being that are accepted and certain ones that aren't, so children from other social classes are directly excluded culturally by these very invisible mechanisms, and this is very common in schools.

Ana: What I perceive in the classroom is that the emphasis is on the "what" and the "when" but never the "how" or the "why" or the "for whom." And when you leave the

university that really hits you because if you really believe in the value of education, you think that the focus is in the “who,” and when you start working you realize that the “who” is totally disregarded and that creates a deep crisis in you. At one point we considered abandoning the field of education. I was not sure if I should continue my studies because I couldn’t find any purpose behind it. I had a very bad experience in school when I was a child, so I thought I could change that if I dedicated myself to the education field. But when I came to the educational institution, I realized that they were projecting the same thing on me that I had rejected as a child. That frustrates you a lot. We are people who are looking to find answers to this frustration, so for us it is very important that the project talks about the structure because the structure of the institutionalized school is the thing that limits the most, and that is the hidden curriculum. There is no respect for the individuality in families or the culture of each one, and that affects every hour you spend with the children. Emotions are also not touched on at any time. No one asks you how you are when you arrive. Some centers have a set of values and teach emotional education for an hour with the younger children, but once you get to elementary school that is no longer the case.

Joan: The two limits of formal education are the stability of cohesive teams and the size of the center. Even if we get to be our own department in a center that has a thousand students, it is impossible to carry out a self-managed community education because you do not know them. You have to know not only the children but the families, their background, in order to educate them and understand their behaviors. Sometimes a kid is bullied in the schoolyard and the center doesn’t realize it because of their large size. How is possible for a child to be harassed with physical aggression in the schoolyard and then the school head says, “We have taken action, we have expelled the student.” There is a complex, wide, diverse structure and there is no capacity for real change in such large schools and with such changing departments.

Ana: You find yourself in the situation that Joan described, which is not something collective, team-based, department-based. This structure doesn’t give decision-making power to the people who are in the school, neither the children nor the adults who participate. There is no option to change. At the legal level there are laws that stipulate how it should be, so the change does not happen. There are colleagues who work in the school who tell you, “I do that in my classroom,” but that isn’t real. Obviously the people who are inside a classroom work within what they allow you to do. You are restricted by a bell and by a person on the administrative team that can enter your classroom at any point to see what you’re doing, to see if you are following the rules of the school. Because of a change of law, now each center has to follow a specific pedagogical path, so the administrative direction works much like the labor market, they enter the classroom and monitor what you do and correct you. They even comment on the posters you hang on your wall. If you adapt well, they don’t send you to another center. This happens in the center where I work. In a cloister of about 50 teachers about 15 people are renewed per year, so there is no team structure. In the 10 days you have before classes begin, you don’t get to know the people you will work with. There’s no team, so it’s very complicated to make changes inside. You can maybe make small changes, plant some seeds. There are centers that support specific projects but that becomes very complicated. I see a lot of barriers to a real transformation.

Noemi: I think there’s a lot of factors that go into it. There is the teachers’ labor union, and the educational issue. There are many arguments and all are plausible but when we went to Ensenyament to hear them make a report, I thought it was important that they said, “The line has to be this, but until we have data

that this works we can not introduce it into the schools," and then there is the economic factor of education as well. It is a huge state structure and how are we going to fight against that? On a personal level, many of us decided that we were very tired of going against it and that what we wanted to do was to bring proposals and be constructive, and that's where we are now.

Who will have access to this project?

Anuk: The access is universal because we feel responsible for ensuring that everyone has access to education. Additionally, we also look at the neighborhood, and if 20% of people have a disability, we try to make the school more accessible so that everyone can go.

Noemí: Of course, because we want to transfer those values from the school to the families. We want them to feel partly responsible for practicing solidarity between families and that kind of social responsibility. We can't assume everything, but we can keep in mind that the reality that is lived in the neighborhood is also lived in school. We do not want the school to be a self-segregated ghetto.

Joan: And for that we created a mechanism of economic compensation. All the teachers of the school make the commitment to give back in the form of scholarships that come from their salary. For a salary of 1,600 euros, each teacher gives back 400 euros in the form of scholarships, so they give a percentage of their salary for scholarships. There are also many people who give money for the project. It is all about creating a network to make public access viable.

What does Arcadia understand by "public"?

Joan: For us, the concept of the public is not linked to the State. The public is what it is shared in common among all of us. This was practiced frequently before the industrial revolution. In fact, there's collective mills and collective lands that are managed communally. There is an extraction of the concept of the "public" here, or a derivation of it, because people often delegate everything public to be managed by the state. Today, there is this idea that what is public is related to the state, so it would be necessary to differentiate the "state public" from the "community public." "Public" means it's accessible, but the "community public" is not only about accessibility but management, that is, it's even more public. You are guaranteeing public access and public management. When it is a state structure, the management of what are supposed to be public goods, extracted in the form of taxes, works similar to a private company. When we talk about the community public, we are talking about direct management, so it's important to emphasize the idea of the public.

What point of the project is Arcadia currently at?

Ana: The project is already designed, thought out, discussed, mapped, drawn, all that is left is the material, the construction and its opening. We are now in the last phase facing many difficulties, but the project has been on paper for years.

Noemí: We must set a precedent, because in order to open a school the regulations for square meters of a construction are made so that only the State, the Church or people with lots of money can open them. Since we planned it from a grassroots base, we have to raise it from a neighborhood and from another economic level

and this takes many years. Many families have approached us but since it is not open they leave, others come and in fact there are already many young people who would have liked to come to Arcadia and who are now already in university.

There are many families and there is a lot of need (for a program like this). In Barcelona there are about 40 freedom-oriented education projects, but they are for the non-obligatory age, and families find themselves hitting a wall because by age six, children are required to be in school. There aren't schools that continue in that line past age six, because as Noemí put it, it is a large investment. So, families have to decide what to do. Some families do homeschooling while others go to a normal school. We come to give an answer to that problem. Other projects having to do with elementary school are starting to pop up, and we'll see where they take us, but we've seen how much the projects in Barcelona have grown. At the beginning you would see only about 5 or 6 free education projects, but now you see 40. Now there are maybe two or three schools that touch on elementary, and we hope there will be more in the future. What's a shame is that this is not seen as an opportunity but as a risk. Normally, the institutions see all of this as a threat. We aren't coming to teach anyone a lesson, we want to make a project, work and cooperate with anyone who wants to cooperate with us, but often any change can be seen as a threat when really, it could be an opportunity to be in a city where so many projects pop up. That is an enormous wealth in a sense. And it's wealth that we had before the Civil War, and then the State of Wellbeing ended up creating a structure and a network, standardizing all of our daily life so much that it's impossible to create schools in the unions, in the athenaeums, like our grandparents would, like they did before. And now we find ourselves in that paradigm where these initiatives have to be in a process of outside of the recognized legal sphere, in limbo, trying to survive in any way they can. We think that is wrong because it's an enormous potential going to waste.

Noemí: And the rest now is economic, we're dedicating ourselves to saving and putting together millions of activities that we never thought we would do to pay for the work of the school which is the greatest expense.

How are you going to implement the project?

Noemí: We're planning to implement the operation of the school itself in stages. It begins with early education, where they learn the dynamics of the school so that we can then start stepping back. All the elementary school equipment would be introduced at its time, beginning at six years old, and the idea is that we all end up in Arcadia and that we have a support system, especially at the economic level, so that we can recover that community public that we need in order for it to be accessible to everyone, and for us to function.

Arcadia is a political project. What type of policy are we talking about?

Joan: The pedagogical principles at the social level. We believe in a society that is more free, just, equal, and supportive that is able to organize from the ground up in the form of assembly, and is confederate within itself. That is our vision. Similarly in the school, we want to work freely among people which, in the end, is a part of our humanity, how we organize together in the most just manner. So it has to start from a dialogical community where the discussion flows, consensus is central and it continues advancing like that, that is our core. We say ironically,

“for a conflictive education,” because if there is no conflict, there is no learning. Education must always be conflictive, like something that makes you progress.

What tradition do you think you come from?

Joan: We are the heirs of popular education in the workers' sense. Let's say that in the past there were about two paths, the new school and the rationalist school, so Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, Paul Robin and so on, we feel like the heirs of that, but there was not a dichotomy or a clear cut in the workers' education or the more liberal progressive education that could be more in line with the Montessori and that could offer really interesting things. I believe that for workers' education, what came to develop most is that vision of class; a more socio-political vision that we consider our heritage. But that then ends up fusing with other things because there are principles perfectly valid for one side and for the other because workers' education also influences projects with different perspectives of class. It's a dialogue.

Noemí: We come from a century very rich at the pedagogical level and, in a way, what we do in Arcadia is adapt it to today's time. If we would get Ferrer i Guàrdia in a pure state surely he would tell us to try to close that school for more concrete things. The hard part of our project is to get all those referents and adapt them to the present and above all to the child. We do not follow any methodology because we think that each child needs what they need at that time. It's not a single line. So between the structure, the values that we want to develop, and the daily practice, well, that's what we contribute.

In times of economic insecurity and political disaffection, how do you keep up hope and energy?

Noemí: If you see it from the education side, it's appropriate to talk about sequencing too. Setting annual goals that you want to meet and that will motivate you. For us, it was very important to go through the process of getting to know each other as a team and to have those conflicts necessary to grow and to continue. Knowing that after one year, another follows, there are small and large goals to meet, building a community at an economical level. There are more than enough reasons to motivate us.

Ana: Also, growth and love. For me, it is the act of appreciating what you believe in and the people who you've joined and the people who will come after you. Life doesn't stop being a cycle. We will vanish and others will remain. For me, it's like an act of love that they can have that possibility of liberty that we might not have had in our childhood.

Joan: I can't conceive of life free of struggle, so ever since I began living life I've been involved in social movements. That's something that either fades out of you or doesn't. If your blood boils when confronted with injustice, you can't just be passive while looking at the news. It's an attitude of life and a bit of reclaiming the inner punk. A punk attitude faces an unbearable society, so we must make it more bearable. The best way to end this is by creating, building, and in that path you'll find people who will support this. And when you change your little daily routine to carry it out in a more collective way, that love, as Ana said, makes you advance and makes you stay in the fight. Sometimes in the fights, young people fall into an error, and I include myself in that, we fall into an error of wanting to see very swift changes and very radical changes, and that burns people because that's when prison sentences and repression begin. So we have to find a way to fight that's

sustainable with time because by keeping up the fight against everything, everyone's blood will boil at some point. I remember a guy from 15M who was interviewed after a week, and he was already very frustrated. He showed a capacity for terrible frustration. This is to say, this goes from defeat to defeat until the final victory.

Noemi: I think it's important that we are not alone. We alone would not be able to open the school, so we need to continue working without isolating ourselves. The restlessness we have for social change goes beyond the day we will open the school. We enjoy and live the process. And part of the strategy of the group is having people much younger come join, because this doesn't end once we leave.

La Ortiga





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewees
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Who are you and what is your relationship to the La Ortiga project?

Mónica: My name is Mónica and I'm from here in Valladolid, from a village in Tudela de Duero. I've been a part of La Ortiga since the beginning, there was a short time during which I was not a part of the assembly, and now I'm a part of the meetings again.

David: My name is David and I participate in the La Ortiga assembly. I didn't participate from the start of the foundation, but La Ortiga was formed on May 3, I believe, and by May 7 I was participating.

When, where, and why was La Ortiga started?

David: Two and a half years ago, activists from different groups throughout the city met and thought that it was necessary to create a space to carry out activities, get together, be political in the city, so then they decided to found La Ortiga.

Mónica: And so, La Ortiga during the first stage was in the Plaza Batallas, and that was a good location because there was a park. Now we're here in the Delicias neighborhood. La Ortiga was formed like how David said, and from the need to have a meeting space for the different groups; Valladolid is a city that has a lot of social movements, so a meeting point was needed, a place to get together and do activities. We're in the Delicias neighborhood.

What kind of neighborhood is it?

David: Well, Las Delicias is a working-class neighborhood where people with average economic capacity live, and it has a large number of migrants, not only from other countries, but Valladolid is the capital of the city of Castilla y Leon and there are many people from towns that, because of the issue of lack of resources, decide to come here. In Valladolid, it's much easier to end up in a neighborhood like this than to be in the center or in other places of the city that are much more lucrative in the sense that the land is much more expensive. So this site seemed perfect for us to educate others or to seek a common ground with people who are more like us than those of other neighborhoods.

Have you managed to involve the neighborhood residents?

Mónica: La Ortiga took a year to get going in this neighborhood, and it's a complicated process. One of our objectives is to hold meetings from time to time to rethink the objectives of the Social Center because, sometimes, we start doing things and forget what still has to be done. I wouldn't fully

say yes, but there are certain activities that we see people are more drawn to. Not all activities are done here on-site; we've done activities in parks, in plazas, wherever. But I would not fully say yes, because in the end a door is a door, even if it's open.

Why the name La Ortiga?

David: We asked our partners because we joined when the name already existed, and they told us that it had been proposed because it was a plant that is beneficial because it can be used to make tea and skin cream and such, but if you don't know how to hold it, it can sting.

Mónica: In addition, the ortiga plant is something very characteristic of Valladolid, from Castilla, you find it in many places. We are a "self-managed social center."

Can you explain to us what that means?

Mónica: So a self-managed social center is, as the name states, a center where people do activities or have social gatherings. And when we talk about "self-managed", we're referring to the fact that we have no interest in receiving any type of subsidy or help because we believe in collective management and that we can carry out our projects with our own resources.

How does a self-managed social center sustain itself?

David: Through fees contributed by people who participate in the assembly, through the vegan get togethers, donations, and from talks that are free. We always remind people before and after each activity that this is a self-managed social center and that it exists from voluntary individual contributions. No one is ever forced to pay to participate.

Mónica: Of course, in the end we manage to rely on the responsibility of the people. In the assembly nobody reviews who has paid fees or who hasn't paid fees, each person gives according to their financial abilities. We think that if you get involved with a project and you're dedicating your time to it, then we know that you're committed to that project. With the activities it's the same, one thing that we clearly wanted is that a person will never be charged for an activity because it seems to us that this is a space that has to be for everyone in the world, and not everyone can pay. So, when an activity happens or someone wants to give money for that activity, the money goes to the space, it never goes to the person who has organized it and managed it because this is a non-profit space.

Why not ask for specific grants to cover the operation of some activities?

Mónica: Fundamentally, I would say that the reason why we don't ask for subsidies is autonomy. To have the autonomy of not having to account for what we do, because this is something that we build and that we believe is perfectly legitimized by itself. And also because the institution is there and many people from the group could generate enough attention to collaborate possibly with certain institutions.

David: Apart from that, ideologically, like Monica said, there are many people who are not in favor of participating directly with a state organization. As we said, that money belongs to everyone but it isn't available to everyone where they need it.

It's money from the state and their ideology is very far from ours and allows and enables cases of oppression that many companions suffer under or that we suffer under within the current system. So, we don't want to participate even indirectly, even if that money belongs to everyone. On the other hand, although we think that it's ours, public money is not because it's from the state, we pay into it and the state is the one that decides who receives the money and who doesn't. So, we don't want to have to owe anything to people that are responsible, directly or indirectly, for what happens to us. But above all, we opt for self-management to create an alternative to ideological thinking that things must function in a specific way and that everything has to do with the state. We offer functioning ideological alternatives so that people come and participate. We can't think that we are the solution for future politics, because I don't think that's our goal either, but we should at least create reasonable doubt in the people that other options, perhaps developed in another way, are really possible, in some activity that is worth having to participate in.

Mónica: And also that we need to trust the capacity of the people, that we need to think that this can be carried out as a collective. Together, projects can be carried out. 15M has meant for many groups a moment of reorganization, reinvention, strength or birth.

What has 15M meant for La Ortiga?

David: As a collective, so to speak, we don't have a direct relationship because La Ortiga is two years old and 15M, which seems like it was yesterday, happened 11 years ago. But there's the studying that each of us can do about what 15M could mean for collective ideology or for politicizing the streets, de-bureaucratizing politics and making it so that politics cease to be only for politicians, making people of this country begin to understand that politics are everything and that you have to participate in politics even in order to not be a taxable person within it.

Mónica: The truth is that 15M happened when I was very young, you know? But I do believe that both here in the city and in many other places, it created a foundation for assemblies that, I can't quite say for sure, but I would say didn't exist before.

So what legal entity was chosen for this project and why?

David: Legal?

Mónica: Legal? None. We aren't considered as an official association, and this space is rented. It was previously rented for a bar and now it's rented as a social center.

David: It's rented by a person, not an association or organization.

Mónica: Right.

David: A person puts it in this name and others, and then the collective group of La Ortiga pays for the space, the bills, and the rest, but we have nothing to do with having an official status of association or whatever.

Mónica: Yeah, there was a debate about the issue of registering as an association or not. We had some doubts thinking about whether or not it would help facilitate the work that we're doing or not. The truth is that we agreed that we didn't think it was necessary. As we said before, it's a self-managed project, and we have no

intention of receiving any kind of subsidy or help. So, we think that it's a collective space that people have, so we don't need legal representation or legal status.

Why is a social center necessary in a city like Valladolid?

Mónica: Social centers, in my opinion, are like pockets of resistance in the community. At the end of the day, we are immersed in a capitalist, patriarchal, colonial society, which drags us down a lot of the time, so it's necessary to have a space to stop briefly, even if it's just to reflect on what we want to build and how we want to grow. A social center is a place to start building, I think.

David: And then, it's a space that's very different from a traditional formula where you are going to propose a talk or want to do a workshop, and you would have to ask for authorization from a City Council or go through a bureaucratic process, or you have to go to a business, but they would make a profit. So, it's important that there are places where you can create growth or entertainment activities in a different way without involving an economic or government body, and that it's done simply so that people can grow as individuals.

Mónica: That's it. In the end, it's a place to come together, isn't it? I think that a social center, regardless of all the work it does to create a social fabric, to raise awareness, in the end is a place to come together to put aside productive values and focus on other values, right? For coming together and building.

On the web page, you talk about your horizontal structure and the use of a general assembly for decision making. Can you tell us about your experience with the assembly? What problems have you had so far and how have you been solving them?

David: I think it's important to eliminate this "mythological shadow" that the assembly is something that works on its own because it's a structure that can only do good. It's not like that. The people who make it up are individual people and if certain types of protocols or common ground are not established, that assembly will create friction and bad feelings. For example, I think that the things that make me most proud of this assembly is that we have been a group for a little over two years and have had debates, but no one has ever raised their voice. At first I didn't realize it, but we have installed care as something essential in the assembly. There's a part at the beginning of the assembly where everyone shares how they're going to integrate care when talking and discussing important matters, keeping in mind the situation of each person. In fact, I think that it's something that makes the assembly unique and alive and that people take care of each other because, after all, the assembly is just that: interpersonal relationships of people united in ways outside of politics. Privacy is also something political that you have to keep in mind and take care of with the people you share the space with.

Mónica: Yes. I totally agree that the assembly is a super powerful tool, but we also have to take into account that here, we meet in a horizontal way but it's a type of relationship that we aren't used to in our day-to-day lives. In fact, I think that our logic as a society is to delegate representatives, to delegate functions, and we aren't used to speaking or being active subjects, which is what David was saying before. So, the assembly is a very powerful instrument but it's an instrument that must also be taken care of. We always make a point to address the assembly itself and whether it's functioning and on schedule. It also leads us to debates. It's important to have a

person that mediates to speed up the operation. The assembly is something that must be worked on and, without a doubt, without care the assembly could not function because we need to be able to speak... Being able to express ourselves but also taking ourselves into account. If there is no care or no love there is no understanding, I think.

How do you make decisions?

Mónica: Well, the decisions here in La Ortiga are by consensus, not by vote. There are certain points that we have that are pretty clear, which are the ideological bases or foundations of the organization, but then we might debate and try to reach agreements and understandings, and the truth is that in all this time we haven't had any problems making decisions

David: The case of veganism or the issue of alcohol, for example, not all the people here are vegan, nor are all the people who participate non-drinkers. But after several debates, they are considered to be ideas that the people in this space must accept. I can defend alcohol consumption, but I can also understand the group's reasoning as to why La Ortiga should be an alcohol-free space. I understand that it's applicable, and that it must be carried out in the space, so I have to make a division between my individual reality and what I consider to be beneficial for the entire space, for the benefit of its own environment and the context, so I can accept it.

Mónica: Right. Generally, in La Ortiga we are people, more or less, of like-minded ideas and contexts. Obviously there is some disparity, but I do believe that there have been people who may have approached this space, but they didn't follow through and join officially because they didn't agree with the ideology that we have here. But yes, debates do take place here. And yes, I think that reaching a consensus does work, and the individual and collective need to converge here, which might mean that you have different backgrounds or ideologies as an individual, like not being vegan or using drugs, but we also understand that this is a space that we're trying to build and it has to be consistent with our ideological positions. In the end, through debating, we continue to build the space. I think that we can't talk about the individual without talking about the collective and vice versa.

I see that you offer a series of monthly activities. How do you organize them? Who takes care of the coordination?

Mónica: In general, these activities are managed by people from the assembly because it can be hard for us to find time, but we do see that these activities can happen. There are many activities that we don't manage that are proposed by other groups or people, so we simply offer our space.

Online it says that you have a "social library" that you describe as "a space to consult books, magazines, newspapers, and other written materials. Some publications that people of power don't want you to know about." What materials might we find in this "social library"?

Mónica: When we talk about a "social library", we mean a library that has a social position and resources of a certain ideological perspective. We have materials about a lot of topics that we consider to have the ability to generate conversation or change in the system; for example, talking about feminism, anti-racism, self-management, and other types of topics, because they are all very powerful and relevant.

What are the ideas that you have in the library that “power doesn’t want you to know about”?

David: The system responds to a form a hegemonic thinking that extends its tentacles in society and this implies an ideology of oppression toward certain groups. We live in a society that, after all is said and done, is vertical and that assumes that someone is under another person and that a part of the common collective, the smallest part normally or in other situations the broader part, oppresses another one that is weaker. What we try to do with the social library is to provide content that flies against that hegemonic way of thinking. These topics are not normally the subject of books or publications that you would find in your local bookstore or public library.

Mónica: Right, and we also find it necessary to collect and represent the voices and stories of prisoners, migrants, and women. Collect fanzines and project protocols. All of that seems very important to us.

Why not collaborate with the public library?

Mónica: In my personal opinion, I believe that public libraries fulfill a function that is very beneficial, but it’s like a civic center, not a social center. In the end, and this is what we’ve been saying, a public library is a state institution managed in a vertical way, and here we believe in a space that we want to be for everyone, so that everyone can build it. We want to be able to talk about the books we want and bring the books that we want. There are certain ideas in our library that I don’t know would be welcome in a public library.

David: It’s very good for people to think about changing the institution, but let’s think about this: Why is it important to take over the institution and not the streets? Why do we have to go to the top when we have the neighborhood, which is ours, is very close, and we’ve abandoned it? Do I have to go to the public? Can’t I have cooperation with the people that are around me and get the same result? We don’t have to think that we have to get involved in the institution, so we give alternatives, in a different way, that don’t have to do with the state.

Mónica: I think that there are different ways to go about it. In reality I don’t think that they’re incompatible, but our position is to create something public as an alternative to the state and to create it with the people. If tomorrow the public libraries were more horizontal and were managed by the people of the neighborhood, great, I would be the first person to support it. But, at the moment, our objective is something else. Also on the website it says that the first Wednesday of every month there is coffee talk and debate of a text previously approved in assembly.

What does the coffee talk consist of?

Mónica: It’s like an everyday coffee conversation, getting together over coffee to chat. Talk as a tool to give life to the library. We pick a text to talk about and have a chat with a hot beverage. Another activity of La Ortiga is social mapping.

Could you explain what a social mapping consists of? Why is it a necessary tool?

David: We start with the people that participate in La Ortiga or don’t participate directly in life in this neighborhood or are not from Valladolid. So, a partner of

ours, Julian, was the one who taught us how to use this tool. In Colombia they use it like a super powerful and active tool, so he showed us and showed us how to think. We came to this neighborhood that we didn't know and we can't tell people what their needs are. We have to know, first hand, what the people who live in the neighborhood consider to be their needs and their daily problems and the areas where we can do some teaching. And this weapon that Julian gave us was very enriching to have a global view of the context in which we act.

Mónica: And social mapping I think has a very powerful aspect, and it's that it's built by people. We're the people affected that are going to decide the necessities of our neighborhood. Here the social cartography, for example, could not have been understood if it weren't for meeting with the people of the neighborhood. And when we talk about getting together with the people in the neighborhood, it's meeting with very diverse people but also diverse opinions, to see what the situation of the neighborhood is and what the needs are. You have in your space a project of vegan get togethers, and you're mediators of anti-commercial distribution.

Can you explain what both activities consist of?

Mónica: Well, the vegan get together is a form of self-management. It's about coming together for dinner. Anti-specism is one of the bases of the social center, so we make dinners periodically to make money for the space and we also get together here for dinner, it's a beautiful thing. And the anti-commercial distribution might be better explained by David.

David: The first thing I must mention is that the distributor doesn't belong to La Ortiga. There are people close to the assembly that have a distributor with books that are unable, because of their content, to be able to be marketed in a bookstore. So, we have them here, so they're visible and people that are close, if they are interested, can get them here. And besides that, we buy some of our publications and they end up in our social library.

Do your activities have any relation to the implementation of socialism as an economy? If so, can you explain this concept and how it relates to the sustainable life you explore?

Mónica: Sure, we try to collaborate with projects that seem sustainable and reasonable to us, for example, we're working with an energy cooperative and there's a consumer group that collaborates a lot with La Ortiga. In fact, La Ortiga has been in talks to be a distribution point for different organizations, if necessary. The truth is that now certain people's space are a big part of the group, so we try to be a part of it. It might have nothing to do with us, but we think it's important. We want to break the logic of "You scratch my back I scratch yours" or the vertical logic of charity. Here, if we make a free store, it's free for everyone, and if we make a dining room that requires prices or contribution it's the same for everyone.

Are there any other tools that you've used that have been especially useful for carrying out your work as agents of social change?

Mónica: Yes, now we've started to make the store free, and we want to do it with the dining room or gazebo and more activities continue to come to us. One thing that seems important to me is mutual support, which is a super powerful co-

listening tool that serves both to deconstruct the patterns we have of the dominant ideology in society as well as to learn to listen and understand each other. Co-listening workshops are held one day a week. As a tool focused specifically on men, it serves to deconstruct toxic masculinity and involve men in the role of feminism and that seems very interesting to me. We have also started with a protocol against harassments and aggressions because there were several instances that touched us indirectly, but we felt it was important to have a protocol in place.

David: And conflicts.

Mónica: Yes, and in the assembly we make a point of having conflict resolution at the beginning because, in the end, we focus on productive logics and resolving conflicts because emotions are almost always behind it. In addition, it seems important to us to hang posters for the space saying that if you feel uncomfortable, we don't talk about assault, but rather resources that you can turn to to talk to someone.

Thinking about all the activities you mentioned, would you say that La Ortiga is, in some way, an informal education project?

Mónica: I think about it a lot because, in the end, on the whole issue of education and universal education, the Institution is far-off; I'm no longer talking about social reality but about everyday reality. What you study in your academic track and what you will later find outside, I think we all agree that it will be quite disconnected. With respect to whether we do informal education, I consider that we do, in the end La Ortiga has educational purposes because this is a space to educate and teach everyone.

David: I think that it's super important. All the people who come here grow and participate equally. For example, in the masculinity workshop. People who identify as men and who participated didn't come here knowing everything. There was a deconstruction of what masculinity is and we all found it very powerful to see. We do it for everyone because here nobody is omnipotent and knows everything. Just as there are some areas in which I have a little more knowledge about, but others that I don't. People who come from the outside come here to participate. In addition, what we always say about breaking the ghetto a little is very important; it seems that people who already have a job do not come to the Social Center. The interesting thing is that neighbors come from the neighborhood because we are doing crochet or yoga and then have different conversations about things like animal liberation or the prison system and have a debate and coffee. Pedagogy is not sitting at a table with another person in a chair; it's having a talk and making points and through interpersonal relationships creating ties from nothing so that you can reach a point where people question new things.

Mónica: And it's very important to talk about those ties. If there are no ties and no connections, the process doesn't work, so there's no care for the space to remain open. Opening yourself up to the neighborhood means that a person can enter and talk about something that might be unpleasant. Having a caring space means that when I can't respond to the comment, there will be a mediator that checks in with people who might be uncomfortable and respond on my behalf.

Speaking from your own personal experience, what's your opinion of current education policy?

Mónica: To me, the truth is that the educational model we have is garbage. Of course, that's what we were talking about. If I believe in a horizontal and self-managed model, then how can I defend a school system that's totally the opposite? There should be other types of school that represent my beliefs more, but the current truth is that it seems quite functional. In the end, the Institution is one more entity of the entire system and the aims of the educational Institution are often the ends of the social system. So, from that perspective, it works, of course, because it works for the system.

David: As a philosophy in the sense of education, we must understand that at the top, there is an economic ideology. The purpose of education is to generate labor, to be able to be qualified and cheap, to carry out the production. So, it seems out of place to say, "I want to study this, but then I work in something else that's totally different." No, the general idea is that you study something because you want to work in something related to that. It's something that shocks people and that the system doesn't understand, that knowledge is to improve the person so everyone can grow. My goal doesn't have to be to participate so that other people can benefit from my hard work.

Thinking about your life path, how have you come to question the current system and participate in this group?

Mónica: From La Ortiga, I don't know, but I started questioning how to get in La Ortiga in the assembly thanks to feminism. Fortunately, in adolescence, I began to fool around with feminism and one thing led to the other.

David: In my case, and thinking about my generation, many people came mainly because of a cultural reason, for example, to book a music group. You can find your own niche within the system, so you end up finding this space; at the moment when you already have an ideology formed or understand that you want to change something then you have to participate and you have to start getting involved with bigger groups and assemblies, political organizations, and then you might end up in your field. In my case, it was Valladolid and I discovered that I was born in a social center, I read a little about it, and I decided to go see it and participate in it to see if it was for me. When you feel you're at ease, you might choose to stay there.

Mónica: Or maybe you have not read any book that has any political theory behind it, or you're one of those people who listen to commercial music, but you know a person or two who catch your attention by the way they think and their ideas, and you start talking, and one thing leads to another...

Are there people over 50 years old in your group?

Mónica: In the assembly we are young people above all, and people who are close to the space, if we're honest, they're also mostly young people.

David: Yes, people in their 40s and 50s are approaching us, but we don't know what the next step is. We do not know if it's because we fail to attract them, or if they see that they think they are a bit out of place. It's similar to if you entered a space of very old people, you still feel a bit out of place to function properly. It's something we have to look at how we can get politicized and unpoliticized people, especially from that age sector, to feel comfortable within La Ortiga.

Mónica: Right, and it takes a lot to get there to make it known what a social center

is. When we were in Las Batallas, after one year, one day we were serving paella around the neighborhood because we had leftovers; everyone thought we were part of a political party. Then we had to start putting up posters explaining that this is not a political party space, nor does it have to do with the City Council or anything like that. And this has been a bar for a long time, I also think that that has its influence. I think that the few older people who come in order something.

David: Thinking you're going to serve them some wine.

Mónica: Or they think that this is a “rock” (social space), so I think it takes more time to show up in the neighborhood. But it's that we have a relationship with several associations, entities or groups in the neighborhood, and when they have parties we're usually there. And yes, we do see older people who come to certain talks or documentaries, and they are people with a very strong ideology. What's harder for us is to reach the neighborhood in general.

What does La Ortiga mean by “the social”, “the common”, and “the public”?

Mónica: When we talk about the public, we make it very clear that we're not referring to the State. We refer to the public, to the common, to what is of the people, whether it's something physical or a collective imaginary. And I think that when we talk about the common we mean another way of doing things, breaking the individualistic logic that we have marketed in this capitalist system and abandoning the values of competition, perhaps because of cooperative values and talking about the common from that perspective.

David: I think we use them as synonyms so that people understand that when we talk about the public, social or common, we do it as a derivative of “that which belongs to people” or has an end in the people, but not only in people who participate in the space, but all people who are within the framework of the neighborhood or the city.

We're discussing a political project, but what policy are we talking about?

Mónica: La Ortiga doesn't have a political ideology as such. We don't say “we are an anarchist space” or “we are a socialist space”. In fact, in the assembly there are people from all different perspectives, although it's true that some ideologies...

David:...are relatively close.

Mónica: Right, so we don't have an ideology specifically, but we do have certain positions such as assembly, horizontality, self-management, anti-specism, anti-racist struggles, feminism; There are a lot of positions that already seem like ideological positions to us.

What do you mean by an “antispecist” struggle?

Mónica: When we talk about antispecism, we talk about veganism, about the oppression of other species.

David: Veganism is the culinary part, and antispecism works to end all kinds of oppression that animals suffer from our productive network or simply from our leisure. It's to go against the idea that we're above everything because we have

been educated that the human being has superior rational capabilities because he can do whatever he wants with whatever. Then, in the end, the superiority can end up being reflected in an idea of superiority towards other people.

Mónica: Right, in the end it's all very related. The oppression of animals, the oppression of the land, of rational values over emotional ones, over women... It's all connected.

From your experience with the collective, what does our model of society need?

David: Maybe the visibility of oppressed sectors, of La Ortiga.

Mónica: Of course, awareness of these issues. And I would start a little too by starting to get involved with the issues that affect us. Beginning to make decisions and be active people in matters that influence us and having awareness.

David: Empathy, a break with individualism.

Mónica: Solidarity and mutual support.

Do you work in a network with other groups and Social Centers?

Mónica: Well, here in the neighborhood, for example, when the collective mapping was done, we were in contact with different groups, with parishes.

David: With the collective of racialized people.

Mónica: Yes, also with religious groups and with Roma associations and with NGOs and associations in general. Then, with respect to the city, we're also in contact with different movements that exist, the feminist movement for example. There are different places in the city with which we are in contact as well. When a conference is done, things are organized from different places and La Ortiga is usually a place where they're organized. Outside the city...

David: ...outside the city, the meeting of social centers is held. More or less twice a year we meet with other social centers about 200 kilometers from us, and what we do is follow an agenda where we analyze things that we consider important, and where it's not only relevant to meet, but also to share ideas. Problems are shared in common and strategies or ideas arise that had never occurred to us in any way.

Mónica: Each meeting takes place in a social center, then we take turns and the center that hosts organizes a little each meeting. Last time there were eight centers, I think.

David: Some were missing.

Mónica: Yeah, and when there are conferences we try to invite groups and stay in touch with these groups. It's very important because you don't know each other and start cutting ties. We also collaborated with unions and with more private entities, such as bars.

What social movements would be the most important in this city of Valladolid?

Mónica: Well, it seems to me that there is a movement regarding the labor

movement and a strong or at least coherent union action. The feminist movement also seems to be quite strong. LGBTQ and diverse movements also seem to be gaining strength. What else...anarchist and autonomous movements. And I've seen a lot of movement especially with the issue of feminist gypsies.

Do you think that the migrant population is represented in the social movement of the city?

Mónica: Perhaps here in the neighborhood we've seen that when we've collaborated with associations that may be more religious or that deal with issues of migrants, but it may seem to be something that's yet to come because, like all of us, when we turn to the typical feminist group or the typical antispecism group, it's true that we don't have a reference of migrants. That doesn't mean that there isn't space for people to safely come though.

What does La Ortiga think about the re-politization of younger people?

Mónica: Well, I think the way to re-politicize is to reach common interests. For example, why didn't feminism reach people before? Because reading certain authors is great, or talking about what feminism has been traditionally, but perhaps what really makes kids move is that they talk about jealousy, of peer pressure, if I shave, if I don't shave, maybe that's what hurts me daily and that's what connects to me. So, on any other subject I think it would be about the same thing, we can't talk about reaching young people perhaps with a speech that isn't connected at all with their reality. Let's see what needs young people have, what gets them fired up, and from there we go to work, I think.

David: Personally, I think that generationally now it seems that everything is focused on the issue of corruption. When you talk about the issue of politics, it's almost only about how the parties are all corrupt, and I think you have to stop thinking about politics only from that one area, to see beyond our nose, so to speak. But we're forgetting what we care to change, which is breaking the individualism that prevails. The biggest problem that I see today is that we have been educated in a society of "I" and in the discourse of trying to stand out. And one stand out normally by stepping on something that belongs to someone else, either at work or throughout this area of mass media, from YouTube, Instagram, or other social media platforms. We're creating individualistic creatures and even, when creating debate, a debate of growth, of respect, of positioning collaboration to help all grow is not being generated. The discourse that prevails is that of "I'm going to destroy your argument but not because I think that I'm right," because if I think about it, it's probably because I want to place myself above you. We're forgetting that the primary way to get political is to generate contexts where people feel comfortable to become politicized, but not politicized by participating in a political party or in the elections, but to worry about everything that is around me and that, after all, affects politics.

In a social moment when we seem to be living in a crisis of trust, how do you use La Ortiga to form trust?

Mónica: It hasn't been something intentional, I don't think we have ever sat down to reflect on trust, but when you build from the commons, you trust above all because you see that the rest respond, and when I have not been able to go on, someone else has gone on. When I've had a problem, I've asked for help and have been supported. And the issue of emotions is basic; if in an assembly I can share what

has happened to me and how I feel, indirectly, you're creating a climate of trust. In a context where there is support and solidarity, trust is generated on its own.

David: Yes, and what's generated is unconscious learning, that is, there are people that have more experience in these types of contexts and people that come with none. So, there are many things that are shared by the people that have more experience and you see, without asking them, you're already assimilated to them.

Keeping in mind the climate of precariousness and political unrest, what keeps the motor of hope alive in La Ortiga?"

Mónica: I think that one of the things that unites and motivates La Ortiga is care. Without care and without affection, we wouldn't accomplish anything. Because if we're working together, ideologically and rationally, but we don't agree or don't know each other emotionally or affectionately, I think that we would achieve nothing. And there are ups and downs, there are times that we're high and others that we're low. But I think that it's especially when an idea comes forward or when we see the results, or you're invited somewhere or you see activity in the neighborhood, because I believe that's what motivates you to continue with it.

David: And then, strategically, when things are bad, you only have two choices: you either normalize it or you work to change it. For example, that's what's happening now after the 2007 explosion of the housing bubble, the crisis and so on that was happening when there was a stronger vindication movement. Now it seems we have normalized that there are people being charged 800 euros and that they we should be grateful that they're being charged that when ten years ago a person who was a billionaire was being charged 1000 euros at least. When you normalize, in the end it's a political defeat because the moment you normalize precarization you will no longer fight it. The other option is to continue the fight and bring attention to the problems that you and the people in your area have; then there's that mix of what individually pushes me to participate in a certain way, which is the emotional and sentimental aspects of what I feel participating here, and that strategically it's necessary to make it clear that we are still at war because it's what we have to do, there's no other alternative, it's a duty.

Mónica: And I think it's also consistency. The debates always talk about theory of practice, which I think is one of the reasons why the Institution is very far from reality, but in the moment when you have a theory without a coherent practice there is no guarantee, you have nothing, what's the use? We're part of a system that is increasingly hostile, I would talk about social cannibalism, so, if you reveal yourself ideologically in front of that, to feel minimally coherent but you don't have a practice that supports it, you have nothing. Consistency seems like a super important aspect to carry out projects of this type, and I'm not talking about on the individual level, I'm talking about on the collective level of collective coherence.

What does it mean for La Ortiga to grow?

Mónica: Well, growing for La Ortiga is not having a bigger place or having more people. It would be to have more people sensitized in the assembly, to get more to the neighborhood, to see more involvement that allows us to do more activities because we're very limited in time and resources. So, growing is raising awareness.

David: I think that as a group we want to grow because if this is a place that has been created for the neighborhood and for the people, then growing means that more people come to feel more and more involved in our goal. And secondly, after all, all of us here are also individual people and our goal is to increase not so much our knowledge but in our sensitivity. Try to be less oppressive with certain types of people, to be able to create situations of less conflict and more comfort for other people. That, after all, is also growing because if people who create emotional ties grow, people who come from outside with greater disparity will feel less uncomfortable or more accepted or more likely to learn with us. We are the ones who participate here.

La Libre





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
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Name of the interviewees
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Who are you and what connection do you have with La Libre (meaning literally “The Free”)?

Josué: My name is Josué Bilbao, and I'll talk a little about where I come from. I had social interests and I started being active in political movements when I started university in the anti-war movement. During the nineties in Spain there was a strong anti-war movement which was against the compulsory military service required in Spain called the Insubordinate movement. Through this anti-war work, I joined other political movements and later participated in the anti-globalization movement. Shortly after, in the heat of these mobilizations taking place in Santander, a city in the Northern coast of Spain, La Libre was born. There, I met people essential to La Libre, but I didn't join the project until 2009 when I started being a part of the management assembly of a collective.

Borja: My name is Borja and I recently joined La Libre. I started my degree in social work quite some years ago out of Cantabria, a Northern coastal region in Spain, and through this degree I learned about political projects within the theme of fighting against social exclusion. I also began to do jobs that were less focused on social work. I finished the degree, but I was convinced that I didn't want to dedicate myself to it professionally. At the same time, I became familiar with the state-wide squatter movement in the different places that I moved. When I decided to return to Cantabria, I heard about La Libre because it was well-known in Santander. It was one of the few things that I was familiar with, and little by little I met their people until they suggested that I join, and here I am.

Why the name La Libre? What's the story behind this project?

Josué: In reality, this name came up by chance by a couple of people who started the project. They were walking down the street talking about what they should call the project and out of all the names they said, La Libre was the one they liked the most. It began in 2001 as a sort of self-employment project by a couple of people who were interested in the world of books and wanted to earn a living with it. After a short time, a few years maybe, they noticed that there was no way to earn a living through books, and then they opened La Libre to more people so that the space and the things they do could be collectively managed.

According to your definition, La Libre is an “alternative bookstore,” an “associative bookstore,” a “self-managed social center,” “a meeting and activity place,” “a collective,” “a cultural association.” What legal entity have you chosen and why?

Josué: La Libre is a cultural association because that's what fits best and also because of the need to have a legal structure to be able to bill the books to the distributors and publishers. The project, like you already know, is various things. It's an alternative bookstore in the sense that the majority of the materials that we have are critical of the capitalist system or promote alternative systems to it. It's also a self-managed social center because we have a little space where we can do activities, talks, debates, showings, presentation of books, poetry recitals, concerts. We also have a library space, a community computer with free access to the internet, and a free store where people can come and take what they need while people who have extra things can leave them at the shop without the exchange of money. The social center allows there to be a large movement of people who understand and talk about topics that concern us. I say self-managed because we don't receive subsidies from public or private entities. We try to get all the support to pay the bills from the sale of the materials and the contributions from the partners. That's where the idea of us being an associative bookstore comes from; it is an attempt for more people to get behind this project and for people that believe it's necessary that La Libre exists in Santander to contribute, in a small way, to help in the economic sustainability.

What is the relationship between La Libre and the government?

Josué: The relationship between La Libre and the government is that, on one side, we are obligated to pay taxes; the value-added tax (VAT), income tax, and association tax. There's also a certain relationship between La Libre and the Santander Municipal Library. This municipal library buys books from diverse bookstores in Santander and we are one of them. This is basically the whole relationship we have with the government.

What problems have you encountered during the process of becoming established?

Josué: In reality, we have not had any problems while establishing ourselves as a cultural association. We looked up some standard statutes and we had no problem legalizing it.

For many collectives with which I have spoken, the 15M, the anti-austerity movement in Spain, has meant a time of reorganization, reinvention, and strengthening. What has this movement meant for La Libre?

Borja: More than for La Libre and not just for La Libre, my analysis is that after the 15M, there was a lot of criticism about what the camps consisted of and from other sectors that we considered close to us, those with libertarian tendencies. What is undeniable is that in our local environment, bridges have been built between people that, until now, we had not met, and the barriers between activists and regular people have changed. Right now, in Santander, projects exist that did not exist before the 15M and that have to do with the movement. When it happened, I was not in La Libre but it's true that I saw people from La Libre in the plaza despite the fact that La Libre as a collective was not participating there.

Josué: Yes, what Borja said is true; there were people who started to pass through La Libre and we started meeting a ton of people that, until that moment, had not been interested or had not been politicized in the sense of having an interest in the public sector and of understanding the policy management of the common good and the public.

We are talking about a “collective,” “a space or zone of crossing and contact,” “a bookstore,” “a free store,” “a library,” and “a collective process.” How do you weave together the internal functioning of these dimensions or spheres of action? What is decision-making like?

Josué: The management of the space and all the areas we have discussed that make up La Libre is coordinated by an assembly of 12 people. The assembly manages all the tasks that are carried out, ranging from scheduling, which is straightforward because we are open from Monday to Saturday, to contacting distributors and publishers, making payments, contacting people that come to do activities, welcoming them and making them feel at home. The website is also kept up to date and information is sent to people who are interested, the free store is managed, invoices and taxes are paid, etc. This whole set of tasks is managed among those 12 people that we call the main core. There are people who don't belong to the assembly but consider it appropriate to help and do shifts once in a while. In fact, we have started opening on Saturdays because there is a group of people nearby who offer to come on Saturdays. So, that's more or less the way it works.

Borja: I wanted to say on this matter that for us, regarding the process of preparing and handing out tasks within the assembly, we believe it is important that they rotate because it prevents them from becoming specialized in one thing. In some things, we manage, but it's also true that in others we are not able to or we find it more comfortable for some things to be handled by other people. For example, there are people who are more comfortable doing outreach tasks than others.

Among the processes of La Libre, you have several initiatives and different activities of your own. Are there people who work for a wage on this project? Why or why not? What does “work” mean for La Libre? What work philosophy is practiced?

Josué: When we talk about work, we are talking about all of the tasks we have discussed and in La Libre we don't have any wage-earning people. All the work that is done is collaborative volunteering, in an altruistic way, and no money is received in return. If we understand work as any productive or reproductive activity that produces goods or services, we don't have a profound reflection about the meaning of work, but with practice we develop a way of understanding what work is. For us, work is a way of managing life and projects without the need for exchanging money, because we think that, many times, putting in a mediator such as money hinders many personal and social relationships and sometimes it is harmful. Regardless of that, we are perfectly aware that we live in a capitalist environment and in fact, we need money to survive. Let's say that we live in this contradiction that gives us a lot to think about and that this is enough to demonstrate that work philosophy. The project began as an attempt at self-employment that was not profitable because it was not possible to make a living with books, at least in Santander at the time in which it started and with this type of books, of course, the type of books that were not best sellers and were not advertised on TV or in the media. That was the initial motive. Then that has remained as a criterion of its own; from there on, all the people who have joined the project have often come together because all the people who are on the project are on equal conditions and no one was paid for it. We were all in the same situation and that generates a kind of living that is very fulfilling. It really makes you feel fulfilled to see that in this mercantilist world that we have, we are able to carry out a project for many years in an altruistic way. It certainly makes you feel fulfilled as a person and as a collective.

Does La Libre collaborate with other collectives or social enterprises?

Borja: We collaborate quite a bit with other bookstores and social centers from other places in the country, but we also collaborate with more local spaces, not just in Santander but also in Cantabria. And it's inevitable because those of us who work in La Libre are also a part of other collectives and in other assemblies, and that's what happens when there's contact between other collectives. It's also true that La Libre is not just a bookstore but it's also capable of helping open other small projects that are emerging and need this physical space to support them.

Josué: I would answer the question the same way; we don't collaborate formally with other collectives; everything is quite informal in that sense. Like Borja said, collectives have been born here and we have helped them get started in the sense that we have lent them the space because really, the subject of the spaces is complicated. And in La Libre different groups get together, ranging from consumer groups to cooperatives that make bread, antiracist collectives, those who promote bikes as a method of transportation, collectives of defense of property, etc. It can't be said that we collaborate in a formal manner but yes, in an informal way we do.

In the description that you have on your website about your concepts and tools, you speak about “promoting non-mercantilist social ideas.” What social ideas are you talking about?

Borja: I think that in the assembly we have individual opinions but agree on a number of issues; for example, we share the idea that we should do things on our own without delegating to more people. This can be translated into practice in the fact that in this space, you can propose activities, you can give your workshop, and you can share ideas with others. Also, in the fact that what is meant by culture or access to a book or being in a space to speak does not depend on the income you have; these activities are free, and you don't need a membership to use them. Then there are other informal relationships that are not measurable and that happen in this place where practices of mutual support emerge, which is another idea we agree on.

You believe in the “collective construction of alternatives.” What kind of alternatives are we talking about?

Josué: When we talk about alternatives in La Libre, we are referring to alternative customs to the capitalist system in which we are emerged. And when we talk about alternatives they can be of all kinds, for example, thinking of alternatives to the capitalist food system, or for clothes, or for education. One of the things that we agree on in La Libre is that this system is harmful to society and the coexistence between people; it's harmful for the planet and for nature and we believe that it is necessary to construct alternatives so that another world is possible beyond the one in front of our noses.

Borja: And also, we understand that these alternatives cannot be separated from the processes of fighting against problems that exist in the street and that we cannot make way without that opposition. That's why when we present La Libre, we don't just talk about generating alternatives but of the criticism of the social order in which we live.

You talk about “creating tools to take apart and put together the world” and the collective is emphasized in the face of capitalist individualism. What does La Libre mean by “the common” and “the public?”

Josué: When we talk about the public, we understand that it can be easily misunderstood because within the public there are two things that overlap; on one side there is the public that is of all and of the people and the public that is state-owned. Then within that concept of the public there are times when the state can take priority and when this happens, priority is given to the interest of the state and the capital that is intimately linked to the state. And when priority is given to the public, priority is given to the interests of the people. So, in that correlation of forces is where the difficulty of speaking about the public directly is. When we talk about the common, we find it interesting to refer to the example of traditional land management in Cantabria which is known as “communal lands.” These are the lands that belong to everyone within a particular town. This means that everyone who lives in that town can use these lands to till them and get food for their livestock or to provide firewood to keep warm through the winter or to cook. It also means that everyone in the town is obligated to take care of these lands and keep them clean and in good condition so they can be passed on to their descendants. And within these communal lands, another important thing is that since they belong to everyone, they cannot be sold. There is no possibility of them being sold, and that also seems very important to us and is a good way to define what the common is.

You work to “raise questions and concerns.” Could you explain what questions and concerns you are referring to?

Josué: When we talk about raising questions, we mean that the capitalist system of the market in which we live, to the people who have just arrived at it, say the younger ones, seems to be natural and the best and the only world possible. We are constantly bombarded with this message by the media. We try to target those people that have been born into the world as it is and that do not have other references of other possible worlds or other possible ways of relating; this is how we understand raising questions.

This project does not receive government subsidies and is supported autonomously and through members. Who are these people and what do they contribute?

Borja: It is maintained by the sale of books and other materials but also with these members who can be people close to La Libre or people who have used the space for an activity, people who came in, liked a book, and kept coming. And we also think it's important that there are more members that can pay less money rather than having fewer members who can pay a ton. That's why the fee is 20 euros a year. The members also, on many occasions, do not only contribute to the project financially but there are also many ways, without having any obligation to do so, where they show their support.

Josué: For example, doing shifts at La Libre and being there a good number of hours, or providing the computers we have that are from members who have given them to us directly, or bringing second-hand books for us to sell to finance the project.

Borja: Bringing activity posters to different places on other sides of the city. There are many tiny ways each day.

You write on the web: “Here culture is not a consumer good but rather a movement of ideas and proposals.” How does La Libre understand culture? What culture are you talking about?

Borja: I believe that in La Libre we have as a reference that past of the Spanish country where in certain places like Catalonia there was a series of ideas coming from a ton of “Ateneos,” or workers, that spread the culture without the need for it to be understood as something that comes after academic education or something that comes after there is an economic investment behind it. So, for us, that is important and on a very small level, we spread it. And what we understand by culture, I also wanted to say that it exists as a kind of cultural myth that is related to that way of understanding it as something that comes after schooling or can only be done “in exchange for.” And what we mean by culture is something much more basic and at street level and of all people because they exist and not because it is formed. And the way of forming it is often simply to live together in spaces like this and like many others that exist.

Josué: Yes, culture is something much broader than just what’s in the books. Culture is all the knowledge that we all have, regardless of whether we have studied or not, and that in this model of making culture from the ones below, for those below, any one of us can teach us all that he learned throughout his life and can share with others.

Palmar: Living culture.

Borja: And for the most part, we think it’s very important to emphasize today that cultural development in the cities is generating a lot of movement of a part of the population to other sides, converting the culture into a commodity.

What are the cultural references of La Libre?

Josué: Talking about the cultural references of La Libre, I would put as references the “Ateneos” that existed at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century in Spain. The Ateneos were groups of workers that worked a ton of hours – at that time there wasn’t the 8-hour work day – and after work they came to the Athenaeum to study and they formed discussion groups, hiking clubs, and everything from the workers and for the workers without trying in any way to oppose the elitist and bourgeoisie culture of that time. The culture of theaters, operas and this kind of elitist culture; that, for us, is not what La Libre is. Speaking of theater, also for example, you can talk about ways from below to understand that culture. We can think of Federico García Lorca and his group La Barraca who went from village to village teaching the classics to the people of the street. That’s what we mean by culture and that’s our reference.

How does La Libre include the cultural diversity of migrants from the neighborhood?

Borja: I think those realities are very much taken into account, but that doesn’t mean these realities are taken into account by the people that live that migrant reality. I do think that despite all the initiatives and the little things that my colleague Josué was talking about, there’s a certain homogeneity in a way that we are not capable of breaking, and I think that there’s also little face-to-face work, and there’s a sensitivity towards that. So, it’s true that the free store is a place where many people from the neighborhood go into and a lot of them are migrants but in a more political activity, well, that diversity doesn’t exist, and that tells us something.

Josué: I would say that there is some diversity at a certain level of the people who form La Libre, in the sense that there are people that live in the capital of Santander and people who are from various valleys of Cantabria and who provide that cultural diversity which, is not as great as the potential diversity when you add migrants. We are all white and “native” to Cantabria. Of course, it’s a complicated question because, for example, half of my family is Cuban, my grandfather comes from Bermeo, my great grandfather is from Madrid. I mean, today the diversity is so great that it’s very hard to put those things together.

What kind of materials does La Libre receive? What selection criteria for books do you use? What are the red lines?

Borja: It’s more than establishing a red line and a few denials of certain books; what we do is prioritize non-commercial publishers and material that interests us about a ton of topics. But this doesn’t imply that we don’t have other materials. For example, it’s reflected in the secondhand books that there can be any sort of content and that it may also be necessary when developing that critical spirit that is another criterion of La Libre, reading that from a critical position.

Josué: Answering the question of what kind of materials we have in general at La Libre, the basic distinction is what is distributed by non-commercial distributors in Spain. The Spanish country has a healthy network of non-commercial distribution. We could talk about Virus, Traffickers, or Cambalache, which are non-commercial distributors, thanks to which projects such as La Libre can survive. Commercial distributors impose what we consider abusive requirements in order to have the books on your shelves. So, what non-commercial distributors do is they leave you the books in deposit – this means you do not have to pay for them – you have the books on your shelves for an indefinite amount of time until you sell them, and that’s when you pay the distributors. So, thanks to this network of distributors, projects like La Libre can exist. That doesn’t mean we don’t have books from commercial distributors. We do have them, whenever there is someone who asks for one or when we consider a particular title interesting, we have it here. Then, in that case, it is ordered and bought from those commercial distributors.

Would you say that La Libre is, in some way, a project of non-formal education for citizens?

Borja: Sure, because if we understand education as something more integral than what is limited to training centers, schools, universities, and so on, that are very oriented to put you into the labor market and to educate you on values of citizenship, which for us is a rather exclusive term because it does not take into account people without papers, for example people classified as illegal. If we understand education as a more integral thing, then yes, this is a space of informal education as it can be a busy market or other meeting space.

Josué: If we talk about La Libre as a space of informal education for citizens or as you ask us whether it turns out to be paradoxical that this type of education is done outside the institutions; well, to us, it is paradoxical but, on the contrary, it seems to us that it is as it should be. We believe in the education of free people to train free people; we don’t believe in education to train citizens because that word etymologically means to be a subject of a government. So, we don’t form part of this network of non-formal education for the citizens because, for us, the important thing is to educate ourselves together to be free people.

Obviously, we are looking at a political project, but what politics are we talking about?

Borja: Everything that we have been talking about is politics, and politics as everyday life results in collective and breaks away from the idea of politics as something reserved for Parliament. That's why when many people come and say, "Okay, but this is political and I don't like politics," that contact is already political.

Josué: We understand politics as the management of public and collective space, of daily life, and we believe that management should be done by the people who live in that space. That management should not be delegated to our Parliament or government because when it is delegated to governments, they usually take advantage of that power they are given; they abuse that power usually by taking advantage of the people who work for them. The management of neighborhoods from the neighborhoods would be an ideal; that it is the people in the city council who decide how to live in a neighborhood and manage it.

Borja: We are light-years away from it, but it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist because there are other experiences within the country and in other places where they are at least close to that reality.

What is La Libre's opinion about current cultural and educational policies?

Josue: When we talk about culture and education from the state, on one side, if we talk about culture and we believe what is being taken care of through that culture is mercantilization and the mediation of money through the cultural changes or through all the cultural realities. That is what the state and the capital aspire to, that are ultimately related. This can be seen in the practice of the policies of city councils to encourage a determined culture in determined neighborhoods, and, in that way, able to expel the humble people that have lived in those neighborhoods and they expel to obtain this cultural "magma" in these neighborhoods. They do this by raising the cost of housing and taxes and rent, and this makes the humble people that have lived there all their lives finally have to leave. If we talk about educational policy, for example, we talk about the last organic law that has called for the improvement in the quality of education through the intention of trying to commodify education, that is, to put market criteria in something that should not be governed at all by the market. On the other hand, they are creating aptitude assessments between students when we think they should create assessments based on cooperation. Creating students who prioritize wanting to be entrepreneurs, when what should be generated is cooperation, mutual help, and the intent to construct a better society for everyone, one in which people aren't excluded by how they arrived, or what neighborhood they were born in, or what money their parents had when they were born.

What would be characteristic of the activities organized by La Libre?

Josue: Look, one of the most important things about the activities that we do in La Libre is that they follow basically two criteria that we have for all activities, not just for the ones that we do from the assembly but those that anyone wants to propose. We usually are pretty flexible when it comes to the criteria for the activities we do, but we maintain basically two: the activity will not have a cost — it will be free — and the second is that the activity will not be organized by a political party. We try to keep political parties outside of what La Libre is.

What is a free store?

Borja: Sometimes when you begin to understand, you understand it as a place where you barter, and it's not that. It's not a place where you necessarily have to exchange something for another; instead, it's a space where people that don't need something leave it so that another person who does need it or wants it can take it. It's not just a matter of necessity and survival but also a matter of values, it's a philosophy in the sense that you would rather get clothes that have already been worn rather than contribute to the production of clothing in appalling conditions by people halfway across the world. So, it has much more of a background than just a small place where you can obtain material things. It's not a place where you give something in exchange for something else but instead simply what is called gift economy, giving in exchange for nothing.

What are the advantages of creating a bookstore-social center?

Borja: The mix between bookstore and social center allows people to come to the social center for the activities and pay attention to the material from the activities, and, in the same way, there are people who come to the bookstore who would not come for the activities of the social center. Thanks to the bookstore, they come. So, something is produced that increases the heterogeneity of the people that come to the space. The same thing can happen to other small places like the computer and the free store.

Given the precarious climate and political hostility, could you tell us what keeps alive the engine of the hope of La Libre?

Josue: Seeing the world like it is, with the difficulties we are having and with the climate to move from politics in general, what I think maintains our hope is continuing to do things, which is the very practice of being here, to come and see that the discussions we have serve people in their daily lives. To see that we serve them transformational projects that intend to generate a conflict to make society aware and that we are useful to collectives that fight for the rights of a lot of people or that fight for the defense of the environment, that is deteriorating. Well, everything in conjunction produces feedback and hope and joy and a desire to keep going forward.

Borja: It's like that.

Josue: And one thing that I think is important is that we are in agreement with people that participate in this project. It's that the capitalist system in which we are immersed is a suicidal system that's bringing us directly to the abyss. So, understanding a little bit of this is sometimes easy and sometimes hard and to generate critical thinking towards the system in which we live and be capable to spread out to the most people as possible is the idea that we're going straight towards the abyss and that, in one way or another, give it a whirl, just by contributing to that we're already happy.

Borja: We were pretty clear about accessing this project that you are carrying out because it's very interesting and hopefully will serve other fights or alternatives that are taking place elsewhere can be nourished by others.

What does it mean for La Libre to grow in non-capitalist terms?

Josue: For me, growing would mean that there would be a Libre in every

neighborhood. That in each neighborhood in Santander there is a free space, in the sense not mediated by money, in which there would be the possibility that the people of the neighborhood could meet there to bring their struggles and to defend the neighbor who is about to be thrown out because she can't pay rent or the neighbor whose water is about to be cut because he hasn't been able to pay. The space would serve the kids that don't have a space to meet and share interests like music or just where they can be together and talk. For me, growth would be these types of projects that would multiply in each neighborhood and, in this way, build a better society that we are sorely lacking.

Borja: For me growth also means growing, adapting to the changing reality but not tying ourselves to the logic of the system in which we live which, of course, we are inside of and like in the beginning of this we said, well, we are part of this contradiction. But to always have in mind these limits that bring us such autonomy when carrying out the project.

Las Gildas





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
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Collective's name
Las Gildas

Name of the interviewee
**Silvia Toral, Gema
Martínez, Marta Fontaneda
and Pilar (Pili) Fontaneda**

Interviewer
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Who are you and what is your relationship with Las Gildas?

Silvia: I've been in Las Gildas for 10 years more or less, with maternity leaves and leaves for child care. In Santander it's very difficult to find groups trying to change things that we don't like in society, and Las Gildas was one of the few groups that was doing this. I loved it and they received me with open arms. I'm still here, feeling really content and motivated to work.

Gema: I'm Gema Martínez and the truth is I don't remember how many years I've been in Las Gildas, maybe it's been about 15. Time really flies! Like Silvia I think it's easier now, there's more going on in Las Gildas. I got involved through a friend, and he said, "You're going to fall in love with this group," and that's what happened. I arrived on a Sunday, I feel in love and the following Sunday I came down to work and now 15 years have passed and here I am.

Marta: I'm Marta Fontaneda and I've been here for 20 years. I started at the beginning of their first year because of my close connection to the people that started it; one of them is my sister, and many of her friends and colleagues were also my friends. They needed a hand and I went to help one day and here I am, 20 years later.

Pili: I'm Pili Fontaneda and I've been in Las Gildas since some friends and I started it as young women. Now I'm taking a break from Las Gildas because I needed to do something else, but I feel very happy to be a Gilda, to have been in Las Gildas and to have created it. And I'm not sure why I came today, I think there are other voices that need to be heard now.

In an interview article about you, it says that "Las Gildas was founded by six women with a strong vocation for collaborating and transforming society that came about after their work in other collectives." We're talking about a project that started 20 years ago. Can you tell us who these six women were? Also, where and why did this movement come about in Santander?

Pili: I can tell you that we were women who came from social movements and that for us, the social sphere, the political sphere and getting involved was normal. It was what we'd been doing since we were kids. Some of us were in JOV, the Peace Brigades, Interpueblos, and other solidarity groups, but we were friends and we would get together every week to have dinner in at somebody's house and discuss what we were experiencing in that particular time: the desire to have children or not, the topic of sexuality... things that worried us, and we talked about them. This satisfied us, but we also felt the need and the desire for this to be not only for us, but something we shared with society. This was something that we felt, and

we wanted it to be not only a political/ideological commitment but also something that we could share with others. And then thinking about something you said before about influences, I thought “Are influences important?” And yes, we had points of reference. We met people in Castro who cooked things that they sold and we said, “Why don’t we do something like this in Santander, since we like to cook and drink wine?” It didn’t take a lot of effort; we didn’t copy anything, but we did use many references in creating our thing; it was easy, like things just started rolling. There were seven of us and we opened one Sunday with food that we cooked and sold, and that’s how it started. This was the beginning, and little by little we got going. During the first year there were seven of us and we opened every Sunday and we started to need more help. And at the beginning we didn’t have time to get together and talk about our things and we spent all our time together talking about the Gildas project, and that’s when we thought a lot about how to distinguish the personal from the collective, which led to nice reflections that we shared with people outside the project.

How many people make up the group Las Gildas?

Gema: We are between 12 or 15 on a consistent basis, but what happens is that the number changes because our activities vary and we have a lot of ways to interact with the greater community. For assemblies and internal matters there are between 12 or 15 of us but then when we do activities in the community, we are a larger group because there is a lot of work, so sometimes there are about 20 of us. But as a decision-making group in assemblies now there are 12 to 15 of us.

Pili: I would like to say that over the past 20 years there have been 150 women or more who have participated in Las Gildas.

Silvia: Each of them was active in a certain period. For example, some of them can’t participate in all of the assemblies now, but they are always willing to help and they love to get together with everybody. Some have left and it’s hard to see them again, but there’s a group that’s pretty important.

Gema: And then there are intermittent people, people who have other priorities but then come back again, or people who find another place. But I remember that three years ago we were counting and we ended up saying that there were around 180 women who had been here.

Pili: The issue of maternity has been a factor as well...

Marta: We are at a very specific age and there have been a lot of women dealing with maternity. Some have brought their babies when they are only months old, others need more time. One thing about Las Gildas is that not all of us have the same level of commitment or need, we’re all there and some of us participate in the assembly to make decisions and others are available for whatever needs arise or for specific tasks.

How did the name come about?

Pili: Just like everything started: for fun, for enjoyment, because it was a name of a small appetizer that we served that was called a “Gilda,” for the beauty of the name.

Palmar: “For its poetic sound?”

Pili: Yes, but we weren't thinking of how it was poetic, it was more out of simplicity.

The 15M Movement, for many collectives that were already working in Spain, became a moment of reorganization, reinvention, strengthening. What did this moment mean for Las Gildas?

Gema: Well, I don't believe we've reflected on what the 15M movement meant for the group. I think that we have experienced 15M as individuals and as something to comment about, but in a more informal way. When I read this question last night I thought that it's important to know that 15M is not what began everything but rather it's a product of something that has a lot of foundation behind it. I think that if that movement has affected us in some way it's that finally, more or less during this period, we made decisions to change our structure because we felt that our work can't just be in the contact with projects from afar; there are many things here in our more immediate society, in our city, that affect us and we want to participate in this as well and have a unified voice when we go out in public as a group, as a collective. And without reflecting specifically on what 15M did, I believe that if we look at what has happened to us in the past 4-5 years, I think it's because the 15M movement has touched us in some way. Also, 15M has generated more movements in the city, there are groups that are much more active, others that have appeared and this need we have to get together with others I think is related to how 15M has affected us.

Why don't you open an establishment-bar-restaurant Gildas?

Pili: I think it's because we didn't think that it was going to be something that was so stable, we thought it was going to be a temporary thing, and besides, we never had the goal of being permanent or doing something big, the goal was always to be small. And then, as we started examining what we were doing, we said, "We have to take advantage of what's already there." At the beginning, we were at the Canela Bar, which was the first space that was generously offered to us, but when the Canela ended, we said, "Well there must be others, it's not the end of the world." There's a part that's naïve [ingenuidad] and not focused on permanence, that's like, "We are this and we don't want to be more."

In one interview, they wrote the following: "About a hundred Gildas have contributed to mobilizing resources that helped develop projects in the communities of Chiapas, Argentina, Cuba, Bolivia, Peru, Guatemala, Colombia, India, Palestine, the Sahara or Haiti. They decided to prepare small appetizers and dishes served with vermouth or white wine on Sundays and to send the money taken in to projects of social change that were not receiving other forms of assistance." Can you explain your activities? How do you support yourselves as a community? What's your internal operation like?

Marta: Our activities have changed a lot during the last 3 years. We started by selling our food every Sunday from 1:00 to 4:00PM at the Canela Bar and then the Bolero Bar and that is what we did. We collected money that we would send to small, transformational projects that had a set of criteria that we all established, criteria that, once in a while, we would ignore because that's what criteria are for. And we would send the money that we took in to these projects. Everything we did, we'd share with our customers (where we would send the money, for what projects, etc.). What we tried to do was maintain the projects over time because if you want to transform, it can't be from one day to the next.

Collaboration has to be sustained and consistent. Then we decided to starting organizing a bigger party once a month in a different place each time. And this also changed because now we do this once every trimester because the parties became very big, bigger than we were expecting and it was a lot of work.

Gema: And the fact that we would go to different places, especially during the first year when we were doing this every month, it required an extra effort to have to plan for different infrastructures for each space, different needs in each moment, and sometimes it was very stressful. We had the feeling that having to plan for a different place was more important than the group itself because what we really wanted to do was be able to discuss whatever topic we wanted to cover at any given moment and really connect with the people in the places we went to. Even the relationships between us changed; the assemblies stopped providing opportunities for us to talk about, "What do you think about what is happening?" and became, "We have to get these tents, we can't go to this place," etc. We were like this for two years and this year we decided that we couldn't sustain ourselves as a group this way because we were getting burnt out and we started to plan these events once every trimester instead because we still like this idea of going to different places.

Marta: Also, we tried to avoid having all the events be in bars. We made an effort, as Pili said, to go to places where we could share with other organizations, open up public spaces with other collectives and give them visibility because we realized that a lot of people come to Las Gildas because it's a friendly space where people feel comfortable. So, opening this space to other collectives also opens up our minds by getting to know them and establishing networks.

Pili: I want to explain something regarding what we do in Las Gildas. I would say that Las Gildas has an interior component and an exterior component. Silvia said that now with the "tea and coffee" space, this interior part is more clear, but I think it's always been there. On one hand, there's what we do out in the community, for example in bars, but we've always had the goal of being aware, for our part, of what is going on in our society. There are times when we've been exhausted and we haven't had time, but we've always wanted to do this. The sum of a group of individuals is what we bring to the community. Some of us might be interested in environmentalism, in maternity, in solidarity...but this is what starts simmering, like the food that we sell, these reflections begin to simmer, little by little, sometimes we don't know how, while we're out having dinner, camping, holding assemblies...this interior work, I believe, is what makes Las Gildas unique, it's what makes Las Gildas stay together. And maybe the most important ingredient, besides the desire, is the optimism and the confidence in human beings, that we all feel that we're necessary, and in the end what we each contribute makes up a stew. The stew isn't made by one or two, we all contribute. This internal-external aspect is what makes Las Gildas unique; the visible part is this and the other part that's less visible but you still see it, is what gets people hooked because we individually don't go any further than the group does. I can think I want whole grain bread at the parties, but if the group doesn't agree, it's fine, there will be white bread until the group sees the need to change and if they don't, it's okay too. It's a silly example but it shows that the group as a whole has to agree with our direction. If the group doesn't go together, nothing happens; transformation doesn't occur until the group moves forward as a whole.

Silvia: That's right. For example, this year after a couple years of a lot of work, we were in the assembly and we were saying that we weren't taking care of

ourselves. There was that feeling. It's important to share all these lived experiences together, and we have to stop and think about what we all want, and when we reflect on this together, we need to decide what we all want and then do it. It was a very nice assembly because you could see how it affected us, not only as individuals but as a group, as a collective, as what we are. It's what Pili said, maybe we don't serve whole grain bread but it will be fine, and when the group wants to, we'll do it. So it's a matter of taking care of ourselves and moving together toward a common idea, because we're all different, and although it's true that we have very similar ideas, we are very different people. It's also important for us to feel valued; for me, she (indicating Pili, Marta, Gema) is very important, so is she, all of them are important and we form part of this together.

What are your criteria for selecting other projects to work with?

Gema: I think we're fairly faithful to our criteria, although occasionally we can ignore them. It's true that all the projects we support are outside of Spain, mainly because we understand that here, even if things are bad, there are ways to get assistance from NGOs or institutions. But we're in contact with places that, due to their size or location, or because they are in opposition with the institutions that to some degree could provide them with assistance or because perhaps they're in the Guatemalan jungle, it's difficult for an NGO to document and justify all their expenses, so they're projects that are in other countries, but small projects, community projects, ones involving community development, without support. They are projects that have very little international coverage so we almost always find out about them thanks to people who have been there, who know them or know of them and tell us their story. Eventually we realized that, as the years passed, that having this contact with people close to us who knew who we are helped a lot. If somebody came to us it was because they already knew where we were and we realized that it was an important criterion to know who we found out about a project through. It's not a definitive criterion to decide whether or not to support it, but we realized that it carried some weight and occasionally we've collaborated on projects that did need urgent help; I'm referring to some that were in India or in Argentina with El Corralito ("the little corral"), a school cafeteria, for example, which offers more of an external aid-based support, or one of those that we've been maintaining for a long time and that doesn't meet all the criteria, is in Haiti. What always comes up, when each year we look at what we've achieved or the support that we can give, with this project in Haiti we always wonder if we should continue to support it or not, but the thought we always have is, "Can they do anything beyond trying to survive?" and at the moment we continue with our support there, but those would be the general criteria.

How would you differentiate your activity from other charity aid groups that, consciously or unconsciously, reproduce colonial capitalistic power hierarchies?

Marta: Everything is decided by them, the groups we support. We don't go around as if we were the good, "enlightened" Europeans who know and tell them what they need. It's their project and it will always be theirs. The community has to be involved and the only thing we do is provide money and here, in Spain, we share with others the knowledge about what is happening there so that the groups we support know that we're aware of their existence, but we don't intervene. So what we look for are small projects based on people's needs, and unfortunately, money is necessary for them.

Pili: I would add that we like that they have the intent to transform their community

and for this it's necessary to raise awareness and create individual and collective educational opportunities. It shouldn't be about just meeting the need of receiving food, which is basic, but in addition they should be reflecting on why they lack food, what are the causes and consequences, what role do they have and what role do other factors have. And we like when they consider those things, those are signs that we need, that give us more of a guarantee that there's the possibility for more ample social transformation, because without the process of becoming aware, it's more difficult; we think it's impossible and that we're just providing temporary relief. We don't question who does it, nor is it something we can do, but we feel better when this occurs because it gives us more faith. We depend on faith, the idea that it's possible is what keeps us going and in order for this to be possible, it's necessary to raise awareness, reflect and act.

How do you make people aware of the conditions facing the groups you work with?

Gema: For many years that is something we tried to do at the parties we organized, and we persisted for years and years and we looked for many different ways: we designed signs, the tablecloths we used for a period of time were an exposition of each one of our projects...but the tool we've been using lately is what we call "Tea and Coffee Meetings," which are like workshops where we don't prepare food, just tea, coffee and cake, and they've worked well. We invite people and there are meetings to learn about the projects that we're collaborating with, and it's something that works very well because people can put a face to these projects and locate them on a map, which connects them to the drinks and appetizers that they have every Sunday at our fundraisers and they experience it another way. These meetings also help us in what we were saying before about how the movement has challenged us, the social revolution a few years ago, it has challenged us as a collective with questions about where to situate ourselves in the face of urbanism, development, feminism...all these things that are going on socially so we don't only look for these spaces for internal reflection, but we also want to take full advantage of them. We look for people that have jobs in these specific areas, or sometimes by showing a movie or a short film or by organizing small round tables based on a specific topic, then we can generate a debate. This also inspires us, and it started about three years ago and is proving to be very enriching.

I see that you've organized gathering of various types to call attention to an array of social problems (forced migration, sustainability, precariousness, invisible problems in our society, etc.). Would you say that Las Gildas carries out, in one way or another, an informal educational function? If so, in what way, and if not, why not?

Pili: I don't know if I see it quite like you say. I believe that everybody does what they have to do. We're a civil society and as such it's clear that we humans are in a constant state of transformation and education. We educate one another and that's good. But I don't think we do it better than universities or than anybody else. I don't feel comfortable competing with other people's jobs; in the space that others create, they have to do it. Many people study at the university and that's good. Although it has to be improved and transformed, like everything, I'm not going to fight with it. I think that at this point in my life, there isn't much that I'm going to fight about. I haven't felt comfortable feeling that we're taking on its role. Universities are carrying out their role and they will have to continue evolving, just like society has to evolve, because we can be critical with ourselves as a society but it's not our role right now. I like what Las Gildas does, I like what society does but I don't think we're better than anybody else.

Gema: Still, it's difficult for us to put ourselves in this role of educators. From the outside, you can see us in this role when we talk about our activities because what we really feel is that we respond to questions like, "Hey, what is going on here?" "What's happening to the coastal area of our city?" "Did this happen and how does it affect us as a group? I'm not sure." "Let's move this. Let's circulate it and get in touch with the neighbors around here to see what they think." "Let's read this." "Let's organize a workshop, a tea and coffee gathering to have tea and biscuits while we listen to this and that and see what is going on in our city." What's more, it helps us as a group to have a clear position and say, "Well, we understand this specific idea, but we can extrapolate this to what's going on in Alicante," for example. Or with gentrification, we laughed a lot about the project title *Gentrification is Not a Woman's Name* ("Gentrificación no es un nombre de señora"); the first time we brought up gentrification in assembly was when we started to read a lot from that. I think that it's difficult for us to see ourselves as educators, even though many of us are teachers and professors. It's hard for us to see ourselves like this because I think that what we always do is respond to our own needs, even before we had the Tea and Coffee Meetings. Every time that I talk about Las Gildas or every time I have to talk about my personal life, I always say that Las Gildas for me is a school because I never stop listening and learning. I really liked what Marta said about having a space where you feel comfortable enough to ask questions without feeling judged. You can ask questions and between all of us we respond, and if we don't know how to answer, we go search for a way.

Why did you choose the legal status of an "Association"?

Marta: For legal reasons, because the Bolero Bar asked us to do it, because for a long time, we were working "a-legally" (not "illegally") so we did it to cover the bar. And we have a president, treasurer and I don't know what else because legally there has to be formalized position. It's a pyramid but we function horizontally. So legally we are an association, also because we need permits to close streets and things like that. What formula did we choose? The one that was the simplest and that covered the people we collaborate with, and we added some bylaws that we took from another association.

Considering the fact that your group is a heterogeneous mix of people, how do you make decisions?

Marta: Horizontally. We don't vote, which surprises people a lot. It's what Pili said before: "if the group doesn't agree, we don't move forward." You yield to something, you don't yield to something, you recognize it, you think some more... we're slow because our idiosyncratic nature is like this.

Silvia: And then we see, for example, if you notice that the group is really convinced about a specific topic or decision, even if you don't agree, you trust your group and therefore you let yourself be convinced. You often say, "I can't see how this will work," but you trust the people you're with so you go for it. It's the way to be as horizontal as possible, it's about trust.

¹ This resource for understanding the issue can be freely downloaded at <http://www.lefthandrotation.com/gentrificacion/>

Have you had any problems with the assemblyist model?

Marta: We were friends who were getting together, and of course, there were more and more people over time...

Pili: I know that there was a crisis... of being so slow; I believe that this sometimes makes people uneasy, not everything is perfect. Since we are a very diverse group there are those of us who like to talk a lot, without being rushed, and there have been people who've said, "Hey, nobody can tolerate this, let's talk about this and that, which is more practical, and we have to make decisions and go faster." So it depended on who was present, we would go more toward one tendency than the other, and then there were non-assembly decisions because we would get together to talk. Eventually we started creating more structure. There have been years when we've had a team coordinator because getting together was a big problem, but there hasn't been a premeditated internal structure, it's as if everything has taken a life of its own, always based on the needs of the things as they appeared.

Gema: I believe our structure -- call it "assembly" -- when we sit down together, is getting better and adapting and I think it's due to the care between all of us. Of course there have been situations in which some people haven't felt able to participate because it was difficult for them or because, in a particular moment, they have ideas but they don't know how to express them clearly and they don't find the right time to intervene. So part of what makes the group unique is being aware of this and saying, "Well, maybe it would be worth talking about this while we get together for a glass of wine in a few days." I came, like the majority of us, from being in groups and doing things collectively by voting and it was so easy to say, "Seven said yes and four, no, so the 'yes' vote wins." For us, if seven people say yes and four say no, it's a clear "no." It means that the group is not at its strongest at this moment unless we continue working on this, reflecting on it and discussing and eventually you start to see it differently. I think that if anything makes us unique it is the consideration we have for those who are present. I don't know if this is a pure assembly or a hybrid or I don't know...

During these times where there is a general lack of trust, thinking about your experience, how would you say you weave a web of trust?

Pili: Perhaps it's the most basic thing. I believe that it's a matter of trusting life, I would say. To be anywhere, you have to have trust. We can all think differently about many things but one thing that unites us is that we are people who trust. Trust can be woven by creating spaces for respect, for respecting one another, for making each other feel safe in the sense that what I contribute is valuable and what you contribute has as much value as what somebody else contributes. This can be felt and transmitted. Then it's true that, during this moment in society, trust is being questioned and it's very difficult, we don't always have it. I'm saying this and there are times when I lose it, but we are aware of the fact that the key to losing fear lies in trusting ourselves, the person next to us and other people. And maybe you don't agree with the others at all, but never for this reason do we de-legitimize their motives for being where they are. I think that this is one of the characteristics of Las Gildas, also when we are coordinating with others and mobilizing. We might be guilty of even understanding others too much, because we know that others have their reason for being where they are.

We've talked about Las Gildas, but...are there any "Gildos"?

Silvia: Yes, I like this question. It's very important. Who wants to explain? Maybe Marta...

Marta: Yes, los "gildos" are guys. They work with us, I mean they don't form part of the decision-making group or of the day-by-day operations. They are men close to us, some are partners of Gildas, others are friends who help us at certain times.

Gema: It's a group that surfaced because at one time it was decided that the Sunday closest to March 8th, Las Gildas don't put on their apron that day. So, "Los Gildos" take over on this Sunday out in public; they're our partners, brothers, friends and they're a group that perhaps isn't as structured, but they're there as a group whenever they are needed. They have other ways of organizing and getting together. Their work out in the public was that Sunday, but then at all the big events that we organize they're there lending a hand and supporting us. For example, something that I liked from the beginning when I arrived here is that I was surprised to find that in a group consisting solely of women, suddenly I felt comfortable. In my life, I'd almost always felt more comfortable among groups with more guys for many reasons involving prejudices and experiences that I've had to deconstruct. Suddenly I felt comfortable in a group made up only of women. I learned a lot, I recognized myself in many things, and I really liked being among a group of women and always listening. But we're here because there's somebody on the other side who's supporting us because there's the shared task of raising children, cooking, and I can be in the assembly until 10:00 at night because there's somebody else at home. Perhaps they aren't Gildos by being there on Sunday but for me there was a male presence that made me understand that I could have the privilege of being in a non-mixed group (of women), but this other part was acknowledged and this for me was also a very important learning experience.

Pili: The relationship hasn't always been very fluid and comfortable with los Gildos. Sometimes the dance has been out of step, but we keep dancing.

Marta: Sometimes they feel ordered around by us, and they are, and sometimes they rebel and we don't accept it.

Gema: I think that many times, the majority of those that are in the Gildos group see it more like a playful experience, like, "This Sunday it's our turn...okay, what do we have to do?" And for them there's not much thought that goes into it while for us, before arriving that Sunday we've been through a long process of deliberating the details. And sometimes that makes the communication difficult. It seems like we aren't organized, but we are, and we do have goals and a way of working and the majority of them see it as an experience of one, two or three days a year when they come to lend us a hand.

Why not be a mixed group?

Pili: Because it started like this.

Marta: And at one point we considered it. There was one moment when we asked "Should we open it up?"

Pili: But it's not like guys have approached us...

Gema: Yes, yes a few have. And I remember assemblies where I

brought it up, but isn't not something that the group supports.

Silvia: Personally, since I've been part of mixed groups, I think I like Las Gildas like we are now and I also like other associations and I was happy, but there are ways of managing things...I don't know, for example, the idea of voting or not voting. I discussed it at home and my partner said we need to vote because this way it's faster to get to what we want to achieve and I said no because we have to talk and talk, and I think that there are things in the family that would break the dynamics of the Gildas.

Gema: I think so, but I believe there are men who would be happy to not vote and I know them. I think it has to do more with having a space of absolute trust. I believe it has to do with that. Hopefully the moment will arrive when we are really prepared to work in mixed groups at all levels and that equality is something that we are all ready for. However, right now, having a non-mixed space gives you freedom, it allows you to not be judged and to have some things that are beneficial in the process. It's like a small bubble. Our daily life is mixed, constantly, and so I say that for me, I arrived at something that I had a hard time understanding at first, and I now know what to call it: it's "sisterhood." When I started I wasn't familiar with this idea, nor did I know what it was, and now for me it's a space of freedom, a specific freedom. I think it has to do with that or the experience of raising children in meetings where there are children...because at that moment that's how it is, you don't have to give too many explanations about why you brought your son or daughter, that's not even necessary. Or for example, if I'm feeling lazy because of my period, I don't know, there are things that because the group isn't mixed there is an immediate complicity of not having to explain things, and it's a benefit.

Marta: It doesn't mean that it is a permanent decision. In ten years, people who are members then will make their own decision. At the moment we don't want to.

What would be the hard rules for las Gildas?

Pili: That nobody decides for you. That the Gildas who are present at a given moment in time are the ones who decide. If in a few years, since memberships changes, if the Gildas then decide something else, well that's the way it will be and it will be perfect. The hard rule perhaps is that nobody else decides what we are or are not.

How is the leadership structured in this group?

Gema: There were working groups, about 40 people were distributed across four working groups...

Marta: ...and there was a coordinating group with one, two or three people from each working group that got together and made the most practical decisions, not the most important. And then there was the assembly which was the deciding body. You or your group would suggest ideas and they would be discussed...

Gema: ...the coordinating team allowed this in two directions; the coordinating team could get the big picture about what to do, what direction to go and this was passed on to the groups. Within the groups, ideas were discussed and mulled over among the eight people and their conclusions went back to the coordinating team or to the assembly. Or the other way around, if from one of the working groups a need arose or something that wasn't working came up, it would be passed on by the

representative to the coordinating team and this finally would go to the assembly. This was the way things worked before. Now since it's a smaller group, almost everything is taken to the assembly and what we distribute are individual tasks. But there is somebody in charge of publicizing events or keeping up on this task or redacting I don't know what or putting announcements on Facebook; for example, when it comes to creating new content, whoever has more experience because of a background in design and has ideas makes the signs, so we do distribute tasks -- or whoever is better when it comes to cooking. I'm a really bad cook; in fact I don't really like to cook. Everyone assumes that if you're in Las Gildas and if you've been a member for more than 15 years, you must be a great cook, and it's not the case with me. But there are people who are wonderful chefs and I've learned a lot, but my task might be slicing tomatoes, peeling potatoes, cooking chicken and that's it. There are other people who give it the final touch. So yes, there's a distribution of tasks.

The following has been written about you: “This support of other communities has gone hand in hand with a dense network woven locally, as they look for social and neighborhood alternatives that have been discussed in their sessions, parties, meetings” etc. How does one weave a network or make a communicating vessel in a place like Santander?

Marta: In the end, this is a small city and everybody knows each other. We approached Quima (<https://centroquima.es>) which is an association, a cultural center more or less, but not part of City Hall. They've been a collective for 30 years. They are mainly women but it's open to men and self-managed and it's primarily cultural.

Pili: They're from that social fabric that came out of the eighties, 40 years ago, when there wasn't anything. The neighborhoods were not even paved. They're people from the working class that lived in the outskirts. We came from there, from those neighborhoods, and we knew of them, we knew that that's somewhere people start to become aware of social issues, but very simply, not from a politicized perspective but from the street. So we knew that this existed and the Gildas were coming more from an urban approach, intellectual, cultural, musical and such, but we knew there was another reality and that living in the neighborhood means being involved in matters like neighborhood parties, like if there are lights or if the women sew or paint. We were interested in making this other, simple thing that existed more visible.

Marta: So we asked for their space, they gladly gave it to us and our clients saw this and the women, I say women because they make up 90%, became aware of another reality out there.

Gema: When I started with the Gildas I didn't know Quima. For me, for example, it was a matter of discovering a group of women from a neighborhood, not exactly in the periphery, but it's not a central neighborhood or a really small one, who decided to learn and teach from one another, to do macramé, and how that has had a transforming effect in the community. Perhaps it doesn't have a clear structure but it does have a transforming effect and for me, to get to know this reality is like seeing that small things can generate a network and a collective that's been around for thirty years. And surely behind the macramé, the painting and the radio, there's something that has to be recognized and that is very powerful, because there they are.

Pili: Then they held gatherings with other neighborhoods.

Marta: Yes, with the group from Prado San Roque, they wanted to tear down their houses, the City Hall claimed ownership of their property to make a freeway that apparently wasn't really needed and, well, we wanted to support them and make it visible. The idea is to form a network so that they feel supported and so the rest of the city becomes aware that the City Hall decides one day that your house is theirs and here...

Gema: Right, it's as if we realized that these realities regarding how the city is developing, how cities are built here and how the use of public space is decided or how it is decided that they suddenly own the green space that belongs to all of us...so, these things that are affecting society in recent years, in a more visible way, has challenged us. And we realized that we could use the capacity to call people together, the capacity that we developed over time for leisure, transformational or solidary purposes, among others; to use this power to call people to say, "Well, if instead of bringing that stuff here, we could be the ones to go to Cueto or Quima and we can take our people there and they can get to know this reality." This is a part of our mission, to give visibility. So, they give us their space, we get to know them, we understand the problem or the project better, what they are doing, and we can provide the audience that to some extent we already have.

Pili: In a certain way it's as if we were sisters, you know? And then we have the capacity to bring a lot of people in, but it's not too much. We have this ability because we join with others. The Gildas can bring a lot of people because of this. Whenever we do something big, when we go about it alone, we don't bring in so many people. But I don't want to take credit away from the Gildas.

Gema: People also come over the years, it's like an accumulation.

Pili: Right but if we get together with Quima, their followers join ours and it's always like this. It's always the combination. And then, the next time we organize an event somewhere else, people from Quima come along as well.

Does the concept of "resistance" resonate with you in any way?

Pili: I don't identify much with it, actually. I feel more "constructionist" than someone who resists. I see myself more as somebody who is constructing. . . It's a conceptual matter. If we talk about it, surely I would agree, but the word "resistance" doesn't resonate with me too much. They are personal matters. For resistance, I have to be angry, and construction makes me feel -- sometimes I'm angry, but building something makes me more likely to see things positively, and resisting makes me more likely to see things negatively, and it makes me act less; it always makes me act more when my analysis of a situation strengthens me.

Silvia: I totally agree with you. I like to create, participate, join those who aren't angry...

Pili: Personally I identify more with that...

Silvia: It's like movement. When you're in motion, you create, you form.

Gema: But I do believe that it is a matter of how we identify the concept. Years ago, I don't remember how long, our sign for inaugurating the season was "Another Year of Resistance," and the image included was of a plant breaking through the

pavement. I do see myself in this resistance, of course I see myself in this resistance. Resisting as a way of building, a way of making sure the plant comes up. I see myself in this form of resistance because I understand this view of resistance as “come what may,” but I also believe that these ways of looking for your space, where to position yourself, where to get involved, are a form of resistance. And perhaps it also has to do with a learning experience for me in the Gildas, the fact that resisting is not a matter of shielding yourself but rather of another way of being. And if I don't fit in here now, maybe I have to go somewhere else or wait a little or speak with five more people because when we're a group of six, well, maybe we'll fit in.

Silvia: It's similar to the topic we're dealing with now, that's worrying us this year. There is an Event Law that prohibited us from doing things in a certain way, so for example, how do we carry out resistance? I remember there was a Tea and Coffee Gathering and there were various opinions. Everybody wanted to resist but not everybody agreed how. For example, there was Paco who said we should do it without asking for permission and if we ended up getting fined, we would pay for it between all of us. And then there was José Antonio who said we should look for a way to get around it... Of course, it's about how you perceive resistance. We want the same thing, but there are many ways of doing it.

We've talked about the importance of respect, care, mutual representation. What are your references, your “backbone,” the thing that inspires you, elements that have allowed you to build and grow?

Gema: Something we've talked for a long time, and that I learned a lot about and keep thinking about is the concept of solidarity. This led us to many reflections and to something that perhaps the veteran members aren't aware of but I got it through them, I'm familiar with the indigenous movement through them. It was my first contact with other ways of being in the world, and they came from phrases and readings that I've found, and years later I said, “But this is what I learned from Pili back in the day.” This is what inspires me: the idea of building from the place of respect, the concept of “good living.” I believe that this is where it's at, what happens is that we haven't rationalized the references very much but this is the line of thinking that inspires me.

Pili: It's true, maybe we haven't thought about them too much. For me it's similar to community. All community processes that might involve indigenous communities, politics, grassroots groups, everything that smells like community I think has helped shape us.

Would you say that the Gildas is a political project, and if so, what type of politics are we talking about?

Pili: I don't have any doubts about it being political.

Marta: I think everything is political. The fear that people express when they say “I don't like politics, that doesn't involve me”, for me this is a mistake. Everything is political. Everything affects us and is a political project. We have an unwritten ideology but it's clearly in our actions.

Gema: And what line of politics could it be? Well, I don't know. Finding affinity with the idea of environmentalism, respect for our environment, the idea of feminism. I also think that it's something that has been building in the group over time.

Pili: Would it be outdated to say that we have another option regarding class? An option that means working toward a society in which nobody is left out. I believe that we've made our position clear, ever since the first moment of forming the Gildas, that nobody be excluded. It makes me angry that there are people excluded from health coverage, education, employment, housing, love, from being seen. This is certainly a consequence of class, that there are those who aren't seen or that don't have a place in society. So I think that yes, it's clearly ideological.

Silvia: For a long time, we've embodied and fought for the phrase, "A world in which all the worlds have a place."

Gema: And this phrase is really difficult sometimes! Sometimes for me it's really difficult.

Pili: But it's clear that either we all have a place or nobody does.

Gema: Of course, but there are days when it's difficult...

Taking into consideration the climate of political discontent and insecurity that we're living through, what is it that helps keep hope alive in Las Gildas?

Gema: We've talked about it many times, and we used to talk about it before as well. There's a clear individual need that is met in the group. It's as if you find a place in the world where you fit in and then there's a need to be able to make modest changes, as a collective. I believe that it's a response to everything that we said about indifference, disenchantment, cynicism. I think there will never stop being people who feel a restlessness for something, even if they don't know how to define it; a restlessness for something that a 70-year old woman might have, or a 15-year old child. A restlessness that makes you search for where to get involved and I have found my place here and besides it allows me to learn by working in a group. I have learned the importance of working together and now it's hard for me to be cynical because I have the experience of transforming things by working together. So although I like to adopt the role of the cynic, the Gildas isn't the place to do it and I know that it's a pose because I've seen things that have been transformed by the group. I'm certain that it is the most egotistical solitary act that I participate in. I don't know if this helps explain what keeps the group going, the fact that we found our place.

Marta: Small things matter, one has to forget the global level and focus on what is close to you, on yourself, on those who are around you and move forward together. Without forgetting the global level, focus on what you can do the fact that you can always do something.

Gema: I remember when Trump won the elections, we called an emergency session because we needed to talk. I was in shock and I remember that I made the joke about "first it was Mariano Rajoy and now it's Trump. Next will be the Zombie apocalypse." I'm going to continue peeling potatoes. At the moment it is the only thing that I can grab on to. I'm going to continue here, I'm going to peel potatoes and I'm going to do this because I know that this has the ability to transform in some way. So I'm going to continue because suddenly I can't face this new reality.

Silvia: It seems like they teach us that we can't do anything, that everything is already established and when you realize that with your small act you can achieve things and you can transform, this becomes your lifeline and it changes you completely. For

example, in my personal experience, before getting to know the Gildas and collectives, there was always this idea from your grandmother, your grandfather, that we came from a background where nothing can be done and when you realize it and you grow and talk to people, you see that things certainly can be done. We've only been shown a small part of it, and it's not that suddenly you meet the Gildas and you learn it, but rather, that's when you put in into practice. For me this is super important and when it comes to sharing it, it's very important, not because I'm doing it and therefore it's marvelous; no, it's because sharing it is like saying "Get involved, get motivated and experiment!" because in the world today we are surrounded by things that make us feel so insignificant, so passive. But no, we are active, we have to do things and say things because if we don't, we'll get lost. This is the feeling that I have.

Pili: I believe that what they've said is what shapes us. When you already have this valuable experience, nobody can tell you otherwise, you have it so this keeps you hopeful. I might be naïve but I believe it. I work with small children and I always look at the world and human beings in a positive light because I think we're getting better, because when a baby is born, they look for how to feel good; we're always looking for how to be good and find happiness, and I think society is looking for that too, and in that search, sometimes you find discomfort and lacks, but they're transitory stages because the search continues. I don't believe that any woman is special, nor are we, in this search as a society. There is no other option but to change for the better. There can be a Trump or whoever, how can there not be, but we come from the Middle Ages where women were nothing, and today we are here. For me this experience has taught me a lot. Women didn't exist, they were animals. There are still places in the world where this happens, I don't want to say that it doesn't, but the social model is not like this. I can't avoid being an optimist, even though I can see, and this optimism continues to give me hope and makes me believe that it is possible. One day I said to my father, "But my children don't read, Dad!" and he said "Well, it doesn't matter. I didn't know how to read and here I am. My mother couldn't read and we got this far." How can you not feel hopeful with this message? He said, "Have faith, your children will find the way, their way, which won't be our way." and my father is an avid reader and, well, it's true, this helps me continue to have hope.

For the Gildas, what does it mean to grow?

Marta: At the beginning when we went from being a small group to a big one, deciding what we wanted to do was chaotic. Then, after opening the door, what you see is that it's necessary to open doors because what comes in is always good, it enriches, feeds us, adds to the group. It's always positive, until somebody, surely more than one, feels disappointed. It's enriching for those who have been there and for everybody, growing is always good.

Gema: I believe that is mainly because we don't see it from a quantitative dimension. In fact, if we only think of this, there have been years and periods where, from a quantitative perspective, we grew a lot in terms of the group, in our ability to draw people, in the money that we managed to raise, in the projects that we got involved in. But I don't think this is the type of growth that we need and, in fact, when this growth got out of control, as we explained at the beginning, we said, "we need to stop." We set our sights on growing in another way. For me growing is adapting and questioning each step. I think that the Gildas sees growth from this perspective. We can grow a lot, even if we decide not to play any public events, this will allow us to grow for sure.

Sosterra





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
**Asociación de Consumo
Crítico Sosterra**

Name of the interviewees
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Who are you and what is your relationship with Sosterra?

Javi: I'm Javi Vázquez, and I've been in Sosterra since its foundation. And now I'm in the group responsible for placing orders with the supplier's products and all that.

Eva: I'm Eva González. I'm also in the ordering group and I've only been here two months, more or less.

Fernando: I'm Fernando Lovato, and I've also been here since the beginning, and I do whatever is left over.

When, where and why was Sosterra born?

Fernando: When? Well physically, as an association in September 2017, but the idea started from way back. We spent a long time planning the organization before it was started in its current form, probably more than two years.

Eva: It was born here, in Colindres, Cantabria. We are in the eastern part of Cantabria and there wasn't a responsible critical consumer group, so we had to fill that niche in this area.

Javi: Why? Like Fernando said, we have been thinking about agroecology, food sovereignty, and all those issues for a long time. And while talking with producers, some producers outside called us and asked us how they could enter the market more in the area. While talking to them we realized that they needed a demand, more customers to consume their products and they were there, but they were all scattered. So we thought that the best way to help them was to create a physical space where all the potential customers could be gathered. That was our motivation to have a physical space, a place to start working on consumer issues, and this was the first project.

Why this name?

Fernando: It came up spontaneously. The first time we gathered, we invited all our contacts to a meeting, because we wanted to work on this, several ideas came out of that meeting.

Javi: It was clear that we had to have a name. In that meeting some names were brought up and others were eliminated and, Sosterra ended up staying because it was related with sustainability ("sostenibilidad" in Spanish), and with that call of help (SOS) from earth that so needs us and that we've so destroyed. And

it was the most well-liked idea, and the catchiest sounding one. It stayed, and that was it, because what's more, of course, it's our definition.

How many members are in Sosterra?

Fernando: Well, as of right now we haven't gotten to 40. The population of the valley is very geographically dispersed, so this town of Colindres, where we are, is kind of a central node. Colindres is a community that has around 10 thousand people. It has two other important communities nearby, Santoña and Laredo at the delta of the Asón river, and then as you go upriver, there are communities that can have one thousand people, two thousand, five thousand, three thousand. I mean the region is extensive, but it has a low population density. So in all the region we're talking about not more than 30.000 people. So there are people in all the towns.

What type of products do you have in this space?

Eva: Well to start, we have our fresh products, which is what Javier and Fernando were saying from local producers, orchard, etc. But then we have canned products. Also dairy products, eggs, natural cosmetic that we have incorporated recently. Pasta, flour, rice, vegetables. A wide range of products, a little bit of everything. The point is to increase according to the needs. If a product is demanded by different people collectively, well, we find providers for that product.

Are you providers for a school or a social center?

Fernando: It's complicated, legislatively you have to compete to get catering contracts. In fact, as of right now in Cantabria the contracting contest is being held by schools and it's complicated to access there. People around here in Cantabria have the idea that they'd like it. It's what we ask for in schools that we know, but it depends on each school's management team to have a contest with a series of conditions, and ecological sustainability can either be a part of those conditions or not when competitors are being judged. There's a lot of work to do. The counsel says that it's open to these things. We know of a school that has done it for years with the same laws and conditions in another part of Cantabria, but it depends on families that take their kids there to eat asking for that, and management teams being open to incorporating it.

For a lot of the collectives and efforts I've been speaking with, 15M has signified a moment of reorganization, of (re) inventing and strengthening. What has signified this moment for Sosterra?

Javi: Yes, I guess so. I'm not sure, but I believe that 15M affected a lot of people in a sense that gave a bit of hope and it communicated that that anger that you carry inside, maybe there's other people that have it. Maybe it makes more sense to organize even after you thought that all was already lost. In the end, 15M became an explosion of complaints, an explosion of anger strong enough to go out to the streets. Which is more necessary. But then, that right to protest also requires us to think about what to do, and what alternatives to propose, if what we have around us now isn't acceptable. Similar to 15M, there have been other micro, minor revolutions that have focused on that. And Sosterra comes up as one of those alternatives. It comes up to say, "Yes, let's organize ourselves, but for what? And how? And when? And in what form? and where?" To respond to these questions and shift toward action, going beyond 15M. Furthermore, we haven't really asked anyone

how much 15M meant to them. That is to say, in the end, we're individual people who believe in a collective project to better our environment and people's lives.

**This is an “association of critical consumption, a collective space where we can rethink what planet and society we are consuming and what types of social environmental alternatives we are capable of putting in practice to change the devastating capitalist dynamic of nature and humanity.”
What legal structure did you choose for this project and why?**

Fernando: Sometimes we give the matter of legality more importance than it really has, and sometimes the discussion is about what legal form to choose to develop an activity. We believe that what matters is to develop the activity, and later we'll find a legal structure to fit that activity into. We do know about other experiences, and in fact we ourselves have almost been proof, where they choose the legal form first and from there, you're already constrained. The association is the most versatile, the easiest, the most even option, it's very simple and it still includes all the instruments of a private company that we're used to. That is, an association can charge, can hire, can come to an agreement, can sign contracts, but it's horizontal and assemblyist, it has access to its own tools for working group control. Although we had started from the idea of a cooperative, setting up a cooperative is really impossible because the legal reality of a cooperative in Cantabria is absolute insanity. That is, it's organized legally in some offices where they've never created a cooperative in their life. Administratively they give people who've never participated in or created a cooperative in their life the responsibility of giving talks on the subject, and those of us who have created cooperatives know how complicated it is and how difficult the administration makes it. So basically from the start we'd given up on the idea of being a work cooperative, in spite of the fact that the idea of a cooperative is very effective in the area of work. So the most versatile legal form for us at the moment continues to be the association.

How are decisions made in this process?

Javi: The decisions inside Sosterra are always made as horizontally as we can or as we know how, although sometimes we don't know how to do it. I don't think we were ever taught to make decisions in an assemblyist way or to organize a group of people without hierarchies or leadership. So these decisions are made within the day-to-day operations that everyone can participate in, and then we have various commissions, various groups in charge of different tasks. Some are perennial positions and they're always there. Others are created for a specific activity, to organize a party or clean a place, they can be more of a one-off. The groups are totally autonomous, they make their own decisions and carry them out. And when they're bigger decisions, they can bring them to other groups. The group above all the other groups is assembly itself, and we celebrate it three times a year. In the assembly, we reveal our accounts with complete transparency, we account for everything, what needs we've had, all our expenses, all our income. The groups, the committees, discuss their challenges and what they've done and then, collectively, we decide what our objectives for the upcoming trimester will be, and what activities we'll do to complete them. And then we come back from the general things to the specifics and redistribute various tasks every assembly, to every little committee, and they carry them out. We actually have an ordering committee that's supervised by the treasury and accounting team, which is another kind of independent group that supervises things and tells us how the accounts are going. Then there's another group that's in charge of having the company store more or less outlined. There's been one or two committees in

charge of internal communications and knowing every member's perspective and what they're aware of. And another committee for external communications to help us figure out what vision of the association we want to present to the public. Then there are more occasional committees like, for example, preparing a one-year anniversary party. There are people in charge of all these activities, and once the party ends, the committee will disappear. That's more or less how we operate.

Are there people working in a salaried capacity in this process?

Eva: Not at the moment, the idea is that there could be a person hired. But well, they still haven't given us the numbers to hire someone for a partial job, even a starting salary. So all the work being done at Sosterra currently is volunteer. We, the members, are the ones who carry out the various tasks in the time we have available, the commitments we can make, etc. Participation is open to all the members, but at the moment it's all volunteer.

Fernando: In any case, I would emphasize that the project has to generate work. In fact, we think that is essential to generate jobs. The same way a bank, to manage people's money, gives jobs to certain people, that has to be exactly the same, or the project will have failed. This isn't born for our leisure to be implemented in a way that allows us to sleep at nights, from an ethical point of view. Transforming reality has to be remunerated work. Otherwise, we won't have accomplished it and we will have to do it in another way.

What does it mean “work” for Sosterra? What labor philosophy do you want to practice?

Fernando: Surely Javi can say it much better than me, but the concept can't be transferred to the concept of salaried work that we have in capitalist circles that we move in. Here, the way we work has to be different. We will probably have to invent it; Javi is an ideologist in this aspect, and the way we engage with organizations and even the way people are paid, because we use community currency. I'm not sure if we already have an idea about all of this, but this is where we'll have to start exploring.

Javi: First, the concept of work would have to be separated from employment because all of us work inside Sosterra. That is, when it's done through activism, it's going to be work. And that work will always be essential. It would be impossible for there to be one person with contracted employment and income and the rest of the people just ignore it, because Sosterra would lose a large part of its essence. There will come a point, as Fernando said, where we need to hire someone for their contribution, but we need for there to be an economically sustainable alternative for the other participants too; that is to say, we need to generate enough income to provide a decent living for our members. So, there's going to be employment. In that sense, I think that we do have in mind the idea of a cooperative of member-workers, and all of that is easy enough in that everyone agrees and they'll decide on it in the assembly, once the numbers allow it. But in parallel, the work is going to continue, and the people will be able to keep working, participating, and collaborating as much as they can and want to.

From Sosterra, you work in the implementation of a “social economy.” Can you explain this concept (“social economy”) and how is it related to the model of sustainable life that you're exploring?

Javi: For five years, we've also worked in this territory in an exchange network, and, working on the same topics of sustainable life and so on, we believed that the economy was largely responsible for a lot of consequences that we didn't like and saw in our surroundings. Then a group of us gathered and decided to create an exchange network. That is to say, a group of people coordinated in a network to assign values to various goods, services, and knowledges that they had without using the euro to mediate, taking for granted that the euro was basically responsible for all of this. From there, looking at other experiences, always copying, trying to adapt them, improving, modifying, adding, subtracting, creating our own exchange network. An exchange network whose key tool is community currency, that is to say, currency created by the people who shaped it within the economic sovereignty that we wanted, giving it the value that we wanted. In this network, the people offer their goods, their services, and they make relationships and they pay for these goods or services, either 100% in community currency or combined with a euro cost according to the situation. All of this was cultivated, it blossomed, and it grew into a network of up to 140 people in the space where we lived, which is very spread out, very rural and with a low population as far as nuclei of population. And right now, what we've done is incorporate this tool into the various projects that have been born around the exchange network. This has a powerful potential and we see it as such, and it has other difficulties and other challenges that we also internalize. There are people who don't have economic income and they can pay for things directly in community currency, or there are people who sell their services and they don't have anywhere to spend those "robles," which is what we call our currency, and they spend them here. Then at the same time, we're trying to close the circle by looking for providers who accept community currency. We have providers of garden produce and other goods who sell their products to us partly for community currency. In that way, one of the community currency's functions is to fix the wealth in one area. So the circulation of money stays within our region.

What does critical consumerism mean to Sosterra?

Fernando: Good question. Let's see, maybe what best encapsulates the world we live in today is the act of consumption. We can't live without being a consumer; it's at the center of our existence. Expending and consuming is very easy to do. You can take part in the consumption process as young as one year old and as old as 99; you can consume in any way, because there are an infinite number of channels that reach you with the sole objective of selling you something, and your life is sometimes simpler and happier if you do consume, so it's about incorporating a critical lens in this form of life. Consumerism is a form of life, is it one we've chosen? Can we do it in a different way? What does merely living, which is to say consuming, imply for other people who aren't you yourself? Looking farther than your own navel, what happens what happens when you buy a certain product in a certain place? Do you know what happens? Do you know what's behind it? Do you know who produced it? Do you know what channels it went through to get here? Do you know whose hard work is letting you enjoy a sale? Behind all that, independent of the service or product that you buy, if you dedicate a little time to reflection and if you start to discuss this with other people and share your knowledge, maybe you'll have an easier time changing the way you consume than you would if you had to think it all through alone in your house. So, one of Sosterra's goals was the all of the paths to critical consumption that we have all taken in the solitude of our own homes, through our own reflections, can be shared as prototypes for others, like an informational highway. So that we don't have to reproduce that tedious path individually, over a long period of time, through many websites, books, conversations just to finally

reach the same conclusions. All these paths together, surely, will help us make the journey shorter for those who haven't yet dared to start it. We'll be able to teach it in a more efficient way, because it's easier for all of us to do this work together. And among all of us, we'll also learn things from each other, generate those moments of intersection that lead you to areas you hadn't thought of. More or less, that's the goal.

Is Sosterra's paper on "critical consumerism" linked to the idea of "prosumers"?

Fernando: Yes and no. The thing is that not everyone has to do everything. We're clear on the fact that we're consumers who want fresh products from the garden, but we don't have our own terrain, nor do many of us know how to farm, and maybe we don't have the resources to learn, but we do know how to do other things. That is to say, there's no reason for everyone to have to do everything themselves. It's not so much about aiming for autarky but rather working to share and look for connections in a network. There isn't really a separation of jobs in as specific a way as there is in the system, but collaborative work is the base that we can build much more equal relationships around. So, in that sense, yes. But we aren't going to be able to do everything, that is to say, being a consumer capable of producing their own material and fulfilling their own needs is kind of complicated in the twenty first century.

Javi: Especially since Sosterra moves in very small circles. The prosumers model makes more sense when we work together as a larger group, for example as a regional effort. That's where we can truly establish important networks with many people producing goods for the network and many others consuming from that network. We need a strong enough critical mass to really be able to go to each individual person and see what they can contribute to the rest and what they can get from their community in turn, so that these circuits function and flow. This is one of the reasons we put so much emphasis on working in a network and on sharing this collective intelligence with other similar collectives.

Can you explain what sustainability and living a sustainable life mean to Sosterra?

Eva: Of course, when we are talking about sustainability, for example, about environmental products, we mean that said product doesn't contain any insecticides or herbicides. But when we want to go a bit further, sustainability doesn't only mean not using pesticides that are harmful for the environment, but it also means knowing where these products are coming from. If it comes from Brazil is it sustainable? Is it sustainable for us to buy products in the grocery store that come from Brazil, which is thousands of kilometers away? Sustainability is also taking into account the CO2 emissions used in order to transport those products, and in the end that matters too. It's not just about how the products were produced but also where they come from. That's kind of the idea.

Javi: A sustainable life, or even sustainability of life, because in addition to all of the environmental variables there are many having to do with human relations and many of them have to do with relationships of trust. We as consumers try to consider the agriculturists, the farmers, and how their labor is managed. On another level, if we're talking about ethical finances, we have to think, what's behind this? What level of environmental or human exploitation is there? With our consumption, we should be able to sustain lives that are worth living, that are dignified. So, what is sustainability of life? Well, it has to do with that, that generation after generation we're not endangering our fields, our terrain, or our hopes and

dreams. We have to generate better conditions for our children on a global scale.

Do you bring up the concept of “social ecology” when talking about your labor?

Fernando: There's a lot of talk. I don't know if it makes us afraid or if we just reject that much talk, but one of our goals has always been to move forward and take action. There are times where we mask inaction with big powerful words. So, really, are we going to be able to do it? There's a lot of talk. For example, right now it's very 'in' to talk about resilience, but can we really live with a different paradigm than the one that's been implanted in us by capitalism and patriarchy? Are we capable, or not? Have we tried? How far have we gotten? Beyond just the talk and the words that get carried away with the wind, what's our reality? Reality is very different and it's really complicated to bring this talk and these concepts to life, because we and all of our neighbors are all different, and we don't all have the same baggage and we don't all have the same goals, and a sustainable form of relationships isn't that easy. Changing the paradigm means changing the game from start to finish, and it's not always understandable to everyone. They don't understand us or we don't make ourselves understood, or we don't fit in their lives, and that's a kind of important work going beyond all this. And you have to move a lot of ground to get there, you have to talk and eat with a lot of people so that you can start to form these fundamental networks of trust that Javi was talking about to be able to be sure that they hear you, or even to be able to listen to them. Because there are times when people come to this fairly rural environment from afar, people who are used to the urban sphere, who have read a lot of books, and they come and teach us what our futures are. And sometimes, it's not like that. So practice will bring us to theory. In spite of the fact that we do have references, we need to build this further than defining it in a paragraph.

Javi: Eventually I know that we will reach some conclusions about the foundations of social ecology, of the environmental anarchists, if all of that fits within the roads of Sosterra. But we're very clear that we were not born to be some academic's project or theory, but to make this a real practice to see if this all makes sense or not. It's true that in academic debates there are these same ideas or very similar ones, but we can't all agree in theory and move on to practice. We should begin with practice, and then from there extract one theory or another, or not at all.

Thinking of Sosterra's practices, you describe your work on your website as the following: “Constructing responsible and sustainable alternatives, reclaiming our rights, carrying out our obligations, without giving up on a combative consumerism that denounces and transforms the impacts of our way of life in towns and cities.” What rights and obligations are you referring to when you state this?

Javi: Yes, this has to do with critical consumerism. When we talk about the rights and obligations they've taken from us, the ones we need to demand or reform, we mean to say that all people are consumers, and as such, should have the right to know what they are consuming and to choose what they want to consume, and we need to fight for this right. We have the right to decide if our community plants a crop or not, even if we don't consume that crop; to decide if the stockbreeding currently in operation here is the kind we want. These rights have been taken away from us, people in other spheres decide these matters now, and it affects us directly. We have a right to decide if they're going to exploit our land through fracking or whatever it may be. These rights aren't respected, they've been taken away from us and we've given them up as lost. And of course, every right comes with an obligation.

So, it's really important to figure out what commitments we're willing to make in order to, from now on, demand those rights and those obligations. And that's what we were talking about before regarding critical consumerism, that is, we're all consumers and we know that consumption is a tool of capitalism to dominate us, and we should reclaim it for ourselves. Consumption is ours, we decide among ourselves what to consume and at the same time what commitments to make.

Fernando: To add on to that, between this village of Colindres and Laredo is a straight road. It's a road with all the grocery store and food chains that you can imagine. So you have the right to decide what grocery store you want to go in. I have all the right in the world to choose to either go left or go right or three streets down to find the same product and so on, but also in Sosterra we have always known that we don't just want to stick to nutrition. It's not just about eating; we have to consume in all aspects/scopes.

Can you tell us about the relationship Sosterra maintains with the institutions and under what conditions this “relationship” becomes important?

Fernando: We haven't looked into that relationship, but at the core of Sosterra there isn't an expectation of getting institutional support to survive. We have to endure without institutional support. As self-managed organization, we don't aim to be funded by institutional sources, but we are not antagonistic either. I mean, we have always been committed to complying with the law, we don't want our site to be shut down, so we've always followed the rules. We are a consumer association, and it took eight months for us to get accredited by the Administration, even though we had all the necessary paperwork. It's the same with our City Council, we're ready, so when the municipal officers get here (as a matter of fact, they've already been here), we can show them legal documentation to prove that our office complies with the rules, and that what we do is legal. Furthermore, administratively speaking, they just understand a consumer association from a legal point of view, as an association that defends basic consumer rights, for example when a consumer claims an incorrect invoice. They don't understand that we're different. At the beginning we had a lot of problems to get accreditation, because we are a consumer association, but we are not only that, and that's why they were confused when it came to identifying and accrediting us. Which is really not our problem. This being said, if we want to apply for a subsidy or grant for our activities, we have to abide by their rules, and we will decide in assembly if we want to do so or not. And regarding the collaboration with the City Council, we have tried not to offend each other; if they want to collaborate with us, great. For example, in regard to a big party that we're organizing, we'll try to let them know what we're going to do, and if they want to work with us, great, but without jeopardizing our future possibility of receiving funding. In other words, we don't want to develop the kind of relationship with the Administration where, due to money changing hands, we could be influenced when it's time to make decisions. I don't believe that the assembly is ever going to go down that road. I don't want to go ahead of myself, but I don't think it's in our DNA to be financially sustained by the Administration.

Javi: We understand that what is public belongs to all citizens, so it's ours as well, and therefore we don't consider the Administration our enemy. But up until now, we haven't received a single Euro from any Institution, and we're doing all right. We'll see what happens in the future, but I'm sure, anyhow, that we will still be doing okay.

Fernando: Yes, as a matter of fact, we have always been commended by the Administration (and by public Institutions).

They think there should be more associations like ours.

Would you say that Sosterra is in a way an informal educational project?

Javi: Informal education... Let's say that our society needs to participate in serious processes of unlearning, I mean, we are at a point where it's urgent to unlearn, to get rid of all those visions, all those methodologies that, historically, the capitalist system has imposed on us. Only then will we be able to start functioning, to start imagining, to start developing new alternatives. We believe that Sosterra has an important role to play in that process, because we're located in a town where there are no other options and alternatives like ours, and nobody really knows what this association is. People come in and ask who we are, what kind of organization we are, and when we explain who we are to them, we're already participating in informal education. Consequently, it's impossible not to be part of this unlearning process. Maybe we should take on the responsibility of being part of informal education, perhaps we should go to schools, universities, and groups of civic activism to speak about social economy. This goal seems too ambitious for us right now, but we've talked about this possibility frequently, we've noticed the need for it. A house needs a good foundation, and there's no doubt that education is the cornerstone of this project. And, even if we don't want to be, we are part of it.

Fernando: I think that's also going to depend on the number of people that are able to come together because it's demonstrating that in learning about Sosterra, every person who comes through gets new information to add to their academic 'backpack.' So right now we have a group that comes to do street theater to spread Sosterra's ideas and share them with neighbors, because right now we believe that one of the principal problems we have is that this town doesn't know what to make of what we do, and the surrounding population, the people who could walk over here, doesn't even know who we are or what we do or where we are. And spontaneously, some of our members have decided to put together a street theatre performance to communicate this. Well, as long as we're able to come together and generate a critical mass, surely this will keep going.

Javi: One of the greatest treasures we have within the community of Sosterra is precisely what Fernando says, that each person has a huge quantity of knowledge and experiences, and once you trust and value them for who they are, they are capable of doing wonders. The locale itself was made with the work of everyone's hands; there are ideas that wouldn't have occurred to those of us here at the beginning, and suddenly you see that all the people have developed their ideas and transformed them into something infinitely more precious or even more effective, and that's the potential that horizontality gives you, that facilitating easy participation gives you. Therefore, the process of unlearning and from informal education, it's not only something to be directed outward, it ends up also influencing those of us within the association. We are accustomed to hierarchical structures where one commands and the others obey, that's why when you're able to delegate and trust in the people around you, very cool things happen.

What are the challenges of Sosterra?

Fernando: First, just making it here. I don't think we're certain that what we do can be transferred in a simple way to normal people, to our neighbors. It's complicated.

Eva: That might be the most important on the side of the project's survival, which in the end is a project with a lot of hope and a lot of work behind it, but if we want to survive we're going to have to reach those people. Then, from there, projects like a party to make us more known in a festive environment, doing activities so that people come and see it, and making it all more simple, because another part of our work for the spirit of critical consumption is the riddle of how to not just get people to come and see what's going on, but get them to change their routines and their dynamics. Maybe someone goes to the supermarket on Saturdays, they buy the whole week's food, but what we're proposing is different. That is, we're not open, you can't come here on a Saturday. So you have to plan things out more to be a critical consumer. You have to want your entire consumption process to be different, responsible. So you have to make time every week to shop here, and just for that inconvenience, many people don't come here. It's not just getting people to come. It's getting them to come and convincing them that this is better because, in the end, it's better for our home, for the earth we all live in. What future do we want to give our children? How do we want to leave the earth in three generations, with all the problems of drought, climate change, etc? That's really the challenging point for me and from there, I think that for Sosterra, being able to survive means reaching more people and expanding our ranks.

Fernando: And that's tied to the economic sphere, which is to say we need to be able to pay for what we sell our members, we need to maintain the economic cycle and have the place full of products and constantly look for more ideal products, and that requires a cycle based on sales, on consumption. But a logical consumption based on what you need. It's not about a few people consuming a lot, it's about having a lot of people consuming just enough for each of their family units. We have units of just one person and of bigger families, but they only have to consume what they need. And the foundation of this economy is important to be able to generate the necessary jobs for this to work, to make it more logical. Those are important challenges. This has to be sustainable from an economic point of view as well because if not, the project doesn't make sense.

Thinking about the crisis of trust in which we are living as a society and in the necessity of building relations of trust to set up communities that sustain themselves and sustain us and serve as references for others, how does Sosterra knit these bonds of trust?

Fernando: We're working on it, it's not achieved yet, precisely because of what you're saying, relationships aren't easy. Making the effort to put ourselves in the producer's shoes, knowing they have it really hard. All the weight falls on them. When things go badly, they have to invest, they have to work to secure a harvest and this harvest may or may not be what we want to buy. What's more, an ecological producer in this little area we have here has to be a marketer as well as a farmer. That is, they have to dedicate themselves to sales and to production. And furthermore, they have to generate their own channels, because there aren't formulas for how to sell eco-friendly garden produce. There's a market, but it's very minimally structured and lacks any kind of support. So they have it really hard. Their experiences have normally been bad. That is to say, when they've made contact or tried to cooperativize their processes, to collaborate, it's normally ended badly, not because of personal relationships, although that's another aspect, but because in the end the idea hasn't been economically viable, because there's not a real market, because there's not sufficient production throughout the year, because the consumers are very demanding since we come from a system where you have to be an activist to buy a product that's not the one we're

used to buying. You have to do that kind of reflection. So they're burned out and frustrated. Of course, when we come in with this discourse of critical consumerism, they don't believe it. We'd been working with them for a long time before coming up with that idea. In fact, the idea came partly from working with them. And the truth is, I'd say we're still taking the first steps. From our point of view, we have problems because we're living somewhere production is seasonal; you can't grow products in the winter, only in the summer. In the summer a lot of food is produced, in the winter nothing is, so we're just forced to hibernate and stick ourselves in a cave and eat only in the summer. So that also needs to change. But of course, that means changing their form of work, their crops, etc. But to work in this way, you have to guarantee that the demand in the winter will be the same, and will maintain itself as well as the demand in the summer. It's pretty complicated and for us, we're still just starting. And I'd say that we've made it there with some, we've managed to propose things and even plan what we're going to eat in the winter so that they plant it now. We're working on planning and even planting to be able to make preserves so that in the winter we can eat the surplus or the specially planted produce. That is, we're inventing ourselves a different formula than just consuming directly from the garden so that we can all maintain the sustainability of this relationship. We don't fit in quite so well with others' models of production, so for the ones who have worked more on their commercialization, we're not such an attractive option because we don't have sales as guaranteed, because we're just a small group. That's where we need to build the demand. So I think it's almost all pending work to do. We have many ideas.

Javi: Trust, for us, it's not just a key thing, it's everything. That is, when we choose providers, there are three criteria. One is proximity -- we understand that the closer the products are produced, the better. Another is environmental; everything we have is eco-friendly, and we prioritize reusable packaging over non-reusable. And then there's the social; we look for small entities, simple ones, who need us as much as we need them; other horizontal, self-managed initiatives. But over all that, what drives us to reject or accept a provider is trust. We look for initiatives without intermediaries. We need to know who's behind it all, know the stories behind the providers and the products so that they transmit to us the passion, the love that they have for their day to day work, so that we can in turn share this with our members. So, everything is based in trust. When an initiative doesn't offer us that trust, we disregard them immediately. We talk with them and many times, those who are able to, visit. It's all completely sustained through trust. We need to translate it to the people who come to buy things. When we come to buy, they ask us to put down some money and, of course, we're asking a lot already, that's why we have to offer that trust and make people feel that it's **their** market. It's important that people can contribute, that they can say what they like, that they can choose what producers to collaborate with, that economic needs aren't a motive for entering or not. We also need to establish a space here where people feel at ease. We can only work under that trust.

Does Sosterra work in networks with other collectives or social employers? What relation do you have with Ecologistas en Acción or with eco-social employers such as ARGOS?

Javi: Yes, for us working in networks is key. In fact, in our relationships with institutions, we've sometimes been intermediaries between providers. For example, here we offer the services of the La Vorágine bookstore, and we've also helped other institutions who have asked for them to get these services. This kind of adding together our combined forces to multiply our strength and impact -- "adding to multiply" -- has

been a mantra at Sosterra. Being a central node of various alternative initiatives is a kind of capital. Practically every week, we talk with similar initiatives who want to combine forces with us, whether it's to sell their products, or to see where we can collaborate on our common needs to look for a collective way to address them.

Fernando: We're part of Solabria (<http://www.solabria.es/>), which is the cooperative marketing green energy en Cantabria; we're part of La Voragine (<https://lavoragine.net>); we're part of Fiare (<https://www.fiarebancaetica.coop>) as well, this ethical bank project that still doesn't have a headquarters in Cantabria and we're pushing to see if we can get a headquarters in Cantabria.

Javi: We are part of telecommunications ethics.

Fernando: Yes, telecommunications ethics, there's one with headquarters in Catalonia. We are part of Somos Conexión <https://somosconexion.coop/>. We only consume what we pay for, and we have to be a node not just of what works in territories close to us, but initiatives doing different things, too.

Javi: And then there's social inclusion companies, like Brumas (<http://www.brumas.org>), the Cantabrian Association for the Fight against Unemployment, like Dínamo (<http://s46114779.mialojamineto.es/?v=04c19fale772>), a social and laboural inclusion project belonging to the Asociación Ciudadana Cántabra Anti-Sida (Cantabrian Citizen's Anti-AIDS Association, ACCAS in its Spanish initials). Here we have their products and we offer their services and try to support them. For example, if one entity organizes a market, the others go too. Here in Cantabria we do feel that there's a lot to do, and at the same time, that gives us a great opportunity to do things differently, and that's what we're working on within the framework of the social economy.

Fernando: A challenge.

Taking into account the climate of political discontent and insecurity in which we live, can you tell us how you sustain hope as a motivating 'motor' in Sosterra?

Eva: I think it's about talking about utopias, but in the sense of believing that things can be done another way, regardless of what the majority of people are doing or what's happening in the majority of the world. The majority is the majority, but you can start out being a minority and then these projects start to develop and reproduce themselves; we're not the only project that's arisen. I, in fact, I didn't come up with this but it was part of my philosophy, I think it's essential for projects like these to emerge in order to bring together people who maybe wouldn't dare to take the first step, to start something like this. So you stand up, thinking about how you're a part of something beautiful. You find yourself with people who more or less think like you, which is also important because in the end, if you're not surrounded by people suggesting things you agree with, or you're talking about something that seems so vital to you and it's all Greek to the people around you, you lose hope. So that's a motivator. I'd say that it's really motivating to form part of a collective like this.

Fernando: Yes, because giving something a "like" on Facebook isn't enough for some people. Talking heatedly in the bar about the solution of the world's problems isn't enough for some people either. So in spite of the fact that we could go wrong and that we'll probably fail, at least we'll have tried. We've done something. It's about the praxis, and maybe if we're intelligent enough, we'll learn something from it.

What does growth mean for Sosterra?

Javi: To resist. In the end, our side of the fight will always have the most to lose. Therefore, staying alive is growth. Really we've spent eight months like this and it's been a tremendous growth, much more than we'd hoped for. There are moments when the fight is more in the trenches, others when it's been more exposed in close quarters. But just to stay here and keep up hope; to see our community, as Eva was saying; to realize that this feeling of solitude that sometimes invades you is shared, and that the search for your goals is something in common, and to find yourself with people and discover that this is as important for the others as it is for you, and that the movement is growing. It's not so much a question of numbers as, above all, hope and drive. As long as you have that, all of this is maintained and time passes and you see that it's viable and possible and it's not absurd to believe that it's worth trying.

Eva: And I also believe it's a question of conscience. To grow also means growing in conscientiousness. It's not about preaching but rather talking about the things you can do in another way and also being true to your own conscience, which is also very important because depending on how you are, you can't do things as you see others doing them because it doesn't fit with your philosophy. So, saying that things aren't okay is a form of growth, spreading the idea that you can do things another way.

Fernando: We've even grown ourselves, maybe, I don't know.

Colegio Vital Alsar





Constellation
of the Commons

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Collective's name
Colegio Vital Alsar

Name of the interviewees
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Who are you and what's your relationship to this center?

Fernando: I'm Fernando Diego, I'm the principal of the school and I'm the father of a little six year old girl who's starting elementary school. My relationship to the project is that I've been here since the start, creating with other teachers and parents a different space for shared learning.

María: I'm María Ribero, I have a ten year old girl in fifth grade and same as Fernando, I've been with the project since the beginning, creating this beautiful story.

Why is the project named Vital Alsar?

Fernando: The Vital Alsar Center is named after a very well-known navigator from Santander who spent his whole life exploring. His motto is to bring peace wherever you go. He travels by sailboats without motors. He's known for his long trips all over the planet and has been well known here for twenty years. Before, the school used to be named The Racetrack of Bellavista because a century ago there was a racetrack in this part of Santander, in Cueto.

María: In fact, there used to be tracks where this school is, and the races would pass by here.

We are in a public school. At what moment did the idea of this initiative for social transformation through public education come to you?

Fernando: This school was born approximately fifty years ago as a public school for Santander and we've been here for eight years. Initially, we had a process of community reflection, amongst many people that have been looking for a different type of education but still through the public schools. And here we are eight years later...

María: Yes, we've been here eight years developing this project. When we started meeting to rethink public education, we were looking for a school. We were informed that they were thinking of closing this school because it had been losing students throughout the years and they were going to close it and transform it into an educational space for adults. We presented to the administration the possibility that instead of closing the school they could let us carry out a different project, and they said yes.

Fernando: Yes, because in this school the student body was from one neighborhood: a slum environment that was very deprived at a social, economic, and cultural level. The students were children from that area. There was no electricity, no water, no sewer system, and kids turning

fourteen would be dispersed to other schools. We took advantage of the opportunity to create a project of social transformation and committed to what we had been looking for. The school administration publicly announced that they were going to close, and because of this, we talked with them and were able to take over the school. We thought that instead of closing it, we would develop a project and the kids wouldn't have to go to other schools, and it would offer a chance for other families to participate in this different educational space that what we were dreaming about.

For many of the groups I talked to, 15M (the anti-austerity movement in Spain) has meant a moment of reorganization, of reinvention, of strengthening. What has this moment signified for those who are part of this project?

María: Something that made me laugh was a moment when I was teaching normally, to whoever came, and a woman was observing and said to me, "I really like this, but my spouse doesn't want to bring our kid here because it's a school of "podemitas," or members of the Podemos Spanish Political Party. (laughs) It was very funny to me. I would say no...

Fernando: Let's see, we participated in the movement..

María: Many people were in it...

Fernando: But we participated on a certain level. It wasn't a movement that had repercussions for Vital, but we lived this hope for change, to empower us, to say, "Hey, we don't like how we are living, we don't like this society or where it is going. We want a new society; we want a change." And from there, well, it's all connected. There were families from here that formed part of 15M but there wasn't a direct connection with the assemblies that were held here. Yes, there was a connection at a personal and ideological level, and we are still participating. We will continue to look for common elements of change and social transformation from all of it.

How and where was your initiative created?

Fernando: We originated as a movement called "A Volar" (Let's Fly). Before we had the school, we were a collective in which we reflected about education and we had already made three commissions. One was on pedagogical reflection; to create and sustain common principles. The other was on establishing connections with the government and developing connections in the public sphere, and doing it effectively. The last one was on raising awareness regarding how we could help people better understand and create unity among participants. We already had that in our DNA. We believe that the more people there are, the easier it is, at least in terms of the transformative element. We also learned that groups with more than eight people working together are very complicated, because there is too much divergence. We needed someone who would tell us how to work, how to make it effective and how to not have the feeling of spending hours and hours talking. That was what was happening to us, without creating anything, without reaching agreements. It's all about organizing our ideas and reaching something representative that inspires change and better unites us.

How have you managed to organize yourselves both nodally and horizontally in an institutional context?

Fernando: Well, we counted on David Pino, who's now a technician of the Andalusian

government, but at that time he wasn't yet. He participated in social movements helping to create cooperatives throughout the horizontal movements. We got here with some of our own ideas, but they were not functioning at an organizational level. But, we got lucky that one of the fathers, Tito, the president of the AMPA (Association of Mothers and Fathers of Students), had a relationship with David through his work. He brought him on two occasions and he gave us two workshops to help organize ourselves and really get on the same page to create this movement, instead of doing what we had been doing, which was the opposite. That helped us create a reflection process that was "Rethinking is Vital," four years ago. Through this process, we established a community-wide process of project development with objectives for the first and fourth years. From there, they suggested 19 different committees and we organized ourselves based on the topics of those committees through nodes. Also, the Head Council was created. The thing is that we have a way of organizing ourselves into distinct groups of people, whether they be teachers, families, or outside people who want to collaborate on the project. We had goals that would span from one to four years. And here we are. They are more or less being achieved by the people who support them. Not everyone can participate in the same way by coming here or through email because they each have their own situation, and everyone participates from their own space.

María: When we made this reflection process that we call "Rethinking is Vital", we did it mostly because it was our fifth year, and we wanted to stop and see where we were. We wanted to see how all of the people who had joined throughout those five years were doing and if they had the same goals that we had started with or if we had to change our goals. Upon the arrival of David Pino, we realized that we were a project on the defense; we had been fighting each other for five years, but also defending ourselves against the administration that was very hard on us, especially on the teachers. But in the end, if they attack the teachers, they attack all of us. The idea was how to transition from a defensive project to a project of growth, by looking toward the future without fear. This process helped us realize that what was there was already stable, that we were five years in, and we started to demonstrate that it was possible, that it can be done. Right now, I think that objective has been accomplished because we now have a hundred boys and girls; three years ago, that was a goal for the fourth year. In addition, the people who join feel like they belong to an open, stable, and organized project. For us, three years ago the feeling was, "We're going to close any day!"; we were always scared and worried. It was greatly needed, to stop and reflect, and from there is where what Fernando says about our new organization of nodes, committees, and working groups comes into play. With respect to the head council, which is a word we don't like, the original idea of the head council is to have some project protectors (that seems beautiful to me), some people who have clarity about what this is, what they are doing here, both teachers and families. They can count on them outside, to count on the people that join and take care to ensure that they don't get distorted on the day to day. And I like project protectors much more but it was just as poetic for the documents [laughs]

Fernando: A council of protectors [they laugh]

Can you tell us how you (Fernando) came to be the principal of the Center?

Fernando: Well it's very strange that I'm the principal of the Center, because in that process teachers were needed. I was doing my training, I had just gotten a position in a school in Laredo, in a class with two-year-olds. There were very few of us who

had managed to get a position. With the teachers who were previously here, the administration gave them the possibility of continuing here and developing the project so that they didn't have to go to other centers or move to a different place. But they were already close to retirement and preferred to choose something different, so they went to other nearby schools, including public schools, and different teachers asked for positions in this Center. One day, Ramon Ruiz came along, the general director who provided the opportunity to start the Center- you always have to find people that in a certain moment would open the door to a different possibility, and in this case he was the politician who took a chance on Vital. In the first meeting, he told us "everything that you folks have reflected on, the principles that you are looking for, fall within public education." I remember perfectly how he knew our principles and had consulted the laws. And he was saying, "everything fits within public education, and within the current policies," which at that time was the Organic Law of Education (LOE). So that's where a negotiation process started and it ended up providing us with the opportunity to develop the project. In January, we started to talk with them, and in September, we started.

When you talk about the communication exchange that you have had with the Public Administration, what sector do you mean?

Fernando: The Public Administration basically is the Secretary of Education in Spain. Every community is autonomous, each community has its own educational policies, that's what governs education. It's true that the law is a national law, but then each region has its own policies. They implement it in one way or another, always respecting the national laws of the state. It's the Secretary of Education that you always have to address if you want to undertake a project. Especially if it's public, that's essential, because public schools require teachers who are civil servants, because the public requires official teachers. Civil servants must fill the positions, and additionally they can't be temporary; they have to be certified for permanent positions or else the project can't be developed.

You mention teachers who compete in a competitive examination. Can you explain what a competitive examination is?

Fernando: A competitive examination is a public contest in which all the teachers apply and compete to get a job, a position that's for life, and you never lose it. In this case, it's to become a teacher. In my case, it was to become a teacher for children from zero to six years old, although, in our region it's only from two to six. And then there's elementary school, which would be students from six to twelve years old. Everyone who wants to be considered for such a position has to pass the exam. This competitive examination has two phases: one being various exams and then, once you pass them, you add some merits, those being the merits that you can have for studies, research, training, and positions you've held. Everything is taken into account and the ones who end up with the highest scores have a position for life.

Were the teachers who came to this center a part of the group that envisioned the project?

María: Among the people that we had gathered to define what type of education project we wanted to have, within a public school, there were already teachers. There was Fernando, María, but there were more. Some already had their positions, they had passed the exams, so what they did was request a position

here on a temporary basis, except they were able to keep extending it.

Fernando: That's right. A person has their definitive place in a school, so then there were three people who had their place and decided not to continue here. Then we asked who among us wanted to form a part of this project and eight teachers opted for the job position. In the advertisement for the center, the following is written: "We are a public school for continued learning that wants to educate students to become healthy, critical, reflective, and sharing people in this world. In this process, we intend to have the educative community be participants because diversity builds society". That's an unusual description in the context of public schools. What type of school are we?

Maria: We imagined a school where our sons and daughters- I'm going to talk as a family member- could come to a place where they were respected and where they could freely develop. A place where we could use all the things we put into our project. A place to make them critical, reflective, to have the capacity to decide, to rethink what they want to do and to know how to decide to do it. And clearly, under public education, this isn't offered. In public education, at least here, what students have access to is an education that is very traditional, very 19th century. Students sit at their desk and stare at the board, listen to adults who just read from a textbook, and then they go home and do homework and exams. All of this since they were 7 or 8 years old. Where is the space for integral development that is necessary for all humans? Where is the space to analyze what happens in the news, what happens around you, social situations like yours but also those that are different, to look at it from a critical perspective, to act in solidarity, to develop empathy and to learn how to think and to even learn how to learn? Then, when we started to develop those basic pedagogical lines that we'd like here, we all tried to reflect. Some of us got better, some of us still haven't gotten there yet, but since then there's a horizon that we aspire to, and that we're constantly working towards. Year after year, we have been getting better; the first year was chaos, the second more chaos, the third a little less and right now we're almost reaching, I'd say, all of the goals that we gave ourselves.

Fernando: From the start, we wanted the children to be agents of change. And to be an agent of change you can't be the same as everyone else. And to not be the same as everyone else, you have to be yourself. And to be yourself, you have to create the space so that the children can find themselves, and bring out the best of them. This is what we were looking for the whole time, to create this space so that they can be themselves, and from there, change their space. Give them another possibility.

Fernando, can you speak about your experience as an educator in the field of public education? What problems have you found?

Fernando: My experience as an educator has been different in every institution that I've been in. There are some that have given me more, they have given me the space that I needed to create things and therefore I could give others the possibility to create, and there are other institutions that don't leave you as much. Within public education, I've only been at a school in Laredo, another local school, and I was lucky to find a management team that allowed me to create things. I chose to be with little kids. I wanted to be with two-year-olds, because you tend to think that while spending time with little ones, it doesn't matter what they do. That's what I used as a strategy for personal development, because being in a place where you have to do the opposite of what you think is very hard. They gave me the possibility of creating that space and then the Administration gave me the possibility to make it here. Creating what you

believe in is essential. If the management team and the public Administration don't allow you to, developing a project is more complicated. You always have the possibility to create something different and that depends a little bit on yourself, of what you're willing to do and gaining publicity, because in the end it's a matter of exposure. When you take a chance on changing things, you expose yourself, but if you do not want to expose yourself, out of fear and previous experiences, for whatever reason, because everyone has a different reality, and if you have someone unwell, it's not your moment, well, it's more difficult. But if you allow that exposure, anything can happen.

I see in the Center's description that there's a clear commitment for emotional education and for educating in the building of effective relationships. Can you describe what you're referring to with "emotional education?"

Fernando: For us, emotional education is everything. It's not about talking about the emotions you have, it's not talking about what happened today. It's a large part of the lives of these children at the school as well as the adults. It's not just for the kids, because if the adults are good, we have a space for ourselves and it gives us the possibility to be better. Emotional education is in everything. It's true that we have predetermined spaces for collective or personal reflection, spaces where students can go to have a moment to themselves if they need it. We're not all fine every moment of the day. We get angry; there's conflict. We also have policies on what to do if there's a conflict, but this policy and this space are not supposed to be above one another. We value everything about emotional education, absolutely everything. We can't create space for learning if someone isn't ok. If someone is sad or upset with a friend, we see that- it's what the student is feeling and it's not usually permitted in the learning process. This is why we give emotional education so much importance. The main thing is to be as you are, and then we handle the rest.

What kind of traditional education inspires the Center?

Fernando: The traditional education that it draws from is from everything and from nothing. We say that we are continuing to learn. We are open to whatever horizon or whatever pedagogical reflection sparks our attention. It's part of the school, it's been years- its continuous work. But, on the other hand, we're our own selves. The reflection process is collective. First, from the staff, but also from the families, and then in our own way of organizing ourselves,-which is through nodes and committees with their own objectives- we combine everything. The basis is active teaching in which each child and each adult creates their own personal learning process. And from there it all fits. We don't like to categorize ourselves. We aren't Montessori, Reggio Emilia or Amara Berri, which are systems that function very well. But if we implement these systems within what we are, in the end we would be lost and not be able to give every child the best possibilities they could want, because we see that there are kids that require something more systemic or others that need to move around and are chaotic. So, we try to create a place that meets each of these styles and constructs a personal process.

One of the most important pillars of the Center is diversity. Could you explain what the Center intends by diversity?

Fernando: When we talk about diversity, we're basically talking about Lev Vygotsky. We believe that diversity allows enrichment and the creation of much bigger things than otherwise. The more homogeneous the group, the less possibilities there are for learning because in the end, you see less, hear less, and there are less models.

We start by grouping ages; we have three groups for children and two groups for infants. We also believe that there has to be a possibility in which the model allows growth. The model has to be close, as Vygotsky says, because if the model is very spread out, if you put a three year old child with a ten year old, of course he's going to learn different things, but there's going to be such a big jump that many won't be able to understand. Then we have homogenous groups because we believe in models of close but also diverse learning. The more possibilities that a child has to see something different, hear something different, the more it will carry on into their life, and that's going to favor reflection. "Ahh, this one does this with that. Ahh, this one listens to that. Ahh, look how this one dances." For us, observing is learning. When a child stops and looks, they still continue to learn. They teach us that if you don't do you don't learn, when you actually only learn from who you are. The very presence of a child in a space is changing everything. It's allowing others to create something different and to be something different. It's from there that we understand it as an active methodology. It's from there that we create heterogeneous groups in which there are a couple of groups of different ages that allow them to make reflections from which they can also learn. The children that come to this school are from wherever. Yes, it's true that there is an administrative process in which we don't choose the children who get admitted; it's an ordinary process and they enter here like any other school. They apply and it depends on where they live, on rent, if their siblings are in the center, on where their parents work, since they have a series of considerations. That's how we get them. For example, in this final process, a family has come from the Canary Islands and another comes from France. And we have people from the north of Spain, children from Galicia, Asturias, Leon, Bilbao, and Catalunya. It's getting harder and harder to get accepted, it's true, because we are already full to the ceiling. Before, it was easier to get here because we had more open spots and, since there was no competition to enter, anyone who applied, entered. Now, we have 102 spots, and that helps us to take care of the children, to accompany them. We don't want to grow, because of the accompaniment; we want to know every part of the Vital process is for the children, what they do, what they like, what they don't like, know how to address them, know if they require space when they're angry. A school with ten boys, ten girls, it can be done. But with a larger school, it's true that it isn't as easy.

How many full time teachers are there in this Center?

What educational profiles predominate?

Fernando: In this center we have nine teachers; most of the jobs are already covered with definitive personnel and others leave for the competitive exam that happens every year and their positions are covered by interim teachers. In the end, the jobs aren't made definitive until the project is set up and the time is maintained. We don't know what's going to happen with this school. We started with fourteen boys and girls, now we're at 100. Then, over time, those positions will become definitive and will always be covered by a teacher from a certain field and who won't change centers.

María: For schools like ours- I understand that the interchange can be complicated for every school- but when there's a very concrete educative project, developing it while changing teachers every year is very difficult. In fact, the first years, when nobody knew us, it was almost impossible to find harmony among the staff. Now we're quite well known in the region to the people that come here and, in fact, many people are eager to get in, but it has been very hard. Years ago, the staff was divided between people who took a chance on this education and people who didn't. Having a stable staff is a basic thing to develop for an educational project for change.

What type of training does a person have to have in order to be an educator in this center?

Fernando: The teachers that enter our school are required to have participated in the contest, but after that the training is that of any other teacher. But they would have to also have previously known the process of reflection and really be looking for this. Because in the end, this is neither better nor worse than any other educative proposals. It's just another option and we believe that this option has many other opportunities for the families and the teachers. Being able to be inside a project that permits you to come in, to accompany your children, and where everything is transparent isn't something that the whole world understands...nor how we see coexistence and respect. Because you can talk about respect but we can have differences in how far respect should go. There might be a situation- there are many day to day situations, with children- in which we act a certain way, understanding different respective things. For us, it's to permit children, to give them everything they require in that moment, and to not try to lead them to what we think is best for them. That's our point of view, our understanding of it. And because of that, there would be many examples. And then there's also the line between faculty and family and the differences there. We're continuously talking. We spend hours talking and talking, and we respect each teacher. If you go to a classroom here, you're going to see within the project it developed in one way, and in another class, it developed differently. This is also enriching because here there are different children, different teachers, different families, and this diversity also allows a child to learn how to locate or be in a space that functions off of what they need.

Maria: I'd like to add that in respect to the question about the training for the teachers, I think that it comes down to the theoretical training they get from the university that lacks deeper training on how to act. They arrive with no experience with accompanying children, the major part of the job, and unless they had decided to prepare themselves more, their training isn't sufficient. I don't agree with the principals (they laugh) that this is the better option. It's clear that we're developing how we can think the best, but I believe that this is the path that you have to take for education in general. Not every school does one thing. It has to be a reflection at the global level on how we're going to educate the children of the world because it's clear that it's not working. Of course, our opinion is our opinion, but yes, you should start to talk about pedagogy in other aspects of the university, so that when people leave, they will be encouraged to make changes at other schools. Because the truth is that the biggest agents of change are educators. The families are here to support, sustain, and accompany, but most of the change is in the educator's hands. That's where I want there to be an unconventional change.

The Center attracts attention for its defense of a model of evaluation from observation. Could you explain this model?

Fernando: Our model of evaluation is developed on the basis of observation. It's true that we are asked about it a lot, especially when faced with the public service inspection. They're searching for objective proof of how the child is doing. My question is, does doing an exam, on a certain day, really show you what a child does and doesn't know? How much easier is it to know what the child knows or doesn't know by daily observations of what the child does? And it's true that you also have to develop a tool that reflects what the child has acquired. It's not only the product, but how they relate, observing how they solve problems and what tools they use, if they

search for what to do, and all of this is done without judgement. It's about finding out what each child requires to create, to be able to develop their lives, to develop their way of being, and to keep learning. This is our philosophy: observing the children develop what they need. It's also important for us because it allows us to see what we aren't doing. I also see that there are many kids in the classroom, 22 to be exact. Being with 22 kids isn't easy. I know that under the administration, they told you that they're lowering the class sizes, but I'd tell them to look in the classrooms. If you really want quality processes that accompany and are able to support what each child needs, it's difficult to do with a large group. Finally, it's an economic problem, I know, but the Administration should be able to reflect on a process to earn more money. We get pamphlets, letters, videos, and examinations that we don't need and that aren't based in any of our necessities. This money-I'm speaking for us because for other schools it may or may not be valid- serves no purpose for us. So, we should use the money or resources for what they really are for, which is to accompany the children or create a process of reflection for the teachers, wherever it's necessary.

Maria: I'd add that the children don't need to be evaluated for anything. It's a thing that we adults have invented in order to know if a child is a seven or a three, therefore, I would take them out of the educational system until graduation. They and the public center are obligated to comply with the law and the law requires Fernando to monitor in a computer program if my daughter is a seven, or a three, or a nine. What we have done here has made this possible to escape from that. Of course, the children are free from this trial. They never know, unless a family member decides to tell them, what grade they have. I find what the teachers do to be precious work, I hear it and it excites me, it's that they make this observation and they have to put it into a final grade. I have no idea how they do it, it seems impossible to do that, but nothing is delivered to the children. Families are now given a general report by PDF of how children are doing in terms of competence, of how they have acquired skills and that seems to be enough judgement, but within there it's not the worst. Then there's a computer program that in Cantabria is called YEDRA, where you can access and see your child's grade in different subjects. Here, most families have never looked at it. It's our little rebellion, because if we don't believe in it, we're not going to look at it. It's true that when they reach the sixth grade many families decide to see how they're doing, because it has to change and you need to think about how you're going to make that step. But it seems to me that this is something that the system has invented, that the adults are the ones who should be evaluated. Why should a nine or ten year old child be? We're going to evaluate the teacher, to see how they're teaching. It's formatted like this to see why you're slipping through these little cracks and to make things more human.

Fernando: Yes, without a doubt. Putting in the grades is the most difficult process because at the end, you're giving out an opinion, and we want to be a space that's free of judgement to the world. It's like how different one is at sea or with children- you don't feel judged. On the other hand, in a meeting of adults everything is opinions and opinions. We want to be that space in which everyone can grow in the absence of judgement. Ideally, the administration would be able to generate the evaluation processes that we're doing, how we're doing it, how it can improve, what every child requires. Obviously, it's going to allow you to improve, be better, or see what shortcomings there are, to see if a child requires something, and those evaluation spaces allow you to also reflect about each child, including those who don't cause problems, because you aren't with them as much. Beyond that, giving a grade, a report card, well, it's something that, from my point of view, I don't believe in anymore.

I read in the descriptions that ecology is another one of the backbone elements of education at the Center. In what way is it present?

Fernando: Ecology in the Center is part of the day to day life. It's true that we are still distancing ourselves from what we don't want to be. Since the Center is not yet sustainable, we have a lot of waste material, but that's serving us as well so the whole community is conscious about what we do and how much waste material we're generating. We organize ecology around nodes and there's a committee of both adults and children that watch over it. They create posters that explain where to recycle, what to throw out, what to bring to recycling bins. They go throughout the classrooms explaining what it consists of. We have a garden project in which they plant what's in season -although it's true that with global warming it's a mess to know what grows in every moment, but we follow the meteorological tables and we learned through the yearly seasons what to plant and what season is closest. But this also serves the children by knowing what care the earth needs, what you can do and what you can't. It's about being with yourself, being yourself, and being with the environment. We also have a marvelous teacher that develops the content within the field of natural science and we're doing it in a transversal way, we're conscious about what we're doing not only for a moment, but throughout the whole day.

María: I find our garden project to be very interesting. When we first got here, the school was surrounded by asphalt. There was no green anywhere. There were two interesting projects, one for a garden and one for a forest. The forest project has taken 8 years to achieve because the asphalt around the school needed to be removed in order to be able to have a forest. It took us 8 years because economically, the cost was very high, and we presented the idea for many years to different public competitions and we finally found one that said yes. We're going to see if we can get this started this summer because things are going slow. And then the garden; the first year we lifted an area of asphalt to put in green space, but it was constantly destroyed because the Center is the place for street parties in the neighborhood. So, there wasn't a way to get the garden moving forward. For me, I think the idea that Laura, a science teacher, came up with this year is very beautiful. The idea was to talk with one of the neighbors, who lives close to the school and has his own little garden, to see if we could plant our garden there too, and we would take care of it. He said yes, so now the children go to the neighbor's garden to plant and nothing has been destroyed all year because it's on this neighbor's property, so it's closed off. But apart from having a garden that isn't being destroyed, it's also allowing us to open up to the neighborhood, which is one of our ongoing projects. It's hard to not be a family with anyone in the neighborhood. Most of the neighborhood doesn't even know we exist, that we're even here. So, we're going to welcome the ties to the neighborhood that the garden has brought us and also the ties that the forest will bring because we want to open up the neighborhood. This lets us care for the environment at an amplified level because it's not just us, but our whole neighborhood.

La Vorágine





Constellation
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Name of the interviewee
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Who are you and how are you involved with La Vorágine?

Carmen: My name is **Carmen** Alquegui Lanas. We're in La Vorágine in Santander, and my relationship with the project goes back three to four years; I work in this space and I am part of La Vorágine's collective.

Paco: My name is Paco Gómez Nadal; we're in La Vorágine, which is a bookstore association, a framework of many other things, a collective challenge, an impossible desire and many possible things that do happen. I'm one of the people who founded it, I'm a part of the collective, and I help where I can.

Why the name "La Vorágine" (The Whirlpool)?

Paco: La Vorágine was born on April 23, 2013, there was still the undercurrent of 15M, which we had many doubts about, but also a lot of curiosity and excitement, and that seemed like a whirlpool moment. There were three manifestations a day, everyone had mobilized in as stagnant a city as this, and it seemed like a whirlpool moment. But what's more, looking for a name, another person in the collective, Pilar, said, "Well, this is a whirlpool," and it reminded us of a marvelous book called "La Vorágine" by José Eustasio Rivera, which is one of the fundamental books in the Latin American canon. It's practically unknown here, and we love it. It talks about rubber fever, so it seemed like that moment of rubber extractivism, the chaos, the questions around the end of the 19th century was pretty similar to our present moment. Just like that, we named the organization that as a joke, but it endured. It was a wink.

Carmen: And not only is it a name that sticks in your memory, it captures the feeling of what happens all the time here. Because when people come close and see what the movement is, they often say it's true, it's a whirlpool. So the very sense of the space, in spite of the fact that the origin was something that happened far away, the name also responds to what's happening here.

What relationship does 15M have with the birth of La Vorágine?

Paco: Really, almost nothing. That is, La Vorágine has kind of a rare origin. The original La Vorágine was founded by two people (including me), and one who was supporting, who's also in the collective, but we were two people who furthermore were in a relationship, so it could almost seem like a personal project. I came very much burned out by the process of meetings; I profoundly believed in them, but they were exhausting, so we followed this logic: we create the project, we get it started, and from there, we have to weave together a community, and

once there's community, the collective will be born from that community and not the reverse. A collective can't imagine itself a community. And it was like that, in the end members of the collective are people who passed by here and were hooked one way or another, and became part of the collective. So, it didn't come from that moment of 15M. What is true, though, is that when La Vorágine was born, we thought that there was a quantity of politicized people, in a precarious way, because the 15M fundamentally is a massive politicization, by spore, by creation, by contagion, but very precarious, because it's without readings, with very little time to digest the ideas, a lot of excitement, a lot of foam, but some small solid components, right? So we said, well, there's a context, right? There are people for whom a project like this could seed and grow ideas. And that's the relationship. But really, we didn't come from 15M at all. Well, Alvaro, one peer, was more involved in 15M, but not much.

Carmen: And I was involved in Bilbao, but not much either.

Thinking of the legal structure, we're in an "Associative bookstore, a place of discovery and various activities, a collective, a cultural association." What legal structure have you chosen to register this as? What problems have you encountered in your process?

Paco: The thing is, it's mutated.

Carmen: It's changed. I can talk a little about what can be done now, and you can talk about the origin.

Paco: I'll talk about the beginning if you want. The thing is that it wasn't born as an association. We were really hurried to put it together, due to economic issues. That is to say, we'd found a place, now we had to start paying, so we had to open. It was insanity. So, we chose the self-employed form because it was the easiest to open because the permits were really complicated for all of them. For this one, someone simply took on the leadership, and as leader, you got the permits in three minutes. If it's an association, it's at least a month in the procedure of papers, and if it's a cooperative, I couldn't even tell you how long. So we chose the quickest form. And the other thing that we laid out was that we would follow the law only so far as it's just, because if we followed it 100%, we wouldn't open. We also believe that that's a political attitude: yes, we're going to be minimally legal, but you don't have to obsess over these things, and we'll improve ourselves with time. We gambled on the security of the space, having the basic civil responsibility security, but little more. In eight months or so, we converted ourselves into a cultural association, and we'd been a cultural association for four years, right?

Carmen: Yes, four and a half.

Paco: Four and a half. And we could have been a cultural association all our lives, but then we did a reflection within the collective of how we would keep the project authentic, because the project has the intention of being productive and reproductive, that is, that the people linked to it can start to live off of or receive remuneration for their work beyond just political commitment. So now we've converted ourselves into a cooperative.

Carmen: It's kind of the formula that fits us best, the one that's most coherent within the idea of the social economy. The act of shaping ourselves as a cooperative, the power

of members making decisions; it's also a formula that lets people who are members -- allies, as we call them in this space -- have more legalized ways to participate than they did in the association, so that the operation of all ends up being lighter. That is, it's more strict, but certainly lighter, less commitment. So the act of conforming to the structure of a cooperative made a lot of sense from the angle of social economy, and also what Paco said, to have a kind of umbrella over all the processes of production that we're already involved in, and the ones we're dreaming about as well. So, because we had a structure that was more legal, more transparent, stronger, the moment we start thinking as a cooperative, we can give it our all. The branches we're working in right now, the ones where we have the most impact, or where we're putting in the most hard work at the moment, are the bookstore itself, the publishing house, and the Critical Institute of Unlearning ("Instituto Crítico de Desaprendizaje") that's taking its first steps too, and that we're dedicating our body and mind to. Then, a little more in the future, there will be the *Voratum* part, which will be in charge of events, event production, scheduling. It was at the beginning of this year that we started to take these steps to become a cooperative; it's been crazy, it isn't easy. In fact, I don't really know how it works in other places, but in Cantabria, supposedly there are laws for cooperatives, but certainly they only have experience in certain fields, and for all the others, there's complete ignorance; no one can advise you well because they don't know, because they haven't had experience in it, because the law is ambiguous, too. So, it's not that we can give lessons about it now, but we've learned a lot on this journey. In just six months, we've had a ton of issues, generally for the worse, but that we keep overcoming because we certainly believe in this. Well, we keep trusting in the process, we had our pivot point, considering if it was worth it or not, but we felt it was, and what's more, someone had to start with all of this. We're actually a structure called a Cooperative of Social Initiative, which you (to Paco) can explain a little more.

Paco: Yes.

Carmen: But it seemed important to us, because, in fact, people were coming to ask about it.

Paco: We're probably the first or second in Cantabria of this kind of organization.

Carmen: Of course, people are aware that we're a part of these, people come having thought about it for a long time but not having taken the step. So there's a need, an intention to enter in this part of the social economy, and it's clear that this can be an organization structure, but as there aren't precursors or information or anything in Cantabria, there are people who don't take that first step. So, well, if this is a function we're providing too, fantastic.

Paco: We're working together. Right now, everything is experiments, it's trial and error. The association continues to manage projects and certain areas, and the cooperative is in charge of the processes of production. We're kind of separating the productive from the more politically active, although everything is very political.

What's a "Cooperative of social initiative"?

Paco: In cooperatives there's a lot of cheating, because cooperativism has gotten really twisted; so, cooperativism right now, in the Spanish state at least, it's a way of camouflaging small companies and entrepreneurship, that word that I hate. So it's a lethal trap, because it's a way for three individuals who have a company to claim

they have a cooperative and pay less taxes. So, searching in the law, we found the Cooperative of Social Initiative, which means that it's purely not-for-profit, which is to say there can't be any capital returns, you can't even distribute capital interests, and we're foolish enough to have chosen that. As Carmen said, it's been very complicated, really, bureaucratically speaking it's tedious, economically complicated, but well, we've gotten past the hard part, which is to conform to the structure, for it to be legal, for it to function, and so on. And we're going to try. As we generally function through trial and error, if it doesn't work, we'll return to association, or we'll look for another form. There's projects that have spent twenty-something years as an association. There are projects that began as cooperatives. For example, when we were just an association, we were really functioning like a cooperative. We had meetings open to the public, and anyone who wanted to could come; we revealed our annual accounts with every last cent accounted for, we share our plans, our projects, the people can participate. The cooperative form requires you to make your accounts public, but public in a register. We'd already been wanting to function under the logic of the social and cooperative economy, but we hadn't done it officially. What does that let you do? Well, it's not relevant to this moment, because La Voragine has never asked for a loan, and I hope that it doesn't do so for a long time, but for example, it would let us pursue the route of savings societies and the real social economy loans that there are, for example, Coop57. This has allowed other projects to increase their resources or installations by leaps and bounds.

And the problem of those projects is that you can conform to just staying how you are forever, that is, La Voragine could remain for a ton of years without doing anything, or simply stay here, more or less with the mechanisms already under control to survive. But we weren't born to survive, this isn't a business. So we have to have little revolutions, which can be areas of growth or partial suicides, and this forces you to have a legal structure that lets you make these leaps. And then the final factor, which is very important, is that when the projects are as political as these, you have to be very completely legally protected, very careful. Because they can get you for stupid things. You might not have a permit, not have taken such-and-such step, and that's where they'll crush you, so you have to be as careful as possible with that.

How many salaried workers are there?

Carmen: Well, with a worthwhile salary, one. [Everyone laughs.]

Paco: There's usually three people; one is Carmen who has 26 hours of work, and then there's two other people, me and one other guy who have three hours a week. Our hope is to have more. The problem is, I don't know how to say it, but the left has a lot of problems with money, a lot of modesty. It seems like charging for this is inappropriate. And it's not that that sentiment comes from outside, it comes from within as well sometimes. How are you going to charge for this? There's a kind of idea that this has to be a messianic kind of activism where you die of hunger and so on.

Carmen: They've asked me that, too, and I've always said that I work and volunteer in the same area, and it works well for me.

Paco: In fact, Carmen has both salaried time and volunteer time. So, first we've gotten over that horror, which is very good, but we invested a lot of money in programming. Being in the periphery, in the geographical and political periphery of the Spanish state forces you to waste a lot of money on programming. If

you're in Madrid or Barcelona, everyone passes through. Here you have to bring everyone to you, you have to find everyone lodging, you have to feed everyone, so, this space spends a lot in programming and on the publishing house, which is an intense production. There could be more people contracted here, but we've invested, at the moment, in other things. I do believe that we're taking the plunge. When the cooperative was first started, within a year and a half there were three or four people contracted, and I don't think we're going down the wrong path.

What does it mean to work in “La Vorágine”?

Carmen: Well, a lot, to be honest. That is, I'd been working on projects where I was really comfortable, I was good, it was my work environment, but in the other projects I come purposely to work, and this was different, I just walked in and felt like it was a space where I wanted to be and participate in in Santander, because you can see the impact it could have on the city. So getting involved little by little, starting to participate in other ways, taking volunteer shifts, you start getting to know the project little by little. And there's the feeling that the city really needed this, and that if I wanted to stay here, the space would need to be maintained. So when there was the chance to be contracted, for me it was marvelous because I was able to be part of something that I really wanted to sustain itself. The truth is that it's exciting, that's why I'm telling you all this too, because people ask you about your work and I say, I can't just leave my work at work because it's activism as well. This is a space that lets everyone participate and make suggestions and have what we feel needs to be done or talked about in this city become part of programming, and lets us plan for the future as well. It's not just about the management of a bookstore, which is maybe the primary part of my work, but simply feeling that you're part of a much larger process and that you can do things and have an impact in every area that makes this what it is.

Is there any danger of self-exploitation when someone volunteers in an activist capacity while working, or works while serving as a volunteer?

Carmen: Sometimes, certainly; that is, you spend more hours, obviously, than you have for work, and a lot more than what you sometimes want to do as a volunteer, but it's precisely because of how much you want certain things to happen, and the satisfaction of seeing things completed that you've spent a ton of hours on makes me feel that things are coming together. That we're succeeding. So, you can be thinking of how many hours you're putting in when you're putting in those hours, but I feel that the results of that work are serving me, and they're serving this place. Really, I decide how much time I'm working here and how much time I'm supporting the bookstore because I want to, because of that activist volunteering. And what's more, I'm very capable of blocking myself off (from work) on the weekends; that is, I go into town and isolate myself.

Paco: But there's another element. Consider that La Volrágine, when it was an association -- well, the cooperative is also non-profit technically -- we've always said and we'll keep saying that this is an economically non-profit project. Because we'd also like to diseconomize life, so there's emotional profit, political profit, cultural profit, that's also a form of payment. The problem is that we value everything in money, so supposedly we don't pay the people in the space, we don't pay the volunteers, but that's a lie. We don't pay them in money, but we pay them in other ways. I also believe that the whole theme of self-exploitation of volunteer activists is part of the mythology of the left. I think we like to complain but really, it's part of that whole

martyrdom thing. There's something almost Catholic in the left, some fascination with martyrdom. We like martyrs, right? If Ché hadn't died, he wouldn't be so incredibly cool. And if Buenaventura Durruti hadn't fired the shot that he fired, he wouldn't be so mythical, right? I think in reality, no one in the volunteer activist sphere can say they exploited themselves because if they're doing it, it's because they're receiving something in compensation. There are other people whose pay-off is watching football, ours is having a meeting like last meeting, Saturday at 9:00pm, after being tired after organizing the anniversary, and we left content. Was that work? Well no, that was something marvelous, it had its own pay-off. I think we have to break out of that idea that the only kind of pay-off is monetary. And then there's the myth that there are a lot of people who want to do things and there's no room for them, and that's also kind of a lie because when you open the door to volunteers more, we see that there's no such thing as perseverance. That is, they come and participate for a 45 minutes and they're already exhausted or bored, and it's because we're always talking about the sexy part, which is when there's events, and then there's hours and hours of making boxes, putting away books, all of that, and that part is hard, but good.

Carmen: I like the part of receiving the books; the part of returning them, not so much.

Paco: But they send them back a lot... the work behind the scenes is harder, and there's no compensation, right? So there's a lot of dirty work, as we'll call it, that you don't see, and of course, when people approach projects, they like the sexy part, the visible part. How great when there's a performance! But the challenge is keeping it open.

La Vorágine is an (economically) non-profit process. As such, it's impelled by the association La Vorágine Crítica (the critical whirlpool) to look for its collective human and economic sustainability, always with the criteria of independence and autonomy that let us act in liberty and with all the diverse plurality that we're capable of articulating. We're talking about a "collective," a "space or zone of friction and contagion," a "bookstore," and a "process." How do you weave together the internal operation of these three dimensions of action?

Carmen: Well, it's really all part of one unified group. They sound separate, but in fact some things can't function without the others. There's the physical space, where we are and where specialized bookstore is, and this is also where many of the things happen. Other things happen outside, but the majority happen here. So it's all part of the same thing. Everything is integrated. In fact, when something is happening here as part of the programming, they want to go into the bookstore. The space is part of all of that and the inverse is true as well. When we see that a relevant book comes in, or specific issues arise, we organize a lot of activities around them.

How are decisions made in this collective? Is assembly procedure used? If so, how has that experience been?

Paco: We've built it along the way. We never had a concrete structure of decision-making. La Vorágine, to explain the organization to you, has an organizational nucleus made up of six people including me, and we're not just members of the project of the project, but we assume the responsibilities, the disasters, the losses, and everything that happens. Of those six people, there are three who are more in the day-to-day, because of our availability of time, for many reasons, and three who have less time because they have families, because of their jobs, and other things, who contribute what they can when they can. These six people try to meet at least once

a month in our meeting, but in reality, many of the decisions are made throughout the month in little meetings of two, conversations of three people, emails with the group. Everything is very carefully worked out because there's a lot of communication, and because although we're radically different, we get along very well, and we respect each other very much. So, when we have the meeting, a lot of things are already advanced and we make decisions very quickly. How do we incorporate the rest of the people? We do open meetings, less than we would want to because life carries us away, and because also, I'll admit, it's kind of disappointing. That is to say, we do these open meetings, we prepare them, we open them to the public, because we'll talk about everything, internal and external, and there are meetings where twenty people might come, but it ends up being a meeting of five. All that effort of transparency, of sharing, should have a pay-off of participation. But, oh well, we do it anyway. For us, there's a difference between projects and processes. La Vorágine is a process because if it were a project, it would have an end date and an evaluation, and we don't do that. That is, we evaluate everything ourselves, informally. We don't have measurable goals or things like that, because it would be like playing with the tools of the enemy, and we don't feel like putting that pressure on ourselves. For us, projects are just something that someone asks us to be a project, like if we've presented a project in a grant proposal. But everything else is more of a *process*. Also, another thing we've learned in this organizational part is that we're going to make a lot of mistakes along the way, we're going to fail a lot, and there are processes that sustain themselves over time and processes that sink, for various reasons. Because it's not the right moment, because the person involved didn't have the strength and energy, because of whatever. And the other thing that we're starting to learn, which is really hard for me, is that there are processes that we inspire, that we support, that we invest all the time and care in the world in, and they achieve something important, and they start to not be yours anymore. They start to have so much autonomy that it's like when a child leaves home, at first it really hurts when they make their own decisions or things happen and you don't find out until later. It's a kind of learning and really, it's really good that it happens, but it hurts.

Carmen: ... although you still feel like part of its successes.

Paco: Of course, of course, it's wonderful, but it's a lesson. Returning to the theme of the organization, we could never have passed on our organizational structure or workflow to another collective. Someone once said to me, "Don't you have a mission, a vision, and -- I don't know what else --?" And I said, "Over our dead bodies." Our moral, ethical, and political principles don't let us have a mission and a vision. For us, it would be absurd.

In your webpage, you write, "We wanted to challenge hegemonic thought and generalized indifference." What hegemonic thought are you talking about?

Paco: It's thought that's capitalist, patriarchal, extractivist, eurocentric. We define ourselves almost always against these things. We don't want to be patriarchal, we don't want to be capitalists, we don't want to be extractivists -- I'm not only talking about a material sense, you can be extractivist regarding knowledge -- we don't want to be eurocentric, we don't want to be ethnocentric, androcentric, so hegemonic thought is really studied, I think, in our context. And I would say that hegemonic falls short as an adjective because this kind of thought is overwhelming, brutal, asphyxiating, it's painful, it generates pain, and it's what brings on indifference. So it sounds very pretentious to fight against that, but it's our grain of sand; it's trying to cling to

those cracks in the wall, of which there are less and less, that escape hegemonic thought. That's very important because it has an influence from the aspect of space, of friction, down to how we do various things. For example, the whole component of graphic design, of graphic design of the space, uses hegemonic tools to fight against the hegemonic, so our webpage isn't ugly, nor are our publications poorly photo-copied. We try to make everything as beautiful as possible because we're reclaiming beauty for ourselves. Why should beauty belong to hegemonic thought? We have a right to it too. But we also use it because it's a way of clinging to the cracks in the walls. So people who never would have thought to listen to someone saying in as many words that capitalism is bad have come to talks here and been amazed because suddenly someone's said it in poetry and they enjoyed it, it made them excited, and they're surprised because critical thought made them excited.

You believe in the “collective construction of alternatives.” What kind?

Carmen: Well, alternatives in how we form relationships with people and in the friendly treatment that's lacking in this city. Alternatives to the activities they put on in the city. Not long ago, we talked in one of those moments of doubt and wondering what the meaning of all this was, about how if La Vorágine didn't exist, really, many voices wouldn't have come to Santander. And because we pursued those voices, and because we did everything we could for them to come, people here have listened to certain things or have started to change certain relationships because of those people who have come.

And reading alternatives as well, and alternatives of thought to this hegemonic thought we just talked about. Here, you can find a shelf of feminism, a shelf of political thought, a shelf of other territories, or of collective memory; these are all topics that we've invested a lot in, and it's a guarantee that if you're interested in these issues, you're going to find an important space full of things that can let you go deeper into these.

You talk about the “rescue and reinterpretation of the common sphere, valuing the power of the collective in the face of individualism.” How does La Vorágine understand the common sphere, and do you distinguish it from “the public sphere” or “the collective sphere”?

Paco: Yes, radically. Especially the common from the public. In fact for those two, the common is the solution to the public/private dichotomy. And what's more, the common should present, from our point of view, a clear alternative to the state-nation. That is, our perspective is that the liberal, capitalist, occidental state-nation, it's in a serious crisis. And yet, we've spent too many decades not knowing how to live any other way. That is, it's a terrifying way to live, it provokes individualism to the extreme, because there's a state that will take care of all the common issues for you. For example, we don't care that a private company manages waste because it's public property. For us, the common is those common goods of humanity that should be managed between everyone, regardless of ownership. That is, the common is beyond the concept of ownership. Therefore, health, for example, is a common good; culture is a common good; water is a common good; energy is a common good, and therefore, I have a right to participate in the direct management of my health center. Not just the doctors, who are a scientific elite that have co opted something, not just the state bureaucracy that does the inspections, but the citizens who manage it. Same thing with culture. And we've tried to promote this in our own process, but what's happening is that we have little success because we as a country

have disregarded the logic of the common so much that people are ashamed to participate. It's kind of absurd, but that's how it is. Before, we did have this logic in the management of national forests,¹ of common goods, of the towns, and so on. So the common, for us, is something very important and it's not the collective because the collective is something super concrete. It's a collective of people who come together because of certain affinities, and they meet and work together to do something. You can belong to various collectives or just one, but we also believe, as we've said many times, that people can't get anywhere alone. Either we go collectively or we're isolated and personally and societally stagnant. So, the collective is your decision to participate in concrete things, and the common is a much wider concept. The common defines what common goods are, and therefore what the model of management is for them. And we don't care about the public. For example, in this debate about public schools, we're for it, but for a school managed from the point of view of the common, and with quality and alternatives to generate critical thought. We believe that since a long time ago, school has been generating non-critical people who want to be successful business people and have two houses and three cars, and we're not interested in any of that. Are we ourselves coherent in everything? Well, sometimes yes, sometimes no, but this helps us re-orient ourselves when we see that we're wrong.

**You work to “seed uncertainties to provoke ‘unlearning.’”
How do you interpret “unlearning,” and what’s the ‘Critical
Institute of Unlearning’ (ICD in its Spanish initials)?**

Carmen: Well, we refer to everything that we were saying about producing school and society; facing these unmovable teachings, we think of the possibility of alternatives, as we said before, to get rid of that and start to think in new ways. That is, starting from zero. And in unlearning, we also suggest other forms of understanding relationships, right? Because we've always lived within something hierarchical where there's someone who teaches you, and we want this learning to be common, too. So, it's about getting rid of all of these mental frameworks and starting to learn from scratch, with other ways of understanding things and seeing that learning.

Paco: And there the theme of uncertainties is very important. That is to say, part of our perspective is that part of the problem that we have is the generation of certainties. Since you're born, they're convincing you that there are things that are certain, secure, unmovable: for example, your parents' love, or that your grandmother is a good person. Well, sometimes that's true, and sometimes it's not. Or that you have to have a future, and I don't know, it depends on what the future is, right? That is to say, everything is focused on certainty. From there, religion is easy, because suddenly everything is resolved, God will prevail. From there, soccer is perfect because every Sunday, you have the show. From there, on to a certainty of maternity, paternity where having kids means having a certainty of old age and purpose in life. We believe that although it's very difficult because we aren't prepared, uncertainty is where you can create new things. In certainty, you can't do anything. So first, we have to doubt ourselves, doubt what we've learned, what are our own uncertainties. We doubt the project a lot but really, it's super productive, because in that doubt which is sometimes very turbulent, we often suddenly see a little light that leads us forward. The ICD is at the moment only an idea. That is to say, we have this as a way of seeing things, and we believe that that could be an interesting route, but we're trying to trace a path. What path? I I have no idea. We don't know if it's wide, narrow, straight, curved; we're clear on certain concepts,

1 This phrase translates literally to “common forests,” highlighting their status as a common good

but of course, it's so complicated because of the tendency that we all have, including me, to reproduce what we know. For example, how do you teach? Well, someone talks, the other person listens, and that's it, right? So, we know what we don't want to do, and we believe that in our society there's a need for spaces like this. We know that in non-western areas, in indigenous towns, in places in Africa, there are brutal alternative experiences of educational formation already being done, and I think it's going to be a little harder for us because we're deeply rooted in these pedagogical or educational certainties. What we've done for ICD is invite a series of people who seem interesting for them to help us think, but we don't have any plans for them. We believe, maybe I'm wrong, but I believe ICD is going to be the slowest process that we've done, and we know it's the most complex challenge. We're all very motivated, but we know that we don't have the capacity or the time, so it goes very slowly, in line with the logic we have of seeding, that you have to plant seeds calmly, little by little, to see what happens. But yes, of course, it has to do with this concept of learning and seeding uncertainties.

What is a “bookstore association”?

Paco: A bookstore association can be a business, because those do exist; in fact, it doesn't have anything to do with whether it's economically non-profit or not. The difference is that it isn't owned by a person or members, or “business partners,” but rather partners who manage the association collectively -- and that's important, because a bookstore association must be collective. It's true that in the vast majority of cases it's non-profit, and part of political or politicized projects, or projects that politicize themselves along the way. Now I believe it's kind of in question, because, for example, there's an increasing presence of bookstores that aren't technically associations because they're from a marriage, or from two friends who put them together. That is, it isn't an “association” or a large collective, but it maintains its spirit like a bookstore association. It also changes in that if you see conventional bookstores, they're very much the project of one person, or one family, very much distinguished by that, and they don't have that pluralistic character, right? I believe that that's kind of where things differ.

You're publishing a line of “Textos (In)surgentes,” ((In) Surgent Texts).² What are insurgent texts? What selection criteria do you use? What are your limits or hard rules?

Paco: Originally, insurgent texts were essays on unrest, that term so salient at the beginning of the 20th century; they were short, and they were a kind of slap in the face to the reader. In practice, that's very complicated because there are very few people who write that unrest, very few people who write short work, and very few people who write at all. We've had another serious problem which is the issue of gender balance. We've realized that there are few women writing about things that aren't feminism, or if there are, it comes from academia so it's published in the academic field, in an academic tone, and the other issue is that in the case of feminism, there's money in editing feminist products, and the larger publishing houses have also taken over this. So, it's amazing because now you can have someone from Randomhouse editing feminism for you. It's really crazy. So, Textos Insurgentes started very well, but it's really having problems with getting authors.

² The name in Spanish is a play on the words “surgentes,” meaning surging or salient, and “insurgentes” meaning insurgent.

Among the processes that the river of La Vorágine runs through, you have various initiatives of your own: the La Vorágine Sonora radio (literally, the sonorous whirlpool), “a live radio that combines with the audio archives of La Vorágine a form of recuperating and rethinking what we’ve lived and projecting what we want to live;” the Little School of Unlearning; “Dignagente” (literally, worthy people); cultural agitation; the Neighborhood of Good Living, Feminist Saturdays, the Forgotten. Would you say that La Vorágine is, in some way, a project of informal education?

Paco: I don't know, personally the word “education” makes me a little panicked; I know that it's only stupidity, only prejudices. But, look, of all the objects that you've listed, there are some that have died and that, in reality, who they've educated has been us because we've learned a lot from many things. That is, I would see it more as transitioning from performance spaces, where you're an audience and you go somewhere, you attend something, you pay or not and you go, into a kind of space where many things happen and you can choose to get involved or not. There are many events, for example, where people come and they don't do anything because we also have this concept of learning as a spectator. So, it's like moving from film city to theatre city, as Antonio Tabucchi said. It's moving from the space where we're all spectators to the space where people can do a little theatre themselves. There are, in La Vorágine, more educational processes from a conventional point of view; there are writing workshops, Arabic workshops, workshops for various things, and there are also shared uncertainties. For example, when we did feminist Saturdays, which is a process that ended as such even though feminism here is hyperpresent, I think it was about sharing doubts, because we met on Saturdays, we invited someone to lead a discussion, and then everyone would ask questions and trying to figure things out. Is that education? Of course, because everything is education, but... I don't know.

What's your opinion on the current formal environment of education, and how is La Vorágine related to this environment?

Paco: I believe, I think about this a lot regarding the march, and maybe I'm wrong, but I think that scientificism, this obsession with professionalizing everything and making little boxes -- you are a teacher, you are a philosopher, you are a poet, you are... -- has led to a kind of problematic guild-like defensiveness, like, “Don't mess with my territory, I was trained for this, I can teach classes.” But I think that in precapitalist societies and even capitalist ones in the beginning, education was a collective process. The neighborhood educated you, the family educated you, your uncle educated you, your grandma educated you, the neighbor educated you, whoever knew how to do I-don't-know-what taught you that. We've lost this, because now everything has to be accredited; you have to pass through a pipeline where they tell you that all your knowledge is valid. And what happens to the rest? So, we have to break the walls of centers of education so that there's more communication and the currents go in both directions. I see it as being very difficult. I'm very pessimistic. I believe that there are wonderful people in the system of education, trying to do things, but I also know a wonderful nun who wants to change the catholic church, and of course, she's exhausted to the point of suicide because she's not going to be able to do anything. Maybe it would be more interesting to construct alliances between those people who are inside, initiating change with the people who are outside, doing other things, and try to see how they work there. What can't happen is for the bureaucracy to hinder the collaboration with the teachers. For example, to go talk about refugees for an hour, you have to present a project. The meeting of I-don't-know-what has to approve it,

you have 47 minutes before the bell rings, and although you try to continue with the kids who are interested, that's not possible. Everything is super limited. So, that has to be broken, and from the outside. The thing is, education is something collective. You learn through imitation, you learn through example. Perhaps the best example is technology. You take a course on video cameras, and it's done by someone specializing in videography. That's very easy because it's technological praxis. But, what do you look at, how do you look at it, what do you record, why do you record it, where do you share it, why do you do it? Who teaches you that? Well, spaces of friction teach you that. Where have we learned the most? Well, meeting people, talking with people who've made the ground shift for us, right? Listening to other experiences. We also have to return to this. To this circuit of conversation, to those experiences, because the other stuff is all technical ability. And the other important thing that I do think has helped a lot is to give up on canons, even alternative canons, because they're restrictive too.

In light of the climate of political discontent and insecurity, can you think of what keeps hope alive in La Vorágine?

Carmen: We've talked about it already. It's that perspective of the future horizon of the common, something you believe in or what you'd like to live, because certainly, you're always thinking about yourself, and then you can extrapolate that to the rest of the people around you. In what world, space, kind of relationships would you like to live? So, when you think about everything we were talking about about the common, I would like for us to be able to manage our own health, our own education. And furthermore you see little examples of things that are working and that's what makes you feel good, in spite of the work you have to do. Maybe this isn't the right path, but at the moment, we feel like we're taking steps in the right direction, and we are moving towards that. We're going to do it in the most coherent way possible, with all the work that that requires. For me personally, that's what moves me, and I understand that that's partly what moves the rest of the people here too.

Paco: Yes, and then, something kind of pretentious, but it's our historical duty, isn't it? Ibañez, an interesting Spanish anarchist theorist, says, "if the sense of life is the nonsense of life, what's the sense of life?" So, it's not something you should look for. The thing is, you have a historical duty to the historical moment in which you live, with no time to wait; that is, the revolution is a daily matter, it happens every day. Above all in this most decadent and painful moment of postcapitalism. This is going to take decades, it's going to be extremely painful, bloody, that is, humanity is going to suffer, well, it's already suffering, but this, it's only going to get worse. I'm very pessimistic.

Carmen's the optimist of the collective. I'm profoundly pessimistic but I do believe we have a historic duty to resist, to build, to reach out towards the alternatives and say, "it's possible." It would be another thing to achieve that. And every time I see a consumer's group, an educational cooperative, an I-don't-know-what, even if they crash, even if they go wrong, well, they're there, just like us. At least the Martian that comes down here in five hundred years and sees what happened, he'll say there were eight thousand, ten thousand, two million crazy people who tried to resist.

Carmen: The fact that all of this exists also sustains our hope.

Paco: Of course. Because if not, what's the point of life, right? So I believe that there is still a dimension almost... Jorge Richman says that the left lacks spirituality. I believe we have to give it a spiritual sense, too. That is, there's a spiritual aspect, this isn't a vocation but a mission that you accept without sacrifice. It's not sacrificing, it's

joyful. We do work a lot, but I believe we enjoy it immensely. And then there's the final motivator, which is the people. The people are fantastic, how they appreciate you, how they share, how... of course there's assholes in the world, but there are wonderful people who, when they come to the space of friction, they appreciate it in every way. So, if we've made this person happy for two hours, or if they've had an eco-radical epiphany or if they've discovered that being a feminist isn't being a gross bitch, and they've said, *Ahh, I'm going to open myself to this*, well, there it is.

Carmen: And that they care for us, furthermore, because they insist that this is necessary, and they care for us in the sense of thinking about us daily and giving us a hand in what's needed as well.

What does it mean to grow in the context of La Voragine?

Paco: Well, growth is one of those words usurped by hegemonic thought, like development and so on. I don't know, I'd say maybe we're growing sideways. Listen, I think that growth in our case could be just a kind of maturation or juvenilization, I'm not entirely sure how. I believe that this process should be a physical growth, we really dream of a bigger space, a place where more things happen and so on... but at the same time, it's not physical, it's a political growth, it's a qualitative growth. The thing is that as we don't have goals, this is absolutely erratic. So, if you talk with us today, we're giving you a version of our vision, but if you talk with us in three months, we'll have another vision because we don't have goals. And yes, of course, if we had a building in the center of town with many more people passing by and more possibilities to seed, well, fantastic. But if not, well... for me, the only thing I miss, I don't know about you, is that the amount of people 100% committed would grow, that is, that we would become a group of more people. I do think it's a fucking shame we haven't reached that goal.

Carmen: Yes, we haven't managed to hook that many people. And the other thing which is really frustrating but I don't think it's exclusively our responsibility is the issue of young people. Our audience is aging, in general, and I think that -- and this is our responsibility -- we haven't known how to find the right language, the right place to situate ourselves. And that's been a challenge, and this would be a marvelous growth. In fact, the times we've had young students, it's made us really excited.

Paco: But they aren't helping us in the collective work. They're not helping us link to collective processes. And there, yes, it's because of this era, but that's not an excuse; it just means we have to put more of our minds into it, and dedicate more time to see how we can get there.

La Molinera





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
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Location
Valladolid, Spain

Collective's name
La Molinera

Name of the interviewee
**Isabel Rodríguez and
Jorge Lebrero**

Interviewer
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Who are you and what's your relation to the social collective La Molinera (Spanish for 'The Miller Woman'), and this social Center?

Isabel: I'm Isabel Rodríguez, and I'm a member of La Molinera.

Jorge: I'm Jorge Lebrero, and like all of us here I'm a member of La Molinera.

Where are we? What kind of neighborhood are we in?

Isabel: We're in Valladolid, a city in the north of the Spanish state, more or less two and a half hours in car from Madrid, to help understand the distance. Right now, we're in the La Molinera social center, which is situated by the old ruins of a five-star hotel, and connects three neighborhoods, curiously enough. It connects La Victoria, which has a big industrial history and is known because it passes through the Castilla canal, and then two others that are predominantly residential, Huerta del Rey, and San Nicolás.

Jorge: Valladolid has had an image of being a gray, conservative city; it has a sad reputation. We consider it a Castilian city with important social movements regarding local unions and social movements in general and this project is going to create a different expression of Valladolid, the more open, tolerant, progressive Valladolid that we want it to become.

**Do you consider yourselves a "social collective"?
Can you explain what this means?**

Isabel: Within the frame of social structuring, La Molinera as a social collective is, well, it's an expression of organization and common action. It's a space of alternative social reconfiguration away from the mindsets of power struggles and capitalist accumulation. We understand that when we talk about social collectives, we're necessarily talking about the construction of a collective intelligence throughout a horizontal social structure, through exercising our own autonomy, liberty, self-governance, and above all through the practice of support and solidarity which is the guiding axis of all our actions.

You're a social collective that decided to occupy an abandoned hotel and open a social center for the Valladolid locals. Can you explain to us what kind of social center you're imagining? Why is this social center necessary in Valladolid?

Jorge: I believe that what this project is looking for above all is to recover a space that was never exactly public, but that was eventually privatized and has been brought to a state of serious ruin. As far as the history of the building goes, for the last 160 years it's been a flour factory, and in

the last fifteen years it went through a reorganization due to organizational plans for urban zoning, which was modified in an irregular way. All of this brought the head of urban planning of León de la Riva to the courts, in fact the trial started on September 18, 2018. The head of urban planning transformed an industrial zone into a zone for residential and hotel use in a fraudulent way. This means that the factory was going to be converted into a 5 star hotel, the only 5 star hotel in the city of Valladolid, in a neighborhood enclave that didn't ask for it, and it's not what the city needs, but they're doing this through the Feder funds (European Regional Development Fund, abbreviated from its Spanish initials). They're public funds from the European Union to correct inequalities between different regions of the EU. Castilla is a depressed town in population decline, it's aging, it's been deindustrialized, and here they waste the public money from Feder in a 5-star hotel. We think it's terrible that this is what they tried to do. First of all, this hotel was abandoned in 2017, and within a year and a half of being abandoned, it's already a place for drug trafficking, and a place where people come in to steal junk and anything that you can sell. This is one of potential conflicts that the locals see as problematic. When we come here, it's to write a new chapter of dignity in the history of this 160-year-old building, which is also very culturally interesting, and put it to the service of critical projects, projects of solidarity, projects of self-management, projects of social mobilization, of learning, of culture, of leisure, etc. Bringing life back to the skeleton that this building had faded into.

How did this building go from being a flour factory to a 5 star hotel?

Jorge: The factory operated for 150 years. In 2003, the general plans for urban zoning changed, and allowed for a different use of what had traditionally been the factory.

The social collective La Molinera was born before the social center we're in. Can you talk about how the collective was started?

Isabel: The collective was born as a conceptual project before it we manifested it concretely, but I think we definitely considered it a social center once we'd figured out that process of occupation and taking the space and started in on it, like with the meetings that we're having. But as a project in itself, it started at least six or seven months before; it's something that we had been pondering for some time. We did an analysis of the city's reality, and we identified a series of needs and problems, and one problem was this space. Really it was a problem for the neighborhoods and everyone. This was a space where there had been a problem of drugs and destroying the building, for example, they burned one floor. So, neither the city council nor any institution was going to take on that responsibility, because it's private property and they weren't going to mess with it. So, from the position of the popular movement, we've taken charge of the problem.

Who belongs to this collective?

Jorge: We're a nucleus of people who knew each other before, from different social movements: the movement for public resources, the union movement, etc. We have a certain ideological affinity, you just naturally group up, and we're a group of people who are working in other spaces and we talked about whether a self-managed social space could exist in Valladolid like it does in many other cities, and that's when we decided to start this project. As my colleague said, La Molinera was born when we decided that this would be that space.

Why the name “La Molinera” (“The Miller Woman’ in English) for the Center?

Jorge: Before, this was called the La Perla flour factory (“The Pearl” in English) and we took the name La Molinera from the more feminist character; that’s the tradition of the workers movement, the movement for food sovereignty, which this place has made space for. This space was also important in the movement called the bread riots, which was a major influence in the mid 19th century in north Castilla. It’s a way to overcome the place’s incarnation as a five star hotel and recover its incarnation as what the La Perla flour factory was, and recover the historical memory of the building and the working class, because hundreds of people passed through here.

Thinking of the process of how the building was occupied, can you explain how and why it was occupied?

Jorge: Well, before, this was a private factory. I mean, it’s not that it went from being a public building to passing into private hands, but even so, we do believe that a flour factory that generates employment for hundreds of workers and carries the symbolism it carried, that’s a far cry from a luxury hotel. I say this with complete respect, of course, for the workers here, who were left without their salaries covered when the owner left, he didn’t lay them off, and they all should have been indemnified. So the fact that building’s changed for the worse, towards a model that we consider unsustainable and that we don’t want in the city, is evident, but it’s true that this was private property, and it continues to be that, and what we’ve found is that it’s in a state of abandon.

Isabel: Before anything else, you have to have a well-organized plan, because if not, it’s a chaos, and you’re really very exposed. Anyone who starts a process of this caliber in the Spanish state knows that they can prosecute you, so it’s important to have a good plan. To begin, we did surveillance of the space, noting the time and watching if there were people lurking around, if there were a lot of entrances and exits. Then we established a list of needed materials, people, and shifts, and then we get to the action. From there, the key thing is that everyone knows the responsibility that they have, and what might happen, because as it’s private property, we’re violating that right, and that’s persecuted up to a point.

Jorge: Yes, I believe that as Isabel said, you have to establish an action plan. Regarding the *why*, I believe that the key thing is to think about what needs the city has, and how this space is going to serve them. We were clear on the fact that we didn’t want this to be a housing solution but rather a space for various distinctive projects. So, you look at the city’s needs and look for what could be the best project to carry out in this space to meet them. It’s important to mention that before we came, the space itself was a problem for the city in the condition it was in, first because it was historic heritage that was being abused, and second because it was a source of problems for the neighborhoods, etc. And regarding the occupation, when we entered we came to resolve a problem, not to generate more problems, and it’s true that we came to question the current cultural, social, and economic model, but we didn’t come to create problems for the neighbors. In fact, they’ve really appreciated having young people here to maintain the space so that it doesn’t get more run down.

With the occupation, we also want to establish a debate about the limits of private property. This isn’t an absolute right, nor is it conceived of as such constitutionally, but there’s a social interest in private property. We believe that there has been a flagrant abuse of the property in this place, because if someone does to a

cultural good what the owner did to this property, if they let it break down the way this place was breaking down, we believe that you have to say, *enough*. State institutions could have appropriated it, if they were brave enough and they'd dared, I suppose that's a difficult process, but the people at the grassroots level can exercise that right too, we can recover a public good of the city for the neighborhood. This building was emblematic of Valladolid, and in the face of inaction on behalf of the owners and institutions, the grassroots movement recovered it.

Can they evict you at any moment? Did you seek legal advice beforehand?

Isabel: No, that's another thing that needs to be explained; in order to carry out an eviction, there has to be an order or a complaint filed by the owner, which in this case there isn't, nor is there likely to be. If the police came in to throw us out, it would be an illegal eviction, and it wouldn't be allowed to proceed if we took it to a judge. We would be absolved. In the case that there were that complaint, the important thing would be to not resist the police force, and above all to remain calm. It's a process; if there's a complaint, we accept responsibility and look for another space to occupy or another path to take.

Jorge: As far as legal advice, we have to be up to date and aware of what can happen on a legal level. We believe that we should face our situation and reclaim the legitimacy of this issue, and I believe that the majority of the city understands it that way.

Where's the owner of the hotel?

Isabel: No one really knows, he's run away. In the beginning, when he fled, we thought he went to the community, but no one knows anything about it. He's summoned to court for the salaries he still owes to the workers. He also owes money to the administration and to many people. He has other hotels around the city, but he's not going to show his face. He left and he left all the debt here.

How has your relationship been with the Valladolid City Council?

Jorge: In a word, I'd say cordial. That is, it's been the kind of cordial treatment that would have been unthinkable with the government team of León de la Riva. We don't think it's that they support the occupation; rather, on a legal level, logically, they're not going to get their hands into the issue. Another thing is, as we said before, this was already a problem before, and we haven't come to aggravate the problem, we've come to generate a solution and an impetus that, as we see it, no progressive municipal government should view as a problem in principle. So, what there has been is a series of friendly meetings with different councilpeople to explain directly what the project is, and a request for concrete technical things which, well, they often can't commit to. For example, some graffiti has appeared on the building's facade, and we'd like to paint over it, and the town cleaning service can't take on responsibility for it, because they say that that depends on the ministry of culture, as it's a cultural good, and they can't tell the cleaning service to cover the graffiti, even though they want to. We pointed out the necessity of painting that so that the space has a nice aesthetic aspect, but the institution says that, although they'd also like to be able to cover it, they can't shirk their duty or break the law to do that.

Isabel: The relationship of the council with the institutions, it isn't bad but it's also not the best possible, it's true. We would have liked it to be more like other cities, for

example, in Italy and Germany, where the social centers are so common that councils already recognize them as legitimate and normal. For example, in the city of Naples, the council changed the statutes surrounding social centers, in fact, they created new ones and denominated the centers common goods, and in that way they established them as something legitimate, something that is right, but that they can't interfere with.

In this case, the council says, "This belongs to the popular movement, to the people who are managing it, and we don't have anything more to say, we'll let you continue." In Valladolid at the moment, we haven't been met with any opposition, but neither are they leaving us alone in that sense. We don't like that when we try to fix the facade that they've painted us, the moment we put up the masking tape, the police have to come and report it. That would be unthinkable in other cities. It's not the worst situation, because it's not a constant repression, but neither is it the best situation it could be.

Jorge: To clarify, what the council has said is, "This is a private property, we can't interfere." So the normal police policy will continue to be applied, and if they pass by and you're doing something sanctioned, and they'll stop you and report it. In that sense they don't interfere. What I believe is an important thing we've done is to have established this debate in the city and political institution. Here, there's an abandoned space, and what happens if a group of people occupy it so that it's no longer abandoned? We discuss the limits of private property, and if this is positive or negative for the society and the neighbors. I believe that in that sense the council has taken a step in making certain qualifications, when they've considered that this had a positive energy, and that it was an interesting question for the city. Already, this ideological debate is cropping up and evolving in a timely way.

What concrete plans do you have for this social center?

Isabel: Well, we've established a short, mid, and long-term plan. For medium and short term, for now, it's about setting it up and making it habitable. because this has been in a deplorable condition, we couldn't even breathe in many zones because there were organic residues from a year and a half ago. Just to make this space habitable is ending up being a big job. In longer term plans, we have a series of political objectives and social objectives. The fundamental objective is for the people to get involved. As *La Molinera*, as a collective, we won't be able to do anything if in the future, people don't come and bring their proposals to collaborate. We see Social Centers as extremely active realities because literally hundreds of people pass by every week to do their things. The principal thing is to understand that in Social Centers like *La Molinera*, activity, responsibility and administration is all collective, everything is collective, so when people come, they organize themselves from grassroots; there are entities they get involved in, and starting there is when they feel like part of the project. Our objective is to get close to the people in the neighborhoods so that they have contact with the political and so that they internalize certain things. I believe that, for example, as far as youth, many people right now only dedicate themselves to drinking around town, or making themselves completely disconnected from reality, and by putting on certain workshops like a movie showing, we believe that we can give them political responsibility, not putting on a conventional movie but one that will really make that *click* happen, make that impulse in your mind so that you start questioning things. We believe that praxis is when you're really learning. In this path, we're kind of going to weave networks around this space and its

neighbors, so that this will become a meeting point for activism, for saying, *well, here we're going to do projects with people who already know what activism is, and are going to create something for the common good*, the kind of place where people are brought together in a way they wouldn't be if we hadn't created it.

Jorge: Yes, we're coming to reclaim the role and the pride of activism. We believe that during a series of years, political affiliation or social activism has been really devalued, because the media has said that it was no good for anything, it was nonsense, better to do things through institution-established pathways, so we're coming to reclaim at the "do it yourself" so for this space, that's also what we want. We always bring up the example that we don't want to be a civic center, with all due respect to civic centers, I say that because the Social Center isn't a place where people go as users or clients or benefactors of something but rather a space where we say, "You've proposed that we host a bread-making workshop—" for example "—so get involved with that. Let's find a space, let's get the material we need, let's see how we can make this possible, etc." What we want is for people to come, get involved, know us, and take on responsibility for their own proposal and we can carry it forward together and learn together what you have to teach, and how we can support you in this. It's about reclaiming what it really means to create a social web in which all the people contribute.

What's the difference between a social center and a civic center?

Jorge: Well, I understand that as they're thought of, civic centers are a bunch of services, but here we don't want to offer services. We believe that that's not just a semantic issue, it's a fundamental one. It's clear that there should exist a network of civic centers and other types of institutions that offer and satisfy the common needs of the neighbors on a more sterile level, but it's also true that we're lacking critical spaces to generate a social model in which people get involved, participate, and become protagonists of change and transformation.

For many of the collectives I've talked with, the 15M activist movement signified a moment of reorganization, (re)invention, and strengthening. What has this moment meant for La Molinera?

Isabel: We recognize and admire the 15M movement. From that moment -- which I believe is a historical reference point for social activism -- from that moment, there surfaced a ton of initiatives for social movements, collectives, centers, absolutely everything. In our case, as a diverse group, there are people that have lived that moment firsthand as well as people who, like me, consider themselves children of 15M. I believe that we collect all that tradition from that moment, when the people rose up to oppose what was [i.e. the social, economic, and political situation of the time]. That's the reality we're bringing to the city, that is, we've made the city reconsider the legality and legitimacy of this; it's repositioning itself in respect to this. And it's a moment for us to rethink and re-organize ourselves. I believe that movements like 15M have inspired new forms of social organization, and we gather them up and from there re-adjust all that. There's nothing new now, but what there is, if you change a few things and such, is that it's really brought us to new forms of social structure and of activism.

Jorge: Yes, well I, as I'm a little older than my colleague, I lived through it in person, at the plazas, and of course it was a very interesting experience above all for people like me who had been affiliated with organizations and such even

before it. It's true that many organizations and political or social agents didn't really know how to situate themselves in the movement, and others even saw it with a certain contempt, because they thought, *"I've been fighting in my union, organization, or whatever, for ages, and these things you're saying that like they're enlightening everyone, we were saying them thirty years ago."* So there was a lot of confusion in what was the organization of the traditional popular movement, but it was very positive in the moment to be able to extend what was being said in all the little collectives that were already practicing resistance throughout wider sections of the population. In 15M they said things like, "They call it democracy and that's not what it is," and these collectives said, "We were shouting this in anti-fascist protests twenty five years ago, when there were four of us." Well, now we've popularized it and the people are understanding and being receptive to a message that maybe before was just from a very small group. Apart from the issue of 15M and how it's transformed us, it's interesting to consider things like the massive feminist mobilizations of recent times. Let's say it's like the feminist 15M, with a fundamental transformative capacity. Just as we're talking about 15M, we have to talk about 2017 and 2018 as the peak of the feminist movement. And another series of movements from which we learned a lot are the democratic movement for Catalan independence, which is important to help us understand the limits of the right to decide and of democracy as it's laid out; or movements like "Surround Congress" ("Rodea el Congreso" in the original Spanish) or large social mobilizations, and above all politicians with the kind of ideological responsibility that we've seen since 15M. We're inheriting all of this, and learning from all of it.

Are you thinking about the sustainability of the center as a self-managed space?

Isabel: Exactly. We aren't thinking of receiving any subsidies or help on behalf of the institutions or any other company. We plan to maintain ourselves based on product sales or the activities themselves; as a self-managed center, we don't look to turn a profit, nor for anyone here to benefit financially from their involvement. We believe that we have a certain autonomy, and that in that sense we can be economically autonomous. It's a social center and it's going to require a lot of resources and people to finance us, but we believe that through donations and people who understand that and decide to volunteer for us, we'll keep afloat and moving forward.

Jorge: The project won't stop being critical of the current economic model, and in that sense, it's important to establish new relationships that aren't strictly monetary. It's true that we need money to do everything, to restore the space we need to invest a lot of money in buying material and in this sense, there are a lot of donations we rely on and there are people who want to collaborate in some way, but of course we don't just want financial collaboration. For example, here there was a bunch of furniture that was falling apart, and there were people who offered to restore them, participating through that. There are a lot of forms of collaboration that don't strictly have to do with money. There are a lot of people who have knowledge of how to repair roofs, or who know what methods and instruments we need, so they come here and teach us, they participate in and develop our process. So yes, we choose self-management, as many other places do. We believe that institutional money is for other things, that is, the people's tax money must be used principally to cover necessities. We firmly believe in the public sphere, but this is a self-managed space that's a third way of doing things; it's neither public nor private, in a sense it's a way to be critical and promote another kind of economic model.

In an interview, I read that you talk about this social center emphasizing the collective sphere¹ in the face of capitalistic individualism. What does La Molinera understand by “the social sphere,” “the common sphere,” “the collective sphere,” and “the public sphere”?

Isabel: I'd say that a common good is a good that's not private property, nor public property exactly, because it's not controlled by the state. In that sense, I believe when we talk about social centers, including La Molinera, we're talking about one of those common goods. So when we refer to the common sphere, we're also referring to projects of this style. This is because people on the inside manage it themselves, and there's no private or institutional property. In that sense, social centers are like a public amenity. When we talk about those things, we're also making reference to countercultural elements because the dominant capitalist system is a system based in competition and individualism, a system that generates inequality and makes us consider the work we do and everything that comes from that as something foreign, something that we aren't inherently tied to as human beings. When we emphasize the glory of the collective sphere, the social sphere, we're talking about the roots inherent to human beings as individuals and as a species. From a more anthropological and philosophical standpoint, a human being is *homo faber*, an animal that works, capitalism and this economic system sells us this idea that that kind of activity and everything we generate with it should be thought of in mercantile terms. We say no, that human beings transformed our reality from nature as social beings, and we work as a community. So when we're talking about the social sphere, the common sphere, and the public sphere, we're talking about these things that we think are private, but they really aren't. In the press release, we said, “La Molinera is just as much ours as yours,” and that's kind of the essence; that the people start to think that what they get from the fruit of their work is theirs. In the situation we're currently in, the public sphere is crucial, and this project kind of responds to that.

Jorge: The only thing I would add is to also appeal, because we're in Castilla, to the sense of the *comuneros* (a term referring to the citizens who revolted against the rule of Charles I in 1520) which for us is a historical tradition, and there's a thread of continuity between the *comuneros* of the sixteenth century and our thought, which in the end is the defense of common over individual interests. In this sense, we understand that the way out of the problems we complain about today is through the common sphere; that is, a collective solution, looking for these meeting points that generate social benefit for the community and for the common good of all mortals, and not look for individual competitive solutions to these kinds of problems.

We're talking about a project that's about weaving a network together with the people of the neighborhood, and their necessities. Could you explain how you've established these relationships and this communication?

Jorge: I think we're fortunate in that we're locals of Valladolid. We know some of these neighborhoods really well, we know their specific needs, and this lets us carry out specific actions accordingly.

Isabel: What we've done since opening is organize meetings with the Associations,

¹ Here, as in all instances I refer to a certain 'sphere,' the original Spanish uses phrasing translating literally to “the [adjective]” (“the collective” or “the public” or “the common” as the case may be) and meaning “the goods, resources, systems, and services which are collective/public/common, etc.”

because we understand that if this is a project that's trying to weave a network among the neighborhoods and connect neighbors, who better than them to be the first to come visit the space? What we did was contact different associations, we invited them over, we gave them a tour of the space, sharing its history and the plans we have here, and how they can get involved and lend a hand. The representatives told us that from the start they saw it as a good kind of work, a project that they see functioning, addressing a problem that they'd been experiencing, and they haven't brought up any problem since then, no one's come to complain.

Jorge: Of course, neighborhood associations, up until now, have functioned kind of like agents with whom we can talk more directly. The first meeting that we had, as my colleague said, was with the associations themselves, because we believed that it was important, and our feeling has been good. Beyond these Associations, many locals have passed through. There are some really interesting anecdotes of people who worked here when it was a flour factory, including a woman who had worked here who gave birth in this room. It's like the most beautiful thing that we've encountered, and right here the woman started crying from the memories, that was really beautiful. The truth is that the feeling between neighbors about what's being done here is currently really positive. And what you asked us at the beginning, about if we'd consulted the neighbors before entering, well, because of how occupation works, you can't do that too much.

You've talked about the tradition of the community members from Castilla as a guiding model of the collective. Are there other models that you've had in mind as you generate the project?

Isabel: I don't think we've thought of any specific names in particular, but we do keep in mind as guiding examples all those people, not only in Valladolid but in every city, that have given their lives to activism and really fought with blood, sweat and tears, literally, to impel change because they understood that this system isn't viable long term, and they tried to make a change. Our role models are all those people who are activists and who stay on the front lines without worrying about the repercussions that many suffer. They're role models for us. Now, as far as social centers, we do have a few examples. In the Spanish state there are a few with whom we've established contact, and then I've looked at a few in Rome and Berlin that are already part of the everyday reality.

Jorge: There's one interesting thing about the hotel that seemed interesting enough to recover, which is that each of the rooms and common spaces have the name of an enlightenment-age figure. This hotel was decorated in the theme of the eighteenth century; you have to understand that it's a building that was built over the Canal of Castillas, which is a fundamental work of hydraulic engineering from the 18th and 19th century. What they did was recover this history and give each room the name of a historical figure related with this era. What we want to do is baptize each of the rooms and the mezzanine with the name of a social warrior from Valladolid, an activist who's a role model for us. It's a way to pay homage to the historical figures of Valladolid from whom we've learned something. From García Quintana, who was mayor of Valladolid and who was shot in 36, to Doris Vengas, who passed away recently, or Avelino Mata, a union member of the CGT who also passed away recently and who stood out in the battle to defend public education, or Beatrice bernal, who was the first woman in the sixteenth century who wrote a book in Castilian to be edited and published. Well, these names still aren't certain but they're what's occurred to us as a way of recovering a history that we want to pay homage to because it's an inspiration.

Based on what you've been explaining, we're talking about a collective meeting point for transforming society while we learn and unlearn. Do you consider yourselves a part of the movement of informal neighborhood education?

Isabel: In a certain way, I believe we could -- I don't know if as educators because I don't believe that this is a relationship of an intellectual authority teaching someone who doesn't know, but I do consider this a center of constant learning. For example, regarding the issue of the center's name, we considered using "Self-Managed Occupied Social Center," but in the end we didn't see it as relevant because where we embrace those particular countercultural elements is in the practice, through the grassroots organization of *La Molinera*.

In a certain way, it's not just the people who are learning from the dynamics that we're creating in the city; we're also being nourished by the wisdom of the people who come here to collaborate. In that sense, I don't believe we're educators, but if we're creating a network of education that goes beyond what we're offered in a biased education that doesn't compel people to question what's established, in that sense we're creating a network.

Jorge: I believe, additionally, that participating in these kinds of projects not just in ours but in any self-respecting social center means participating in a process of continual, accelerated learning. Here, in a few weeks we've learned about everything: talking to the press, using a drill, cleaning, participating in assembly, etc. You learn many things, and this without having put into motion the specific projects, because we're just getting started. When we put on a workshop for professional training to learn how to use a circular saw or a drill, we'll learn a lot more. I believe that overall, the centers are spaces of learning and social transformation. We're transforming and generating new societies and new models of relationships while we learn and unlearn how to do it, because we're built through a series of issues that come almost by default and that we need to recover from.

Thinking of your personal experience, what are the major unresolved issues of the current formal educational model?

Isabel: I'm a public school student, in fact I'm a minor. I'm starting my second year of *bachillerato* [high school-equivalent starting at age 16] in the field of social sciences, and my experience being in a public school is the reality that you see. For me, the educational system is like a chain of production. They factory-produce products with the same characteristics, and they have to be trimmed according to a series of measurements. If you're not in line with those measurements and you're not an identical product, they're simply going to offer you a path that leaves the educational track, or you simply fail and are useless to them. Therefore, I believe that when you asked us the question about co-education, it's kind of about leaving that model. You don't have to think in commercial terms because you should never think of education in commercial terms, that's kind of my experience. While you go along this path and you go through a series of competitions which aren't really competitions in the end, you're going to triumph in a manner of speaking, but failing in school doesn't mean that you're a failure, it's just because you're not following their lines. Here in Spain, there's a lot of stigma surrounding the people who do professional training yet in reality, they're getting an education that's much more practical than the university education; that is to say, they're teaching them to do a job. What I experience in the institute is that it seems like everyone has to pursue a high-education career, and that's not

the case, in fact there's a lot of people who simply can't do that because of the cost. It's only an obstacle course for the students, especially if we're students and activists or students and workers, that's even worse because you can't juggle everything.

Jorge: Well, I'm a historian and I'm almost done, I have a few months left for my doctoral thesis. I'm in the writing phase and I've gotten the support of one of the FPU grants the Ministry gives, and this has meant that I've had some teaching experience in the university. I'm not very proud of the university because I understand that since the Bologna Plan the educational model that we have isn't letting us do marvels, we'd prefer to teach in other ways, but you have to adapt yourself to what's there. So, we would have liked to do other things within History, because you can experiment and support different viewpoints through reading different sources, but it's been an experience in which we haven't been able to innovate or bring up other issues.

As far as being a political project, what kind of politics are we talking about?

Isabel: I believe that in that sense we're different from other social movements which have emerged here in the Spanish state because we don't take part in the defensive political activism that seems to motivate other movements where they're combatting some specific injustice or inequality. Here, I believe that the political act we're carrying out is a more offensive [ie proactive] or transformative one. Instead of simply putting patches on things, defending ourselves from the blows that we receive, we're opening breaches in the general system. For us, from my point of view, we've said "There's a problem here," and we've acted against the problem, but after solving the problem of the degradation of the space and the loss of tradition etc., we've said that beyond solving that problem and resisting all that, we're going to give this space a path forward, a future usefulness. I would talk about transformative political action, where we contribute something positive, not just always resist the negative. We could have been a perpetual occupation, but that's not what happened because we're occupying with the spirit of opening up, not closing off.

Jorge: Yes, fundamentally it's a generative political act, not of raising a grievance. It's clear that resistance is fundamental, there have been attacks on all kinds of public sectors, and in that sense a dynamic of resistance is generated like the movements² to defend the public sphere or like 15M, as a space for saying, we can't do this anymore, you're crushing us. But it's true that to deconstruct, you also have to construct, and have alternative projects that suggest things for practical life and solutions that the people see as viable and responsible. So I believe that right now we're in the process of generating spaces for direct confrontation to propose new models and new solutions. We feel as if the 78th regiment is ending and we have to overcome it. We see that there's an unprecedented institutional, territorial, economic and social crisis, and this is the moment to decide to transform. In that sense, it's up to us to support the dismissal process. If the 78th regiment is ending, we have to finish knocking it down, we have to shake it until it falls to find a way out and generate something positive for the working class in general and for the popular masses. Something that can substitute what there currently is in a way that's essentially progressive.

² The term used here, 'Mareas' translates literally to 'tide' or 'wave,' and refers to the movements focusing specifically on issues like housing, water rights, public health, etc., that arose from the 15M movement

How do you organize your operation through assembly? How has that experience been?

Isabel: Well from the first moment we've shaped ourselves as an assembly, but we understand that in that aspect if there isn't good management or good internal organization, it's very easy for everyone to abandon it. For example, we took the form of an open assembly, which means that administration and responsibility is collective, but when it comes time to incorporate people into the meeting, although it's in an open form, we believe there has to be a sieve so that those who come add to our group rather than diminish it. It's normal for conflicts to arise among us because it's part of what assembly is, and you have to understand that there have to be guidelines. In *La Molinera*, there are some guidelines for coexistence that everyone has to respect and if they're violated, not regarding the project but between the members, maybe it's better if you disconnect yourself from *La Molinera*. On a personal level, we don't understand the capitalist system because it pits us against each other, but we do believe that we have to learn certain things from it. It seems to me that many of the strategic plans that companies have, if we adapt them to social projects, they can lead to better results. I think that in that sense, we've also gotten over our fear and are trying to apply all these things, without thinking in commercial terms; no one's going to make a profit here. But for example, we're a brand, in the end we're marketing tools and we have to be considering how we inspire loyalty in the neighborhood and we should continue adapting little things like these in the meetings.

Jorge: We also see the importance of generating a healthy environment for those of us on the inside of the organization. Those of us who initiated the project more or less were clear on what we wanted, because we were coming from working on it in a series of meetings, and so we just refined what needed refining, and as some of us come from a long activist tradition, we know what happens: in truth, many things destroy themselves from the inside. You don't need the police to come to evict you or fine you or whatever, many times internal tensions can end up weakening and tearing down the project. So we established the assembly as a guiding nucleus of everything this project is, in order to avoid it weakening itself or going against what we wanted in the beginning. In that sense, as my colleague said, it's about incorporating people who can keep contributing, and who we can tell aren't going to bring up problems that those of us who started the project have already worked through. We are interested in the seeds of projects that can grow around this space. If someone's going to come here to make some of these rooms a public library or cafeteria or some kind of workshop, they'll have the freedom to manage that project, more or less independently, as long as they fulfill the conduct guidelines. Someone from the assembly will sponsor the project and will be the link between the nuclear sector and that workshop or activity in particular. As far as the assembly itself, we have standard practices for how to incorporate someone or how to make decisions and, in the case of having to expel someone, how to do that, etc. to protect the project. We're putting too much of ourselves into this project to let it be brought down by that kind of issue.

Do you make decisions through consensus, or through voting?

Jorge: I wouldn't say consensus, and I think that's something that we've learned through 15M. Historically, we've looked for wide consensus, but you can't always get to a consensus. So, we believe that we have to take decisions with a wide support from the assembly. There's a desire for consensus, but if we can't reach it, logically, we have to give up and keep moving forward and making decisions.

What, for you, are the keys to the healthy function of the collective?

Isabel: I think the first thing, when it comes time to work collectively, is taking care of personal relationships. What my colleague said earlier, in order to carry out good work anywhere, not just her, there has to be a healthy environment. It doesn't mean that we have to be best friends, but at least have a healthy relationship where we can work and where there are mutual ties of respect. In a certain way, it's normal for us to debate certain things because someone has one opinion and someone else has another, so the goal is to reach a wide consensus, not 100%. That's kind of what we try to do. In the end, it's effective just because we work at it. I think that through activist work, in the end, we're all people that have gone through the same thing, who live with the same inequalities, who've had the police draw up a charge sheet for you or open a file on you, and we've all had those experiences that end up creating a community network among us, and I think that's fundamental.

Jorge: The people who started the project, we knew each other before, so you already know who you're playing with. And I think that's important because you'll do anything for your buddies, you'll go to prison if that's what it takes, or you'll pay fines because you know that there's going to be a group of people who support you and have your back. So, you have that mutual trust. What happens when you incorporate new people that you maybe don't know? Well, that trust has to be built and remade from the start. This is something, also, that you have to take care of on a daily basis because people, this is a natural tendency, they drift apart or together as problems occur and experiences accumulate. So I think this is a continuous work. And, like she said, this mindfulness is a fundamental issue. There's no use saying that this is a space where you won't tolerate macho attitudes or you're not going to tolerate disrespect; these things happen and you have to figure out how to minimize them, how to handle them and correct them. So that's an important job that fortunately, people who are activists and who have experience with assemblyism³, they already have experience working on this a little, although there's always a lot to learn and new situations keep appearing that you've never faced before. So we call on our collective responsibility and on the importance of the project, and we have to focus on the common good right now, which is how to keep moving forward.

From this experience, what would you recommend to a collective that's thinking of opening a social center?

Isabel: I think that a recommendation for all potential social centers is that they come up with a series of objectives in the initial process. I think that the first thing is to have goals in different areas that you want to complete, and from there, always establish a system for reflection and control because a lot of times we make mistakes in forgetting to revise these initial goals. I recommend that the whole project is clear on what the objectives are, which can be modified of course, because needs change and political issues do too. And from there, to create a strategic plan and a plan for reflection in order to see where you've fallen short, what things you've managed, what things you haven't, and how things are going to get better, those are reflections that should be being made constantly.

³ *Asamblearismo* in Spanish; neologism meaning the practice and philosophy of using whole-organization meetings or assemblies as the central method of planning, organizing, and making decisions

Jorge: We're a recently born collective, so we aren't here to be an example of many practical things, especially for social centers, where others have been functioning for decades. There have been many different models of occupation, and we're not going to get into the legitimacy of all that because in principal we support them as critical models. Our experience has been really good with them whenever we've tried to get the topic of occupation and social center projects into mainstream conception. There is a general hostility at first from a lot of the population because they have a mistaken concept of how these self-managed spaces operate and a lot of times the occupation movement hasn't done much to erase that stigma. For us, what's been good is being able to work here, to kind of put a face to the occupation, and to do a press conference to say that this is what we've come to do, and we're normal neighbors, and in our protocols of coexistence it says that it's crucial not to bother the neighbors or degrade the neighborhood, and to be careful about impacting traffic or using drugs because that ties into a larger discussion about how we've come to respect the building which in our case is a cultural good, etc. You have to project an image, not just as a tactical decision but you have to believe it yourself. As we say, we came here to contribute something to society and to the public, etc. So I don't come here to hide from the neighbors. I come here to show up and talk with the neighbors and explain the *why* behind this process and talk to them about whatever they want to talk about. So, I understand that if I have an attitude of not wanting to talk with them or of trying to hide away, or like what I'm doing is clandestine for legal reasons, they're not going to understand. The legality of this is what it is, and we'll face the legal consequences of this if there are any. At the moment, it seems like everything's going well, but for us the important thing for right now is to keep showing our faces and saying, "Whatever happens, we're here, and we're activists." I think the experience of having acted like this has been really good.

How does this collective think about incorporating the diversity of neighbors' abilities, knowledges, realities?

Isabel: For now, I think the majority of us are from Valladolid or the surrounding area, but as our assemblies are open, that doesn't mean that tomorrow there won't be someone with a different reality or who came from a different city further away, or from a different country. The reality is, we're a diverse group just in terms of generational span; there are young students, 17 and 18 years old, there are working people, and within all that variety there are also different realities. I think that the act of kind of forming ourselves in this way, as a diverse group, is what really enriches us. Next, I'd love for more people to come tomorrow with different realities and from whom we can keep learning.

Jorge: One of the principle challenges that projects have, not just our project but the entire popular movement in general, is how to incorporate what we'll call the *migrant collective*. This happens because they have really different realities to the problems we have -- those of us firmly established here, often natives of this place, and many times we don't know what it's like to come someplace as a stranger. For example, the anti-fascist collectives do an anti-racist activity, a little soccer world cup in a neighborhood with a large immigrant and second-generation immigrant community, but the immigrants don't come, and you think, *why didn't they come?* Well, because you don't know what needs these people might have, and those who advocate for these needs have to be them and not us. So I want to take advantage of this interview to open this space to the needs that these people may have and invite them to participate. Some of the proposals that have come to us, for example, are Castilian

[ie Spanish language] workshops for people who've arrived recently and don't know the language well. So that's a form of working on this issue, although they have many problems and a wide variety of them, and it's important to keep looking for how we can help them through these problems and support the needs of those communities.

Have you thought of working collaboratively with other social centers?

Isabel: I think that we're open to working with other collectives; at the same time, we want to create a collaborative network among the neighbors themselves. For example, in Valladolid there are other social centers, maybe not occupied ones, that also do a lot of work and do other kinds of activities, and I think it's interesting that in a certain way, we diversify ourselves according to the requests that there are. In the end, it's like I said, the guiding axis of all our actions is solidarity and support with the neighbors and with other centers. I don't know if there exists a network of us per se, maybe this project could explore that, but you have to understand that this isn't an oligopoly, it's not about competing but rather cooperating. For example, in Nash's game theory, they talked a little about the dilemma of what's better, if I say you're the guilty one and I end up benefiting, or if we cooperate and the punishment is decreased⁴, well that's kind of the theory that we need to practice not only in Valladolid but rather in all of Spain. In the end, we're all experiencing very similar circumstances, practically equal, and it's a way of learning about the errors that can be made and the needs that can emerge because this center isn't the same. It's situated between three neighborhoods, one of which is right in the center of the other side of the city, which has different needs, and you have to approach them in a different way.

Jorge: Well, there's this fairly solid movement of occupied social centers throughout the state, and yes, there is a certain amount of coordination among them. I, for example, was just in Vitoria last week and they have a *Gaztetxe*, or social center, that's been around for 30 years and we were able to talk to one of the people who's worked there and they said that they want to host a meeting of social centers to share experiences and so on. Of course, each of the social centers is its own world and it responds to the specific needs of its town, and it owes a lot to the people who started the project. So, I think our philosophy, like that of other centers, is to learn everything that we can, find our own rhythm, and meet the needs and particular context of Valladolid.

What does growth mean for La Molinera?

Isabel: I always think that it's like a plant. The first thing is to put down roots, and then once you have roots, the roots expand and you start taking initiative in certain directions, you start forming yourself. When the stem starts, there's already a solid underlying layer. Then a social center or any other social activism effort in the state can come from those roots, it can start to take on its own path and once time has passed, even if the climate isn't the best, all these fruits and flowers will emerge from the foundation of those solid roots. So for *La Molinera* to grow, it's key for us to be expanding. That is to say, as we've repeated throughout the interview, we've opened discussions, we've contacted people, people have come to us, we've addressed a lot of proposals and we have more on the table. This is kind of the moment of sending up a stem, we're starting to have more strong roots and now is the moment to take off, so to speak, and shortly it will start to flourish and that's when we'll realize that we've been making history for a while.

⁴ Here, Isabel is referring to the thought experiment *The Prisoner's Dilemma*

Jorge: That's a really good metaphor, I buy it. Here at *La Molinera* yesterday there was the first meeting with people from the cultural sphere. Fifty or so people came, first to learn about the space and then to have a meeting where they could discuss what the city's needs were on a cultural and artistic level, and how this space could contribute something in that area. It's clear that this isn't a lottery where people come and say, "I need this room for this one movie I'm making," but you can kind of pick up on those feelings and see how the space could be transformed. That's what it means to grow. Growing for us has been putting up papers on the door when we did our opening day so that people would visit the space and fill it with tons of proposals and things that could be done in this space. This hasn't just stayed as part of the initial initiative of this group of people who started here, but rather the people are already recognizing that they can go, they can suggest things, they can do specific things and that's what it means to grow inside this space. And outside, as she said, it's about opening the discussion about the limits of the legality and legitimacy of property law, and contributing to the social discussion and suggesting things that no one had managed to suggest with such concrete results. We do have a ton of experience and a lot of people working on various things, but we think that with these actions we've broken through media silence when we proposed them, and we think it's a really good sign that the city is talking about these issues.

Keeping in mind the atmosphere of political discontent and instability in which we live, can you tell us how you maintain hope as an engine motivating La Molinera?

Isabel: I think that that very atmosphere of discontent, of seeing that every day people are more passive and distant from reality is what motivates us to consider ourselves, to varying degrees, activists. If the circumstances here were different and people were super active, well, obviously, the motivation would then be to keep it going. As there's an atmosphere of constant passivity, what we want to do is attack that and say, this is our time to be here and we have to continue because we'll make up for everything with initiatives and activist efforts. I remember the first time I was in Villalar de los Comuneros and one girl said to me, "For me, activism is like my family," and then I was thinking about it at home, and I realized that it's true, in the end it's like life itself. There's a climate that isn't favorable to us, that presents us with obstacles, but this is the moment, it's really the moment. You don't just form part of a vital project because you have a philosophy of life that's contrary to the dominant one, but rather it makes you see your peers in the same situation as you and say, "There's a problem that should really be solved." That's kind of the engine of all activism, that there's a solution and ways to look for alternatives and keep fighting, even if you hit a thousand barriers.

Jorge: Continuing with this simile of the engine, which is really interesting to me. I think that for this project, we have to give it gasoline, it's an engine that constantly needs projects that will make people hopeful. Here in the city, the reception has been really good on behalf of the more activist people, they were kind of amazed by the project because this had been abandoned for a year and a half. It's a very emblematic space and when the people saw that someone had taken the initiative to enter, they've received us very well and these are the kinds of issues that impel many people given to being cyclothymic, where sometimes they give it their all, and then after two years with little progress they get tired suddenly and go home and lose motivation. But it's true that the popular movement goes through cycles of high involvement in social struggles and moments when it seems like everything has to come from the institutions and we can go home and rest. So, the people who have come here, luckily we're the kind of people who reclaim the role of activism, often

people who have already fought in a thousand other movements and have taken it as a way of life; that is, you know that you're going to die fighting, protesting, creating new spaces and challenging things. That's the good thing, that the fact that the root of the project is entrenched in activism means that the project isn't going to languish, essentially. It will go through difficult times, but here there are people who say, "It's going to be a priority to keep this moving forward and within a year, even if we're tired, if we keep going, we're going to keep getting things done." Reclaiming that it's not just a question of hope, but of people taking on the protagonist role in everyday activism; if we don't do it, the political system will do it for us, often opposite of what we'd want, so we have to get involved and move forward.

Casa de Respiro





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
July 20, 2018

Location
**Sierra Norte de
la Comunidad de
Madrid, Spain**

Collective's name
Casa de Respiro

Name of the interviewees
**Victor Arias, Sara
García and Loreto and
Rodríguez de Rivera**

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Translated by
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Who are you, and how are you involved with La Casa de Respiro (the Deep Breath House¹)?

Loreto: My name is Loreto Rodríguez de Rivera, I'm one of the founders of the project, and actually more responsible for the aspect of accompanying the clients, we could say.

Sara: I'm Sara García, and I work as part of the technical team, that works on the psychosocial, corporal, and medical support. My work is in osteopathy and diaphreotherapy (a yoga-like alternative therapy).

Victor: I'm Víctor Arias, and I work mostly in the areas of client accompaniment and management of the activists' travel and stay in Casa de Respiro.

Why the name 'Casa de Respiro'?

Loreto: Well, because, really, the project is a house where people come to take a breather from their activities and their work and their stressful life, dedicated to defending human rights. And we wanted to make it a place where one could come to breathe easy.

I see Casa is a project by defenred (literally 'ActivistNetwork'). What is defenred?

Victor: Really, Casa de Respiro is the fundamental part of the project. The initial idea was to do many more things, but at the moment, the main project is Casa de Respiro. Around Casa we're gradually forming a larger network. That is to say, this is a space where the activists come to take a breath, but the bigger idea is to build a wider network around it. We're in a rural environment and the idea is that the activists feel kind of supported by this environment, by this network of people. We also belong to some wider networks of other organizations, but the most interesting thing is that the people, on coming to this space, can find a large group of people who collaborate with us and come to form part of their lives. Some more, some less, because they aren't here very long; but that's kind of the spirit of what this network is.

The description of the project says "The nature of the work of human rights activists in many of the world's countries forces activists to face very stressful situations, including threats or direct risk for their lives or the lives of their loved ones. When this situation is sustained

¹ The name in Spanish, 'Casa del Respiro,' translates more literally to 'the House of Rest' or 'the House of Taking a Breath'

over a long period of time, it can have consequences on the activist's physical and psychic health. The health and well-being of human rights activists can often be found to be affected, and this is an area in which they should find more support." How did you come up with this idea? Who developed it into a functioning project? Can you talk to us about the origin of the project?

Loreto: The origin of the project is, we were four people who joined together in the beginning, and through the work experience of some of us we could see how this was a necessity in society, especially in the area of human rights. Many activists have to leave their countries because they're threatened, and some have to relocate temporarily to other sites, but there wasn't a space where they could come to rest for a while, in order to later return to their countries and keep working. That's where the idea came from. We needed a space, so we built what became the Casa de Respiro on our property, taking advantage of the fact that we have the grounds on which to make it, and also thinking that if in a given moment the project doesn't work or stops working, we'll still have that house built. Casa is in the Madrid sierra, in a town in the north sierra. And from there, we started contacting organizations that work with human rights activists and explaining this project and so they would send people here to get that moment of taking a breath, of resting.

Victor: About this topic of the project's origin, I think there are plenty of organizations that dedicate a lot to the cause of rescuing human rights activists when they're in dangerous situations, but there aren't many who dedicate themselves to what we do at Casa. And I say a lot, but there aren't a lot, not as many as there should be, and in the last few years, in fact, we can confirm that there are more and more of these situations of conflict. So it's more and more necessary.

One of the realities that we observed -- and this is why the project got started -- is that the area of rest is one that isn't covered. The problem is that we end up with human rights activists who, after many years working, have a ton of health issues, a ton of problems, because they're people who haven't had a break in a long time, right? The majority have to do with stress, with working 24 hours seven days a week. So, seeing that a place for rest isn't already offered, we wanted to offer it. People don't come when they're in a dangerous situation, instead, they come to work on self-care.

Are you a collective, an association? What legal structure have you chosen to register this project as?

Loreto: We organize it like a nonprofit association; really, the general structure is simply a legal way of organizing ourselves for when we'll need to present ourselves to someone, or ask for or talk about money. In reality, we don't think too much about the legal structure. It isn't something that we've given much importance to. We're a nonprofit association, registered in the registry of associations, and we work from there. We don't do all the legal things that an association should have to do, I don't know if it's okay to say that, but... (laughter). We don't have assemblies or take minutes. We decided on this structure to be able to be something whenever you introduce yourself because they always ask, "But who are you guys?" So, well, we say we're an association called La Masiega, and our project is defenred.

Victor: Yeah, really the association has been useful for introducing ourselves but it doesn't have any greater purpose. It lets us have members which is a

method of financing, it lets us have people that collaborate with the association in a legal way, and have everything legalized. And not much more.

Are there salaried people working in Casa?

Victor: No. It's a topic that we proposed at one point, but the leap to having a salaried person is a big one. It doesn't interest us right now, it's not a topic that interests us. I'm not saying that in the future we couldn't do it. It would lead to a series of legal questions which at the moment seem like they would complicate our lives more than it would help us.

What does it mean to work, or how does the concept of work change in the context of Casa de Respiro?

Loreto: I believe, at least for me, it isn't a job like my job, nor is it a vocation, because I'm a professor, and I know that I feel vocationed for teaching, but it's like completing part of a dream. It's like something more in your life, above all when the project is in your own house, when in the end it's something you live and coexist with. I've never considered this like work or like volunteering, but rather like something more that we dreamed before, and with time has come to fruition.

Sara: Well, for me, I'm not sure if I would describe it as work or as a form of life. I would also like to be part of an association where you see mutual support that doesn't have to be mediated or motivated by money or bureaucracy. I think that if we organized life in another way and participated more, bureaucracy would turn into something more. So my work here is to support the society I want to live in, supporting each other and giving support to the people who could use it. And also, in part, learning. This also helps us to create networks, to know experiences that, if it weren't for the 'excuse' of Casa, we wouldn't have.

Victor: I wouldn't know how to answer you very well. Actually, this is a job. I think of it like that because I always think that if I win the lottery one day, I would stop working for a salary, but I wouldn't stop working. I always think of this as the space where I'd like to dedicate the greater part of my time. So it's work in that sense, because it's something that moves you to action. It's work in an interesting sense, which is, doing it professionally; that is to say, the fact that we're volunteers doesn't mean that our work isn't professional. And this is something that I've always tried to work on regarding associations. The fact that you do things as a volunteer doesn't mean that you do them badly, but rather the opposite; usually, it's the opposite. So it seems to me that in that sense it's professional. But then I'm kind of in line with what Sara said about understanding this as a form of life. It seems to me like it would be good for us to be able to dedicate a large part of our time to this kind of thing, that has to do with caring for other people. We're lucky enough to live in a society that, although we complain about it a lot, is lightyears ahead of others on the level of rights. So my work here is a way of contributing my grain of sand. I think about it a lot, but by now I'm too old to go travelling around or to go work abroad for this, so offering my house and my welcome to people who come is a way of returning to the world a little of everything you have; I don't know if the reason you have it is fair or not, or if you just have it and that's it.

How do you sustain this kind of project? Do you get Institutional support of some kind? What kind of relationship do you have with the Institutions?

Loreto: As far as economic sustainability, we decided at the beginning to not receive subsidies, not to ask for them, because that requires certain things that at the moment we aren't working on. And what's more, we've had the experience of having worked on the issue of the social and what it means to be a project dependent on public money, if suddenly that money disappears and then the project is over just because of a lack of money. So the decision was clear. Only individual members -- and our membership is growing at the moment. Our initial idea was for 100 people who would give 100 € per year, because we figured with 10,000 € we'd have enough to function perfectly. We haven't managed to get those hundred collaborating members, but we keep growing and we've gotten on well. It's also true that above all in the area of airfare, we've received one-time contributions from the organizations that send the people or other organizations that have funds stored for financing plane tickets. But it's just that one specific purchase of the ticket, the rest are individual contributions.

How many members are there?

Victor: About 40. We have other sources of income. This year, for example, we've had the book *Relatos para Respirar* ("Stories for Breathing"). There could be one-time donations, like for example a few years ago some friends got married and one of the things they put in their wedding registry was that the people collaborate with deferred, instead of doing gifts. So, there are some ingenious solutions that help us to survive. It's also true, I believe, that the spirit of the organization is to not be costly, and I think that's one of its good decisions. If we had to pay for rent, if we had to pay for something annual, well, it would be much harder to maintain. I think that's also something that gives it value, the fact that the people can see that with very little money you can do big things. It isn't necessary to have an infrastructure of thousands of millions, thousands of euros in order to function. Sometimes small things work too.

For many of the collectives we're talking with, 15M represented a moment of reorganization, reinvention, and strengthening. Was this moment at all related to the opening of Casa?

Victor: We haven't had any relationship with 15M. That is, at the start... I believe the 15M had a lot of force in Madrid, which is the capitol. Here there were people, there were groups in certain towns that did start to organize a little more, but the truth is that the sierra was pretty well structured, and the people that were involved in 15M were the people who were already organized before. So in most cases, it wouldn't be considered a revolution. There have been some changes in some towns, but for us as an organization, it hasn't affected us.

Loreto: No; the majority of us, furthermore, come historically from social collectives, that is, it wasn't something new for us. It's true that with the 15M many people's social conscience awoke; it was like, "It's possible to do things together!" But we knew how to do things together before, so I don't believe that influenced us like that. It was a moment where you see more people that are uniting to do things, but for us as a project, it didn't impact us.

Casa welcomes people from "A community of human rights activists." Can you explain what kinds of people end up staying here? What's the process like for coming here?

Víctor: Well, in principle, we're a tiny organization, so what we ask is that the people who come are brought in by some 'recognized' organization, let's say, that works in human rights. And that they indicate that the person coming has a clear need for this breather, this rest. Surprisingly (because I think that it's something we didn't expect), we've had all kinds of people, from people who work with women to people who work with territory, people who work with the environment, lawyers, more grassroots people, farmers... the majority have been women but there are men too; there's been people from Africa, Asia. For us, it's been kind of a surprise. In principle, the condition is that they work in the area of human rights. That was the fundamental condition. And as far as how they come, well, we've made certain alliances with some organizations that we've known throughout this time, for example, 'Iniciativa Mesoamericana' (Mesoamerican Initiative), which is an organization of women activists for human rights that has been working in various Central American countries for many years, and they, for example, send us someone every year, or other collectives, or people that we've met through other people generating networks. And so the recommendations come to us through these people. We don't have a very large capacity; we take in three to five people per year, normally three is the goal. So we can't do a massive campaign because we don't have the capacity for many people.

How much time do people stay at Casa?

Loreto: The maximum time is usually three months, because the tourist visa comes to an end, which is what they can get in Spain. Normally what we suggest is a stay between four and six weeks, which we consider sufficient time to do, well, to complete the experience, but it's true that it's hard for a person to find a month or six weeks of vacation, or to leave their children for that long, or leave their country, so in general, the average is four to five weeks that the people are here.

How do you organize Casa's internal functioning?

Víctor: It's kind of member-based, which is to say that we're a central group who can be 3, 6, 8 people depending on the year and the circumstances of the moment. So the group meets up throughout the year, and some of us handle more of the management, others manage more the technical part of the support when the team is there. So the people that are more part of the support, we do more of the coordination, when the people come, we meet with them and analyze the agenda with them, although the principle goal is for there not to be an agenda, that is, that the people unburden themselves from agendas. So we sit with them, and we look at possible activities and coordinate with them. And there's not one person who takes charge of this, various people take turns accompanying those who come through here.

Loreto: Then, we take turns talking with the contacts before the activists come, because we have to talk with the activists, see about the issue of the ticket, health insurance, any needs that person might have, and we split up that work among ourselves. Similarly, if we do other kinds of activities, someone takes on the role of coordinating, but there's not one coordinator; we take turns.

Víctor: We're all in a close environment, the majority composed of people who live here, in this town. Some live a little further, but the majority here. So there's basically two different parts. One is the part where the person is at the property, and the other is the rest of the time. So in the rest of the time, communication is kind of everyone's job. That's when we meet once a month, we have meetings,

we prepare for the year, we see who's coming and who's not, we see what requests there are. And that's work we all do. And then, when the people are here, everyone does their part. The technical team has their hours, their dates, and if they need something, there's always one of us who can talk to someone on the technical team to coordinate if there's some difficulty or issue.

**The core organizing team is made up of six people.
Were these people already friends?**

Loreto: Yes, well --

Victor: -- and we still are! (Laughter)

Loreto: There's a lot of history with this. There's a group that have known each other for a long time, then part of this group ran into another group doing other work in Madrid, and that became another group, and then we came to live in the sierra, and we've met people that we didn't know before. But yes, we're all friends; we were friends and we continue to be friends -- for now. (Laughter)

Victor: As far as structure, it's important to say that although this core group is six people, one of the things that we've been working on, especially during the last two to three years, is trying to incorporate more people into this, not just because this is a hard thing to handle just ourselves, but also because of philosophy. Sometimes coordinating work with other people is more work than just doing it alone. It's like what happens in homes with little kids, right? That it's easier to do it yourself. But normally, in the end, it's the opposite; in the end, the fact that there's a lot of people has a positive impact overall-- a positive impact for the activists, and for the people who get involved. So there is a wider group that we're working on coordinating with, incorporating with, and we aren't friends, in fact we meet most of them for the first time when they come.

On the web, you explain that the people who stay at Casa have the opportunity to travel to Spain, to the north sierra of the community of Madrid, for a period of various weeks, with the objective "to offer a period of rest and breathing that serves for physical and psychological recuperation... we are obviously facing an important labor of care and selfcare. Can you explain what's meant by care and self-care in this context, and how that work manifests itself?

Sara: Self-care, which is something we really revolve around, also has to do with the power to analyze and utilize one's own resources for well-being. And those resources emerge through analysis of your own situation, and through analysis of your environment. And based on this, to be able to see how you can support yourself, how you can sustain yourself when the institution doesn't sustain you. Leisure and rest are very important, because it's not a matter of implementing theories or doing a simple theoretical analysis; instead, I believe, one of the most successful parts of the project is experimentation. It's being able to experience that when you rest, you can look at your reality in a different way. We do both things at the same time. It's about doing the work of resting, of meeting people, of finding yourself in a group with more people, but also of doing an analysis of your psychological, corporal, and physical state, and of seeing where you have the resources to be able to take care of yourself and your environment. The people who come from caring for other people know plenty. It has more to do with how in order to care for other people, you have to be okay, too. And we also wonder what we're creating if it's leading to the exhaustion

that these people are experiencing, what kind of society are we creating. We think the most important issue is the issue of the struggle, or of achieving goals, but beyond that the path that you create for yourself is important in itself. And, well, that's kind of the general philosophy, but what I would emphasize is the importance of the integration of everything they do; that is, going on an excursion or walking around are just as important as medical support. Because many times when you return, you're not going to have the medical support, but you will be able to say, "It's helped me a lot to talk about this problem I have," or, "It's helped me a lot to cook and have three meals a day," or, "It's helped me a lot to read a book that doesn't have anything to do with a political essay." Everyone has that thing that sustains them, right? Also, a lot of the time, it's resuming relationships, for example, when families have come, they've had a space for enjoying their own family, where not everything's about survival. Discovering that sometimes the best support we can find was close to us all along.

Victor: For me, something that we say a lot, that I believe is very important, is that self-care is something political. And we defend it as such. When we started the project, sometimes you talked to people, and they asked, "So they go on vacation?" Well, yes, but no. That is to say that it isn't a vacation. It's about recovering certain spaces as political -- one's own body, one's family, if you want to make one, one's relationships, the things Sara talked about. I think it's really important to retake this as a political matter. It isn't something that just has to do with taking time off, or relaxing on vacation. And in fact, it's one of the objectives in the time they spend here to do that analysis that I talked about to build something different for when they return to their countries. And many times, this building happens because you, as an activist, or we, can justify that self-care and care is just an important and political part of the movement as the work we do. Then, apart from that, there's a political question regarding the movements, because if we continue like this, and we continue without working on self-care, we're probably going to exhaust ourselves and there will come a moment when we cease to exist. But that part of each person justifies that space as something necessary and something political too, and it reclaims that in their organization, that that organization generate this space, and generate it politically; that's something that we defend, and that we believe is very important and necessary.

What kind of therapies or support geared toward self-care do you offer these people?

Sara: The technical support team is four of us: the doctor, who intervenes with synergy; the psychologist, who offers significant psycho-social support; one person who does osteopathy and sacrocraneal therapy, and me, and I do osteopathy and diaphreotherapy (*diafreoterapia*, a yoga-like alternative therapy). So between the four of us, we offer those resources. You do a little analysis of the situation, you learn specific techniques, because you work on one side with restructuring, relaxing, and then incorporating techniques. When you don't address things from theory but rather from practice, it's pretty interesting; relaxing first, letting go, and getting rid of the blocks to be able to absorb the rest. And to be able to plant seeds. That's why you do interventions with different kinds of techniques. They have more or less one session a week with each of us, and it depends on the person and the problem they come with, they address it in different ways. But the four of us are always involved in interventions.

Victor: It's important to keep in mind that the technical work we're referring to isn't about doing a specific therapy. I believe that it's a *therapeutic process*, but therapies take more time. They always tell us that. It's really

an accompaniment that helps you discover and analyze yourself.

Do you have any protocol for preparing for the arrival of this person and to be able to advise them in their self-care?

Loreto: Before they come, we ask some questions, we know a little about their work, but in reality, you don't know until they come here what state they'll come in. Because there are people that have come in a state of almost not being able to stay standing, due to what they've been living, and there are younger people, they're less punished by life, and they've arrived in a better state. Until we see them here, we don't talk to them, until the first week passes, more or less, we don't really know exactly how they are, no matter what they tell you.

You talk about a “new concept of *safety* that’s opening pathways with a wider definition, which among other concepts includes well-being as a fundamental variable.” Can you explain this concept of “Safety/Security” from the perspective of Casa de Respiro?

Victor: As far as the issue of safety, the idea is that it should be considered more holistically. Think how in recent years, we started to hear in a lot of forums about integral safety, because we always talk about safety only talking about the physical, and talking about protection. And so one of the objectives is that safety be something more integral, so the emotional part is as important as the physical. Of course, the physical is in first place, but what we discovered many times is that neglecting the emotional aspect leads to neglecting the physical. So the concept of safety is a wider concept that includes the person and that political aspect that we talked about before.

On the subject of care-takers, you wrote the following on the web: “What isn’t easy is convincing the activist that self-care and mutual support are elements that should be taken into consideration as fundamental for continuing their work for human rights with a long-term perspective.” Can you explain the reason for this difficulty with the activists?

Victor: I believe that there's a very serious problem, something we talk about in many forums, and it's that there's a philosophy of fighting to the death, considered very honorable in general, in many of these fields. So being the one who works the most, for example, gets you certain benefits. We would talk, for example, about how when you're a person who's in a lot of risk, the European Union gives you an aid donation. If you're not in much risk, they don't give it to you. The EU or a country, to give you asylum, has to believe that you've suffered a lot, but no one takes care of those who haven't suffered to this extreme. Many of the activists, when they come, say, “I didn't want to come, because there are others that deserve it more than me.” I think practically everyone has said that. And think how they're used to taking care of things or people, but they don't recognize the necessity of that kind of care. It's always a price that they don't deserve. “There are people who are worse than me.” And that's one of the first things to work on. I always thought that once we started to be more well-known in the project, this would be more busy, but there aren't that many requests to come. There are even people who when they come, they tell you, “I didn't want to come, they practically forced me, because they saw I needed it.” It's more because the rest of the group saw that you needed it than because you yourself were able to see it. That's kind of the key.

What have you learned from your experience as caretakers?

Loreto: I believe we've learned a lot of things throughout these years because first, we've learned the therapeutic value of solidarity. At the beginning we thought that just a massage, or psychological therapy, or a visit to the doctor, is what cures you of your problems. But I believe we've realized that there are other things that almost cure more than that same visit to the doctor. The feeling that there are people who support you, the feeling that you're building something together. Everyone has left here content. But many of them, I think the great majority, when they talk about what helped them the most -- everything helped them but what sticks with them is seeing that there are people who dedicate their time to be with them, to talk, to build relationships, I believe that it's one of the most important things. Then with the team, too, we've learned to work together, we've gotten to know each other, we've seen everyone's little things, and I think that we're aware that we don't want to burn ourselves out. Working with people who work on behalf of others, and who are in such bad shape, makes us think that we don't want to get to that point of working for people and being in a bad state. At least we have that in mind. And I think that we keep learning more every day.

What's a person's life like in at Casa de Respiro?

Víctor: The first and second days, what we do is a little meeting with them to try to be conscious that they came to spend time alone and find themselves again, something which isn't easy for anyone in general. In that meeting, you just plan the first days. They have all this free time, most people don't know anyone here, and even if they do, they don't usually leave for the first week. So the first week is basically a lot of walks, a lot of leisure activities, some food, some dinner, and then one appointment per week with each one of the professionals, and trying to kind of enjoy the environment, and trying to find a place for themselves here. After the first four or five days pass, people are can already kind of see the dimensions of the project, and we start doing a little more planning. But there's not much more planning. Every person is their own world, with their own needs. That's where the wider group of people comes in. The idea is to involve more people, and I believe one of the most spectacular parts of the project is getting these people to integrate with this person even if they don't have anything to do with them, or it's complicated sometimes, just passing an afternoon together, a morning, a meal, a dinner. And what Loreto said is that the greatest positive experiences come from this. And then the techniques offer them a few tools. The idea is that while they're here, they can also work on their challenges on their own, with these tools.

Sara: Yes, it's easier when you take a calm moment free of any urgency to implement the tools that we offer. As there are four of us, it's easier for them to be able to ask, to question, to do specific exercises, to do analysis, so they don't bring a ton of material to work on where they won't be able to work on them. It's about what they implement here. On the walks, we think about what strikes them, what worries them, the pain, the annoyance, or the anxiety, we look what's happening, what thought is causing that, and we work on it during the four weeks we have.

Loreto: And they carry out daily life. They have their kitchen, they have to go shopping, to buy, cook, go onto the street to do their things, everything that's implied in living. They aren't integrated into our family life, rather they make their life here, and they integrate or don't integrate depending on how they are, how they find themselves.

Victor: One of the objectives is to try to discover the little things in life, the pleasure in those little things. Many people do comment on the pleasure of having time to cook, read. There's a cultural center and a library here, and they go there to be able to "waste time"-- whatever that means -- for a morning, reading or chatting with people. That's the goal, to try to discover that kind of thing and reclaim them for your daily life after your stay. In some cases -- because sometimes people come with their kids, with their family -- it's also to reclaim family spaces, go to the pool, if that does you good, go on a walk, whatever. Then, the sierra offers many activities, so, sometimes there's a shearing or there's an I-don't-know-what, so you take advantage of what's there. That's kind of the spirit.

Among your objectives, you talk about "generating interactions with Spanish society so that they can explain and bring closer the reality of their community and their work." This informative activity about the problems that the activists are involved with connects to the environment of informal education. How do you organize this activity?

Loreto: We've been varying the format a little. We're conscious that there's many of these realities that aren't known here because many of the things about situations in countries that we learn about when an activist comes never come out in the media. All that gets out is what they want to get out. We think it's a very interesting moment for the rest of the people to be able to inform themselves about these other realities, these other situations. At the beginning of the project, we started to organize chats with pretty large public broadcasting. Putting up posters, for example, if someone comes from El Salvador, "This person is going to talk about the situation of El Salvador, how they are over there, how they live, the dangers." Sometimes it was a little frustrating, because not many people would come, so you built the entire event infrastructure just for five to six people. We also tried to do it in Madrid, but between the fact that the dates are usually in the summer months, times when the people leave more, and that the people who are interested are interested in so many things that they have numerous activities, we sometimes think it's a little excessive. Then we moved on to the format of personalized invitations, as the circle of people interested in defenred has grown, and the amount of people who know the project has grown, we've -- when someone comes and is interested in talking about their work, well, we already have an invitation. A meeting with the activist to talk about their work and their situation, and that's how we've received the largest responses. At one point I was in charge of twenty people. We've organized the meetings in a cultural center that exists here, but by doing it in this personalized way, I believe that more people have come, it's lead to a greater response.

Victor: One of the things that we'd like for the people to understand is that they don't come to to make an impact or to lobby. The goal isn't to convince anyone. First, because we don't have the capacity, and then because that implies a time that isn't for rest. As far as the initial chats, another inconvenience is that the people prepare the talks, and that isn't the goal. The idea, for example the other day when we did one, it was a dinner with the person, we already said, "Don't prepare anything. Come, tell us what you do, the people will ask you questions, we'll chat a little, and that's it." So it's more a therapeutic space where the people listen to what you're doing, where the people -- where you can see people in another area who recognize that what you're doing is something important, because often one of the problems of the activists is that in place of origin, even within their families, or the society, they have problems because of the type of work they do. And also to be able to be in another

area like this, and see yourself recognized for your work, I believe that's something interesting and kind of therapeutic. So it's more or less along these lines, what we try to do. And then there's the other thing, well, with the more collaborative, wider group which sometimes goes deeper. But well, that isn't the idea. In fact, one of our policies is not to ask too many questions. I mean, this isn't about people coming here to make martyrs of themselves all over again, which is one of the problems that we see when people come to tour Europe, but rather it's about the opposite. We try to lighten the load, we want what you tell to be more the result of your needs, of your desire to tell it, than trying to demonstrate or tell the awfulness of it.

People often talk about the therapeutic value of active listening. Has this been your experience with Casa?

Loreto: yes, the people aren't used to being heard. But what's more, it isn't a listening where I sit and you tell me, but rather while taking a walk, you see that the person is starting to tell you things, starting to tell you things about their life, their work, and at the end of the walk, they say that they feel better, and you haven't done anything. They talk about such interesting things, they don't seem interesting to them, but they tell you their lives, their histories, and I believe they aren't used to being listened to like people. Surely in their countries they've given many talks, they've had many discussions, or they've talked to large groups of communities in their work in the struggle for rights. But I believe that in a one-on-one conversation, drinking coffee, taking a walk or sitting on the shore of the reservoir if you're going swimming, I believe it's an experience that they're really grateful for, to feel heard. And we learn a ton; I believe in the end, we get more than they do. At least, I believe so.

Do you think that the defense of human rights is talked about enough in our society? Do you think it's an unresolved issue? How do you think we can implement the changes necessary in the environment of education?

Loreto: I believe it's very much an unresolved issue. I've been a professor of "Citizenship," the subject so criticized by various people. I don't know if as a *subject* or whatever, if there should be value given to it. I work with adolescents, you have to make the adolescents come to terms with what society really is, what's happening, because their views are really biased, depending on their family, you only know what your parents want you to know. And when you talk to them about different things, there are people who say, "And this is really happening?" I don't know as far as a subject in school, throughout everything that they explain, if there has to be something more. It's true that it's difficult. I work in a catholic high school, and there are things that they don't see well. It's complicated to talk about certain values, certain circumstances, certain situations, and still I believe that at least in the environment I work in, there's a much larger space of dialogue than I'd hoped opening. Regarding many topics. But what strikes me is the kids' ignorance of what the world is. They can be aware of the boats, because right now they're seeing the refugees arriving, and all the people that drown and such, but they keep saying, "What are they coming for?" No one knows what's happening in their countries, no one knows what they're living, or why someone would decide to leave their country and board boats like this. For example, this year the kids who knew about the defenred book bout it and said, "But this, where is it happening?" I told them, and the kids look at you like they can't believe it. They should have access to more alternative media or something, where they can inform themselves. Because not even access to the internet is enough if they don't know what to look for. There's free access to the internet, you can look

up what you want and see what you want, but they don't know to look for it.

As a society, what would you say are our most important unresolved issues?

Sara: To reclaim the town, maybe not exactly the way it was before, but to manifest it, to start to use the media and today's knowledge to distance ourselves from this capitalist, individualist society. Not all the support has to be institutional; it's more in the environment, in normal day-to-day life.

Víctor: Yes, I was listening to Loreto and I was thinking that a lot of our problems aren't from the educational institutions, they're part of society. The issue of how we access information in the end is a societal problem. We live in a society marked by image consulting, which is what makes people make certain decisions over others, often not based on any ideological backing or any process of mental analysis, but more temporary things that have to do with groups in power who dominate the media. It's a complicated topic because I think we live in a society where the problem right now has to do with over-information, not the lack of it, where it's so easy to start a rumor, or for someone with certain power to generate a wrong idea. That's why it's kind of complicated to think about society on a global level. I think the kind of thing that we do, being able to have close and direct contact with an activist who lives in another area of the world can give you that vision of how they work and, and can make them able to see how we work here. I believe we can start to generate those kinds of networks to create something kind of different. Because waiting for some big thing is kind of complicated. I do believe reality should enter into the institutions, but reality is so malleable, the concept of reality and post-truth, that in the end I've found that only in one-on-one interactions, in small communities connected with other communities is where you can find trustworthy alternatives. Maybe one solution would be to see how people like us and like people in other areas can generate some kind of alternative network.

How is does this project keep itself separate from welfare and paternalistic eurocentric proposals?

Víctor: This is something very much of the right wing, this accusing people of paternalism/being do-gooders, because now we're not going to be able to do anything good. I think that doing good things is good. It's not good to do them with the Judeochristian concept of *I'm superior to you*. That's kind of the idea: justice. That when you do these things, you're doing them with the goal of reaching social justice. Obviously there's a difference between us, because I'm here and they're there, and that's a reality for better or worse. I think the only thing that saves us from that is that we're hunting for justice, and one thing is evident and that's that the people who come are equals with us. All the relationships with all the people who come and the relationships that last after, they're always horizontal. The huge problem of clueless paternalism, that has to do with the charitable nuns of years ago, that kind of philosophy, of charity based on poor understanding.

What collectives or projects are you connected with?

Víctor: Since a few years ago we've been generating a network of collectives that work in human rights and cooperation in Madrid. We work with other networks in other areas, also in Central America and South America, but overall in Madrid, and although our link there is debatable as we aren't close to Madrid, we aren't

close to Madrid, we try to support as much as we can. It's something important, above all for managing resources in common, because the resources are increasingly scarce, and we're few people. If someone comes to a collective, then we can have this link, or the reverse -- when they come here to make another link with other people. It's a subject we're working on, step by step. There are other cities that have made more progress with it, but well, here we are.

Sara: The work through networks that we're doing with organizations like Iniciativa Mesoamericana (Mesoamerican Initiative) also has to do with passing facts and information. They've created another Casa de Respiro, so we've collaborated in the process and we talk about the process of how they've set it up, how they manage it, what problems they have, what's the difference between the two environments, the two countries, that kind of sharing of information.

Loreto: And a few years ago, we organized a virtual dialogue between people. We organized it from Defenred but many others participated, about the theme of self-care. Human rights activists talked virtually for a week. More or less making their contributions as a way of putting into common knowledge all their understandings and experiences of what self-care and human rights activism is.

Víctor: Defenred and Iniciativa Mesoamericana organized this, between the two of us.

What references did you consider when creating this project?

Loreto: I have the image of my father, because a lot of what I am, I am because of him. He always told me, "The world is everyone's, and everyone is responsible for what happens in the world. You can't say, 'That doesn't have to do with me.' Anything that's happening anywhere in the world is your responsibility." He'd say that to all of us. And the truth is that the majority of my siblings, in some way we're involved with the issue of labor, or with another cause. Feeling responsible for what's happening in the world, the good and the bad, I think that from there is where I started to work from a very young age on social issues, getting involved in different projects and different things. Ideologically I'm not sure what this means, but here we are.

Sara: I believe I'm developing my ideology working here. I wasn't so involved in the social change environment. I work with diaphry, with osteopathy. I've been involved in assemblyist things, in consumer's cooperatives, so I understand working in a network. But being here is really broadening my perspective, getting to know the activists and the environment of human rights work, which I wasn't familiar with. And I've put together my ideology from that, I'm still putting it together.

Víctor: There is one thing that right now, based on what we were talking about, seems really important. We're the children of the postdictatorship era. We were born at the end of the dictatorship, and I do remember a lot of the work of the first association, which is where some of us met for the first time; it was an association in Pan Bendito, a marginal neighborhood in Madrid, an association close to the neighborhood coordinators, and a little more progressive in the insubordinate movement.² And I do recognize a lot of the things that we worked on in that moment, we still need to reach them now. It really pains me that over time we've lost our capacity for organizing.

2 A civil-disobedience-based anti-military movement against obligatory military service

I think we had a capacity for organization that would be wanted now in many collectives, a capacity for management, mobilization, ideological analysis, and it pains me a little not to have maintained that. But we're fruit of that moment of escaping the dictatorship, there wasn't yet a world like there is now, everything very rigid, so we grew up with a ton of references: priests leading neighborhood coordination, families and organizations that we organized ourselves. We organized block parties, we organized the activities we did, everything! And there came a moment where if the administration wasn't paying you, you wouldn't organize anything. We're kind of returning to that. We should reclaim that, because the administration's money is ours, but reclaiming it doesn't mean not carrying out and managing your own life. It means that we have to do both things. We have to organize ourselves to ask to share that money that's ours among ourselves, but also organize things ourselves first.

Would you say that this project is related to a political project? If so, what politics are we talking about?

Victor: I believe everything is political. Your body is political, it's a space, often a territory to conquer; your family, your environment, and many times we've let that be consumed. That's what the political is. The other thing, the big thing that we talked about in the chat with the activists, almost none of us are interested in it. It's a shame, but almost none of us are interested. But at least that little part should interest us.

Sara: I'd say that it's a mix between ecology and social economy. We have limited resources in a limited space, and we're a lot of people. Sharing and managing these resources for the wellbeing of the whole population, I'd say that's political. So that we can all be okay, so that there's an equal distribution, without exploitation.

"Stories for Taking a Breath" (Relatos para Respirar in the original Spanish) is a book you wrote from the experiences shared by the activists that have visited Casa. Can you tell us a little about how you wrote it and how it's been broadcast?

Loreto: The book, in principle it wasn't a project as such. It happened that Ana and I had the habit of writing in our lives, of writing what happened to us, what occurred, her for her part and I for mine. We've done it to help with reflection, to incorporate what happens into your life in different moments. And one day, at one point, we discovered that we were both writing about the people who came here. Experiences not directly about the people, but maybe about the root of an anecdote that they told you or a moment of discovery that you had with them, we generated a little history, a story, sometimes half-fiction, half-reality, keeping this in mind. And, coincidentally, there was a person who was part of the project who works in a publishing house, and this person said, "Why don't you turn this into a book?" Well, you can imagine our laughter. "How are you going to write a book?" They suggested we present the stories that we wanted to the publishing team, and they would see if it was editable or not. So we presented a collection of thirty stories to the publishers, and they gave their approval, and they published the book for us. They looked for an illustrator first. We wanted Sara to illustrate our book, but the publishers, this was one of the big publishing houses, they had their own illustrators. At first we were really worried about who was going to draw what we were writing, because if they don't know the project they might not understand. So they sent us a few drawings, drawings of some stories, and we were pleasantly surprised, not only because they were very beautiful drawings, but because they perfectly captured the essence of what the story was. To the point where some characters

looked like the real people! I said, "This person really looks like the person who came!" So it was a feeling of, "How can someone capture this just by reading?" Of course, then when met the illustrator, the day of the book premiere, he's a person with our same sensibility, he'd also been involved with projects relating to refugees, so we saw that we'd connected. The book was called *Stories for Taking a Breath*, and the majority of the stories -- not all of them -- have to do with the people who've passed through Casa de Respiro and recounted moments of their lives. Some have read them and have liked them a lot. The truth is that it's surprised me, Ana too, not because we're writers but because everyone who's read it, after reading it they've said how they were amazed by it, people have even bought it as gifts, even people we didn't know have come back to order more books because they liked it so much.

Considering the climate of political discontent and insecurity, can you tell us how you keep up hope?

Sara: For me, the people. The people who come, those who get close and who share, the act of telling it, seeing their faces and seeing the more immediate results. Then other people come and they also want to listen, to share --

Victor: I believe it's one of our moments of self-care, too. Being able to find yourself with those people, which has always been a dream, like Loreto talked about earlier. I think it's kind of the dream to find yourself with people, with people that are working with super cool things, people you get along with better or worse, but always people who are on the other side of the world, working on things that seem like justice to you. To me, it's very hope-inspiring in general. And, yeah, above all, that. I believe that, above all, the people. And then, it's true that the space of sharing makes you grow a lot. Sometimes it's difficult; organizations have their moments, have their difficulties, but in general, in the end, the situation is always very positive, to be able to be working with people. I'd really missed it. From a young age I worked in many organizations, and we live in an increasingly individualistic society. And working in a group, working in a team, is an added value on what we do. But above all, it's the people who come. And I think it's important to reflect on how in this project, what's important is the people that come. The people who are here, the people who later return, and the people who keep fighting and working in their areas.

Loreto: And then, to see how the people who have left stay in contact with us, because some do more than others, but a lot of the people who stay in contact are always reminding you that this is one of the best places they've been, and that thanks to this they've taken up many things in their life again. It makes you really want to continue, knowing you're helping people. I could even say that Casa is somewhere we've established relationships with those people, and that now we have a ton of friends all over the world if we ever want to travel to those countries.

From your experience, what do you think keeps the human rights activists going?

Victor: The problems are numerous, and in many cases, they're very serious problems. The other day, one of the activists here told us, "One of the things I've admired most is the strength of the people; the energy when you come here of all the people who come to be with you. I think it's kind of the same thing. They have that energy for justice -- because at its core, that's what follows the project, and what follows each one of the people who come here. Justice. That energy is what moves us. There aren't many other things that can move

you to do something this difficult. And to keep doing it as it gets harder.

Sara: It's an idea of justice that's above individual justice, but real. It's something very internally personal. I work with the body and there are some who don't have a concept of their body as something separate from the collective. One of the people who came said, in a strange way, how would it make sense for them to stay here and save their life, if in their country people would keep dying. But he said in a strange way because someone in a talk had asked him, "But if you're going to return and they're going to kill you, why don't you stay?" And he said, "How would it make sense for me to stay?" It's a concept of self, environment, and collective that I'm not familiar with, I haven't grown up with that.

Loreto: Also, they've grown up living with the need to fight just to eat, right? I mean, I believe that a lot of what Victor said about why our society is more listless is because of wellbeing. I think the better off we are, the less we want to fight, because everything is to our liking. It's a mechanism that makes us alienate ourselves from the suffering of others, but these people have been active since they were kids. Some have been activists almost since three years old, doing things for the revolution or the fight. I think they think they want to live a different way and they should fight for it.

What would growing mean for this project?

Victor: For me one of the things that would be really interesting would be for other projects like this to be created. Sometimes many small things can come together to make something much bigger. So that's a kind of growth that would be very interesting. We have a lot of areas to grow in, we have a lot to think about. Each of us has a direction or an idea in their mind, and reality keeps you in your place. For me, I'd like to create more projects like this. I'd like for us to end up being -- not us, but all these groups -- a reverence in the sense of showing the importance of self-care in collectives. For me, that would be really important, that collectives, that the people can incorporate this into their structures. That the very organizations, associations, of the activists that come could dedicate a part of their time, "obligatorily" (in quotes, right?) to the self-care of the team. That they care for the workers they have in their organizations, that those very workers dedicate that time to self-care, for me that would be a very interesting growth.

Sara: My vision is along similar lines, it would be about sharing. Sharing the experience, being able to talk about it.

Loreto: The matter of growth is something where we have different viewpoints. Because there are people who think that we should grow more, have more people, launch more projects, and there are others who don't see it that way because that isn't our job, we're volunteers here, you're talking about a whole different story, and that's when you say, "The thing is that if I get involved in more things, or if this takes more of my time, I'm going to deplete myself and I'll have to spend some time at Casa de Respiro for a break. That's one of the discussions that's still unresolved. I personally think that it would be good for there to be more Casa de Respiro places, for more people to get involved, for us to be able to bring another activist in because we get more funding.

Victor: For me, it's really interesting to positively visualize the project. Sometimes in the capitalist society we live in, when we experience the struggle, we experience them painfully. And I like to find the positive aspect of us. Not positive in a paternalistic way,

like we talked about before, but positively through the construction and recovery of our spaces, positively. Not from the ugly fight that we've often carried out because sometimes there's no other option and you have to do it. But it's important that the path be comfortable as well. It's uncomfortable because when you fight to recover spaces or rights, it's uncomfortable, because the powerful people make it uncomfortable. But to try to make it as comfortable as possible, make it comfortable between us... kind of positive construction seems very important to value. And getting the activists to value it. And that's one thing, the construction of what we talked about physically, spiritually, and bodily. That it should come from something positive, and not from anger. Often you need to use anger, you need to be angry, and you have to face it, but this other part should also be important, that seems fundamental to me.

Sara: As an activist said, "Strength that comes from happiness, not strength that comes from anger." I think we also need to recover the idea that less is more, that not everything's about growing, growing, making things bigger, bigger, getting to more areas, just for the sake of growing. Faced with the really virtual but also really theoretical world that this is becoming, the importance of getting a coffee, talking, having contact with humanity, with other people... for me that's really essential and I receive a lot of that in this project.

Loreto: Something that's always caught my attention about defenred is that, especially in the past two years, the diversity of the people who've gotten involved to collaborate with us. Normally the people who get involved in a project like this cut more or less from the same cloth. However, the great diversity that there is, and the hope with which the people come to collaborate, to say they want to spend time with the activists to get to know them, from retired people to very young people, people who want to bring their kids to get to know the activists, to people who only come to the talks. There's so much variety and so much diversity that I say, "It's true that people really need solidarity." I think it does us good as well. It's not that we're helping the activists, it's that they're helping us to grow as people and to be different. I believe the people who build relationships with them, they come, they live that, and I believe that that's what inspires them so much.

Victor: There's a book called "What's the point of revolution if we can't dance?" It's an integral part of our bookshelf that we usually recommend to people who come. The book's very good, but above all I think the title's brilliant. I believe that that's kind of the spirit. The spirit of Casa and what we've learned is this: that it's important to make the revolution, but it's also important to be happy.

Trabensol





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
**Torremocha de
Jarama, Madrid**

Collective's name
Trabensol

Name of the interviewees
**Jaime Moreno Monjas,
Paloma Rodríguez, María
Luisa Llorena Barajas
and Pilar Ruisánchez**

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Who are you and what is your relationship with the Trabensol project?

Jaime: My name is Jaime Moreno Monjas, and we started this project before the year 2000. We started to talk about the idea of this project because we were aware of the reality that we were getting older and due to all the different changes society had gone through, we realized they would not have a solution to the different needs we were going to have. Since we were very active people in society, always present in the social and political spaces of this country trying to transform, change it and make it suitable for people, we had the experience and started this project. We thought that we had to create something that would respond to the necessities we anticipated we were going to have as we got older, and that was the birth of Trabensol.

Paloma: I am Paloma Rodríguez. I am the 25th member, and I have been here since the beginning of this project. I was president of this project from the year 2012 until December 2016. Now, I am only part of the commissions of activities, communication, and one more...

Pilar: I am Pilar Ruisánchez. I'm new to the project because I came after the project had already been established, it just needed a couple more members to join the cooperative. I came from a similar experience of that of the partners here. I knew many of the partners here, and when I saw that this project was up and running and the other one had come to a stop, Jaime, my husband and I decided to come here. We do not have that previous experience, but somehow we have followed the experience of the constitution of Trabensol. We know how hard everyone has worked, how much they have suffered, as if we had done it, and we are very grateful to this group because we know how difficult this project is.

Maria: I am María Luisa Ximena Barajas, and I've been here since the beginning. I have always thought that living with friends was something incredible. I have always done what I did before like reader's theater, organized a film forum. Now, because of fatigue I can't do it anymore, but I am happy here.

I see that we have a project before us whose “fundamental objective is to seek a satisfactory way to spend the last years of life” where is it located?

Jaime: We are in Madrid, Spain in a town called Torremocha de Jarama that in the past was known as the “poor mountains” of Madrid in the Northern mountain range. It's an interesting town filled with history, so it's worth coming not only to visit Trabensol but also walk around the area. There is an illustrated project here that was made in the 18th century by the Count of Cabarrús. There are still remains. There is the “house of trades”. At that time,

it was necessary to work with animals and in the House of Trades one learned how to shoe horses, fix cars, threshing machines and other things. It is worth coming here.

Why the name “Trabensol”?

Maria: The name Trabensol means human beings in solidarity. Because the group that started to think and create Trabensol had worked together in the past on different issues in the neighborhood, we decided to do something for all of us who were getting older.

You are a cooperative, can you tell us why you have chosen this model of organization? How has your legal process been? What difficulties have you encountered?

Paloma: Many of the people who were involved in the project already had experience with cooperatives. There was a group that had built homes, the first two groups had built schools for our children in a cooperative regime, we had made a consumer cooperative, which in some cases had become cooperatives of associated work. We had experience in cooperatives and knew that if we wanted to do something autonomous, the best thing was the cooperative business model, a social enterprise.

Jaime: The cooperative is a way of functioning and is perfectly regulated. There is a general regulation covering the entire Spanish State, but each autonomous community has small nuances. We are within the Madrid community and have the peculiarity of a Madrid cooperative, but all the cooperatives have a general assembly where the members are the ones deciding. There is a governing council that executes and carries out what is approved in the assembly or smaller things between assemblies, but an interesting peculiarity is that work commissions have been created here. Those commissions are formed by members who have a background or are interested in that area. There is a member sanitary commission that deals with hygiene and diet. There is a vegetable garden commission that is in charge of mowing the lawn. Most of us are from the city, but there have been members who have learned to do field work and carry it out here. There is also the communication commission where some of us work since we have experience working as journalists. In that way, all members are involved in concrete things that the cooperative needs.

Who initiated this project?

Paloma: There were two groups, one in Moratalaz and another in Vallecas, which are two neighborhoods in Madrid that share a connection with one another, and we were in the same process. We have lived our whole lives together, making schools and cooperatives, so now, “Will our children decide what to do with us when we are no longer able to make that decision?” It was then when we said, “Well, let’s decide until the very end.” We decided to do something that would give more life to this last stage of life that gets longer every time and that we want to be more fruitful because we did not want to retire from life and everything else, just retire from the labor force.

Jaime: The experience we had was that when an old person left their home to go to a nursing home, they were physically and sometimes mentally exhausted. The nursery homes where these exhausted people go bring about much sadness, especially women who are the ones that endure the most. It saddens one because they have always been super active. We did not want to reach that point where our children, unable to attend and care for us, would take us to a nursing

home. We wanted to be in control of our own future and destiny. That was the main motivation for creating Trabensol, a life center and not a center where one awaits death rather a center where you can keep growing as a human being.

I read on the web that this project falls under the category of “Social Center of Coexistence, Assistance and Services for the Elderly” From your experience, what differentiates this social center from a nursing home?

Pilar: Well, for starters the human relationships that occur between the people inside the establishment. The main difference is that in a traditional nursing home, you are an individual that enters a totally alien center where you are a passive being. You go there solely to cover the needs you have at a time of your life where you do not get to decide anything and everything is already made for you because you no longer have the capability to do it yourself. In Trabensol, it is very different because we are a group of people who, even though we are retired, still have the capability to take care of ourselves. We created a center run by us where we have the services we decide on and we have a network of human, social relationships among us that will make our lives more pleasant. Not everyone here has the same level of friendship, you are friendlier with some more than others, and you can have your own group of friends, but you feel happier when you see your friends and acquaintances every day. Everyone, in moments of need is willing to lend a hand, people collaborate, and all that creates an environment that has nothing to do with traditional nursing homes.

Paloma: We have also given ourselves some norms, so the norms aren't being imposed by someone else. It is also true that this reality which is no longer a project will change according to the group that is here. We will go involuntarily, I suppose and then others will come, and those others will do what they need to do, always respecting and understanding the project well. From the Commission of Reception, we ensure that the people who are arriving understand and share the basic principles that we have.

Jaime: The basic principles have a key base which is fundamental. It is mutual aid, solidarity, which is nothing that you feel forced to do but rather it comes out of you. We know how fragile all these norms are but we have great confidence that they are good norms that come out from the deepest depths of being human that with certain respect and care of one another can be maintained even if the project changes. We hope that the fundamental base consisting of mutual help and solidarity is present as long as Trabensol exists. This is our aspiration. Maybe we are mistaken, but it is the reality that we intend.

What exactly does the person who decides to be part of this cooperative society have access to?

Paloma: Before being partners, they go through a type of courtship because according to our colleague Consuelo, this is a love story between 80. There is no other choice but to see what the other person wants. If they are people who arrive asking: where is the doctor? where are the nurses? where is the hospital? we tell them that it would be better to look for something else. There is a doctor and a nurse living here as residents, but it is up to them if they want to lend a hand. We are trying to use public services. On the other hand, if they are people who have not been in associations, unions or political activism, in other words people who have never done anything as a collective, it is very difficult for them to get used to being here. What is purchased is the participation in the cooperative which gives you the

right to use an apartment. There are 54 apartments and the cooperative society is divided into 54 parts. I am the owner of one of 54 in addition to the totality of the cooperative, and that gives me the right to use and enjoy an apartment.

Jaime: Not only the apartment, but all the common spaces. We can practically say that our housing is for sleeping; the rest of the day, we are in all the facilities that we have, which is where we develop our lives. It has been beneficial having a 50m² space as our housing, which is very easy to keep presentable and clean, but what we use is the totality of what we have here: workshops, living rooms, spaces that for us are fundamental. The garden and orchard are wonderful, seeing the seasons go by through them is very pleasant.

What is the internal functioning of the people of this cooperative society?

Paloma: My understanding is that in an assembly, the decisions would be made by the 80 of us who live here, but that is not the case. In the assembly, we choose a governing council consisting of nine members and a president. The general lines are marked in the assembly, and the governing council follows day to day supported in a centered direction.

Jaime: I disagree a bit from that nuance. The Governing Council has decision-making power but also has a distinguished and important position within the cooperative, but if a decision needs to be made and the Governing Council makes it, it would do very poorly. It is the assembly that has to approve it. The Governing Council has a mandate that comes out of the assembly. Small things can come up in between, but if they are important things, they must go to the assembly. The Governing Council cannot decide for itself. The weight of the cooperative is the assembly and the Governing Council is the base. Although the Governing Council can assume responsibility including making decisions that the community may think need to be rectified. What is important here is the assembly, the members. The Governing Council is a very important part, but it has no authority by itself except for what the assembly decides and delegates. Not another thing, otherwise it would be the last straw.

Paloma: If this was the assembly, I wouldn't want to say what it would be.

Jaime: It is not that. It is not bringing up every point to the assembly to discuss, but it is bringing up perfectly elaborated things. The assembly, based on reasoning makes decisions and can also make mistakes. After some time seeing that in practice things are not working out, it always good to turn around and say, "This is not working, let's improve it," because the intention of the cooperative and all the members in particular is finding the best for the operation of the cooperative. So, not dwelling in one thing because, "This has been decided," rectifying is wise.

Paloma: We are similar to the CUP in Cataluña.

Pilar: I think that the information we are sharing, it's great because you're actually seeing the vulnerability that a cooperative has. If people are more tolerant, it works better, and if they are less tolerant, it works poorly. Our real challenge and the cooperative's is that decisions made in a larger group are more difficult to make. It has its pros and cons that some see one way and others see in another. We are still learning, and in this case, it is true that here we have our tendencies, our commissions, where we can qualify, and in that way, we continue marching like society

itself because we come here with all our equipment in our head and we want use it in freedom. But, I have to say that in some reasonable levels, it continues forwards. We have our crisis that exist, and then they get resolved and nothing happens.

Jaime: I think that respect and tolerance are the fundamental basis. Being tolerant does not mean that you give up defending your criteria in a reasonable way and being respectful of the ones in front of you, but above all, making sure to provide data and things that fit. We know that being democratic is more difficult than living in a dictatorship, but it is worth it when you take stock.

Are decisions made by voting or by consensus?

Jaime: By consensus.

Pilar: By voting. [everyone laughs]

Jaime: Voting happens, but it is sought through dialogue, wasting a lot of time, using many arguments, repeating a lot, because many times what you say is repeated by another who adds a small nuance. That takes a lot of time, but we always try to come to a consensus. Pilar is right, in the end, many times we have to vote.

Paloma: One of our principles is that it is better to collaborate than to compete. We have that clear, but when it is time to defend positions there are many people, especially older people, that have irrevocable principles that cannot be given up. Sometimes, the ones that give up their principles from time to time get mad, so then ours are also non renounceable, and that is where the argument begins.

María Luisa: There are many egos.

Jaime: Egos are not only masculine, it is a mix. The important thing is to not be pigeonholed into one position but to provide arguments. It is important to inform yourself with thoughts and ideas that you might not have considered before since they enrich your own argument and that is key when changing your mind. You have to change your mind many times. Being human means thinking and feeling over and over.

How is a project of this type sustained?

Paloma: Its sustainability in the future is being studied in a commission that has spent two years on this. We hope to receive the results in October. There has not been any type of help at the time of construction. There has only been an award, which I am not sure if it went through as a donation to the type of cooling that we have through a geothermal system. We have put up everything else ourselves. If you multiply what the members have put in by 54 that is our capital. That includes the purchase of the land, construction, and the maintenance of the building.

Is this project sustainable in the long term?

Paloma: It will always be sustainable as long as people, partners, voluntarily or forcibly leave, changes continue to happen in order to keep everything running. In the beginning, there was a pile of savings. When we came in 2013, there were six empty apartments because initially there were one hundred and fifty members who had signed up, but there were many people who sadly due to

economic reasons could not come here. We had to overcome these fears when we first came here because everything was still new. We had six free apartments that took two years to fill. At the moment, we have one free apartment.

Pilar: It is very interesting to me how the cooperative has been organized financially. The capital of the cooperative comes from the contributions of the members. There is also an investment that has been made, as Paloma mentioned previously, that has been used for the materials that we have now. In all of this, none of the contributions are shared as profit. Almost every type of economic project has an economic result at the end of the year that is shared between the members. This is in case there is a profit, if there is a loss, the members lose. The way all of us have chosen to organize ourselves is that the capital is not paid out. This means that our contribution gives us the right to live in a house, but we do not pay interest, nor are profits charged if the result is positive, but they do go towards savings. So, the financing is totally social, and it breaks the capitalist model. For me, this makes this project more viable because there is no one person receiving profits from the work and the services we offer to the members, which is not expensive rather we simply pay for what we consume. Also, the administration consists of you using the resources that you have in order to obtain the services that we want. If our financial strength is limited, we limit the services. Since we do not have to pay anyone, we give ourselves that which makes the project very viable.

Does the possibility of obtaining institutional subsidies to sustain this cooperative society model exist?

Jaime: There is no category where Trabensol fits. What qualifications do we have as a cooperative? That box is simply not there for us to check. There are different characteristics listed. For example, one says “shelter homes” another says “residences” and the last one is a box that says “others”. That is where we are placed under because it does not have a clear definition. On the one hand, it is our house and there are other things that point towards “residency” but it is not that. We help each other mutually and we employ specialized personnel as needed. That is why it is very difficult to fit under one of those labels. Every time we talk to the administrations, we explain why they have to change legislation, so we can qualify and have access to the services because they do not know where to place us. The law of dependency is a law that is intended to serve the elderly in residences but it does not help us. So, we will not qualify for those services if a legislative reform is not made.

Are there people employed in Trabensol?

Paloma: There are three hired directly at the moment. The gardener is hired directly as autonomous, and then we have two companies, one is the caterer that makes our meals here and the other is the cleaning and care provider.

Trabensol proposes a model of life that is centered on solidarity, physical and psychological care, mutual support, and trust. How are these values represented in your daily practices?

Maria: Here, for example, setting the table and clearing it, the services, are all done voluntarily by those who chose to. There are many things that we can do, and we do them. There is an example with Antonia who died a few months ago. She was unable to move but every day she was taken out for a walk in the garden on a wheelchair. This woman was cared for until the end by her peers.

Pilar: The formula is still young because we've been here for five years, so we do not yet have dependents in sufficient numbers to have a very organized care. We have them a bit organized, and that care, as Jaime has said, as the care increases then also the aid the member requests. People must say when they want to be helped because it is an intrusion into their own privacy. Each person here has the freedom to request help, so that they can be given that help. For example, my partner is dependent. My husband has musculoskeletal problems right now, and we have not yet requested any special help at the center because I can do the little things that he needs. At the moment it is not necessary to have a special service in place for him, but the day we see that there is that need, then we will ask the organization to respond to that need. There is a commission working on the dependents and there are people prepared to request for the help we have the right to get under the Law of Dependence. We are still not well profiled because we are young.

Paloma: There are cares that reach a certain limit. I can accompany someone. I can assist. I can purchase. I can take someone on a stroll or play in the rooms. We made, voluntarily, a room to be with people so the caretakers can rest because there are illnesses that are exhausting for the caretakers. We do what we can with what we have, but we are not asking for 100%. I do not know if we are going to be changing diapers. We need professional people to do that because amongst friends, it doesn't feel too good that your neighbor does that for you.

Jaime: There is also a series of services that we have already started. For example, if someone has to go to the hospital that is a few kilometers from here, in San Sebastian de los Reyes, those of us who still drive cars are at the service of the person who needs them and well, all these things that in the day to day come up. If it happens that you need transportation and the person needs attentive care, there is an important group of people who are available to do so. There are a lot of services in the house, even the afternoon counseling is covered by us and the dining room service that we mentioned. Actually, we are not closed on ourselves because we are neighbors. We are registered in the town of Torremocha and we participate and utilize all the public services that it has, the municipal services. We have our facilities open. We have the cinema forum and lots of activities that are open to the town such as a lounge "of silence," as we call it, where people do yoga and the world dances. All these things- is not that they prodigate much because the town's people are slow to change, but there are people who come to yoga, who come for the things we do here. Even in the last municipal elections, the town created a popular assembly, and many of us who are here formed part of that popular assembly with no rules even when we are organizing with political parties and are working with collectives of the town. There is a CCA which is an association of producers and consumers of agricultural and livestock products, and we are part of that group. There are comrades who distribute, take the eggs and prepare them. There is a very active life in collaboration with the people. In the group there are also people of the town who are unemployed. There's a collaboration association with the unemployed, and that's how we are involved in almost the whole town.

The Center writes that one comes to live here during “the final stage of life.” Can you explain what you understand by this stage?

Pilar: That stage exists. We have already seen how the evolution of our parents and our grandparents has been. We know that you are at home. You retire and let time pass. Society isolates you, and your nature also isolates you, and you end up alone. The children leave. I mean, the final stage is that. It is real and it exists in that you end up

alone and isolated. There are people that end up alone and isolated earlier, and there are people that take longer, in a town, for example. In the big city, you stay isolated because you do not have the ability to go along with the fast pace of the big city, and also because the relationship between you and your neighbors are not as cordial as in a small town. People in small town can endure a bit more than them because their neighbor is going to see them, and you can survive the life of a senior in your house. In the big cities it is more difficult. The loneliness of your environment tells you when you begin the stage that we have wanted to give life to here. I really believe that is achieved one hundred percent because we come here and deploy an activity you don't see. As Jaime was saying about collaboration, that without meaning to, you develop a cordial relationship with people. Yesterday, for example, someone had to remove a molar. I accompanied them. So, the very nature of living together gives you the opportunity to live a fuller life comparable to the one you develop in a city.

Jaime: One thing that we have not talked about, which is very interesting, is the experience we have had of death. We do not consider that logically you will lose strength, capacity, but you do not consider that. You are living day to day and besides you are doing it in a very active way. We know that at any moment it can stop, but you do not think about that. I am doing what I have to do in the moment I want to, and I do it. "No because it is going to come. I am not sure..." Well, when it comes, we will find a remedy because it is what we have been doing during the entirety of our lives. Human beings are not born cowards thinking about how the world is going to crumble at their feet. When it does fall, I will see how I can get out of that, but what is clear is that while the world does not crumble, I am not going to spend my days thinking it will crumble. The same thing applies to death. The experience that I think has been very curious is having five women die for each man. We have broken the statistic which says that it is normal for men to die before women. Then, what has happened to the couples that have stayed behind? Nothing has happened. They have found themselves in the same environment they were before. No one has gone after them. "How are you?" Simply that they are still in the same activities that they would do. And that is a reference they would never have in the places they lived in retirement with their children gone, alone in their house. Every now and then a friend would visit them, and they would leave their house. Here, life flows on a day to day basis and that really is important because you see it in your eyes. There are people who a month or two ago have lost their partner and you see them leading their normal life. They will cry, but there's no doubt that they are surrounded by a strong human group which is really important.

What kind of person can live in Trabensol?

Jaime: We do not close the door to people from other countries, but we are aware that it is not a thing most people can accept because you have to have a sufficient average pension to make the monthly payments. Also, most of us here had apartments owned in the 60s when there were no rental apartments in Spain and you were forced to have one if you wanted a family. Selling those apartments has allowed us to be able to contribute the necessary money to the cooperative. All the members in the cooperative have put in the same amount of money, and that amount is returnable if you leave or the heirs receive that money when other people move in. That is what the cooperative is looking for. As Paloma said before, it is not something that a member can enter into negotiations with a potential resident, only the cooperative does that. It is also as Pilar has said previously a non-profit meaning that that amount is what fills the seats that are left empty which is returnable money.

Paloma: We have many people in their 50's who have decided they want to live here, but who are still part of the labor force.

Jaime: It's a virtual list, it's real but it is virtual in the sense that they have children and have to sell their apartment.

Can you tell us what a pensioner's reality is like in Spain?

Pilar: It depends on the pension and on the capital that people have. In Spain the generation that is right now in the labor force will have a very difficult future if they do not change the laws, but they will presumably change them because you can't have people who have worked and not have a pension. A pension is an acquired right that, as long as there is not a crisis that puts things upside down, people have to have that right after retiring to be able to continue living. But the pensioner who lives on their own has lived in a house that they own because here in Spain is customary to buy a house if you're middle class. If your pension is enough for you to have someone in your service, then you have someone to support you in old age because you rely on people of service and your children. That puts a burden on their children because just when they finished raising their children, they find themselves having to take care of their elderly parents, and sometimes, to support them economically. That seemed to be natural, that the children should take care of their parents when they age. It's like the return of borrowed services by the parents, and that is what we have wanted to avoid: that our children had to have to take care of us. We have been able to do this (take care of ourselves) because we are under a good economic era. The era of society's welfare has permitted that, but that era has passed. Right now, society's welfare has disappeared quite a lot which means that the future is not resolved for future generations. The pension fund has changed a lot, and the salaries are so low and so precarious, and people are not thinking about elders, so they will not have good pensions. I do not know how the politicians see it, but I see it as quite dark.

Paloma: Pensions are more complicated because not all women from our generation work. Well, all women work but some just don't get paid. When there's only one pension, it gets more complicated. If a woman becomes a widow, she is left with 55% of the husband's pension, then things are more difficult. Furthermore, the floor, that tends to be what all Spanish middle class families save for, ends up partially belonging to the children. And there are tragic situations where the mother ends up in a really bad state.

Jaime: Pensions are a right that has been fought for and obtained in Europe. In this moment, they want to take it away. An idea has been proposed where people, besides having a salary, have to have money to save and to invest in a pension fund. Which is crazy because it is expected that the people do the project in the future which does not happen often. What has happened to the pensions? There has been a moment that, keeping in mind the crisis and what not, has left a great cut. There has even been a year where pensions were not raised. Then, there was a 0.25 raise while the cost of living raised more and it was not meeting the IPC (Consumer Price Index) for the pensions. That would be a topic we can discuss because having a money bank to secure pensions is like when one has a piggy bank in their house, and when it's broken and spent, there is no longer a piggy bank. The state has an obligation to its citizens to give them an answer at all stages of their lives, and one assumes that there are no money boxes to justify when it runs out and there is no more. It has to come from the state. In the same manner that the state provides for

fixing roads, for education, for health and such. That is why we are fighting because we want article 50 of the Constitution where it states that the rights of citizens are protected when they get older to become an organic law and social services are developed. The law of social security states the pensions as a constitutional right that every citizen has. That is what we, the Spanish, aspire to have for reality to change, and not just in Spain but in the rest of Europe too. The Nordic countries to conserve what they had and the southern countries, which is us and are the ones with certain delays because we had solved many things in family affairs- that has been lost with industrialization- to arrive to a public system that, with citizen participation, deals with issues differently and done thinking about the individual.

Paloma: I don't agree with that. It is not industrialization. What has changed is family. The role of women.

Jaime: And why have women changed?

Paloma: Because we women are doing things we had not done before.

Jaime: Paloma and I like each other very much, but we have many long debates.

Can you tell us how you've experienced El 15M?

Jaime: It had to happen earlier. It pained us that the generations that had been moving, struggling and aspiring to have a different society during the Franco regime, possibly naively, because you thought that Franco's death was going to assume that this was Europe, and then when you looked at Europe, it turns out that it was the same but without a dictator, but with an identical economic component. Well, at a certain moment that generation had created, under quotation marks, a well-off society; where a child would open the refrigerator and find yogurt instead of when you would open the cooler and only find cobwebs. That generation that at a certain moment lived comfortably suddenly fell into onto reality, which pushed it to act. I think that within that generation there were already kids that were actively fighting similar to how the 15M was an awakening. An awakening that said if we do not fight, this reality will drown us. The ones that come from a previous generation we say, well it's about time we are now all together trying to make a change.

Maria: Many of the children of people who fought during Franco's regime had seen this in their parents. I think some were aware of what was happening. I like that the young people are more involved and many of us joined.

Jaime: What happened was that one had to be careful to not speak too much because there are times that what one has can hinder, and we have to support what is current. We were there but we did not want to be bothersome. We have to support what is current.

Pilar: I was surprised and liked it a lot. We had read that our children were passive, that they did not value one thing over the other, that they were not involved in politics. Then we discovered that they had a new conscience. I do not know if they know where they are headed to, but this was able to fire up the youth, which gives life to society.

Paloma: Also, there are those who have exposed the darker aspects of that. I have heard a lot. The other day a woman of PP part of the Madrid community

said disdainfully, "All this about cooperative for the elderly came out of 15M."

Jaime: And that is not true. We were here before.

Paloma: How are we supposed to come out of 15M when we are already built college for our children because we didn't have that, and we made housing in a cooperative regime. I would tell that person, "You think what you like, but you are wrong."

Coming from a vital activity that relates to cooperativism, why do you think that the cooperative tradition has not yet established itself as a social model even though we are in a territory where cooperativism has strong historical roots?

Jaime: Well, for many years there have been new economic ways that gave the image that everything could be profitable, so people no longer thought about the commons. Bit by bit, there is an increase in that thought where if rent for yourself, it will be more profitable than if you support completely because what you own is there too.

Paloma: I was in Palencia not long ago, and found out that there is no cooperative movement. There is some agricultural thing, but there is no sense of cooperative at all. They wanted to do something similar to this, but there was not enough support. The housing cooperatives that surged in the 60s was to construct a building. Later, they made a horizontal division, and that is where the cooperative ended. There wasn't a spirit of unity.

Jaime: There are collectives for legal rights of Navarra, for example.

Pilar: The social economy is trying to open paths but it is against the capitalist system, the pond that is Europe. Anything that is not within the parameters of the capitalist system takes a long time to function. It is like playing Parcheesi on the Goose game board. When one is the welfare state, like the one we were under Felipe Gonzalez's socialism, which were many years of economic development, it was after we were very poor. Being in poverty allowed for social movements and for unions. You do have the conscience of class, but when you live in the welfare state, you do not want to fight as much. One reacts differently.

Jaime: There is one thing that is also very important to note. At this moment they've been creating things stemming from 15M, like the social market, which existed. They have appeared suddenly but many already functioned. Trabensol is forming part of that market of social services. There are also other things that are surging: cooperatives, federations of cooperatives like Hispacoop. Explain it, Paloma. You were there.

Paloma: In Hispacoop, there are nine cooperatives grouped together under the umbrella of a federation of consumer cooperatives. We have this is because we still do not have enough strength and, perhaps, not much desire since we are all older those from Cuenca, Málaga, Jaén, Tarragona. It is good for us to have support at least in administration, with the contacts in Europe which are in the Social Economy Counsel at the national level. We meet a few times a year to see what difficulties we are having and together lend a hand to those trying to do something similar, so they don't have it as difficult as we've had. When thinking about what a cooperative is, you cannot stay in your own cooperative since in some way you are cooperating with others.

Do you advise people so they can replicate the Trabensol model?

Jaime: We have also participated, not as Trabensol, but at the level of different associations because some of us have participated, or still are part of, in social and political associations and groups in the State Council for the Elderly. In Europe in the International Year of the Elderly, it was thought that the Administrations to favor organizations for the elderly. So in Spain it was created, with the motive of that European directive, the State Council for the Elderly in 1994. What happens is that they are systems supervised by the administration in such a way that they are very uncooperative, but that does not mean that we do not have to work with them because that is the way all political institutions run. They are always trying to be mediated by the party that has the power at that moment which is always the same one. From the State Council for the Elderly, the law of dependency has come out. Since the first drafts, changes and improvements have been introduced, and people from the cooperative have been involved very directly. For instance, Paloma is working at this time in Histacoop. She is representing Trabensol, but with all the knowledge she already has by having had jobs in cooperatives. You are contributing your experience and trying to be as effective as possible. There are times when you feel that you do very little but doing just a little is always important.

Paloma: Totally, today I have spoken with two people who are interested in coming here. I have told some of them to come because it would benefit them. Others will come with their mayor because they want to see if they can replicate this project in their own town. We do the same as other cooperatives. First, because they have convinced us that being active is very good for elderly people, and second, because we are supportive. Many people have come here from universities. Last week, a retired engineer came who was doing his sociology thesis on this project, and some of us went to hear about his thesis. It is a big deal, his thesis.

Jaime: There is a great curiosity around the world precisely about the elderly population in developed countries specifically regarding the increase in the elderly population. All around the world, they ask us, "What do we do with the elderly?" Well, people have come here from the University of Japan to Europe to see, and they definitely came here, what answers were given to the elderly. They have come from the Nordic countries to see the peculiarity of the Mediterranean. In those more developed countries from the administration of the Council, they have, after many years, answers for the elderly. But in the Mediterranean, the answers are being born in a spontaneous and lively manner, possibly with errors, but rich in experiences. So they were curious to see that. They have also come from Norway, from many countries in Latin America, from Costa Rica, from Mexico, and from many other places, including Arab countries. Al Jazeera was recording here to see what answers were given because they also have a similar problem with the elderly population. It is very enriching to think about the people. All of this is a great enrichment for thinking about the individual. The important thing is that people realize that we have the leading role and that no one has to give it to us. It is ours and we have to make it run and that is what will make things richer because we enrich it, not because they are given to us. We are doing new things. We had not heard about co-housing or about Denmark or the Netherlands. This is something that was born here. When we started, we went to see something that was in Malaga, and we saw that in different places they were creating different things because it stems from the differences of the individuals that create them.

What does it mean for Trabensol to grow?

Pilar: For me it means trying to perfect the system that we have established, getting to know our partners, and provide them with a better welfare. For me, for this to grow means that we are able to be happy here. All that gives us pain is the failure of Trabensol, and when it gives us happiness, that is growth. For me, the well-being of our partners is the goal.

Paloma: For me, my personal growth would come from being able to better communicate with people, to listen. There are many people here who do not listen. I have become active, and I am a good listener. That does not mean that I do not speak. Life keeps putting challenges up that we must overcome, and that makes you grow as a person because if everything is given to you, and you sit on a chair to watch television to see how others are doing, well you get lost because that does not make you as an individual.

Jaime: Like Paloma and Pilar said, growth can also be about personal growth. When is that growth going to end? When you cannot anymore. In the meantime, you are going to keep evolving and growing, taking in sharp criticism from what you are receiving, and what you offer. And in that process you enrich yourself. We are in a living process because we are still creating. The project is not something that is finished because we have made the building and we are living here. It is done day by day, constantly and we are constantly receiving information and at the same time we do not know if this is going to stay as it is. The capacity humans have throughout their lives of being able to create things as a response to necessities, could also be a whim, but generally, when we move, it is for something. And we respond to that stimulus. That response in this moment is this one. But we do not know how it will be after some time, with different people. What we are willing to do is to fight, to keep working with all of our capabilities, and finding support from others so people, perhaps not us anymore, other people can put to action things. And if we are still here, then we can pay attention because there will be better things and we could apply them. It is growth as individuals and as a collective of people.

Maria: Like Jaime says, I think that it is very important to know how to share the ideas that have helped us that many times are not implemented in society. I think it is very important to transmit all those ideas.

Based on your experience, what does this model of society have yet to learn about this stage of life?

Pilar: I have a painful conscience. First by being a woman. You spend your entire life feeling how they push you aside, and then, when you get old, you are ignored. You go to the hair salon, and they speak to you by talking differently to you. You go to the store, and they speak in a different tone, and wherever you are, no one hears what you say. It is clear to me that that is a harsh experience.

Considering your experience in this cooperative society and your own learning, what ideas, values or experiences would you say could be useful for the pending task of social transformation?

Maria: Forming groups to do something good for society, or that did not exist before, and we create groups so that exists. Like we've

said before, we do not want anyone to tell us what we have to do because we want to do it ourselves and that is very important.

Paloma: Working as a group is very important. It is very noticeable that the people who have come here have been in collaboration. We have our whole lives. I've come here with twenty-something friends that have been doing many things in our neighborhood for 50 years, and we're still fighting. We've built a school, a choir and a consumer cooperative, and we always speak in the plural because we've done it together. We knew if someone had an idea, they would be supported by many. When we had nowhere to go, we would go camping because we had a middle class that was "loose" because of a series of things.

Pilar: An aspect we have not talked about, but it is very interesting is our faith. The people that have come here due to our age have come from a Christian Spain, and when this project was created we made it non-denominational. There are no chapels or rosaries here. **[Paloma:** We already did it in the school.] However, people here have created their own reflection groups. There are three reflection groups that meet periodically, and at their base, it is Christian. In some manner, it is not religious but ethical. I think this side has been important. The common ethic to all, and then there are groups that have their missions in a character that is what this is.

Jaime: It would be interesting to explore what that Spain supposed of the defeat of the year 39 and the deep emptiness of ideologies and the connection between social politics and the role of the Catholic Church at the moment of the awakening of a person's dignity. That meant the penetration of lots of collectives with different ideologies. I do not refer to the church, I mean the collectives coming from the church. For example, in France, a movement of the working-class priests arose and that was repeated in the late 50s or 60s in Spain, in the neighborhoods. That is to say, the sociopolitical fabric of the country had a very important role with the awakening of Christian ideologies and the dignity of a person, in the liberation theology of Latin America. There were many things done in the neighborhoods. Propaganda pamphlets were prepared in churches where the priest could copy documents. Reunions were done in nun convents.

Paloma: Another contradiction, the school we made, which was not religious, became a school.

Jaime: And it was made with the support of the priest. Classrooms where religion was not taught, were given to us by the priest. In this new solidification of ideologies, the young priests had a great role, and after they became secular and had families. That is an interesting topic that should be looked at again.

[They talk about an anecdote where a priest stopped giving Maria communion, in the 60s, in an ultra-catholic context, and of hard collaborators of Franco's regime.]

Paloma: Older people have to organize themselves. People need to have something to do. This weekend, I saw a couple and I had to tell them that we cannot take people over 70 because this would become a geriatric; it would not be what we want it to be. I told them, "put us in contact with people from your town." There are timid initiatives. For example, three or four women who place themselves in a flat and look for someone to help them, and then they rent the other three floors, and in some ways, they live like the Spanish Golden Girls. I also know a town that is accommodating

people, so they do not leave their homes. There are many solutions, and this is just one of them, but it is not easy. It can be done because we have done it ourselves. There are already 9 or 10 groups in Spain that already have people living together. But we have to look for solutions. We cannot keep waiting for our children to tell us they are taking us to a nursing home when we are no longer able to decide because that is death.



Autofabricantes





Constellation
of the Commons

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Who are you and what is your relationship with the project Autofabricantes?

I'm Francisco Díaz, coordinator for research of the research project and working group Autofabricantes.

When, where and why did this project come about?

The project Autofabricantes started in October 2015 when there was an open call for proposals by Medialab-Prado in order to select cultural and research projects in different areas of social innovation related to technology, culture, etc. I was selected to develop this project and what I did was open it up to the entire community to start the working group we are today. But Autofabricantes started in 2014 in Seville with a family we knew and shared other projects with. They were going to have a little girl who they knew was going to be born without a hand, and faced with this scenario, not only from a medical perspective but also an orthoprosthetic one, they asked us what other alternatives there were so that Paula would really be autonomous and free in terms of her personal technical support that the system was offering. That was when we started thinking because we had already been working for three years with 3D printing and other technologies in open code and we saw that creating a prosthesis for Paula was really a realistic alternative and that led to a whole research project.

Now we are in Madrid in Medialab-Prado. It is a public office, a laboratory of the people of the City of Madrid. It's open so that anybody can collaborate in any type of research or in any type of activity as long as it is collective and everything that is produced is given back to the community.

How many years has the project been functioning?

Here in Madrid we have been operating for three years or "three school years" as we like to say, during which many people and collaborators of different types have contributed tools on the level of technology, practicality or for research.

Where did the name Autofabricantes come from?

Well, like all names come about, it was a coincidence. We were defining our project as collective independent manufacturing of prosthesis and in open code. And it is independent manufacturing because we work with 3D printing machines where we provide our own technical support, and from there the idea of "autofabricantes" (literally "self-manufacturers") came about -- people who produce their own resources.

Are you a research group?

We are a working group associated with Medialab like any other group, but in addition, for two years we were a research project that I coordinated, and we're still a research project that I coordinate, not in mediation and research anymore but in another area.

Are you planning on becoming an association or collective?

Yes, we are already an association. After two years working and getting to know one another, and with people joining and leaving the team, we saw that there could be a much more sustainable and stronger future. So we took part in a group participation facilitation process for six months that led to us becoming an association, redefined and reorganized as a collective and not only relying on what I was proposing.

Can anybody join? What is the profile of the people that have joined so far?

In principle, yes. We simply established some minimum requirements for time commitments when collaborating with us, but just like in any other type of place. Most people are pretty technically experienced because in the beginning we developed or created the model with all the collaborators who are technicians in different areas, from health or occupational therapy or in the specific engineering field of 3D printing, 3D design, electronics, mechatronics, etc.

The 15M Movement, for many of the collectives that I've been speaking with, represented a moment of reorganization, reinventing, regrouping. What has this movement represented for the people in your association?

Personally yes, but regarding Autofabricantes or on a professional level no because it was four years after all of this. Autofabricantes didn't exist when the 15M Movement happened, although there are collectives like "En torno a la silla" and others that we collaborate with and they did have a very important relaunching as far as their functional diversity is concerned, for example, and regarding other concepts that are associated with this type of project.

This project came out of Medialab Prado, but how does this project sustain itself institutionally?

During the first two years, there was very important financial support that allowed me to work on research, coordinating the team and the whole project. This ranged from the material costs, which were also covered by Medialab, to the whole infrastructure that we use here which is very valuable. After that, we looked for external funding and now we rely on an outside foundation called The Daniel and Nina Carasso Foundation which also co-finances part of the project in another bigger lab. Besides this, with a certain amount of autonomy within the association, we make small agreements with small associations, foundations or companies to finance small projects.

Would this research process be possible without institutional support?

A project that is so long-term like this one would be very difficult, without minimal institutional support for infrastructure and with a minimum of financial support for materials or for workshops that we pay for. It would be very difficult because, in the first place, everybody gets tired of collaborating on any type of project and afterwards,

you need community support in order to make the projects you are working on known. There needs to be a big community that provides people and knowledge and that then receives feedback about everything that is produced. So Medialab is an ideal community for this type of project. Medialab or other similar places.

How does a project like this sustain itself after the institutional support from Medialab ends?

We're dealing with this now. Right now we're okay because we receive support from the Carasso Foundation and Medialab and this will continue for another year. But it's true that we have to keep looking for support, not only financial but also from a team perspective and for the whole project because when a collaborative team comes together, there are people on the team who have the expectation and time to dedicate three hours a week and this is fine. But there are others on the team who see that this could be a lifetime project and it's important to try to make this possible. When thinking about possibilities for the future, economically we could be an association, a foundation or a company. In my view, it would be better to continue as an association but it must be economically sustainable for the collaborators and continue to follow the principles of open code, as a center for design and development and with all the families, keeping costs low and the knowledge available.

How many people participate on this team? Are any of them salaried?

Currently on the team there are fifteen people as associates, but in addition there are five or six people who are regular collaborators and another five or six who collaborate now and then. Currently we are all volunteers. I'm in the lab coordinating other activities and a small part of my job is to coordinate Autofabricantes. All the workers have other jobs.

How many hours do the people involved in this project work as volunteers?

There are colleagues who work three hours every fifteen days, others who work the three hours during our meeting each Monday, weekly, and there are colleagues who come up to two or three times a week to do their work. Long term, we should be sufficiently stable economically so that anybody can work more hours beyond those that are done as a volunteer.

Thinking of the concept of “work”, what has “work” meant in the context of this project in Medialab?

Well it's incredible working here due to all the input that you have from different projects going on in Medialab. It's also very interesting to work with the different installations that are here, with all of the community because there are many events that you can collaborate with or projects that you can't even imagine come through here and they end up generating a very interesting collaboration.

In your web page it says the following: “This project establishes an ethical and political alternative to the current system of patents and high costs for prostheses in a closed-off industry.” Can you explain to us what problems come from the current system of prostheses and why it is not ethical? Why is it that your work is ethical?

Well it's a difficult question because that was the first idea behind the beginning of the project. When a family, or any individual, is told that they have to depend, for the rest of their life, on a catalogue system for the body in order to access different means of support, well okay, because it's a system that guarantees that you'll be allowed to access these types of resources to be able to manage your life better and have more autonomy. But when you discover that behind all of it is an industry with extremely high costs due to patents and lack of investment, and then when you realize that all the technology they have is obsolete, when considering the costs, you begin to have doubts and that's how this project started. And it's not the only one in Spain or Europe; with these projects the goal is to establish some alternatives that are accessible as far as knowledge about their existence and the technology involved, but also economically, so that families across income brackets can access this type of technical support and also have the freedom to be able to replicate, create or improve it.

In order for this project to be possible, it seems essential for there to be a combination of “new tools of digital manufacturing, open code, mutual care and the collaboration of a multitude of professionals and citizens.” Can you explain how all these elements combine on this project?

Well, combining all these concepts or ways of doing things can seem difficult but the whole process is very nice and yes, it's true that it takes a lot of invisible work, but it's not a problem and we do it gladly. It's very simple. Digital manufacturing inevitably goes hand in hand with the technology of 3D printing, laser cutting or CNC, which are currently very accessible in Europe or the U.S. The part about “open culture” is the DNA of the project. Everything that is produced, whether it be something in progress or completed, it has to be described and published so that anybody can replicate or improve it in another part of the world. And the part about care, there are times when we forget about it, but it's very important for the whole team of volunteers to be comfortable, to trust one another, to believe in the project, and also, considering that not only technicians but also families are involved in the work process from the very beginning, it's important to create a comfortable space for dialogue because this is where the real innovation starts. And then there's learning because we also consider that it's very important for there to be people involved who are not only technicians or users but also anybody who wants to contribute and learn. What does this mean? Well we have various examples, like Paola, and I love to talk about her work because she started collaborating on the project and she knew very little about 2D and 3D design and, through collaborating with us, seeing that she had the opportunity to learn and contribute in the whole project, now she is one of the people who works not only on 2D and 3D but also in Calculus programs with a fairly complex design.

From what I've read you are a working group that has “communication without taboos.” What are the taboos that exist in the area of disabilities that you have decided to eliminate?

Well, related to the topic of disabilities there are many taboos, especially among adults, and also regarding how we used to talk with industry people. To talk without taboos is to talk about high costs, which people often seem afraid to point out, and it seems like we're afraid to talk about different bodies that are lacking a hand or a foot

or whatever. It's amazing when two children who are missing a hand meet and they talk about their disability with an incredible openness that even surprises us, and we are very used to the topic. And this is the most interesting part because we see that the adults are the ones who complicate things that should be very natural, like the fact that we have different bodies and we relate to the world in a very different way.

Do you offer some type of workshop to make your activities known?

For now, we're doing very technical workshops, for example, on developing and designing different types of prostheses; but the conceptual methodological part about everything that we do might be an interesting topic too. We do a lot to disseminate information, but workshops to highlight our work would be a good idea.

You've written that, up to now, you have developed an arm-hand prosthesis and that you have been working with Paula (the young protagonist of the project) and her family on a long-term basis. Can you tell us the story about this family?

Of course, Paula is the daughter of Juan and Natalia, the couple from Seville with whom we started this project and continue working with, and if it's possible, soon we'll do a workshop with Paula's participation. She's using one of the projects that we developed here and we'll do a workshop there in order to do it as a group with other children in Seville. That is, we continue to be in touch with them as we're developing projects with them.

How do you work on updating the prostheses for the people you work with?

This is one of the main problems with the industry and with this type of project in general because it's necessary to change the prosthesis every six months or year, depending on the age of the child, and apart from the major wear and tear that playing has on it. So, with this type of technology it is very easy to reprint another prosthesis with updated measurements and this drastically reduces costs. In addition, it allows children to redesign or change the colors and even the structure according to what they need at each stage of their growth.

What difference is there between a 3D prosthesis and a commercial one?

The commercial prosthesis has a different manufacturing system, and these ones in 3D have a customized model in 3D where you can put in the dimensions, change the model and you can download it to print directly in 3D, in a single morning or afternoon.

How much does a prosthesis cost?

Well, the commercial ones can range from 2,000 €, to those that are merely more aesthetic, up to 20,000 €. Then there are those that are covered by social security or by the national healthcare system and have motorized functionality. We can't sell prostheses, but we do have production costs and hours of work and there are some that we are developing that do not have anything electronic but a high functionality that are called Supergiz and one of these can have a cost of 3D printing and development between approximately 300 and 500 €.

Do the families that receive these prostheses have to pay for them?

Currently, since we have public financing, we are not offering any type of commercial service. They can simply use them for free because in addition, we understand that we are in a beta testing phase; that is, even though there are many families using them, there is always a relationship with them that goes beyond a user of a product because they provide input. They invent other types of solutions that we develop and these end up benefiting other children.

What does it mean to apply free license in the realm of prostheses?

Applying free licensing means that with a model that has been developed here or that has been developed in another part of the world, we can download it, improve it and upload it again so that anybody with a similar need can use it.

Do you work with or form a network with other collectives?

Yes, here in Spain we know other collectives that we collaborate with and we develop very similar projects. We're also in an international network called Enabling the Future that was started in the U.S. and has all of the prostheses that we have seen advertised, with a very specific mechanical model that was developed by a father there when he saw that there was a need to think about another way to offer technical assistance for missing arms.

Is Autofabricantes a political project? If so, what kind of politics are involved?

I would say no. It's a project that offers alternatives and that each person can adapt to their needs. I would say that it's a project generating these alternatives and adding innovation or social use to a technology that, up until now, I considered was just for building action figures and didn't make much sense. And this is what gave meaning to 3D printing, which today has spread throughout the world and it provides an alternative to something that has been standardized like the industry of prosthetics, whether we like it or not, when bodies are not standard and much less in these cases.

How many families have passed through Autofabricantes?

Currently, in all of all of our projects together there have been about 25 families, either here in Spain or when we've done work in Colombia. We're in contact with other families in Spain that have come to collaborate and we have been developing projects with them, little by little, because the amount of volunteer hours we can count on is limited, and besides, many of the projects start with a conversation with the family because they think that something we have can help them, but once you start looking into it and do a technical assessment to see what the needs are, you realize that you'd have to start the project from zero.

How do you select the families?

Well normally it's by request. A family comes and we study the cases and we see if it's possible technically and if practically we can develop it. Normally regarding technology there aren't problems, but in practical terms we sometimes don't have time and we have to put the project on hold until we're able to work on it.

What have you learned working with these families?

Well it's a daily learning process, especially when we're with the family and it's incredible to see how something that you've been researching and working on for six or seven months has a real application and the children try it out and put it to use right away, and this is the most gratifying and amazing part of the projects. It's nice working attentively and carefully and listening to the families who often are reluctant to tell you about silly things in life that, in the end, aren't that silly after all.

How do you make decisions as a group?

Every Monday we work on development, we assign tasks for the week and on the following Monday, we assess these tasks and assign others. Every 15 days we have a meeting to tell the whole team how each of the seven research projects is going and once per trimester, we have meetings to evaluate how things are working in general (internal and external communication, etc., or with families) and how work is progressing. We don't always stay on schedule but we do try to carry out effective assessment because the success of the project depends on everything functioning as it should.

Have you designed your own protocol for making sure the group performs well?

We haven't designed tools but we do consider it essential to get together for a drink after work or to celebrate an important accomplishment with a glass of wine or something because it is very important to celebrate every small accomplishment in research projects that are so big.

You come from the university environment. What relationship does the group have with universities?

Currently we have 12 students who collaborate with us and they are working on projects for their degree, for completing a Masters or internships, which have allowed them to get involved and they are even developing new avenues of research that we didn't have access to due to lack of machinery or lab materials. So, we signed an agreement with the Polytechnic University of Madrid to have this exchange with students and ideas, as long as everything that is produced stays in open code and the students learn from a multidisciplinary team.

There is a false dichotomy between the sciences and the humanities at universities. How do these two spheres integrate on this project?

I believe that one has to give meaning to science and all technological developments that we have in our hands, especially in developed countries because there are times when fantastic technological developments occur but they don't have any connection with practical objectives or with people who can put them to use. This is the tool of 3D printing. We have micro-electric prostheses with a highly advanced technology and a person might not care about this until they understand that this can help them move an arm. So it is important to teach people about this and bring down to earth scientific or technical advances that are cutting edge.

Why do you believe in open code?

Because it's not necessary to reinvent the wheel twice in the world. If somebody has already invented it, why think about it again? We have to think beyond this.

How did you get introduced to open code?

I started collaborating at the Fablab in Seville, in the Department of Architecture where I studied in 2011, and I was playing around with the 3D printers that were in Spain. Behind this technology there is a huge community that has made this highly advanced technology possible and that is where I understood that with many people thinking together and sharing what they know, they are capable of doing something very important, and it produces a real improvement in our society.

What are, from the perspective of Autofabricantes, the areas where we need to improve regarding functional diversity?

Well, first there is the idea of normalization, and then of full integration and working more on the autonomy of all people, in the different aspects of life, especially in the area we work in: education. This can be complex and it involves many different areas because the educational system, starting from pre-school, should focus more on sharing, working on concrete projects, collaborating more. Then afterwards, in college, we need to get away from thinking in terms of departments and professions in order to do multidisciplinary projects that have practical applications in the community. Also, we must stop being obsessed with patents and publishing everything we do so that we can produce real change and real innovations beyond a publication or a patent that often sits in a drawer somewhere.

What do you think we need to learn as a society to help us collaborate more?

Well we really need to free ourselves from the "professional chains" and from all the mental ties holding us back with regard to our capacities because surely, if we talk with a neighbor, a classmate or a laboratory colleague, we'll be able to do something that is much more interesting. When we go beyond these limits, this is really when the magic appears and where you smile and say, "We're going to forge ahead in this adventure and maybe something lovely will come out of it."

Do you have documents with information about your methodology or materials that explain your accomplishments?

We are currently working on a new web page where we'll describe all of our projects. Another one of our upcoming projects is to carry out a group analysis consisting of systematizing our work methodology and sharing information about everything we're working on. We plan to work on this little by little.

Are there any tools or concepts that you have invented that you would like to share with us?

I think there are two that are part of the same project. On one hand, there is Supergiz which is a project that came about from dialogues with families, and it entails a prosthesis that doesn't look like a hand -- nor does it function like one. It's a type of glove that has some hooks to handle specific gadgets and it has a specific functionality.

This is fairly innovative, not just because I'm saying it is but because it conceptualizes the functionality of a hand in a specific way. It assumes that bodies have to be autonomous throughout the whole day and it helps with a specific part of one's daily activities. In addition, it allows the children to design and develop the gadgets they're really going to use with us, focusing on their interests and hobbies. It's great to see how, after barely three months into a project, you can develop some gadgets and specific tools for challenges that users have never had the opportunity to overcome.

With this project, instead of releasing it and making it public, which we've already done, we've started to develop it in the context of workshops with six or seven children with similar needs who develop and design these types of gadgets together with designers over three months of work. It's enriching to see how the children connect with one another and they have a good team of designers who make it possible for the rough drawings they do one morning to become a reality in 3D printing in a way that really works.

What does growth mean for Autofabricantes?

from my point of view, and Autofabricante's, it's always important to come to agreement in our meetings. However, from my perspective, I think growing means having an idea that's bigger than what we are doing now. Growth is a matter of being more sustainable as a group, which means more confident, to trust one another more. Growing means having an environment of users and families that have a lot of trust, an environment that is well nourished. For me, growing isn't just a bigger number or a greater sum.

Keeping in mind the climate of political discontent and insecurity in different aspects of life, how do you stay motivated and how do you deal with powerlessness?

This is one of the most difficult parts. Currently there is a project that has taken three years of work and then there are shorter research projects that yield positive results in a short amount of time. It's a matter of celebrating the small victories in these longer research projects. It's important to celebrate each of the small steps that we take and to try to sketch out the whole path together until we reach our final objectives. We have to avoid having abstract goals and make sure they are very specific.

Consume hasta morir





Constellation
of the Commons

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Location
Madrid, Spain

Collective's name
Consume Hasta Morir

Name of the interviewees
Isidro Jiménez Gómez

Interviewer
Palmar Álvarez-Blanco

Website
consumehastamorir.org

Translated and reviewed by
Emily Bruell



Who are you, and what's your relationship with the project "Consume Hasta Morir"?

I am Isidro Jimenez from the project Consume Hasta Morir (Literally, "Consume until death") which was created in 2002 within Ecologistas en Acción ("Environmentalists in Action,") in Madrid. I was one of its founders. The project was born from a group of people who wanted to work in the field of consumption. When I found out about it, I became very interested and decided to join them. I had already worked with Ecologistas en Acción, and before that, in a different organization called Adena which was kind of the seed of Ecologistas en Acción. As they were working on issues of consumption and I was very interested in working on those issues, I suggested we do a project looking at what other projects did. One thing that really stood out was anti-advertising, which was really a project on responsible consumption, but dressed up with all that history of anti-advertising.

What type of work do you do?

I've always been a graphic designer and worked in the field of communication, especially social communication. For the last 15 years, I've worked for the most part in social communication. Currently, I am an associate professor in information sciences at the Complutense University of Madrid.

How is "Consume Hasta Morir" organized as a project or a work group?

Actually, around an almost incidental issue that ended up being very good for us. There was a commission on consumption in Ecologistas en Acción when we created this story, but it was a very small commission. It consisted of three people who met once in a while. Because we didn't have any problem with these people who were doing their job, we decided not to make a commission, which is the typical route to take within Ecologistas en Acción in Madrid. Ecologistas en Acción is a coordinator of groups at the state level with almost 300 groups throughout Spain, and each group is organized the way they want. Because Madrid is so big, it has a lot of commissions, and each commission works on a specific issue. In fact, there is no commission on consumption anywhere else. Seeing that there was already a consumption commission here, we decided not to make a commission but to do something else. We proposed an organizational alternative that was then talked about a lot because it was really anecdotal and different but it also allowed us to think about other forms of organization within Ecologistas en Acción and other groups. In the end, it was a project that would last for a long time and that didn't have a fixed structure. It also went a little outside of the typical form

because the commissions are usually an open space where people can come and go, and it's not that Consume Hasta Morir wasn't like that, but it was created with a set objective of being an occasional project. Actually, Consume Hasta Morir was initially a training course for people who wanted to learn about eco-social issues. Ecologistas en Acción has really strong roots, not only in ecology but also social ecology, it's one of the few representatives of social ecology in the Spanish state.

So, people got to know the issue, and that group formed Consume Hasta Morir. It was a very large group with about thirty-something people, and we stuck with the name and started the project. We weren't a commission, we didn't have the same requirements that other Ecologistas en Acción groups had, but we still felt like part of Ecologistas en Acción. Another different thing is that we keep in mind that we're not interested in being too similar to Ecologistas en Acción, that's been almost a strategic point for us. but we have always been part of Ecologistas en Acción. In fact, Consume Hasta Morir was the origin of a consumption commission that still exists today, because the earlier little commission dissolved. People from Consume Hasta Morir have always been involved in the new consumption commission; we've started and supported the efforts of the consumption commission, including financially, as well as being involved in the area of consumption in general, which is more important because on a state level, that's something transversal in Ecologistas, and something that connects all the consumption-related things that various groups in the State do, and we were really the ones who championed that story.

What is your relationship with Ecologistas en Acción?

Right now, we're an autonomous group within Ecologistas en Acción. We are linked to the consumption commission and the area of consumption in Ecologistas en Acción. I don't think we ever had the idea of being an artistic group or an absolutely independent collective because we have always felt that we were part of something else and that our purpose was to do other things. In fact, as a group we've put a lot into supporting the creation of the area of consumption in Ecologistas en Acción. We have always had this in our DNA from the beginning, so to change and take advantage of it has been mutually beneficial because we've gone from being the provocateurs of anti-consumerism to the ones proposing another economy, and obviously you can't do that alone, you need the support from others.

Do you make the decisions together with Ecologistas en Acción or make them autonomously as a working group?

Not really. Consume Hasta Morir has always been considered a space to experiment with different things. The commission in Ecologistas has the effect of raising awareness, such as by attracting young people who want to learn about the issues of responsible consumption, but of course in that space, there's not much time to experiment or to try to do something different. For example, once we did an informative project at the Leganés town hall, and we went to 14 institutes to do workshops. That demanded the kind of work and logistical effort a commission can't carry out, because commissions have the format of sporadic volunteering. So, the good thing about Consume Hasta Morir is that you have the freedom to manage your projects when you want, and when the moment is right.

How many people work in this project? What are their jobs?

Right now, we are 4 people. Two of them are in the consumption commission. Then, there's a person who works with audiovisuals and another person who is a psychologist. Always, and it's been almost twenty years that we've existed, the good part about the group has been that it changes itself and adapts to the circumstances. Depending on the projects that we've done, we've had more or less people of various profiles. I think the interesting thing is that now, we really work through projects, and they're the kinds of projects where really it makes the most sense for a certain kind of person to be doing them. When we have worked on educational projects, we have had more people connected to education. Now, we're planning to do what we did back in 2005 when we made our first documentary, called *Gran Superficie* ("Superstore"), which was an important challenge; now we want to make the second part, as we'd say, with another name and another story, and for that we need people of that kind of profile. The group grows depending on the people who fit the profile for each individual project.

The 15M has signified a moment of reorganization, (re) invention, strengthening or contribution to the experience of many of the groups with whom I have spoken to. What has the 15M signified for "Consume Hasta Morir"?

I think that we contribute to 15M on a personal level. We're activists and almost all of us who have participated in Consume Hasta Morir have tried to get involved somehow with the 15M as much as we've been able to. For example, two of us got involved through the "official journalism groups" of the 15M because we were more linked to the world of communication. We each contributed as much as we wanted as individuals. It wasn't a group decision, because 15M asked for personal participation, not from a whole group. It's true that for us it was an important moment, because of what happened after. For many years we assumed a provocative role; in fact, we did this to the point where we'd go to advertising faculties in that role of provocateur. We went to talk to advertising students who were learning the classic matters of advertising, and threw all that into question. It's also true that we've accepted that the provocateur's role wasn't so necessary anymore, because luckily, we're in a new phase of responsible consumption. For example, we've seen that suddenly, many people started bringing up anti-advertising in the classroom. That helped us see that we were in a place where people reflected more on responsible consumption. And the 15M helped us realize that we had to change. That is to say, it wasn't worth continuing to work on the issue of provocation for responsible consumption and against multinational companies. We had to change the discourse. It was a process where we needed to accept that we had to propose alternatives. There are two fundamental steps we took. One of them is that we started to get involved, but not as Consume Hasta Morir because that wouldn't make sense. For example, as Consume Hasta Morir, we couldn't connect with the social economy of Madrid, which is really a state network that's part of the social and solidarity-based economy. We wanted to participate in this type of story, and that involves changing your ideology. Now you're not against consumption, now you're looking for a different kind of consumption and promoting different kinds of consumption, but how are you going to do that with a name like Consumo Hasta Morir, Consume Until Death? What we've tried to do is have Ecologistas en Acción be inside the social economy, kind of supporting that transition and doing it in a personal way, that is to say, trying to situate our entities and companies where we work within the social economy. This has been an essential step that we've taken since then. And the other step was to try to lead an initiative for the social economy whose main objective would be to spread the social economy, and so we started working with other people from the organization Economistas Sin

Fronteras (Economists Without Borders) an NGO that works a lot in economics, and who we have a great relationship with. With those people, we created a project called Salmón Contracorriente (Counter-current Salmon), a project really related to Consume Hasta Morir, focused on communicating the alternatives and trying to encourage them.

On Rebellion.org, you wrote, “We don’t sell anything here because a critical perspective must be free.” How is this activity financially sustained?

We have never really had excessive economic problems. Luckily, I think that counter-advertising requires a lot of imagination but not a lot of technology or anything like that. In fact, we have always considered things as challenges. For example, when we recorded the documentary in 2005, we used a simple tourist camera and a collar microphone. We always set challenges for ourselves like this. We could do it with amazing cameras, but that’s not the point. We’ve always had this philosophy in almost all projects, and I believe that this has allowed us to not depend much on money. It’s also true that as we’re an autonomous group, we’ve always laid out an autonomous economy in the sense that, for example, we’ve never charged for doing projects although there are people who have paid us. With that, we’ve made some money which has allowed us to continue solving internal economic problems and the rest of the work is obviously volunteer. We’ve never charged money to do work as Consume Hasta Morir because we have a clear activist vision of its story. When we’ve needed to hire someone specifically, we paid them as a professional, but the group does it all as activists. How much time does everyone put in? Well, whatever they can. I think the good part of the project is that we’re people coming from many years of work in social movements. For example, I started in Adena in ‘93, and other people who were in the project have many years experience working with Ecologistas en Acción, and with other organizations. So, it seems normal to us to dedicate your time to these kinds of things, but we also recognize that not everyone has stayed all these twenty years.

Have you received institutional support?

Not directly; once we received funds through Ecologistas en Acción, but I would for the most part say no, and I’ll share an anecdote to show that. Once, Consume Hasta Morir received an award from the city of Córdoba as a prize for our environmental work. I don’t remember how much money, but it was not very much, maybe €2000 or €3000. We gave this money to Ecologistas en Acción. What I’m trying to say is that the project has never really relied on institutions because the decision was made a long time ago to try to become autonomous. We’re lucky in that sometimes people come who like the project and they decide to support us with money in exchange for a talk, a session or a workshop, and with this, we’ve been able to sustain ourselves and provide for our needs. When someone gives you money, you can really grow, and we’ve seen projects that haven’t handled this well. That is to say, you get a lot of money and you have to change your way of thinking, you have to contract someone, etc. We’ve never wanted to have to take that step. Another different thing is the social and solidarity-based economy. We’ve seen that certain entities of the social and solidarity-based economy might need a bit more income, and grants in this situation could be helpful, but, for example, Salmón Contracorriente was created with economic independence in mind by offering courses, writing books and selling T-shirts, and always trying to adjust to the economy. We always said that Consume Hasta Morir would not hire people who would earn a salary for doing a job, but when we thought of alternatives, we realized that sometimes work needs to be paid. We’ve done that with Salmón Contracorriente, and it’s worked well because we now have a person hired for the project.

Thinking about the concept of “work,” what does “work” mean in the context of Consume Hasta Morir?

Before working in entities related to what we'd now call the social and solidarity-based economy, which in that time wasn't really talked about yet, I've had the good fortune to work for social entities professionally. I say professionally because for me it was not a separation of two worlds where in the morning I'm working in the bank and in the afternoon I dedicate myself to a different job that liberates me from that. For me, it was all part of the same thing. That is to say, it's all been work, and I try to make it as coherent as possible. There was a time when I worked for the “evil” -- I say that as a joke --and I did advertising for many years working for advertising agencies. But once I moved past that phase and started working for social entities, I decided that for me activism was an extension of what I already did with a degree of volunteerism. That's what I do now, and at the end of the day, it is social and ethical work for me but it also gives me food, and as such it has certain negative elements which is that they ask you for something by the morning and you have to do it by the morning. However, the part of the work that has to do with Consume Hasta Morir has always been a more hedonistic matter in the sense that we worked on what felt the most important at the time, things that we were occupied with including in an experimental context. It has a playful cultural part as well, and that's really hard for me to associate with work.

“Salmón Contracorriente” has come out of “Consume Hasta Morir.” What legal structure have you given to “Salmón Contracorriente”?

Salmón Contracorriente was established as a nonprofit association because we needed to start the project and it seemed like a logical step. Being an association let us edit books and other things at the time. We started as an association, and the idea was to go through different stages until we arrived at the cooperative. What happened is that the alliance with El Salto (Catalan newspaper) happened, and so that line of action was cut short. Consume Hasta Morir has never been anything legally, it hasn't had any legal structure.

Can you tell us about “Salmón Contracorriente”?

Salmón Contracorriente is the result of an alliance with other people in order to make a media that spoke of the social and solidarity-based economy. That was our idea. There were a few reviews that talked about alternative economy, and there were a few specific websites, but there wasn't any media that would publish two or three pieces of daily news about this world. So it seemed like it was a possibility, an interesting option to create a specific media with people who wanted to get into newspaper activism because they were willing to write news every day and to function like an editorial office. We saw that possibility, and it seemed like a really interesting one, because it was going to broadcast alternatives, and they were going to be seen. We were really committed to the idea that these alternatives would get out there, that people would talk about the political economy but that they'd also talk about Pepi's Bakery that follows the criteria for the social and solidarity-based economy. We tried to make this project like that, spreading a balance of information.

Can you tell us how you define the social and solidarity-based economy?

It's a type of economic entrepreneurship, because in reality most of the social and solidarity economy projects are enterprises of a small group of people, in many cases

with the legal form of the cooperative or simply independent people who decided to start a business under certain environmental, social, and ethical criteria. These criteria are controlled with the network's tools, and that seems like an essential aspect to me. The RSC (Spanish initials for the non-profit Observatory of Corporate Social Responsibility) also tells what the big companies do, and the Telefonica Foundation, for example, is marvelous, but the problem is that there isn't a system, a structure, a network that would allow companies to have criteria that's comparable, coordinated, and possible to critique, as is our case. That is to say, the social and solidarity-based economy allows all the entities within it to be questionable, and that they're questioned, because the criteria is created by everyone and respected by everyone. That's the interesting thing, you don't get to create your own standard and say "I'm very responsible with the environment." The network is what says if you're really socially and environmentally responsible. In the social and solidarity-based economy, those criteria are put on the table, and there's no room for anything else.

What should one do if they want to be part of that network?

If you want to participate in that network, you have to pass a personal interview, and you have to show these criteria, and they'll be analyzed annually. You have to refill a social balance where they ask you questions as specific as, "How many kilowatts do you spend per year? What environmental challenge are you setting yourself for this year?" The network itself is what exercises control over the entities that are inside it, and in fact, if you do things that are obviously outside the social and solidarity-based economy, the network itself maintains vigilance and can tell you, "We're seeing that you aren't fulfilling the criteria that you said you'd fulfill to be part of this network." That's what's interesting to me. It's the network that's really exercising that vigilance. You have a social balance, which is a measure that you have to refill every year, and every year you have to show how you function as an entity.

I'm part of it as a graphic design and communication entity, and additionally as Salmón Contracorriente and El Salto. These three entities are within the network of the social economy of Madrid, and we also work with other entities. That's another thing that's really valued, that you network with other entities in other sites. We have a really good relationship with entities in Aragon, which is another social market, and for example, there's an association of psychologists that we've worked and shared materials with for many years. The criteria would have to be specific, but they're really varied according to issue. For example, on the topic of labor, they ask for transparency, democracy, horizontal decision-making within the entity, practicing a culture of caring, having an even male/female split, there are many things you have to carry out. The majority of the entities don't have many problems completing certain things, because they're nonprofit cooperatives that reinvest the benefits of the cooperative in new cooperative projects; there isn't a member-owner that gets the extra money, so the very economic model helps them fulfill certain criteria.

Rebellion.org has a text that states that you work to consolidate a culture of critical, just, and responsible consumption through "an exercise of irony that momentarily liberates us from the pressure that different media exercise continually on the citizens." Seeing a bit of the work of the posters that you've done in the past, it seems like you aim to deliver 'blows' of fiction that short-circuit the collective imagination through the use of irony, parody, and collage. Today, do you believe in the effectiveness of these languages?

Yes and no. I believe that at the time when we started, in 2002, there was very little responsible consumption information similar to what we have today. There was material on responsible consumption of food, for example, and there were reflections on reducing consumption, but there was not much visual or attractive material. I believe that our material was immediately striking because it was something different and circulated in environments of people who were aware of the issue. We've been told many times that our materials don't reach the people, and I ask, "Who reaches 'the people,' if 'the people' even exist?" I think that you have to eradicate the idea of 'the people' in communication, because it doesn't exist. You can reach a certain audience; our audience was people aware of the issue, who were interested in that kind of material because it offered them suggestions and invited them to think about new things. In that context, we did carry out our role. For example, we organized the Day Without Purchases, which was always at the end of November; now it's Black Friday, and the two coincide, but at that time Black Friday didn't exist. The media that came to record our actions always asked us, "But are the people going to stop buying things today?" Obviously, you don't reach all the people, you reach the people who are aware, and it works from there. And then we've seen some studies done within social movements about who identifies with responsible consumption, and we've seen that we have a role. At the time, we did fulfill our role of identifying what responsible consumption is, and I think that here the important thing is to have in mind that the language we used in that age was already oriented and planned for that kind of audience. We didn't do counter-advertising because you put up an anti-advertising poster on the street and 'the people' think that it's a brand and you're advertising something. To make them think that it's a critique requires someone to already be kind of in line with what you're looking for. Therefore, we've always thought that anti-advertising and their action radio are limited from the beginning. We've done a Malababa Review¹ with other groups, and that review isn't for every audience, we're aware of that, but we've also participated in campaigns for responsible consumption that are aimed at a wider audience, not so much an audience with that 'awareness.' For example, right now in Ecologistas en Acción's consumption commission, there's a campaign where they call into question whether consumption gives us happiness, they call it "We Consume Happiness."² It's super simple, and it's a way to come with really clear messages, and you reach more people sincerely than with an anti-advertising campaign because anti-advertising is harder to read. You have to understand it, you have to use disruptive codes that challenge hegemonic story, so you have to be prepared for that. The disruption itself doesn't work if everyone uses the same attention-getting strategy; there comes a moment when it no longer grabs attention. You have to do something different even though it's not attention-getting at the time, it's something different. Anti-advertising, in a space like ours with an impressive quantity of all kinds of messages, many of which are very flashy themselves, it's hard to get people's attention because you have to understand that that little message that's just as flashy as the rest, is an alternative to the rest and criticizes them. For this, you have to have a sense of the big picture, and that's really difficult. We've done an experiment related to this: leave anti-advertising in urban spaces and watch the effect. They've been done by people who've studied in workshops of Consume Hasta Morir, trying to see the extent to which anti-advertising is effective compared to

1 Malababa is an anti-advertising newspaper with issues available online: https://issuu.com/malababa/docs/malababa_1

2 "Consumimos felicidad" in the original Spanish; website available here: <https://consumimosfelicidad.org/que-sabemos-de-la-felicidad/>

advertising, and the results don't strike me as particularly suggestive. It's very difficult to get people's attention, and it doesn't matter if it's advertising or anti-advertising. That's why we're always thinking that we have to take advantage of our channels as much as possible. The communication that works is the communication where you know how to manage the different channels of media used. Not just anything is valuable in communication. That is to say, it's much better to plan a campaign well, consider who to direct it to, how to do it. Bioculture is a typical example. Bioculture is a responsible consumption fair, but we go with a campaign, all in black as if it were a cemetery of consumption, saying "Don't buy anything," and it's really interesting because it's really provocative, but already in a space of limited consumption. The consumers who go there understand the message, but some of them don't fully understand it, and some even come and insult us. That's an interesting space to carry out campaigns in and see the reactions. Outside of this context, people would see the cemetery and say that it's performance art. I think the interesting thing is that we've learned a lot from communication, from how to take advantage of our resources to the maximum, how to orient ourselves better and see the potential of the image in every case. All this while trying to manage legal issues. You can't use the logo of any brand, you have to talk about that brand and then see how you can do it. That's another thing we've learned how to do. We've learned how to kind of circumvent legal matters to be able to continue communicating, sometimes close to illegality.

Considering that you carry out your work in the context of a sensationalist society governed by entertainment and simulation, how can you combat one image with another?

I think a good example of this is a book that we edited called "Contrapublicidad" (Anti-advertising) because that's kind of our approach. When you open it, you find striking images that make you think. It would be like graphic humor, where you're given an image to think and reflect on, and all the images are accompanied by very short texts, very brief, artistic, and easy to read. There is also an introduction that very few people read, which is a theoretical work explaining how a consumption-based society can be transformed and why a consumption-based society is both environmentally and socially unsustainable. So, without those elements, it's impossible. We are aware that there are people who are at a point in their lives where they don't want to read that, but we would like to get to that information anyway because really, becoming conscious of something is a gradual process. You have an image that captures your attention, you're interested in that issue and you go deeper, asking yourself, "Why is this thing that I'm seeing environmentally and socially unsustainable?" That's the challenge. It's not so much making flashy images but giving it a meaningful backdrop. There are a lot of collectives that are renouncing this, and it seems kind of outrageous to us because if you want a transformation, you have to explain what your plan is, at least your critique, even if you don't offer alternatives. We've spent a lot of time forging and recommending alternatives. Just sticking with one flashy, impactful image and taking it for granted that the rest of the story is implied, that's hardly a credible plan. That's why we did the Gran Superficie documentary, which is an hour of explanations where, for example, Ramón Fernández Durán from Ecologistas en Acción clearly explains in 2004 what was going to happen with the 2007 Housing Crisis. We're not just interested in using posters, we want to take advantage of different formats to explain things. Our approach is to go beyond that more aesthetic, artistic vision of "I want to disrupt things, and then everyone will assume responsibility." We've never tried to do that. We've always wanted it to be understood that consumption-based society is unsustainable and if we have to explain it in different ways, using different language, then that's what

we do. Above all of this is the idea of offering material for reflection that go deeper into these issues. Obviously, there are people who understand only one viewpoint, for example, I'm reminded of a colleague in Ecologistas who works on matters of consumer groups and the guy's great, he's someone with an extremely powerful approach. One day he came and told us that he'd spent days hanging around an anti-advertisement, and suddenly he understood what it meant. That guy didn't need so much explanation because he's someone who's read a lot about these issues, but it inspired him to reflect in an interesting way. For other people, it's their first step for understanding why the consumption model is unsustainable. For example, it seems good to them that there are supermarkets and agriculture within the supermarkets, they don't see any problem with this. We say that that's not how it is, and we reflect that the model of the supermarket in itself generates poverty and inequality, and we suggest our vision of things. We offer theoretical approaches because it's not just a question of showing images, and that's it. For us, the important thing is to debate, even whether or not commercial products should be in a supermarket. In a way, all that material is a tool for us to encourage deeper analysis and critique of alternative models of consumption.

From your experience as a graphic designer can you tell us why advertising is so effective in this neoliberal time?

It's effective because it's learned how to generate constant disruption. One of the most important things is getting the message to always be flashy, and for that you have to know the rules of constant disruption. One of them is that whenever something repeats, you have to change the discussion and create something else to get people's attention back. Then, it's necessary to empathize, and to be able to recognize the desires that people have. There are several strategies that are used today in neoliberal communication to make the message reach people better. They don't always achieve this because it's very hard to make good advertisements, and because you have to find the necessary attractive segments that go along with your message. I think that this is one of the central axes of this kind of disruption. You find yourself in an ad for whole grain biscuits and suddenly, who knows why, a couple is having breakfast in a fabulous chalet and five superheroes appear dressed in whole grains, so that the advertisement isn't an advertisement anymore. It's about getting these grains to seem different from other grains when in reality, it's the same as always, they're just breakfast biscuits. The advertising industry is always inventing new ways to catch our attention, offering something different from the previous ad in order to sell the message. Really, advertising is not easy to do because it has its own problems, like the saturation of ads, or that the excess of attention-getting material diverts your attention from the message, and you end up doing something surreal that doesn't function communicatively. When we started with this in 2002, I remember they invited us to give that course in Leganés because they saw there was a deficit in communicative literacy. In fact, our secondary school courses were impactful because we tried to show how we question things. I remember, for example, that we did one beautiful thing which was to imitate a videoconference that wasn't real, it was all recorded. The person who was in the class spoke as if they were talking with a person directly, and it was all a lie, it was pre-recorded. And the students were really impacted, some of them even got mad because you were pulling their leg, and all of that was done to show them how easy it is to be tricked when it comes to technology. And all of this to throw into doubt what the media offers us. It worked really well, but they got mad, and they were also mad when we told them that in their favorite television series, if a favorite character, a dog, came out, it was because it was sponsored by a brand of dog food, and of course, that ruined the illusion for them. That role of provocateur

that we don't always try to maintain has that aspect; sometimes you're saying things that people don't want to hear, but that's how the world of advertising functions.

So, the world of advertising is really dangerous when you're in an unknown environment. As an example, almost everyone knows how the media works, and there's increasingly been this culture of being critical of the media and the front pages of newspapers like El País, ABC, or La Razón, but the innovation of advertising is constant and now they pay you to make articles that aren't really articles on the internet. And that's the problem, that you have to spend all your time constantly showing and teaching literacy so that citizens will be critical and have the necessary tools to be able to recognize what's advertising, because they break the law that obligates you to declare what is advertising, and there are always new strategies and tools appearing for advertising. We're not aware of how in one block of ads we might see 40 clips in rapid succession, and it's impossible to reason through 40 clips, 40 different strategies, no one can be critical with all of that. More or less, we've learned to be critical of ads, but there are new and increasingly intelligent forms of advertising, and they're getting better and better at introducing themselves into the communicative norm. Ambient advertising, which is that kind of advertising, seems just like that, a normal part of the environment; street marketing, and maybe the most dangerous one is "branding content," which is exactly the idea that the articles, in the sense of texts that explain things and that are advertising but they don't tell you that, they make it seem like it isn't an ad. It's the best example of where we've gotten to with advertising, that it wants to not be advertising anymore, it wants to be the key content of media communication because in the end, it pays the media and it doesn't want to just be a minor presence in the news, it wants to be the key content. For example, an ad might say, "We're going to talk about something important, going around the city on bike, and I'm sponsoring this, but I don't want to come out as the sponsor, I just want to write the article and say what I want about the bicycle." And then at the end, there's the Volkswagen brand logo, telling you that they sell cars, but the bicycle is essential, and they make a good pair, you can have a Volkswagen to go to work, and the bike for the weekend. They want to give whatever impression they want of the bicycle. For example, they're not going to tell you that the bicycle is essential for going to work, because then the Volkswagen is in danger. It's really dangerous, because as an article, it's presenting a way of thinking about things.

What would you highlight as specific to this age of neoliberal advertising?

I believe that one of the most interesting things that has happened with time, something that the industry of advertising has understood very well, is the need to seek out interdisciplinarity, which mostly falls on the content of messages that don't appear to be relevant. Immediately, the advertising industry has said that to advertise, you need to be familiar with psychology and sociology because it's important to define the audience you're addressing, and you have to know how to split up audiences, and that's sociology. You have to know philosophy, because it's a kind of transversal discipline that can analyze people's objectives and explain their desires, what we look for in life, or where we find meaning. In the end, advertising is the industry that's best understood everything else it needs to make powerful advertising, and there are a lot of people in other fields who still haven't understood that. I studied philosophy, and advertising has allowed me to philosophize more than I have in the academic setting, because there they have structures and you get to where you get to.

The philosophical problems that you encounter in communication are massive,

and in the end you realize that advertising hasn't done it because of any marvelous goal, but just to be more powerful. The pragmatic aspect of being more communicatively efficient and reaching people better is something they've done really well, because they have many resources, that's the truth. You have money, you can afford to have psychologists, philosophers, and sociologists who study this issue. Now one of the most fashionable jobs in the advertising industry is the strategic planner which consists of a sociologist with a background in psychology so they can connect with what consumers want, etc. That's a kind of work that before, advertisers were wary of, and now they've accepted it as necessary.

Thinking about your work in communication and media literacy, would you say that “Consume Hasta Morir” is linked to the field of formal and non-formal education? What would you say are the challenges or unresolved issues in our formal educational model regarding the field of communication?

One of the principal tasks of Consume Hasta Morir since the beginning has been education. For example, we have a very good relationship with audiovisual education professors because they are people who really see our work as useful, and ask us for workshops. This happens because there's a big deficit in materials and resources for communicative literacy or audiovisual media literacy, but it all depends on the faculty. Whether or not it's at all present in curriculum depends on the faculty. For example, Ángel Encinas is a big collaborator of ours who's in Ecologistas en Acción right now. He's a professor, retired now, and with time he's gotten increasingly closer to Ecologistas en Acción as we've been engaging with his materials and resources. This kind of professor, very interested in us, isn't the norm because not everyone shares our critical view of the media. So, effectively, there's a terrible deficit of all this. For example, I ask my students from the first day how an email that you write now gets to a friend in the US, and I give them three options: by satellite, by massive antennae that send the signal, or by underwater cables under the ocean. Only two raise their hands and say under the ocean, because the majority think, because we live in a culture of the imaginary, that internet is the cloud, the ethereal. It doesn't occur to anyone that there are cables under the ocean to send things via internet. This example really captures this problem that we have of not knowing how technology functions, because new things are appearing at an impressive rate, and we don't have time to decide to accept it or to see the problems. So of course, communication without that part would be really lacking, because we don't know where these things come from, and we can't understand the change that's happened from analog to digital, which is crazy, and all in the last 15 years. Many times, I explain to my students that in this 15-year transition from once-omnipresent analog to the digital, now every two days they produce as much digital information as all of the conversations that have taken place in humanity's history. The students are astounded, and it's because we don't understand the scale of communication today, we don't understand it because we've never understood how communication functions. We didn't even understand how the telephone worked. That's a tremendous deficit as it relates to communication. Many people consider communication something very simple, because we communicate amongst ourselves every day, but that's not the truth. So communicative literacy seems like something essential, and we've tried to create materials, but of course it's not just a question of creating material. There's the whole other issue, which is ideological, and it has to do with why all the powerful tools that they study in advertising are only studied in advertising. Because there's an obvious interest in protecting that space and not letting the information escape there, so that the tricks and tools of a discipline can be safeguarded somewhere, so those people know best how to convince you, how to

make a message more attractive. And of course, what the rest of society has to do is receive the messages, not knowing how advertising functions. And that's dangerous, obviously, because communication in advertising, like audiovisual communication, is a kind of communication that's evolved to be increasingly more attractive, and to avoid the typical problems that pop up when people gain knowledge and understanding about how things work. Advertising always stays one step ahead, trying to avoid that.

What do collectives and social movements need to learn about the pragmatics of advertising?

The world of advertising has been pragmatically intelligent while other worlds have not. Social movements are still learning about communication and rejecting marketing because it sounds like selling something, and that's good, but the world of communications in social movements is really far behind. They are at a level where they don't understand the audience they are addressing, wrapped up in a myth thinking that you're reaching the people; in fact, you still hear a lot of social movements saying that the more people they can reach, the better, but that's not saying anything. You don't know if they're trying to reach adults, young people, or so on, or what social class. Then they create leaflets that no one understands with super complicated words that can only be understood by people with a high academic level. Advertising left that kind of strategy behind in the '70s. It's problematic, there's no communicative culture in the better part of social organizations. We call it organized citizenry, because it's really broad and there's no communicative culture in the sense of understanding communication as a constant process; normally, social movements understand communication as the final step. What happens is that when you want to communicate something that you spent years investigating, suddenly you want to communicate it to the whole world really quickly and through all kinds of media. But there's no strategy, you don't know what group you're trying to reach, you haven't pulled out different materials for different audiences, as if the whole world could operate with the same resources and tools. And advertising doesn't do this. That is, we are effectively lightyears from what advertisement has evolved into, communicationally speaking. And obviously, we all know that advertising has these tools in order to sell cars, and social movements have them to transform society. Social movements have a lot to say, they have really important things to say, and that's where the chaos comes from, and they say it all in a single leaflet. But having important, valuable things to say doesn't mean that you have to make these massive errors in communication. So we still have a lot to learn from the pragmatics of advertising. And it's not about whether everything has the same value in the end, as many people say, because not all of the tools are the same. We're reluctant to use certain advertising tools like print fliers. We think about it a lot while the agencies do it without any problems. We still have a lot to learn about strategies for social movements.

Do you do communication advising?

Yes, that's something we've done from the beginning, and we've been learning how to little by little. In the year 2005, we did not know much about how communication worked, so we've been learning. Whenever we're able, not only have we advised people, we've helped various campaigns of social movements. People who come to mind that we've worked a lot with is the Educational Council of Castillo de León. This is a very powerful group of teachers that has called us to do social campaigns many times. For example, campaigns against certain neoliberal educational plans in recent years. And they asked us to help them learn about communication and

at the same time help generate materials and tools in a campaign to spread them for the parents and students. So we went over there and worked together to try to generate those materials, and it's always been an exchange, we learn about something, and at the same time offer our advice regarding communication. The important thing is that these people are professors, but it's also a social movement. I think that it's essential for all social movements to learn communication strategies. Organized citizenry, like even a community of neighbors, needs to learn communication strategies because without that today, you can't move through that world because you don't have anything to do. With the current level of other agents like the companies, social movements come along and give up hope because they don't see results, because the journalists or newscasters don't come to record what they do, and, well, of course, it's because you're moving in a different environment.

How are the “Consume Hasta Morir” materials shared?

Right now, we are rebuilding the website because we had a hacker attack a while back, so we're thinking about how to redo the website. We have about 5,000 items saved; some of them are very outdated, and all of this has served to help us rethink if it's worth saving all that material or selecting and keeping the pieces that interest us. We have publications, our anti-advertising posters... and we're really in the middle of revising the website. The website is disabled for the moment until we revise it one last time, but most of the materials are in pdf format. For example, the books we have written, a report on sexist advertising, and the didactic CD that we made as a compilation of educational resources about consumption and communication. We gave the CDs to professors who asked for them, but they have now become a little obsolete. It is a lot of material and we are trying to see what is still valid and what is not. Historical files are okay to have, but people end up going to the articles that pop up first on Google.

How do you work the kind of problems that you develop in a country where there is a gag law and an intellectual property law?

I believe that the gag law is a law aimed at silencing social movements in their more traditional form, not so much in other forms of communication. For example, I think the intellectual property law is more damaging for a collective against advertising because the law doesn't let you touch practically anything. I mean, Nike wants you to tattoo the Nike logo on yourself, there's no problem there, but if I take the logo and break it, then comes a complaint. This shows very clearly that the law of intellectual property defends companies or owners and prevents true criticism in the world of images. There can be criticism in text, I can write to report Nike, but I cannot express it with an act as simple and foolish as breaking their logo, which is very interesting. The law of intellectual property is there to protect social imaginaries, while the gag law is aimed at limiting protest. That is, it is more oriented toward the classic forms of protest, and it's never been our biggest problem. Our biggest problem has been the protection that exists for large companies. In the case of the intellectual property law, it's clearly set up precisely to avoid anti-advertising expression.

How have you settled the issue of complaints?

Many times through reasoning. In fact, we've written text for a British book about this issue because they asked us to explain our experience with the law, and it's something that usually comes up in the workshops we do, it's a common question. First, if you

notice, almost all of the anti-advertising we've done avoid directly using the logo. That was a decision made to avoid legal problems. Then, we put together a money box -- I haven't told people about this before -- to cover legal issues. We all put in some money every year, not a lot, but just so that money box was there in case we had a legal problem. We haven't ever had to use it, and the best example is a case when we saw a photographer taking pictures of one of our exhibitions, I think it was in Biocultura. He took photos of the posters in Biocultura, and in that moment we weren't bothered at all, but then we realized that he worked for one of the big photo libraries. A lawyer from a big firm wrote us, saying that the photos we were using in that exhibition were theirs, they were from that library, which obviously paid for them because real photographers took them. And we didn't complain about that, because we understand that photographers sell photography. But the crazy thing is that we made a poster and there was a normal photo of the Eiffel Tower, and they said that that photo was theirs, which is impossible to demonstrate because there are thousands of photos of the Eiffel Tower and that was outrageous. We came to an agreement and we told them that they were right about two of the photos, because we'd taken them from the internet and they probably did have an author. We eliminated those photos and substituted them for other free ones. From there, we decided that we'd never use more photos from the internet, but take them ourselves or use free photo libraries. So we switched those photos out, and there wasn't any problem after that. We refused to switch the Eiffel Tower photo, we said that it was outrageous for them to get money from photography that was obviously from the public domain.

In that text that we wrote for the book, they asked us to write about our experience, but it's been a positive one because we haven't had any serious problems due to our fear of causing problems for Ecologistas en Acción. In the end, we exist as our own entity, but behind us is Ecologistas en Acción, and it seemed like it would be easy to get into problems and then shirk and leave Ecologistas to take the blame, so we've always thought, well, we have to be responsible with this and not get into too much trouble, and manage ourselves by ourselves, and because of this, we've barely had any stories, but the ones we have had are very meaningful to talk about and explain what lies behind them, because people think you can take a logo and do what you want with it, and it's not that easy.

Have you had any legal problems?

Interestingly, no, and I do regret that a little because I feel like it's an important issue. Maybe we've hoped that something legal would occur and the people would support us, but we've never done it because in the end, we've never gotten that far. We've had various cases where they've written us legal burofaxes, including brands like Lacoste, a dermatological/aesthetic corporation, because we did advertisements similar to their brand and they wrote us demanding that we eliminate all of their material, and the funny thing is that the company has failed, it's gone out of business, and we keep going. It shows that at the end, they can't just denounce us.

Is "Consume Hasta Morir" a political project? If so, what policy are we talking about?

I would say that it is political in the way we understand consumption. I mean, talking about recycling today is very easy because it's even profitable; it used to be something innovative but now we've reached a point where there are recycling lobbyists want us to recycle a lot, but consume even more, as if recycling gets rid of the limits on consumption. Our proposal is much more

radical in the sense that we say without reducing consumption, we can't go anywhere; so, for the millions of people who keep consuming at this rate, you can be as efficient as you want but climate change will still be here.

We're in a situation where climate change is the big problem, because you could say it's a lack of resources, but lack of resources in what sense? It's not a lack of resources, the problem is that if we continue to consume at this rate, we'll not only run out of resources, but we're really going to make climate change make this planet uninhabitable in a few decades.

We have always opted to try to defend a consumption model that flips the current values; opposing thoughtless consumption, there's conscious consumption and the search for ways to reduce it, but sometimes they're values that are hard to explain and need more theorizing. For example, slowness versus speed. We live in a world where people want to move at full speed to get to places faster, sometimes to work all day. To have that speed and that crazy rhythm, with all the anxiety -- because that lifestyle generates anxiety -- we end up with a lifestyle that's a wheel of unhappiness. All those devices act as providers of comfort, and we want everything faster and more comfortable, and of course when you start taking these values and turning them upside down you realize that the thing that's worked up until now, the reason we've gotten here, is totally the opposite. Gradual processes, understanding natural processes, understanding your environment, having time to reflect on your own life and the stages you've passed through, being happy with other people. When we ask secondary school students who's responsible for happiness, they say 'Coca Cola' just by association. So the most important product in the world is a soda, something disposable, that says a lot about the world of consumption we live in.

To turn all those things around would mean changing a ton of things in our heads and that's very difficult to do, to eliminate the rhythms, the speed, the productivity. Yesterday, I interviewed a researcher who reflects on the productive and the nonproductive; we live in a society that doesn't let you do anything unproductive. Of course, that's crazy, we didn't use to understand life like that. You did something not productive in a given moment and it was seen as good. Now everything has to be productive. It's kind of putting in question how we live, and that's what hurts because in a way we've been promised that technological comfort, more technology, is going to be what saves our lives in the sense of making us happy, and also letting us avoid certain problems like global warming, and now we know that's not how it is. So of course it's political, we've always tried to do sociopolitical transformation not to enlighten people or anything but just to recognize the limits of what we have ahead of us. It's as basic as trying to recognize the limits of our society.

You've been dedicated to social change since the '90s. With the climate of political disaffection and economic insecurity, how do you keep up hope as the engine of your work? How do you combat helplessness?

First of all, I think the issues have changed. I also believe like everyone who's been an activist in various settings, I've changed over time. For example, in my twenties, what excited me the most was defending the rights of animals. After some time, you begin to understand and dive into other subjects. You mobilize for issues that begin to matter more to you. Now, for instance, it could be climate change or issues of consumption, or the bicycle. Activism doesn't have to be something ethereal, it needs to be something connected to your life, your desires. What keeps me in activism is

that you find things that connect with your life and your day-to-day experience. For example, free software has been one of my central principles in recent years and it has to do with my work because I use free software tools. If it didn't have to do with me or what I do, it would be really hard to keep up hope and keep fighting for these things. I think really the trick is to keep connecting to these things, and find hope in things in your own life, etc. Then there have been movements that give you hope and optimism regarding the global capacity for change, such as 15M. For me, 15M proved that sometimes when you least expect it, certain things begin to connect and you see a possibility for important change. It showed that maybe you can change things, and it's always good to have a certain optimism.

Keeping in mind that “growth” is a concept co-opted by capitalism, what does it mean for “Consume Hasta Morir” to grow?

For me, growing means to be able to keep functioning, adapting ourselves to the times in a dynamic way. For instance, many people tell me, “Consume Hasta Morir was a very good project because it was critical.” I would like for the project to continue offering other things. I would like it to be able to have other, different discussions and offer other, different solutions because now, we need other things. That's my biggest hope. I think that growing, in our case, is being able to change. It doesn't matter if it's still called Consume Hasta Morir or if the name changes, the important thing is that it keeps existing with the members, and that it keeps shaping itself in new ways.

Antropoloops





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
September 9, 2018

Location
Seville, Spain

Collective's name
Antropoloops

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What is Antropoloops?

Well, Antropoloops is a project of musical remix that is based on the simple idea of putting together fragments of traditional musical recordings from around the world, that were made during distinct time periods and in distinct places, without changing the original tones of those fragments so that new songs are created from all of these traditional musical recordings.

How long have you been developing this project?

The project arose about five years ago and was developed by Esperanza Moreno and myself. She handles the visualization of data and I oversee the musical aspect because from the beginning, it was very important to us that all of the remixed fragments showed a live preview of what was happening. We were very interested in opening all of the possibilities from this remixing process as much for the composition as for the live viewing portion. Then, when I am finished with everything I am doing, mixing the fragments with the software, it will display where on the world map each of the fragments comes from, the original cover of the disc that is being used, the duration of the loop, all the titles, the name of the disc, of the song. In this way it's also possible to interpret in a clearer way the process of remixing.

Can you explain the circumstances under which the Antropoloops workshops were developed?

The roots of this educational project actually emerged almost out of a demand that we were starting to receive from the sites we visited. We were at a festival in Italy and the organizer asked us if we had considered doing a workshop for children or adolescents. Somehow, we started to see that there was also a possibility of development and application of this work methodology, or the idea of a project in the educational setting, and with this in mind, I proposed this option to Nuria Garcia and we got together one day to brainstorm about what possibilities there could be and how to try to actualize it. That is, to think a little about the important question of how to translate the project from a creative approach, to an educational approach and methodology. A few ideas started coming out of doing small workshops that took place over one day, three days, maybe a week, with different types of people, but it just so happened that I was stuck with Pedro from Zemos98 one day who told me about a grant for citizen art projects sponsored by the Carasso Foundation and we went and presented the project. Nuria, since the first day we came together, spoke of this school, San Jose Obrero, because she knew about it through Zemos98 and it seemed to be the ideal place for a first experience and above all, to develop the project because the school has boys and girls from a variety of nationalities, it is a neighborhood with

a high population of immigrants, there is a high diversity of cultural origins, and it is also very powerful in the sense that they work with a very open educational approach which is very in line with the logic that the neighborhood implements. It was also an ideal site for us to try to experiment a little with this idea and also to learn.

What are some of the concrete objectives of the Antropoloops workshops?

We think our job goes beyond just piggybacking on projects that are already out there. This is a center that works really hard to emphasize the importance of inclusion and the methodology of the work; so, through the Antropoloops workshops, we think that we are able to contribute a new layer to the whole work approach by valuing diversity and inclusion. We understand that what we are able to contribute is working toward and valuing diversity, the richness of diversity and respecting each other, and the incorporation of play, and the approach to remixing of traditional music. That is to say, we hope that children can experience in a playful way an approach to music through remixing, as a creative beginning and through a series of tools that we are also going to develop, with the teachers and with the kids to control and remix sound. We also hope to work a little with the idea of geographic location of the source and that this type of playful tool serves as a medium to continue working on all these topics that already exist in the framework of the organization.

You are a musician. Why would you say music is an interesting tool for working with diversity?

Music has a central component which is that it exists as a common language despite all the linguistic and cultural differences. Music, to me, is a kind of central heart for all human beings, so, we think that it is one of the more universal languages and that, through music, it is possible to find oneself. In fact, Antropoloops stems a little from this idea that, despite all the differences that exist, which generate this richness, it is also possible to celebrate the common part that unites us all, and all of this is through music. It seems to us that it is a mechanism and a very powerful vehicle to find ourselves despite the superficial or cultural differences that may exist.

How does this project promote the value of diversity in a world dominated by a culture of masses aiming at uniformity?

Diversity forms part of our reality, not just the current situation but in the last few decades. It is an almost fundamental issue in western society but, precisely, I believe that, in spite of or maybe against everything, all of that predominance of commercial and commodified values that they make are a kind of unique, uniform cultural message. I also believe that it is interesting to place value on the many specificities and differences that exist. In this sense, I believe that, despite this homogenization, a large quantity of movements to recover the differences and value the specificity of each culture is also being produced. So, I find it interesting to utilize or value traditional music not from a protectionist or patrimonial perspective, but from a creative approach. That is, utilizing the tradition in a contemporary way to reinvent the tradition more as a means to self-reflect and as a means to value something that is at risk of becoming nonexistent.

What have been your first impressions of crossing Antropoloops with the classroom?

Well, the first impression that we had in the classroom has been great. The

truth is that there is a great, very natural environment. One can really notice that the children are very happy in school and happy with the teaching team.

How do you think the children perceive diversity in this school?

The children do not perceive diversity based on physical characteristics like we as adults do. I believe that they see it from a natural perspective and accept it in a very natural way. I believe that for the boys and girls in the classroom, the others are simply classmates. They do not have that interpretation of cultural differences; they are only classmates to one another. However, my feeling is that these issues are obviously still there. That is, on a level of coexistence everything works very well, and it is beautiful, but it is also true that they are aware of the differences that exist between them, but they do not live as if it is a problem but quite the opposite. I believe that it is a treasure.

Can you explain the circumstances in which the Antropoloops project was developed?

Well, for us since the beginning it was important for music to be incorporated from a technological perspective as a teaching tool. Those three legs have been central in the project since the moment we started to think about it as a whole development. The project is articulated from three approaches: didactic, musical, and technological. The didactic leg is obviously an educational project and is what encompasses everything. It is true that Antropoloops in the end is a project of remixing music that utilizes the tools of electronic music, so from the beginning it was very interesting to us to work in elementary school and with these ages in an approach to musical composition. Not from the logic of traditional instruments, but from the logic of electronic music because we think that it also opens new possibilities of approach to the creation of music for children that at this age have not yet managed to play an instrument and with the difficulty that often entails. Then, it is true that technology is a tool that facilitates a good deal of experimentation at certain initial levels, and on the other hand, it also allows us something that is very essential to the project and that is the spatial approach. That is to say, we are very interested in working with sound and remixing and composition, valuing classroom space, bodies as tools of interaction, the use of world maps as a reference to locate things to see where they come from, where they emerge. Then, in this sense, we want to utilize technology also as a medium so that the children are conscious of what is happening on a more abstract level and also conscious of how all of these interactions often arise from collective interactions among children. It is a tool to work toward this objective of valuing diversity and recognizing it.

How do you present the technological dimension in the classroom?

What do you believe is the children's connection to this?

In the approach that we had implemented in regards to technology in the classroom, there is a very important idea, "cacharreo" which is a concept that is also used frequently in the educational technology environment. It means that the boys and girls are actually capable of experimenting with technology and that the process of learning also applies to the understanding of the tool itself that is being used and to experiment with it based on trial and error, in order to create new things. That is, instead of using it as a kind of device that does wonderful things that the children do not quite know the inner workings of, they really try to disassemble and break down the things in order to understand its functionality. In accordance with this philosophy we have started to use the Makey Makey device that is, a device that functions

very well because it contains electronic circuits and allows interacting with all of the tools that we want to develop. We would like for it to be a free software that is replicable, but that also enhances this use of “cacharreo” or playing with technology.

What are the concrete objectives of the artistic Antropoloops project?

The main objective of the project, as a pilot experience, is to develop a work methodology that uses the remixing of traditional music as a tool to value the recognition of the other, the richness of cultural diversity and inclusion in the classroom. As a pilot experience, the initial fundamental objective would be that these workshops, or these dynamics, remain at the center as part of their teaching program, which is a tool that the teaching team can continue to use. In that sense, it is true that the project is also a bit focused on teachers as a tool for social change. We are interested in developing tools with the teachers through testing them and experimenting so that it really becomes a useful tool and that the project then has the ability to remain in the center. On the other hand, we are also interested in this experience having the ability to be replicated in other places. It is a project that lasts three years. The first year is considered a year of experimentation, in the second we will try to optimize all that we have developed to systematize and replicate it so that in the third year it can be applied in other centers. The project is developed both in this school and in an affiliated high school. Along with the idea that this first year is a year of experimentation and testing, we have defined a narrative for everything we are going to do during the three trimesters with the students. The idea is that in the first term, they work on different approaches to the idea of remixing so that they become familiar with that tool. In the second term we will work with life stories. We will try to work with the boys and girls, so that they look into their cultural and family origins, the history of their families and how they got here, to actively collect that material and value those differences. In the third term through all that music and all those ideas that we have collected, we will try to make a kind of collective musical composition, like a classroom soundtrack.

How are you all developing the project in this first year?

Within the idea that this first year, as I have said, is one of experimentation, of trial and error, of designing and finding tools, what we have proposed is a story that goes from the first term, where we will be working with them in different ways to various approaches to remixing as a creative tool. In the second term we will try to have the participants collect information and music and contents of their family stories, the life history of each and every one so that in the third term, with these materials, they can create a collective composition that works as a kind of soundtrack of the classroom and also use other devices. For example, in the second term we will try to make a sound mural among all the boys and girls and in the third term we will develop and utilize that like a carpet with a map of the world so that they are the ones who create the game and can activate and compose the whole piece that was composed during that term.

How long since you've last entered the school?

Many, many years, because my educational experience in the past years has been at the University. I am a professor. I have been teaching at the University for six years, and entering the school again brought back a lot of memories because I studied at a school here in Seville, which is the Aljarafe school that, in its time, was one of the first schools to start to propose more open methodologies and an active education. The building was also very powerful at the architectural level, and truth be told, the atmosphere

of this center has reminded me a lot of what I had in my elementary school days. It has been a very interesting experience with new challenges that I am getting the hang of. I do not have much educational experience with these age groups, in fact I take care of the musical part and the coordination of the project, and Nuria is the one that is leading the most didactic coordination and Dani, Miguel, and Juan are the ones who are in charge of the technological aspect. We are a kind of tripartite team.

As an architect, what do you make of how schools are set up in our society?

I believe that the issue of spatial closure of schools internally within neighborhoods is a worrying issue. For example, in the school where I was, there were no hallways, the classrooms were closed spaces that were directly connected to the outside. You went from the classroom to an open, fluid, and continuous space. The school was outside of Seville. There wasn't a city around at that time, the suburbs were closed off, but with expansion the school is now inside the city. That continuous systematization of boxed-off rooms is the norm when building new schools. It is very strict. Schools, in regard to space, are becoming more rigid. The square footage is measured and optimized, which has an economic logic, but I believe that there is a loss of wealth that accompanies it. I also believe that this spatial characteristic reflects the characteristics of the society itself and its educational system.

Speaking of enclosed spaces, it seemed as though that in the city of Seville the cultural activity is restricted to the center, actively forgetting about the culture that developed in the neighborhoods. Now that you are working in a school of the neighborhood, do you share that impression?

Of course, it's that Seville, I believe, has a very large and very absorbent historical hub as a center of attention. So, the vast majority of cultural life, of cultural production, is very centralized and that is a real problem. All the wealth that is produced from activities of daily life in the neighborhoods, outside the center, is very invisible, but I believe that in recent times there have also been movements against this. For example, the "Neighborhood Lights" project that is also participating this year in this school, is trying to enhance and value everything that happens outside the city center and not focus so much attention on what happens in the historical part of the city. We think that in places like these there is a great need to do things, so it seems very interesting to us to also try to propose the project in this context and try to intervene, not only in the classroom, but that the project of the Antropoloops workshops was also a tool that let us reach the families and, in effect, the neighborhood. That is, that it had a certain impact outside the classroom as a uniting element or celebration of cultural diversity.

How do you take into account the cultural identity work with second generation children in the Antropoloops Workshops?

It is a fundamental issue because children do not reflect on their cultural identity at that age; I don't think they are conscious of it, they don't worry about those issues, like we talked about before when we discussed diversity in the classroom. As a second generation I understand that their main need is to belong here and be one more boy, one more girl, and how they adapt to fit in based on the context. That is to say, I believe that, as a second generation, they also have a need to belong to the cultural context of Seville and to adapt. I believe that, for our part, there is an almost conceptual need of the project to value those differences. So, I think that there is a tension from the project. We have to know how to articulate and avoid forcing a kind of construction

of the identity of each culture but rather, that through the children, we will be able to do it in a very natural way, that is, articulate those two needs without artificializing it.

What is your opinion of the work being done in this school to value cultural diversity as a social theme?

I believe that this school, along with the work that the teaching team does, is a kind of sanctuary and should be the norm. The attitude of normalcy, of coexistence and of respect that is present in this center and that the children work with and perceive, should be the norm both at the urban, social level and at the media level. Unfortunately, it is just the opposite. Actually, we live in a time where from the state and from the media, there is a promotion of a tale of confrontation and rejection of everything that is foreign and of immigration in the city as well. In general, not only in school but in the neighborhood, I believe that the daily life of neighborhood coexistence is very normal and very positive. I believe that this problem with immigration has to do with social classes. I believe that on a certain level for the people that live here, coexistence is much easier, and respect comes much more naturally than from the points of view of other social classes. And I believe that what is reflected in the media has more to do with this classism than with what actually occurs in daily neighborhood life regarding coexistence and obviously a lot more in the center. Here coexistence works with the naturalness, which should be a role model. And I think that's partly why this center is well valued. Just yesterday they gave an award to the center, a mention of educational value.

What do you make of racism in society?

I believe that racism is fundamentally a mix of ignorance, intransigence, and insecurity. It is necessary to establish an effective relationship and human coexistence through many channels to really realize that we are all equal and we all deserve the same rights and that, in the end, coexistence is more easily achieved than it seems.

Of course, there are linguistic and cultural differences, but in the same way that there are linguistic and cultural differences within the same nation state such as Spain. I believe that the level of coexistence in neighborhoods like this is not that difficult, in fact, coexistence is much easier than what is reported by the media.

Do you believe a project like the Antropoloops workshops can have a social transformative effect?

It is true that what occurs in this facility is peculiar. The principal the other day told an anecdote of students from this center who went to the high school to work in class. In some cases, they had been grouped by nationality, which is a bit like going backwards with all of the work that has been done here and get a mindset focused on differences.

I believe that since we had started the work group, we are conscious of not falling into a kind of magical thinking that this project is going to change... We are joining a kind of force that is already very powerful in this center and we want to an additional piece to that channel. It is a project that starts from the creative realm and that tries to translate into an educational tool. We think that it can contribute things from a collective effort that must be done among many people. I would stay satisfied if in these three years the teachers discover a series of technological and methodical tools of utilizing music in the classroom. Or that we have suddenly managed to open up

the ears of the children who have participated in the workshops to other music that is not mainstream from commercial radio. And I would even love, for example, that families could get something from this project as a way for them to feel recognized, challenged, and included in the context of the center and the work of the project. In a way, Antropoloops intends to celebrate the union between everyone through music.

What social or institutional agents have made the development of this project possible in a public school?

They are, on one side, we who formed as the motor team; the collaborating centers that are the San José Obrero School, the Cervantes High School and the Carasso Foundation, which is the foundation that financially supports the project. The relationship with the Carasso Foundation has been quite positive in the short time that we have been collaborating as much at the stage of writing the project as at startup. So far it has been great in the sense that they are developing a task regarding how to finance the project and how to follow it in a way that seems unique to us, that isn't very common. With a lot of freedom and support, trying not to make precarious interventions, the truth is that, in this sense, we are all very happy. I believe that the entire organization, with the whole project, with all the people, is very powerful as well. In this sense, we are very satisfied.



Colegio San José Obrero





Constellation
of the Commons

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Miguel, you are the director of this school. Can you explain to us what type of center the San Jose Obrero School is?

The truth is that it is complicated to describe this school and I have never thought to define it. A school with a variety of important children. This school currently has four hundred students. Of those four hundred students, fifty percent are of foreign descent from over thirty nationalities. This diversity makes it hard for this school to stay afloat, but when you experience the day-to-day routine, it becomes simple. When people come and have these criticisms about our school, I ask them, "In what ways are we a difficult school?", because I do not see these disciplinary problems or see the detrimental problems in the students learning deficiencies. Labels are unhealthy and very toxic; it does not matter how the school was labeled. The labels are given by outsiders who see that there are foreign children and say that it's a school for the Chinese, for the Gypsies, etc. This is most harmful because it creates a stigma that is difficult to get rid of. We become the "school of the Gypsies" before the school of foreigners.

What qualities would you use to describe the school?

I see it as a lively, active, school that when you walk in through the door you identify quickly with it because everyone inside the school welcomes you with open arms. It is a flexible school due to the faculty's treatment of designing schedules, enforcing the curriculum and being flexible with families. Our focus is with the family from when they first arrive throughout their time with us. We are flexible with the plans, projects, and programs of the groups that want to work with us. We are an accepting school. A school that is open to the neighborhood and open to the community.

When did the first wave of students from the Gypsy community come in? What was the reaction?

That was in 1997 and they came in large numbers. In a class where there were twenty-five children, two or three entered, each one from the settlement of Vacie. They were children who had never been to school and were of all ages. This school took on fifty-eight children and, evidently, neither the staff nor the school had the resources to accommodate these children. So, what happened? In a short amount of time the school, which had around seven hundred students, went through a five-year recession where the student body was cut down to three hundred and fifty students. The parents took their children to another school because this was the school for Gypsies. I don't blame them. A war was happening here, and this war had been happening from the year '97 until about 2002. It was very sad. There were teachers who left, teachers who asked to transfer because they couldn't handle it. All

they talked about was the problem of the children from Vacie and other problems, but there were no solutions. I believe that there were no solutions for the reasons I mentioned earlier. When the school began to recover with the students from the Vacie settlement, more foreign students began to arrive. As I mentioned before, the school was left with a small population of less than four hundred students. There were less and less students until the foreign students arrived, which started an increase in students. The foreign student body has saved the school in terms of registration. They have taught us to rethink what we are capable of doing with the new students who came from different backgrounds, some of them immigrants. We didn't start from square one like we did when the students from Vacie came. We knew that the students were different and had to be treated in a different way

This has been the fate and the luck of the school. I consider myself lucky that I have been a part of it. I believe that the school and myself were fortunate enough to live through this. Often the ups and downs of education make it so that the principals stay for four years and then leave. There is no continuity in the process. This also sets the school apart. Not because it was me, but because there is a correlation between the work I did and its success. Additionally, I could also provide a common teaching style that is worth keeping around for the duration of the school.

How did you become the principal and how did you prepare for the responsibility of leading?

Well, I was a PE teacher and in 2002, the district called me and asked me if I wanted to be the principal of the school. The district decided this because, at that time, nobody wanted to be the principal of San Jose Obrero because it was a disaster. So, I gave them my objections because I couldn't imagine going from a gym teacher to a principal. I didn't think that I had what it took to lead, much less in those times. There were also other people who wanted to be the principal, but they were not sure if they would stay for long. Finally, the district decided that I would be the principal. Since I ended up as the principal, I had to start from square one. How do you do this? How do you become a leader? There was no class for that. Now there are classes on how to become a leader, but I don't think those are worth much. I believe that leading is learned in the classrooms and hallways. This is the way. You are leaving your mark in the way you do things. I think that my way of leading is to give space to the staff so that they feel comfortable. For example, if a project comes from an entity such as Antropoloops or any other that we are currently working on, you know that the school is open and that the staff will receive it well. All of that is normal here, which can't be said as easily for other schools, because I give space to the staff, which allows them to feel comfortable.

How does diversity play out in this school?

If you reject diversity, it is a handicap and a problem. Now, if you try to get to know, understand and comprehend people that come from outside your community, you are giving them an identity. Doing so allows them to become a part of the school and the culture. This is crucial because the school is for everyone and they have to feel like they are a part of our community, even if they do come from Colombia or the Philippines. They should feel like the school is supportive, which is important. When you are cultivating the principle of identity and belonging, the families feel comfortable with the school and support the work of the school and the faculty. I think that this is one of the achievements of the school. This

diversity that results from challenges changes them into opportunities. I believe that this interaction between diversity and the projects that are being done at the school is what allows the inclusive initiatives to be successful at the school.

The richness that diversity adds is amazing and we know that. We know and we take advantage because the diversity enriches so much. We have been creating a work system for each project that is very unique. That is to say, we have always started by working with one or two classrooms or a certain grade with a specific project, and that project has always been added to other courses, levels, and academic curriculums. Then, what starts as a music project is expanded and by the end it is more than a mere music project. It is a project in which most students participate, and families are able to talk about where they came from. In one of my fifth-grade classes for example, we look at Google Maps to find the students' home countries, where they are and where they come from. In other words, we are doing geography, math, music and this integrated project is what makes all of the children feel a part of the school community. We are not only talking about the individual geographic location of each student. We are all around a musical project and today I will explain it, tomorrow you will explain it, but it is part of the San Jose Obrero music project, and that is a music project that will unite us all. That is the great wealth of the school and that is what has given us so much success up to this point. That is, being able to change all the problems of diversity into advantages.

Do you think that your work in the school has had an effect on the neighborhood?

With all of the changes that have been made to this area, in the Carrasca and Cerezo neighborhoods, there has been a very important change in population, there is an important heterogeneity, there is interculturality that is palpable. I think that we have had some influence, so\}} that the neighborhood is a peaceful place. It is not a neighborhood with great difficulties, it is not a neighborhood where there is danger, or where there is fear. No, it is a normal neighborhood. The residents open their stores, one from Pakistan, one from Ecuador, one from Bolivia, and it works out. Although they might have their own groups, they respect each other, and that respect is fundamental to the community.

Rosalía said the other day: Imagine a child. A child from the third-grade class that will celebrate his birthday at home. The boy is Ethiopian and invites another child who is Chinese, another who is from Nigeria, invites his friend who is from Bolivia, invites two or three who are Spanish. On that birthday, in that apartment building, five continents are coexisting around a birthday cake and that cannot be mandated by law. This happens by living together, sharing together, and nurturing it every day. This is what we do here. We have not designed a detailed plan that is conducive to this type of community because that is impossible, but I do believe that somehow, we have accidentally made this a norm within our school. The secretary, Mercedes, gave this example the other day: "I took a student out of class and asked him how many students were of color in his class and he didn't know." That is, he is continuously coexisting with twenty-five classmates, you ask him how many children are of color in your class and he says, "well, I don't know."

Are you satisfied with the development of your educational model?

You see, I am very optimistic. I think that the attention that we give to all students is an individualized teaching approach and this is what makes us unique. The

treatment of each child is a world, that each child is different, that you have to treat each child as he is. We do not claim that they are all the same. I think that the biggest problem is making that differentiation: the Muslims on the one hand, the Pakistanis on the other, and the Romanians on the other. I think this is wrong. I think one has to forget this because the labels are sickening, they are very toxic. I believe that here we have to work with people, and we, from a three-year old child up to a twelve-year old child, work with children and that's that. It doesn't matter if his name is Manolo, or if his name is Hassan, or his name is Vladimir or whatever it may be, we work with that child and give them all the support they need. If the child needs more affection, we give it to him, and if he needs us to talk to his parents, we do it. The other day, a Romanian father who makes his living playing the saxophone on the street came to the school and he is considered family to us. I believe we have a very important duty of public service and this is often what saves us. I am very proud of my school, as you can tell when I speak about it.

In what type of neighborhood is your school located?

This is a unique neighborhood that has been adapting to immigrants from all over the world who have arrived over the years. The people from Morocco were the first to arrive, then from all over the area of Maghreb, and later on people from South America, Bolivia, and Ecuador. They come in waves. For example, right now, there is a wave of people coming from Venezuela. We have never stopped receiving people from different countries. We also have European children from Romania, from the Philippines, from Bangladesh and from Nepal. Here, diversity is very powerful, and the neighborhood has changed a lot. Yes, the physiognomy of the neighborhood is not the same as it was twenty years ago. It is true that the jobs are still lower-class, more precarious than before because many of them have to do with the struggling economy. A lot of the work is in private homes and this makes it so that the families struggle to get by. It makes me feel good knowing that many of the families who come are no longer families that arrive and leave. They are families who stay here in the area. That generates quality relationships because families identify with the community that they are a part of. The neighborhood is creating certain dynamics of strength and I like that. More shops are opening and there is more life.

How was the proposal received for having the collective Antropoloops work in this school?

Well, they arrived and told us that they were going to do a musical anthropology project about the music of the world that will take advantage of the diversity of our students. We are also going to learn about all of these geographical aspects through a screen and music. How could we say no? Apart from the fact that this is a unique opportunity that we have never seen anywhere else, it is a project where music intervenes with physical education, mathematics, and language. The administration is involved so there are a lot of people participating beside the group Antropoloops. Other than Antropoloops, there are many other people involved. Supporting a project such as this is in line with the dynamic of the school. Look, we work with children individually, one by one, and in a project like this, individuality is maximized. Each child does their part of the project and then when they work in groups, apart from their individuality, they are working in a collaborative setting. We are combining individuality with cooperative and collaborative work, plus the musical aspect that Antropoloops gives us. So, when they do their cooperative-collaborative activities, they are great. In addition, they are learning music and

learning other super interesting content that is being developed through this project, which I think is great. Thanks to them and their design, we can use their activities. One of the major problems that schools face when doing this type of project is time constraints. Many times, the problem does not come down to economic resources, it is about having the time to develop all the work. This is challenging because as teachers we do not have the time for this. So, when someone tells us, "Look, we are going to come and do this variety of activities, which will be carried out in this way and we will be the performers and the participants of said activities." For us, that is a dream. It is fantastic. In addition, the children feel comfortable, they are happy, they are having fun, and they are learning. Isn't that what education is about?

What results do you expect to come out of the collaboration with Antropoloops?

Well, above anything, I hope that the children will see that they have been happy. That they see that they had a good time and also learned something. If you aren't having fun or enjoying yourself, you will not learn. In the past, you didn't learn from enjoyment, but because of coercion and competition. There are two ways of learning: either for enjoyment or for fear of failure. We choose to enjoy and enjoy learning. When one is doing something they enjoy and that excites them, they learn from that too. It is so much easier to work this way, instead of working fearfully.

Before Antropoloops came to the school, was music an important part of the school?

Yes, this school works a lot with music and when Antropoloops started the music project, the children could see where they came from, the music of their country, or an area where they live. This, to them, is strengthening their culture of origin and is also creating the culture of the San Jose Obrero School where all the musical puzzle pieces come together to make one culture. And that is what they live: that part of their music, part of the puzzle, is here and that everyone forms the music of San Jose Obrero, which is us.

What problems are you able to identify in a current, formal education?

Separating education and teaching seems to be a mistake, in my opinion. To continue living in what was structured in the 19th century after the industrial revolution, and to remain a school of the industrial revolution, which is what we are, seems to me to be a mistake. If the music does not fit into that structure of industrial revolution, then we try with these projects to break that rigid structure to make sure that music intervenes in and energizes other subjects. This way there are no subjects, only knowledge. The schools have to go backwards. I think that schools need to turn this around, right? We have to tell our students to think critically. Tell them this, and then once they leave primary school, still very young, they will be able to buy a train ticket or read a label and know what they are eating. That is to say, that we develop skills, that we develop abilities, that we develop competencies so that these children are capable of being autonomous once they leave school. They will be independent, autonomous and have an autonomy and value that gives them strength in the face of adversity. That is the only thing that we ask of them, and it is very important.

Interview with Ana Perez

How would you describe the San Jose Obrero school?

San Jose Obrero is difficult to define on paper and in two words because I would tell you that it is a school that is made day-by-day. It is a school of 400 and some students are born here, but of a foreign background, and from more than 30 nationalities. So, it is a school that is very unique, but a school that is made day-by-day. It is a school where we take advantage of cultural diversity as an enriching factor. We take advantage of this cultural diversity. As a teacher, I am the first to admit that the teachers are the ones that are learning at San Jose Obrero with this brutal mix of nationalities that we have here. So, it is a living school, where the teachers, students and their families all interact together. Here, we share everything and learn everything from everyone. From the minute you walk in the door every morning, you are learning. Every day at work is different because you cannot stick to a certain learning or teaching style. We are teachers, and of course our goal is for our students to acquire an adequate level of knowledge. That is a basic principle of any teacher. But, having the circumstances and special characteristics that this neighborhood does, we cannot have a closed curriculum where the same treatment is given to every student. Here, you are getting a child in November, another leaves in January and/or a family comes from China or Nepal half-way through the semester. Anyway, you cannot have a general model of learning for all of your students. What they mean by individualized teaching is that you have to learn every day to improvise a lot of what you do. You have to make things up as you go because you are faced with situations and circumstances that no one has explained or taught to you, because it is something that you have to learn on your own by living it. So, I think that is what a lot of us learn here: to work day-by-day with the children. They are learning, but we also have to learn with them, at their rhythm. I think that is a little bit of what is lived here, inside of this center.

From what you've told me, do you think that being a teacher at San Jose Obrero is a hard job to carry out?

Well, it is a hard job to carry out. Not because of the cultural diversity, but instead, because of the stories and the socio-economic circumstances that these families have to go through. They have to fight daily for their lives. They are families that you have to work with day-to-day, so it is hard because you really live their stories. These students carry their stories. Each one has their own, and you are a part of their story. It might be difficult, but at the same time very comforting, and these children are very grateful because they are very much in need of the affection that they find here. So no, it is not a difficult job to carry out, but it is true that the circumstances and stories of these children do affect you. I do not see that my work is difficult, but very heart-warming, because you can learn every day. You arrive every morning and every morning is different. You never know what you are going to have to face every day. You never know what is going to arise during the day, because many things do, and you are going to have to improvise and solve problems throughout the day. This is a little of the life that I live here.

In what neighborhood is the school located?

It is a lower-middle class neighborhood of working families. What happens is that right now, you could walk down a street in the neighborhood and you would be impacted by the large amount of diversity that there is, and the number of cultures and religions. It is complicated, and it is the ignorance around this reality that scares people from outside. Here, in the neighborhood, I think that at first this transformation happened when the neighborhood began to introduce cultural differences. Those families that were arriving, including children from the shanty-town of Vacie, also

impacted the families here at the school. So, all of that ignorance is what many times held us back, but I think that we have learned how to coexist. I will give you an example: Last year, a choir was created at the school for Christmas. It was a choir made of fathers, mothers and families. You were able to see that within the choir there was a mother from Nepal, a mother from Morocco with her veil, another South American, all singing Christmas carols. It is impossible to imagine, and you might say, "How could that be?", well, it is. They have learned, shared and mixed naturally. What could originally be seen as a factor of segregation and conflict, the neighborhood now lives with, accepting it as something enriching in the neighborhood.

What role has the school played in the transformation of the neighborhood?

The school has played a very important role. I don't think that we have noticed because it has been gradual. The school has changed a lot since the beginning, since about 10-12 years ago. It has changed a lot because the school has functioned well as a cultural center and a neighborhood association. It is an open school because we do not just work with the children, but we also have to work a lot with the neighborhood, the families, social services and with the different associations that there are in the neighborhood that work with us. So, it is a school that is always open, even on Saturdays, for any organized activities, such as a spring party, a flea market or a neighborhood meeting. This school is the cultural center of the neighborhood, because they do not have any other place that brings them together. It serves as a revitalizer for some families and as a meeting place. So yes, it has played a very important role. This school is open, but open for real, because it has to be this way. Here, there are families that come for registration, who come from Senegal, Cameroon, Romania and do not speak the language, who many times do not know how to read or write in Spanish, let alone their own language. So, you cannot say that the secretary's schedule is from 12-2, because then the family that is working all day at precarious jobs, or a stay at home mother, will not be able to come because the secretary's schedule is at 12. The school has to be open and flexible. I would say that the word that slightly defines the school and our way of interacting is "flexibility." You have to be flexible on everything: your objectives, in tutoring parents, in the grouping of children. You have to be flexible outside and inside of school hours. You have to be open at whatever time, and if they come to see the principal, or me, as Director of Studies, you have to drop everything at a moment's notice, and attend to those parents that are coming. For this reason, I tell you that we live day-to-day, and that every day walking through the door, you have to understand that you will have a list of things to do, but that it is very likely that something different will come up and that you will have to drop what you are doing at any moment. This is our style of work, but there is no other way. There is no other way.

What does diversity bring to the school?

This diversity brings us so much. It is such an enriching factor. Here, you do not see... I don't know how to explain it. We do not take advantage of the diversity. This is a school where there are children, just like any other school, where there is a lot of diversity, but you do not say that you are going to work at diversity or that you are going to do such an activity. No. Here we live diversity. You walk out onto the porch and a girl from Ethiopia arrives, who does not know Spanish. You then see a Chinese girl who is teaching her Spanish, because she has been here a few years already and they are friends and you do not need any students to serve as mediators, but they do anyway. We do not have a strategy. When they ask us how we do it, we answer that we do not do anything. It is just that kids are kids and they live in their stories. They tell you their

stories, their lives, and they are used to sharing their stories and their lives with other children. I will give you an example from last year from my class, because that is what I live and what I feel. There was a poetry contest, so they had to learn poetry. I had a boy from China who said, "If you want, I can recite my poetry in Chinese," and I had a girl from the Philippines who said, "Well I can in Tagalog," and yet another child from Morocco said, "I can in Arabic," and finally, another child from South America said, "I can in quechua." One activity, that in the moment was about poetry, transformed into another activity so rich, so different, without me even saying anything. It was them, themselves, who proposed it. I had no objective. That is our work dynamic. This is not to say that we worked at diversity, but we lived it, because it is a norm in our center, so we take advantage of this richness. I think that it is a wealth and we learn a lot from it.

What happens when the children finish their studies at this school?

The fear that we often have is in the transition from our school to secondary school. It is true that there is a certain drop-out rate, and there are some students who lose their good study habits, but we already have students who are getting out of secondary school and making it to university. So, little-by-little, there are some, but not all, as it is very complicated. It is complicated because some families have very difficult situations and it is necessary to keep in mind that they do not have the same opportunities that other children have. For example, in their homes, many children do not have internet, or they do not read because they are not empowered to do so in their home. Many are not familiar with Sevilla. You take them out of the neighborhood, and they feel like they are in a different city. So, in this school, we work very hard through projects and promote a lot of opportunities to experience parks and museums. It has been a few years since we did a learning and service project. In this project, they had to make a budget and spend it on visiting sites within the city, since they do not normally have this opportunity. So yes, it is true that the school does intense work with these children who are slightly cut off after they leave the school. Each time, they become more conscious that they can do it. That by working and trying hard, they can achieve, but it is true that there is always a group that stays in the middle of the path. Here, we are fighting and trying to make sure that this does not happen. This is a lot of working with the families and the neighborhood, a task that includes doing workshops with the parents and speaking with them a lot. This also includes working with the associations that work with us because these children later have a connection outside of the school that supports them to do their homework, to work and to go on excursions with them on the weekends. This is needed because many families work all day and cannot be with their children at this time. Here, we have students who are 11 and 12 years old and carry a key to their house, because at 2 pm there is no one at home waiting for them. They even prepare their own food. So, it is difficult for the work that you do, many times, to continue because it really depends on the circumstances that they are in and the social changes are very slow, as we know. This is very difficult. The transformations are very complicated, and there are a lot of factors that intervene. It is hard because, little-by-little, we are changing the mind-set that we have about certain realities that we live in. It is very important that we recognize these realities. I think that it is the ignorance of not knowing what resources are available that, many times, does not allow you to help or to be there to share in experiences with people.

When you talk about this individualized teaching school, what do you mean?

Well, individualized teaching means that we understand that each child is a different world and that we are all different. Not because we are from Romania,

neither from China, nor Africa, but we are different. So, every boy and girl needs unique treatment and learning. We cannot come to the classroom, open the book, and say, "Everyone come to the front." We cannot do this because each child has their own rhythm and their own needs. Behind every boy and girl are many stories and you cannot get there and treat the idea the same for everyone. Instead, you have to respect the rhythm of learning for each one. Here, the key word is "flexibility." Adapting to what is asked of you by each child. When looking at the groupings, for example, a boy or a girl could arrive, who might be in 5th grade by age, but has not been in school. All of the teachers have a clear idea that they will be in 4th. Through the reinforcements, supports and adaptations that we have to make, we have to adapt the curriculum, objectives and contents... we are constantly changing. This is a little bit of what it means to have an individualized teaching style. We try to make sure that every boy and girl receive the learning that they need in that moment. There is no other way in this center that works for us, we have to work.

In what ways would you say that this school is different than other schools?

In most schools there is a management team that runs things but here what happens is that it is a faculty of teachers that are suggesting activities, projects, etc. We are continually collaborating between teachers. This is happening at our school and we did not even notice, but little-by-little we have been changing until we have reached where we are right now. At other schools it is not this way. It is proposed from one point of view and infrequently. Here, it is the faculty of teachers that make suggestions as they see the needs and potential. Then you can think of twenty thousand stories that arise from one day to another.

Is the participation of boys and girls encouraged in this center?

We put a lot of emphasis on class assemblies and dialogues. I, for example, have a mailbox for suggestions where they can put their topics, ideas that they want to share and things that concern them. I tell them to write about whatever they want, things that worry them or things that they are interested in. Then we do class assemblies in all of our courses and there, the boys and girls talk and tell stories, put out their ideas, their worries, etc. And then I, as the Director of Studies, have a commission of delegates that meets monthly who tell me what they talked about in those assemblies: the concerns of the children, what the school is missing... and at the end of the course, we send a written letter to the mayor or the delegate depending on what we see. This way, the children can see that they can participate in their school and in their neighborhood, so we do that a lot. There is a lot of work meant for them to give their opinion and participate in what the school is.

How do the teachers work here?

Everyone works in their way and not all of the teachers follow the same path. Each one has their own way of working and their own way of doing things, but it is true that we do have a lot of coordination meetings where we talk about all of this and where we share everything. We have to talk a lot amongst ourselves because new situations come every day that we have to comment on daily. We also share our ways of working individually, we also have to share because many things happen to you that are good that the rest of the people should know. This is a little bit of the dynamic at the school.

Why do you insist so much on teamwork?

Teamwork contributes to autonomy, responsibility, things that are not actually in the curriculum. We believe that the alumni should leave this school center with these abilities that respond to our way of working. To me, I am more interested that my alumni leave with these capabilities that are most likely not considered in the curriculum, but that will later on serve in their life and that are social skills of relationship building, of autonomy, of the capability of expression, of dialogue, of finding solutions to their problems.

How is the center's collaboration with the Antropoloops project going?

Everything that I am telling you, they are relating through music. They are developing many of these types of abilities because they are working on many activities in groups, they have to problem solve, come to an understanding to move forward in the sessions and, more than anything, very important, they are working on bodily expression, something that is not given much importance in schools. For all of us, we struggle a lot in expressing ourselves orally and bodily and this is being worked on very well. The boys and girls have a hard time with this because they have to lose that embarrassment in front of everyone else. Expressing themselves freely is very hard for them and I like it because they are living it. I have already seen that they are changing a little in this aspect. When we first started the project at the beginning of the course, until now, they have finally been losing a little of the fear and expressing themselves through rhythms, for example, because they have to move their bodies, their arms, which embarrasses a lot of them. I have seen that this is helping them and then impacts the other subjects because it is helping them be, to let themselves go, to lose a little of the fear of others, to know how to talk to others, and this is very important and I believe that at other schools, this is not much of a priority because, in schools, we are more accustomed to writing. We have done a little bit of an evaluation this trimester of what they have done and what they have learned. They have told us, in their own way that they have liked everything, but the best part is that they have enjoyed themselves and they have learned to be responsible and to work with their classmates and that sticks with me. For me that itself is very important.

Resistencia Films





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Who are you? What is your relationship with the field of cinema, journalism and social activism?

My name is Alejandro Garcia. I was born in Granada, but I've lived in Madrid for six years. I started studying audiovisual communications in the Complutense University of Madrid. Later, I completed a Masters in Master Lav, which is a cinema and contemporary art school, dealing with experimental cinema and artistic experimentation. At the same time, my involvement at the political level was kind of starting with the 15M. In my town, I'd already had some involvement with the student movement when I was in school, but I became more active with the 15M in Cádiz. I later returned to Madrid where my activism continued in the 15M and in PAH (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, the Platform for Victims of Mortgage*) and the anti-repression movement and other different movements that emerged in Madrid. My development as a political activist started to develop from there.

At the same time, I started working on my projects in university but there was a moment when I realized that I wasn't learning everything I needed there and that I could start learning on my own. Rather than doing free internships for companies, I wanted to dedicate that free work to another part of my life that would help me learn and contribute to something I considered important instead of increasing the wealth of a single person. I started to bring the knowledge from the university to my daily activism, giving voice to both what I saw and the movements I participated in.

Alex, you're an activist, journalist and filmmaker. As a filmmaker you have done *Tomad nuestra voz en vuestra gargantas* (2017, "Take our voice and make it your own) y *Represión Un arma de doble filo* (2015, "Repression: A Double-Edged Sword"). Can you tell us about the origin of these projects and their relationship to your own development as a filmmaker?

Yes, *Represión Un arma de doble filo* (Repression: a Double-Edged Sword) was the first project I did when I started the Resistencia Films channel. I started with this project because it was a time where political repression was beginning to increase and reach several sectors. Many people with a certain political orientation ended up detained or in preventive prison, as was the case of Alfon, rappers who were being sentenced and received prison sentences because of their lyrics. All this was happening, and it was something that wasn't being talked about and that people didn't know about. So, I saw the need to start documenting all those testimonies and to talk about the reality that we were living, always from a point of view that repression wasn't something new, but it was starting to increase and it was going to become a real problem that we'd have to face at some point.

I interviewed seven people who were suffering cases of repression at different levels, some at the level of police harassment for their activism in their neighborhoods, others for participating in demonstrations or strikes and others for freedom of expression. I also interviewed two lawyers to give an insight as to why all this repression was coming from within the State and how the laws that we have in place justified themselves. I made this documentary in 2014 and I felt that I had not approached repression in a very profound way. I stayed in a very general point of view of repression, on a formal level, so to speak. At a formal level, the documentary was too discursive and too journalistic, perhaps. Also because of my lack of experience, because I was in the second year of my career, I had a camera, I didn't have a microphone, everything was super precarious. Then, when I began my Masters, I decided to return to that same idea of repression and why this happens in the Spanish State, so I started the project *Tomad nuestra voz en vuestra gargantas* (Take our voice and make it your own). For me it talks about the same, but it is a very different project because *Tomad nuestra voz en vuestra gargantas* talks less from a discursive view of the political argument and why all this happens, and starts talking more about the sensations, about the meaning of repression and the impact it has on the people who suffer from it. I conducted five interviews, not so much regarding political repression directly for activism, but with people who have lost their homes, which is a type of economical repression, with women suffering violence from their partners, which is a form of sexual and male chauvinist repression, and with an immigrant suffering repression because of their origin, which is another form of repression, and also to a person suffering political repression for their activism. These people tell their experiences through their feelings and, although they are different topics, they are all talking about the same thing: fear, loneliness, isolation. It is also a bit more experimental on a formal level because it is not so much a narrative but rather the voices of the people and the landscape that I record that, in some way, kind of reflect the construction of the Spanish State and how that repression is present in the streets, in the headquarters, in video surveillance and in other forms that we see reflected in our day to day lives.

Where have they been screened?

In different universities through the collaboration of several student associations in Salamanca, in Granada, in Barcelona, in Seville, and they've also been projected a lot in social centers and neighborhood associations in Extremadura, the Basque Country, Santander, Andalucía, Madrid, Barcelona, Cantabria. Not a single cinema has shown it. The first one I didn't send in at a cinematic level. The second one, I did send to a few festivals, but it didn't make it into the festival's programming. The last one premiered in Filmin.

Isn't it contradictory to use a YouTube channel to deliver activist content?

I want to reach the public, and the public uses YouTube. So, we have to use what people use as well. If I isolated myself, at the end of the day only my four friends and I would see it, so my ability to change things or influence someone else would not exist. One has to be where the public is, and if we could have a television program and show it on television, we would have to do it because at the end of the day, that's the way to reach people and fight against dangerous media. If instead of fighting against this type of media, we isolate ourselves and use smaller platforms, at the end of the day it will work more against us than in our favor.

How are these types of projects subsidized?

Well, I think that nowadays it is easier to make an audiovisual project with a very small budget. My budget has been very minimal for both projects. Basically, it's been all travel expenses, which I took advantage of by doing something or seeing a friend, which ended up being pretty economical, and I used the least amount of resources possible. I ended up using my camera, which is the one I used for university and a tape recorder for the second documentary. It was with these two materials that I carried out the project, so the cost was maybe 30 euros for the second project and 50 euros for the first. The truth is that it is quite economical nowadays to be able to do a project like this without needing a big budget.

**What thoughts come to mind when thinking about independent cinema?
From your point of view, what are some of the pending subjects?**

I think that a very interesting kind of independent cinema is created in Spain but in the end, because of subsidy issues, it is often dependent on the subsidy of the State that, in some way, controls these projects at a political level because it is difficult to get a private subsidy to be able to do an independent project, although I think that the amount of independent projects have been increasing over time. On the other hand, I feel that sometimes independent cinema is removed from the realities of society or its problems since they are seen from a very distant plane, especially when we talk about the political cinema or projects that want to work on political issues. I often feel that they work from the outside, far away from the political movement, like they aren't working from the inside out. It's kind of what I was trying to change with my channel. I am not the type of person who gets close to a social movement just to record an interview, I become an activist of that social movement and use the audiovisual material to help that social movement from the inside out, not as an external onlooker that approaches the movement just to see what happens there. I think that many times that external perspective creates an isolation or a separation or a distance between both projects and does not arrive at a clear point.

15M has signified a moment of reorganization, (re) invention, strengthening or contribution to the experience of many of the groups with whom I have spoken to. What has 15M signified for "Resistencia Films"?

The 15M was for me a particular and important moment in the history of this country, although it was movement at a very early stage, so to speak, because it wasn't clear about what it wanted to be or what it was, not even what it wanted. It was an outburst of indignation from the people who reached a point where they said, "I can't take these problems anymore," and people who didn't know how to organize themselves and who had never had any kind of political organization, who didn't even talk about politics, who just exploded and said "I can't anymore." The first assemblies that I remember seemed eternal because there were people who were not used to participating in an assembly and people with very broad personal problems and in the end they were assemblies that lasted six hours or eight hours where everyone needed to vent and tell all their problems: "my son has been fired from his job," "they want to take my house away," "I am waiting for surgery and it is taking a long time," etc. I think that the important thing about 15M wasn't so much the project itself but what it meant for Spanish society. I also don't have a lot of experience because I'm young and lived in a town, but before the 15M I had never heard politics talked about in my house; not in my school; not on the street. I had some political interest, but it was something personal of mine. I think that the 15M allowed politics to return to the people. Through the 15M, people started to worry about politics again, they started

talking about politics at home, they started talking about politics at school, in the streets and in bars. Until then, with the welfare state that they'd painted us, politics was something for the politicians and the Parliament, and the people didn't participate in it and weren't interested in it, except for when they had to vote. I think that at that moment we started to think of politics as something that wasn't 'theirs' but that was ours as well and that we had to start influencing. I think that was the important thing about 15M, that from then on, we started taking politics and making it ours.

In the field of media, you are known above all for founding Resistencia Films. What type of channel is it and what is its legal entity?

It doesn't have a legal entity. Basically, it's a YouTube channel. At the beginning, my idea was to make a wider communication project with more people able to participate but in the end, it was just me making these projects. The channel is basically me and a YouTube channel with three social networks where I broadcast the contents of the channel.

My channel is kind of intuitive. I mean, at the beginning it wasn't a serious communication service, that's not how I planned it. At the beginning, it was a way of practicing with my camera and contributing something to the movements I worked with, as an additional tool for those movements. Over time, I've been focusing a bit more on that and social movements have gotten to know more about me, and they've asked me for help, and it's become a more serious channel. At first, it wasn't an idea for a project, I was simply working without really having a bigger project in mind.

Resistencia Films started in 2014, and as you've explained at an intervention in the European Parliament, you try to "give voice to the problems we have in Spain and to the people who have been silenced through repression." Can you explain these problems? What people have you given voice to with your camera?

There are many problems in the Spanish State. We have the problem of housing, we have the problem of working conditions; the budget cuts in health and in education; we have the problem of repression, which is something the channel has been very focused on since its origin because I think it's a topic that's not talked about often. In the end, the fight against repression is a fight for all the problems we face because, if we don't fight against that repression, we're also losing the right to fight for housing. So, I believe that this is a transversal problem, and therefore a large part of the work has focused on denouncing this repression. I also give voice to people of the social movements whose struggles are not heard and to the people who suffer of repression from the State because what the State wants to do is isolate and silence them, so their reason for fighting is not heard and those who are fighting are not known because they serve as an example of fighting back for other people and that promotes even more fighting. It is something that the channel tries to stop. They are also people who have fought for many years and who have suffered repression for many years and who have been in prison for about 30 years due to their political activism. The State has put a lot of effort to isolate these people in prison and ensure that their cases or reasons for being in prison are not known. Part of my objective with the channel was to give voice to all these people who are fighting for a better world and a change in the injustices that we live.

Resistencia Films is a political project. What type of politics are we talking about?

The channel, above all, is an anti-fascist project that breaks away from what I consider to be a state that imposed itself in 1939 through a war that brought thousands of deaths and that massacred any possibility for a democracy in this country. I believe that it's continued today with some partial changes, but with a fascist essence that does not allow any kind of fight or dissent against the injustices that surround us. The project, in the end, is an effort to break away from that fascist state that was imposed on us and an attempt to reclaim a democracy in this country that we don't have, that we lost.

In some way, Resistencia Films is an archive of materials that you're compiling. How is the theme of copyright and user rights managed in the channel?

Well, we don't have many problems with the archived images. They're usually files that don't have copyright. They're images taken by anonymous people and uploaded to YouTube that have no rights whatsoever, or images that have lost their rights through time, so we've had no problems relating to those rights.

Do you work by yourself or with others?

A collaboration hasn't been able to happen. There are so many collectives and associations that live in the Spanish State that, in the end, it's very difficult to unite and organize among us, especially because of the issue of repression because every time there's a repressive case there are associations or groups in support of the repressed person, but there's no collective that tries to truly gather and organize all of the reprisal victims as a whole. The anti-repression movement emerged very recently in Madrid, it kind of tries to do that within the field of Madrid, because throughout the entire Spanish state, that would be almost impossible. It's already difficult for us here in Madrid to unify all these cases of repression and to move towards a common goal and unite for mutual support.

Why is it challenging to do collaborative work, dealing with similar issues?

Well, I think that in the end it is kind of because of the individualism the State injects in us from a very young age, and we put forth that individualism by focusing on ourselves. So, it's a job that we all have to do, of organizing and putting things together. It's a process that takes time and for it to come together, work must be done. Before there was almost never talk of politics, and in recent years, the associations have gained more strength and began to talk more about these issues. So, I think that at first we did need that personal development and now that we've reached a point where there's a trajectory and a broader personal development, I think it's time to lay our cards on the table and see what things we have in common and what we're all looking for.

Thinking about the contents of your materials, would you say that Resistencia Films falls under the field of informal education?

Yes, I believe that, in the end, some of my information has spread more by alternative ways through social networks, through the internet and the new platforms that exist that allow you to obtain different information, kind of against the tide of official information. At least, it allows you to contrast and discover new things and by contrasting you're able to generate your own conclusions and not simply receive information from a channel that, in the end, doesn't allow you to create your own conclusions because you end up repeating the information you receive. I imagine that the intention of the channel is also to give political information about my

vision or the vision that I see around me or the vision of the people who I hear speak and that this may allow other people to generate their own reflections and reach their own conclusions regarding what happens in the Spanish State.

Thinking about formal education in the cinematographic field and in relation to all the other themes you discuss in you channel, what would you say are the obstacles or unresolved issues in this educational model?

I think that there are many, and depending on the point we focus on, there would be many more. Regarding the topic of cinema, for example, the cinema that we're taught is almost a dead one that takes the classic ideas of cinema and repeats them in a way that means nothing. It's simply a part of the production of big industry and machinery. I don't think I learned anything in University, and that's why, because in the end, the way that they would teach you to relate to cinema and images was an almost dead way. The subject of scripts, technical and what not, seemed to me somewhat dated; it was like trying to put something on paper that you have to see, so I had a hard time working like that. On a political level, I think that, above all, we have a problem in the Spanish State when it comes to the topic of the history of this country. I think it's a void that we have that will always accompany us, especially the most recent history: what the Transition, Francoism, and the Civil War were. I think it's something that we need to rescue because this absence generates more silence. Oblivion was imposed, and for my generation and the future generations there is a gap. We have to begin to rescue and discover what happened in those moments because no one has told us, because no one wanted to talk about that topic. Repression had imposed a deep fear in the previous generations and the State tried with all its might to silence those glimpses of voices of those years. My generation has not known anything of that history, and we are beginning to discover it and to kind of dig into what happened there and why we live the way we live. In the end, the fact that we live the way we do has to do with what happened in the past. I think it is important to know where we come from and why we're in the state we're in.

One of the things that, at the cinematographic level, was absent in university was a response to all the cultural domination we have from the United States. I ended up boycotting American cinema. American films are interesting, but, almost internally, I ended up boycotting it because as you begin to find out about each country, and the filmography of each country, and all the independent work that has been done, you realize, "Fuck, I've spent 24 years of my life watching only American films." You would go to a movie theater, and out of 20 films showing, 19 were American and one was Spanish, and perhaps every now and then, they would show a French one. I know nothing of Russian, Bulgarian, Italian, Portuguese cinema, not even Spanish cinema. So in the end it's part of that imperialistic cultural domination.

Have you received any invitations from formal education settings to talk about your works?

I have received invitations from student associations, which are the ones that invite me to the university. There are never formal invitations to universities and I don't expect them because the State will not formally give me an invitation to participate in a public university, but I have been able to enter the University thanks to student associations trying to provide alternative information and to create alternative spaces to those from the system.

Considering that you now upload your content in a YouTube account and that social media is changing, especially in moments of political discontent and learned helplessness, in big trash piles of complaints, rage and indignation, do you believe that the media diffusion of a culture against the prevailing circumstances is capable of provoking concrete actions?

I believe that art or journalism, in the end, are tools. I believe that what transforms reality is the organization of people to transform of reality, and that is the only thing that can truly change something. At that point, that transformation uses many tools: it can be a rally, a strike, a news outlet, a film, a work of art or music. There are many tools that can be used, but I think that if these tools are used in an isolated manner within that organization and the movement from the working class, it won't go anywhere. I think that all these tools have to come from something greater, and the only thing that can make things change is everyone organizing to create a better world.

On July 28, 2017, you were summoned to the National Court for possibly committing the crime of glorifying terrorism. In particular, it seems that you were accused of “guilt by association.” Can you explain what this expression refers to and how it connects to the alleged “glorification of terrorism”?

Well, I don't have a clear sense of what terrorism means today. I often hear of accusations for glorifying terrorism and of terrorism, but that doesn't clarify things. Not long ago, a story was published in Spain about a Neo-Nazi sniper who attempted the assassination of the President for trying to remove Franco from the Valley of the Fallen with a large military arsenal, and the National Court declared that this person wasn't a terrorist, that they could not sentence him because it wasn't a crime of terrorism and that a regional court had to sentence him and not them. Then, I wondered what terrorism is because, on the other hand, we see how rappers are going to National Court for crimes of terrorism, and we see people being charged with crimes of terrorism for attending organizations, and now for doing interviews, I have to go to the National Court for a charge of crime of terrorism, so what is terrorism?

The prosecution, above all, argued in their last plea that I generated an abstract risk and an indirect incitement to violence. It's a contradiction because the risk is already abstract, not something material or concrete. Then, the abstract risk is the abstraction of abstraction or something like that. And then, what does indirect incitement to violence mean? If I record an eviction, and it generates hate in someone who sees it, is it my fault or of whoever caused the eviction? If I show the images of how the police attacks people for protesting peacefully in a plaza and that generates hatred in someone, is it my fault or of the police that has committed this act? As I told the National Audience, I am not making anything up. I am not creating a reality. I am holding a camera, and I'm reflecting something that is there. I am not at fault for what it generates in people who see it. The fault is of whoever provokes these realities and creates these realities. Terrorism is something abstract. In the end, we don't know what it is, and because we don't know what it is, it can be anything. Then, it's easy to take it to any place. For saying, “the fight is in the streets and not in Parliament,” there have been people accused, just for saying that phrase, of inciting terrorism. In the end, the word terrorism is good for anything and they can use it any way they can. I suggested my judgement regarding the dilemma of what is terrorism. To go out to the street to protest, to denounce the situation of a prisoner, what does that mean?

What specific material is being denounced?

They're accusing the entire channel. They don't specify any particular video, but they make an accusation to the entire channel claiming that the channel has a clear intention of increasing terrorism from its very origins. And they are basing the accusation on 17 videos, especially the videos that are on the topic of repression of political prisoners that have been in prison for many years.

Because of this act, you faced two years of prison, 10 of complete prohibition from continuing your video work and a €2,400 fine. Can you describe what the process of your case has been? What has been the result in legal and personal terms?

They call me on June 25, 2017. They call me by phone to tell me I should give them my email address so they can send me the court citation. It arrives by email. They tell me that I should present myself at court. They don't explain the reasons why, but I go to receive the summary. I go to court to declare begin the judicial process, and it ends on November 12, 2018. Of course, there's no particular accusation. No one lodges a complaint against my channel in particular. The police are the ones who conduct an investigation by digging through the internet. This is what they declared in the trial on November 12. They said they were simply doing an investigation by searching in the internet for content that they considered punishable. My lawyer, for example, asked them if they had made an evaluation of the risk of those contents, as in, if any of the videos had provoked a concrete deed that can be considered punishable, and the police said no. They would simply see the video, and then they would send it to the prosecutor, who would make the accusation and write the summary to take me to court. Luckily, my lawyer offered to take on my case in solidarity and has not charged me heavily for the defense trial. Luckily, there are people that work in the field of activism to financially support the fight against repression, and that has allowed me to go through this process without any economic costs.

Afterwards, of course, there's the personal cost of the two years I was sentenced. Even more than me, because in a way I faced the process from the start with the awareness of why I was being judged, my family is the one that has had the greatest emotional impact. And the people around me because they were not as aware of why I had to go there, and of course, fear is a powerful weapon. Two years of incarceration with the possibility of going to prison meant that you don't have fixed plans for the future. That is, my life, since going to court, can only be traced up to a month or two ahead. I couldn't enter a long-lasting project because I didn't know if I would need to end it at any moment to go to prison. Of course, there is a personal cost, and there is also a social cost because all of this is to try to plant fear all around you so that, in the end you're dominated by the fear that something like this will happen to you because you can end up in prison, have fines or judicial problems.

I have listened very carefully to the summary of cases of repression that you list in your intervention at the European Parliament. Based on these cases and your own experience with Resistencia Films, what is your reading of the history of political repression in this country?

Well, as far as the judicial process, the media has not paid much attention to the case. Above all there's been attention from alternative media that has supported my situation. There has been some larger media, but also some independent news outlets that have also given me a bit of a voice, and the rest of the media basically ended

up repeating the accusations of the prosecution and reproducing the case in a very simple and plain way. At the end, they seemed like press notes almost written by the National Court. It was also difficult to stigmatize me because I don't speak in any of my videos. I mean, I was someone who interviews people from GRAPO, and people read it and think that accusing me doesn't make sense. In the end, it was a purely ideological process. The national audience doesn't ask me about the videos, they ask me about what I think, what I feel, what I believe, what my ideas are, what intentions I have, where I get the information from. The prosecutor at the trial tried very hard to ask me where I got the information for each video, and I don't know what he wanted me to say, if I took it out of a vault that I had in Vallecas or what. I told him that I get my information from Google, from YouTube, from social networks, I don't know what he expected. He had a strong emphasis on asking where I got that information from, who was passing me the information, as if I had I-don't-know-what. It was a shock at the beginning of the testimony because I, of course didn't expect those kinds of questions. I didn't really know why they had called me, but I thought it was to ask me about the videos so I was prepared to answer why I did the videos and that there was no crime in any of the videos, but the questions were directed towards what I thought. At first, I was a bit shocked and didn't know if should answer and in the end I decided that I don't have to explain what I think. If you are taking me to trial for my ideas, then say it clearly: "We are judging you for having some anti-system, anti-fascist, communist ideas and such." Then, maybe, I'd think about answering some of your questions, but if not, it doesn't make sense for you to ask me what I think, what I feel, or what ideas I have.

How many similar cases do you know of and what seem to be the accusations made against them?

At the level of censorship and repression of freedom of expression there have been about 367 from the beginning of what we know as a democracy, but of course there are thousands of cases of repression and there comes a point where it's impossible to quantify or make contact with all of them. When I did the project *Represión, Un arma de doble filo*, I was starting with all of this and I had the opportunity to interview the most intense cases in that year and more or less I think I picked up a bit of the panorama or, at least, the most visible, but today it would be impossible. There are different accusations at the level of freedom of expression, usually they hide behind charges of glorifying terrorism or insulting the crown or to the security bodies of the State. These are basically the three denunciations. For example, the most recent trial is that of Pablo. Pablo has three denunciations, three accusations, one for glorifying terrorism, another for insults to the crown and another for insults to the state security forces. Although it's for the same thing and it's the same judicial process, each has its own conviction. For glorifying terrorism, they asked for two years, for insults to the crown for a year and a half and for insults to the State security bodies another year and a half. If we talk about other areas, other kinds of accusations come up. For example, public disorder, aggression to the police and disobedience to authority. This kind of set of accusations in the social movement is often called the "activist pack" and it's that they accuse you of disorders, disobedience and aggression. These would be the favorite accusations of the State to attack the social movement.

What are some indicators that we can observe in the Spanish State that speak of the culture of political or thought repression?

How can we talk about the beginning of freedom or democracy in this country when everyone wasn't allowed to be present at the elections? That is, a few were allowed. To

say that we're breaking from a previous political regime and have started a new project in freedom, all political positions should have been legalized and we should have decided which path we want. They marked out which road we could choose for us; that is, we can choose this path, but not all of these, and from there we have the freedom to move and decide. Then, of course, there are a lot of laws that are aimed directly at ending various organizations, associations, political parties. For example, the law of parties that allows the illegalization of these parties-- just now, Vox was protesting that the independence parties in Catalonia were made illegal. Laws that hinder or control or try to manipulate political movements, and that generate this kind of imaginary idea that we live in a great democracy until you start to see everything that is not allowed. The fact that they don't allow protests for various things, the fact that they don't allow you to talk about various things, the fact that they don't allow you to organize for various things. Then you begin to get the idea that this freedom we had was false. We have freedom to choose between A and B, but we don't have the option to choose C.

From your own perspective, do you think freedom of expression exists in the Spanish State?

In this country there is freedom of expression, but it exists for limited subjects; for the right, for fascism, for the most reactionary ideas and the ones that are in agreement with the State, but there's no freedom of expression for any ideas that are dissident or that go against the fundamental principles of the regime that was imposed on us.

The silence of activist collectives in the Spanish State seems to be accentuated by the Gag Law. For people who are not familiar with this country, can you explain what the Gag Law is and what impact it has today in the activist, journalistic and film field?

Well, regarding the Gag Law there is a lot of confusion, especially in the media. The Gag Law is a law of citizen security. There have been many in this country, in fact, all governments have had it. The Gag Law in particular, what it does is update the previous laws of citizen security in the present context, that is to say, in the context of 15M's massive mobilizations, in the context where social networks and the internet are starting to generate alternative content. It's a law that goes with administrative fines, never criminal fines. All these cases of glorification of terrorism go through the National Court and are criminal, so it has nothing to do with the Gag Law. Many people confuse it, for example in an interview they've done to me, they have titled it "The YouTuber going to prison because of the Gag Law," which is something that's really not related because the Gag Law is about a fine. This law is a problem and it's generating a problem of very high fines that are difficult to afford and that succeed in getting people to refrain from going to a demonstration because they can get fined. That said, this law itself is not the problem. The Gag Law is one more law, an update of old laws. The problem is much deeper and comes from much earlier. I believe that there has also been a badly judged intention to link the Gag Law with everything that was happening that was kind of trying to advance the idea that the problem was the Partido Popular (the Popular Party, PP) and isolate the rest of the political parties from this repression. They said that the problem was that the Popular Party had implemented a law called the Gag Law, in order to make people think that this was a problem of the Popular Party, period, and not talking about everything before the Popular Party. And of course, it's not really like that. The first trial that Pablo Hasel had was when the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, PSOE) was in power, and in this country, all the governments we've had have needed to change. It's not something specific to the PP's Gag Law.

From your perspective, is there “revolutionary” art? What would your description be?

Yes, I believe that revolutionary art does exist. I believe that it's the dreams of the social movement, of the people organizing; those ideas that expand and are shown to the outside. The art that, besides coming from that, infects others with the motivation to fight. It is an art that, somehow, makes you get off the couch and mobilize. It doesn't tell you, "This is the reality we live in and we can't do anything to change it, stay at home and let's cry about all the problems we have." It's an art that tells you, "This is happening like this, but you can change it and we need you to help change it."

Bearing in mind that we live in a society of images and the market of images, what can an image be, according to your own practice as a filmmaker? Or around the same, how do you fight an image with another image?

In the end, I believe that the images that are going to fight against the images that are imposed on us must be images that originate from the social movements themselves. What I am clear on is that it's the social movements, the organization of people that have to create that image, and nowadays we have that ability. Nowadays any person with a mobile phone, without having studied film, without having any idea about images on a technical or audiovisual level, has the ability to create images and I believe that these are the images that have to be created directly, not from the outside but from the inside, about what you are living through, about what you feel. I think these are the images that should be created; that people should take out their phones and show the realities we live in order to be able to know them.

Taking into account the climate of general political discontent and your own discontent after your recent experience with the judicial system, how do you maintain hope?

I am very optimistic for the most part. I feel that there are changes and I believe that when you're in the streets and you witness how things have evolved, you realize that there have been very small steps taken and that we have changed little by little through time, or at least it appears slow to us. Yes, there are changes and, in those changes, you find out that things can be changed and that it is possible and that it's not a lost cause. Of course, we often have the short-lasting idea that the revolution has to be something from one day to the next, but social processes have taken years. Capitalism is a very young system. We have the idea that capitalism is something eternal that takes all life and that is going to continue throughout life, but feudalism lasted many more years, slavery lasted many more years as well. I think it's a little-by-little process but in the end, there's no other way out because there's no solution within this formula. It's not possible to solve the problem we have. The State cannot guarantee us those rights and those freedoms because to guarantee them means to destroy itself and there is no other way left. Sooner or later we'll have to end this.

Pasaje Seguro Ya!





Constellation
of the Commons

Date of the interview
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Location
Santander Cantabria, Spain

Collective's name
Pasaje Seguro Ya!

Name of the interviewees
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Translated and reviewed by
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Who are you and what's your relationship with Pasaje Seguro ('Safe Passage' in English)?

Mila: I'm Mila Gárate. I'm from *Santander, Cantabria, I've been part of the citizen group Pasaje Seguro* since its origins, and, well, I've been here since the start and I'm continuing to be a part of it.

Patricia: I'm Patricia Manrique, I'm also part of Pasaje Seguro, and just like Mila I've been here since the beginning.

How, when, and where was this citizen's collective born?

Patricia: Well, this collective was born in (to Mila) 2015, or 2016?

Mila: 2016

Patricia: In 2016, at the most visible moment of the refugee crisis. So I decided to get in contact with people in various collectives in Cantabria, in certain social centers, collectives, and so on, and we put together a wide call to action, because on a pan-European level, a manifestation had been put together for February 27. So we met in the Santander public library, we chose that as a neutral site, some place that was of the people, in order to call together the largest number of people possible. We called on people from collectives, but also for example many people that had entered the city's political scene through 15M. We started to have preparatory meetings, and we convened that manifestation. We didn't know if it was going to have a good reception, and it really surprised us, because in the people you could see an anxiety, a concern about the issue of the refugees and the disastrous or non-existent response on behalf of the European states including Spain. That worry brought the people into the streets. As a manifestation of people coming together in so many diverse ways, there was a big response from all kinds of people, all ages. So from there, we decided to gather all that energy, and as the manifestation wasn't going to solve the problem on an international level, we decided to put together a working group.

What's the legal form of Pasaje Seguro?

Mila: No, we don't have a legal entity, we consider ourselves a working group.

Patricia: A citizen's working group. And what brings us together is the common work we're doing, we didn't want to give it any legal status, not even as an association. A lot of times the press and the media get it wrong, saying it's an association, that it's an NGO, because apparently

when you're dealing with human rights issues you have to be an NGO, which isn't at all our case. We're a political citizen's work group, but that doesn't have a legal form.

What media do you use to display your denouncements and demands?

Mila: Well, if this refers to economic resources, really through contributions made by members of Pasaje Seguro. Then at some points we've sold shirts, badges, pennants, which has helped us spread the message, raise awareness, and raise funds. Nothing more [has been a source of income], because sometimes money comes to us through some organization, for example a theatre group, or high schools, who dedicate the proceeds of something, a march in solidarity or some rummage sale, and they call us to come talk about our cause, they call us because we're concerned with refugees -- that money doesn't stay in Pasaje Seguro. That money goes to some project that we aren't leading, but we always have some contact with. The first year, we had contact with Vicente, who was in, I don't remember...

Patricia: In Lesbos, a volunteer in Lesbos

Mila: In Lesbos. Then, later we had contact with the collective Himaya (<http://himaya.es/es/>). It's a collective organized and run in Greece, but the people are Spanish --

Patricia: Yes, they're Catalan, to be exact, some are from Catalonia.

Mila: -- Yes, and they're concerned with renting floors for the most vulnerable people and so on. So, money from high schools, that we've received for participation in marches of solidarity, we've sent it there. And we're comfortable with that. They commit to telling the centers about how they've spent the money.

How many people make up this citizen group?

Patricia: It's hard to say because it depends on the time. Let's see, looking at who's on the mail list, there's seventy-something people. Who went to the first meetings? That's 35, 40, 45. How many people are still here working day-to-day after the years? 10, 12, 15. And it kind of varies, because there are also moments that coincide with critical moments in the news. We're always trying to publicize what we do however we can, so that more people come, sometimes suddenly more people come to a certain event, an event, that mobilizes people, but it [the amount of members] varies. As far as age, it's diverse, but we could say about thirty and up, because it's something that young people, for example, have participated in very little. It's been more older people.

Mila: Yes, in the beginning, when you [to Patricia] said there were 35, 40 people, there were more young people. But I think now I'd say it's 30 and up.

Patricia: 40, maybe.

Mila: Maybe, yes.

Patricia: The people here now are the resistant ones, and as such, I'd say that the majority of them come from other experiences, other histories of commitment which if you think about it is what happens in a lot of collectives in the end. That in the end, those who stay are the most disciplined, and then there are a lot of people... the thing is that Pasaje Seguro isn't a collective. We're a citizen's work group. So if

you ask me, “who participates in Pasaje Seguro?” Well, anyone who feels themselves represented by Pasaje Seguro. Now, if we’re talking about the nucleus that facilitates things and puts plans into motion and deals with the meetings every two weeks, etc, we’re those ten, twelve people. But if we were only those ten, twelve, I don’t know what would happen with Pasaje Seguro. The idea is, there’s a lot of people behind us, worried about this issue, it’s true that there’s less and less, we do have to recognize that, we’ve gotten used to that, we’ve gotten used to that. I like to think of Pasaje Seguro as a movement, and I feel more like I’m participating in a movement than in a working group. I consider myself a worker within a movement, I consider anyone a Pasajista (coined term meaning member of/believer in Pasaje Seguro) who sees the news and gets angry and sometimes goes out into the street to protest.

Are there people who’ve migrated in the citizen’s group?

Patricia: Migrant people, people who migrated? There haven’t been. Well, they’ve come to some meetings, and once a refugee came, but in general, no. Because, and we see this with the refugees and immigrants that we’ve collaborated with on a radio program where we do an interview every week,¹ these people had their own problems and maybe being part of this collective would be too much. But, well, no. Almost all of us are citizens of Spain.

How do you function internally?

Patricia: Through assembly.

Mila: Yes, through assembly. Who organizes it, who convenes the assembly? We share this work, Patricia has done a lot of it.

Patricia: I’m the facilitator of the group.

Mila: Yes. And she’s inspired other people to take on for example calling together the meeting, selecting the crucial points to discuss, for which you have to be very involved in what’s going on. So, so far it’s been like this, there are various people who take on the roles of making the order of the day, so named in the classical way, and taking minutes as well. Then all the people really participate; as the meeting operates in the form of assembly, there are many people who present actions to carry out, really we’re never lacking in actions. And these actions, they’re almost always previously presented in writing, so there are people who maybe don’t propose actions themselves but they support them, and in a way they contribute to them, shape and develop them, so it’s a very shared work. And then, from there are sub-groups, but they’re not all functioning all the time; for example, there’s a sub-group for the radio, the sub-group of two or three people who are in charge of the issue of the press, and a sub-group for education that isn’t always operative. So, we always try to make these groups function kind of independently, but linked together. What happens is the assemblies are short, and there’s no time to go over everything. So, we give the group all the information over email.

Patricia: Yes, we just tell everything. Anyway, I’d also like to add to what Mila said about

¹ The program is called “Voces del vecindario,” or “Voices of the Neighborhood”: https://www.eldiario.es/norte/cantabria/podcast/Programa-Voces-Vecindario-Radio-Migrante_6_862723748.html

learning a little about inside the collectives, that we often like to think that everything they do, they do together in common, and that's not how it works. I personally do have the feeling that all the time we need a figure of facilitation, which, yes, generally has been me, someone concerned with... not just the tasks to do, because everyone brings up tasks, as Mila explained, but someone concerned supporting the group materially, which includes emotional issues, of how the group is, what things we can do, if this is the right moment to do this, if an action will be more motivating or frustrating, all that kind of thing. So, it's important in the group that this work is shared around more. Because it's a really invisible task, and I believe that in social movements we've learned very recently that it even exists, it's often referred to as something that just "is done," in the passive form like that. And I believe it's really important that this task is covered and it's given importance: determining how an assembly goes, what issues it can cover, how the people are, thinking about the people who disappear maybe because their mom is sick, or they have some problem. All those things really influence the work of the group. And I believe it's necessary to have that figure of facilitation because this doesn't just "get done" on its own. And if it does get done, what happens is that that duty falls on certain people in an invisible and kind of unfair way.

Have you created any protocol for assemblies for the people who come for the first time?

Patricia: We facilitate that. We do sometimes do protocols but we have a problem with carrying out protocols because sometimes you make them in one moment, you want to set up a plan for how to receive a person, but then later you don't carry it out. So, really I believe that what we have is facilitation. Not only on my part. Other people in the group take on that responsibility too. And we should demystify assemblyism (ie the philosophy and practice of work organized through assembly). I'm a firm believer in assemblyism, but assemblyism requires a lot of work, it's not something spontaneous, and we don't have protocols but there is consideration, there's always work behind the scenes for the assemblies. Never, as far as I remember, have I gone to a Pasaje Seguro assembly where we got there without a plan. There's always an order of the day, a person who's going to be in charge of facilitating the meeting, a person who takes minutes, and various people in the group who I consider pretty empathetic and concerned with the people around them, who concern themselves with how the meeting functions. So, spontaneous it is not.

Patricia, you're the facilitator of the group, where did you learn to facilitate?

Patricia: Well, I've been an activist in movements since I was 18. But where I learned the most was really in 15M. Because I'd participated in many collectives, some very diverse assemblies, some really exhausting ones that generate frustration, and that was in, let's say, homogenous collectives. Where I really learned to facilitate was in 15M because it wasn't homogenous. So, if you go to a homogenous collective, you tend to think... the thing is, more or less there are things you take for granted, there are certain dynamics that are already marked out. In contrast, in 15M, you found yourself in the street with a ton of people. It was a really enjoyable experience, an activist's dream, and you had to pay attention. I've learned to pay attention, or to spend a meeting looking at the faces of the people. Paying attention to the faces, the gestures, what issues they were focusing on, what they were generating, if there was a logic to what they were saying. So my fundamental learning from then on was in 15M.

Indirectly, you're talking about facilitation as an exercise in caretaking. Does that

way of understanding facilitation come to you from 15M, or from feminist study?

Patricia: Man, I came from... of course I have a grounding in feminism, and what's more, the issue of caretaking has interested me in an abstract sense, as a part of feminine counterculture -- the women have these issues, we know how to care for people, and as far as politicizing this, it's not just for the women but for the men to do too. Yes, of course, I got the idea from my feminism background, but in 15M I was able to put a lot of these things into practice. I saw them embodied, materially manifested, corporealized. And above all, finding a variety of profiles, finding yourself facing something totally open to the idea of assembly, the kind of meeting that requires care, that requires a rearguard, and what's more, a rearguard that has to be minimally active in a lead role. Right now, we're talking about this here because we're analyzing it, but in the day-to-day as a facilitator I don't have a leading role, not me or anyone else who facilitates, because in fact as the figure of facilitation you try to erase yourself a little, it's another thing you have to learn, it's really an exercise in generosity, because you have to erase yourself and kind of give up what you want in order to see what's brewing, what's coming together, and what the group wants or above all what the group is able to do.

What other collectives or groups with aspirations or demands exist in the Spanish state? Do you work through a network with them?

Mila: For example, with collectives similar to ours, in the rest of Spain, I would emphasize a few that sometimes we collaborate with and we have, we're putting together pretty powerful actions, I believe. For example, we collaborated with -- and I'm talking about refugee organizations -- with *Ongi Etorri* ("Good Welcome" in Basque) in Bilbao. It's not exactly that we work in a network, but we do share a lot of core work, and when those cores touch, we work together. The most adaptable to that is Ongi Etorri of Bilbao, with whom we share the theme "The war starts here" about the issue of weapons and weapon trafficking in the ports, first in the Port of Bilbao, and then the Port of Santander. We share a lot of information with them. There are other actions that we've done in an area of Spain, we've collaborated with the organizations from that area, like for example in Asturias, when they organized an action in 2017 for the presentation of the "Princess of Asturias" award to the European Union, they called us to the Oviedo assembly. In Burgos, another immigration rights organization has also gotten in touch with us to bring up the issue of the Expal weapons factory, which is in Paramo de Masa. They produce explosives and weapons and that's where they load much of what's coming right now to the Port of Santander, and is then brought to Saudi Arabia. That is to say, we have occasional contact with these organizations for specific reasons. I've also talked to Aurora, she's part of Abriendo Fronteras ("Opening Borders,") which has contact with Stop Mare Mortum and Abriendo Fronteras de Valencia, but not much contact. Really the one we have the most contact is Ongi Etorri, because we share the theme of "The war starts here." Burgos is also "The war starts here, let's stop it here" regarding the issue of weapons. So, ultimately, this is the issue that unites us.

For many collectives and projects (prior to 15M), 15M has represented a moment of reorganization, recognition, and strengthening. What did this moment signify for this working group?

Patricia: On a level... We could say, on a level of climate, that is 15M was really an environment, an atmosphere that led to later collaboration in Pasaje Seguro among a

really diverse group of people. And what's more, it enabled people in various collectives to collaborate better with people who hadn't been in collectives. So in that sense, yes. In the specific sense of people in Pasaje Seguro, if I'm not mis-remembering, the majority of people who attended the first meetings and continued to attend were the ones who already belonged to other collectives, and there were some people from 15M, people who'd specifically participated there, and then others who joined after the manifestation. And people who joined after, in fact a little bit ago one of our really active members joined. So, in regards to general climate, yes. Also, 15M brought focus onto the practice of assembly. I remember in Cantabria before 15M, and even the first day of 15M, there wasn't the understanding of assemblyism that there is now. I was affiliated with the union CNT, and we were very clear on it there, and in other libertarian spaces, they were more familiar. But in other areas, assembly wasn't, assemblyism wasn't the typical practice. One of the great accomplishments of 15M was understanding that assemblyism wasn't a tool linked with any one particular ideology but something that could be used as a very useful tool for collective work, and learning how to use it. So, in this more abstract sense, yes. As far as people in particular, I couldn't say. But in this more abstract sense, yes.

In the web, you write “We’re a citizen’s working group formed by anonymous people who refuse to accept the disastrous role that the European Union and its states are taking on regarding refugees(...)” Can you explain why, from your point of view, the role taken on by the European Union regarding refugees is “disastrous”?

Mila: Well, in the first place, because of the failure to follow through on the commitments for refuge and asylum, that's the origin of everything. In the second place, because of the agreements they've come to with the object of restraining the people in search of refuge, coming from a war or a hunger crisis, curbing access to the European Union and the agreements they've come to with unsafe countries so that they retain the would-be refugees, as was the case of Turkey, and then later also with Niger, with Libya, with Morocco, where you can already see what the European Union is wanting to do. In contrast with this, however, they're emphasizing more and more the work of Frontex, increasing the budget to contract more agents. For example this summer in the discussion of the State of the Union, done by Jean-Claude Juncker, there was nothing said about the issue of how to attend to refugee-seekers. Nothing about this in particular, but it was said very clearly that for the year 2020, they're going to increase the number of Frontex agents to 20,000. This news was received very well by our new president. The other problem is the total lack of understanding that they have regarding saving people. NGOs started to do this work, but they started to criminalize the NGOs and confiscate their boats and leave them at the ports so they wouldn't save people. Later, the ports closed, and the European Union does nothing, knowing that huge catastrophes are going to occur. The rescue coordination, which used to be in Rome, I think it was this summer when we started hearing that it had moved to Libya. Italy passed it to Libya. At first, I thought it was a temporary action, but as far as I can tell, Libya has the rescue coordination indefinitely.

Patricia: There's an agreement about it, in fact.

Mila: So, right now, they deny the boats the licence to go to sea. It's disastrous. It couldn't be more disastrous. And it seems that path they're on keeps getting more and more extreme.

Patricia: It's insanity because to start, it's illegal. They're disobeying all international law.

And it's immoral. And what that immorality is leading to is an absolute loss of values, the few values that Europe had once had -- and it considers itself the birthplace of values -- and the increase of extreme right options that we're seeing. It wasn't a hurricane that suddenly brought these options here, but -- among other things -- the treatment of the politics of migration. And it's also stupid because basically where all the European states are anchored is in a focus on the immediate financial present, that is, on money. That's the only thing that interests them. The matter of human rights, as Mila explains, doesn't interest them, but they're not thinking of the long-term. They're not handling a phenomenon as fundamental to our time as migration. Of course, in *Pasaje Seguro*, we don't make distinction between refugees, asylum-seekers, or immigrants. That is, those who need to leave where they were born to look for a better life -- we can assume it's not exactly enjoyable, because it's one thing to travel or want an extended stay somewhere and it's another thing to have to immigrate because there's no other solution -- Well, that's the great phenomenon of our times, and they aren't paying attention to it. Why aren't they paying attention? It would be really easy to look for one single cause, but it would be a lie; we're in a neoliberal insanity, the system is taking on water from all sides, it's not generating anything more than unhappiness and part of this infernal unhappiness comes from the looting and exploiting of other places. And they don't know how to handle that, my sense is that they live in a continuous present. That is, they don't think about tomorrow, they just go solving things as they go. Right now, for instance, they have a lucrative business regarding borders, public security, private security. This translates to an increase in funding for Frontex and in general companies that are profiting -- here in Spain there's Indra, which apart from the whole issue of the border's business is involved in the electoral business. So it's all about the business and that's what it is to live in a reality full of idiots, in the sense of having no commitment at all to the common good, not to mention being imbeciles because this situation is going to blow up in our faces. It's already blowing up, it's already generating problems that they don't know how to solve. It's immoral, it's illegal, and it's idiotic. All the i's possible.

Mila: Well, the agreement was made in 2016, no, 2015, in September when that drowned boy, Aylán Kurdi, appeared on the coast of Turkey. So of course, in the public opinion, everyone was shocked and scandalized. Before Aylán Kurdi, many children had died. What happened was that people seemed to respond to that image because it could have been our children or our grandchildren, the characteristics of his attire, his little clothes, so people were very emotional and of course they turned to the European Union, which met immediately and decided to welcome or relocate those in Greece or Italy, I don't have an exact number, 160 or 170,000, the Spanish president Mariano Rajoy says 16,000... but nothing really changed. But there's one thing that called my attention: two months after this, there's the Valletta summit in Malta. African and Italian leaders meet up to analyze the issue of migrations, the human trafficking, mafia, and so on, and they say that we should curb all of this, but we really should work towards the development of Africa and create a fiduciary fund so that these funds can go towards developing and improving Africa at the same time as they can go towards stable migration. Immediately, we learned that -- according to Amnesty International -- in the Valletta Summit they were mixing two things. They were talking about cooperation when really they were talking about border control, because that money isn't going to be for cooperation. That money's going towards training the Nigerian police so the sub-saharans don't make it North, it's going toward Libya and then Morocco to essentially outsource the borders. What's the first border they outsource? Where do they start? With Turkey. And in March of 2016, they gave Turkey a billion dollars to keep the Syrians essentially but also the Afghans and Iraqis who use that Oriental route to

pass through to Europe. They gave Turkey a billion euros, then the promise that they're not going to have to get a visa to come to Europe, that they're going to have an easier time entering the European Union and so on. So that's kind of what happened.

Patricia: The Spanish state, I would add, the Spanish state knows all about outsourcing borders because the southern border of Spain is like Europe's laboratory of migration. So the relationship that the European Union established with Turkey was the one Spain had been carrying out for many years with Morocco. Throughout the years, there have been negotiations with Morocco to control the borders, in fact throughout the years if you were vigilant you saw there were moments where people jumped over the fence because the Moroccan military relaxed it, under the orders of the government, because there was going to be a Spanish-Moroccan meeting. So this had been going on for a long time. In the case of Spain, there were a lot of people throwing their hands up: *Oh my God, how can they be outsourcing borders?* Well, I'm sorry, but Spain has been doing that for a long time. And we're talking about migration politics, which at that time was controlled by the PSOE (Socialist Workers' Party of Spain). If I'm not misremembering, the first to lead these shameful policies in Europe were the PSOE, with the CIEs (Centers of Foreigner Internment) where they detain people up to sixty days in subhuman conditions, the whole matter of the CIEs. So the Spanish state, it shouldn't have taken us by surprise because here, the southern border has been experimental grounds for exploring migration policy's security, legal, and moral implications.

Elsewhere, it's said that this citizens' group completely rejects "the EU-Turkey Pact, internationally recognized as the 'Pact of Shame,' which violates international law protecting the right to asylum and refuge." Can you explain the context of the signing of this agreement and its implications in the specific case of Spain?

Patricia: It's complicated. We had the luck, starting at the foundation, that among the people we work with, we have legal collaborators who we can rely on whenever we have doubts. So the cases are very diverse; in principle there's a lot of mixing between refugees and asylum-seekers, and in fact often statistics combine them because within asylum there's the possibility... it's usually political asylum, but there's also subsidiary protection which is for other causes, including humanitarian causes. For example, someone who's sick in a country where it's impossible to get the attention they need. So, they can request asylum, and in fact some Syrians have come here because there were people piled up like goods in a warehouse, there's no other way to say it, in Greece. There were people with medical needs... I'm reminded of one paraplegic boy who was very sick, who needed immediate medical attention, and as they weren't going to grant him refuge, they asked for humanitarian protection, which is under the umbrella of asylum. If they grant you asylum, you have permanent residence, and if they grant you subsidiary protection, you have to renew it every five years, and then there are humanitarian aids, which are one-time affairs -- but this would be better to talk to a lawyer about.

Based on your own knowledge and experience, what are the main causes for requests for asylum and refuge by the people who ask for them in Spain?

Patricia: Seeking asylum and refuge, there's been a crazy boom in recent years, Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis, many Venezuelans, for Venezuelans more than coming into contact with them through *Pasaje Seguro* we've heard about them from organizations that work here that are dealing with the matter of asylum. And what's

more, you see in the statistics from CEAR (the Spanish Commission for Refugee Aid) or from the government, and right now, there's a crazy amount of people from Venezuela. But I there have also been a lot of Syrians. And the ones that have some chance at asylum, those are Syrians. The more painful cases, where we know they don't have much of a chance: Afghans. Today Mila and I were talking about an Afghan boy, for example, charming, a hard worker, good people, who came here, got work (even though as an Afghan they didn't give him anything automatically). He was working, he was already integrated, and then he had to leave his work and now he's hidden in the house of a friend, without means -- living off of charity, having had to leave his job, waiting and hoping to be able to get support to get papers some other way, because the Afghan cases in general are very painful. I don't know if Mila wanted to add anything else about the nationalities...

Mila: What I know is on a national level, when they talk about refugee priorities... In that sense, an Afghan person has less possibilities, but I've also seen, well, I've read about many times when someone asks for asylum -- not only in Spain but in the rest of Europe too -- and they're Syrian, if they're from somewhere and the war isn't taking place there in that moment, they won't give them asylum because in that moment there's no war in that zone, even though it might exist two hundred or three hundred kilometers away.

Patricia: Well, two out of every three aren't granted asylum, and that's being generous.

Mila: Very few get it. And even refuge -- because here one of the questions that we've asked of the delegation of the government of Cantabria is how many refugees Cantabria receives. What nationalities? What happens after those eighteen months of refuge? Well, we're waiting for a response, we don't have a response to that.

Your work also includes demanding safe routes and a dignified welcome to people soliciting refuge and asylum. Can you tell us how the arrival process usually is for someone who comes to Cantabria in search of asylum? What realities do they find when they get to Cantabria? How is their process of integration?

Patricia: I can't answer in just one way, but they're stories of immense suffering. Right now, I've just thought of the most recent powerful story, a father, or, well a family -- the one who talked with us was the father -- he was in MPDL (the Spanish organization Movement for Peace, Disarmament, and Liberty), in that organization where we know everyone who works there, and I know that there are really good people working there with the resources they have, very conscious that they have a really short program, that eighteen months doesn't leave time for much. But the issue is that this man told me, well, he was falling apart because he had a son in, I don't remember where exactly but just imagine, I have one son in Syria and the daughter in Libya. Libya. So this man, he was destroyed, and he brought his wife and she too couldn't do anything but cry. The man talked because the woman just cried. Because they couldn't be okay because they had a family that wanted to reunite, and they couldn't. They couldn't. There was no way. They went to this program but you have to understand a program is a concrete thing, that is, it can't perform miracles. Of course it can make everything better that it can. This program has language classes, they do activities, they help the clients with paperwork, they help them look for visas, because sometimes they have difficulties acquiring visas. But this guy wasn't content. And someone could say "fuck, how can they complain?" which is what any oblivious racist would say, but the thing is they have a daughter on one side of the planet and a son

on the other, they can't be happy like that, so it's a really complicated situation. It's a terrible situation. And there are many many stories like this. About boys, about one Palestinian boy who wouldn't talk, a Palestinian refugee, and now he's started to say a few words, but he literally didn't talk at first. There are people with terrible trauma.

Is *Pasaje Seguro* a tool facilitating these people's integration and accompaniment, or does it center around political work?

Patricia: Political work, which doesn't mean we don't form relationships with people, because within our political work, for example, every week here we do a radio show interviewing migrants or refugees. Obviously, you know those stories. Once, we were notified by a lawyer who works for *Pasaje Seguro* -- he didn't work for us then, he joined later -- about a sub-saharan boy whose age they tested through X-ray. This system has a two-year margin of error and, and as they've already done to tons of sub-saharan minors, the government of Cantabria insisted that he was older and wanted to expel him. So we went in and of course established relationships and so on. The people who come here now come through what the Ministry of Jobs and Immigration decides and through an NGO called MPDL (*El Movimiento por la Paz, el Desarmamento, y la Libertad*; The Movement for Peace, Disarmament, and Liberty). So they're the ones who are welcoming the refugees, they have an eighteen-month program to welcome them. There are also people who go to Red Cross, and Red Cross does their work. In the moment of greatest chaos, in the beginning, this citizen's collective was launched as well, it's currently an NGO called "Cantabria Actúa" and it's been more proactive because they've been to Greece and established contacts there, and there were people who came here. And the people who are here, as these programs sometimes last eighteen months and then are completely done, Cantabria Actúa has worked a lot on cultivating relationships with the clients and looking for jobs for them, or other tasks. I just thought of a beautiful example to share. There was an Afghan boy who was really depressed, and his dream had always been to play the guitar. So there was a mobilization among the contacts of people who knew him, and we got someone to give him guitar lessons to raise his spirits. That kind of thing is what Cantabria Actúa does. What we do is a different kind of work, and sometimes it puts us in direct contact with immigrants and refugees, of course.

Mila: For example, for six years, there has been this movement, Citizens against Healthcare Exclusion, I'm a part of that movement and when Spain got rid of universal health care and for the immigrants without residence permits, who were left without a health card, we accompanied them to the doctor, we didn't leave until they served them, and in the end we got a kind of local order at the level of autonomous region, that they must be served. Although they still have to be accompanied [by documented residents]. And in this sense, I've had contact with immigrants in accompanying them through the national healthcare system.

18. It's interesting that the defense of human rights has become an urgent issue of the welfare States, and yet it's the NGOs or groups like this who take on the role of denouncing violation of the same. What has your relationship with the institutional environment been like up until now?

Patricia: Well, our relationship with Institutions has been that we demand that they carry out their duties. We had a discussion before about what lines of work we want to carry out as *Pasaje Seguro*, and we understood that it was absolutely necessary do the work of raising awareness and of auditing the institutions. Even with this,

though, because sometimes life brings you to things like this and we aren't rigid, we've had to become involved with certain issues you could call aid, like for example working with Himaya, and what they do is rent places for people who were tossed in Greek concentration camps or industrial ships, which was a completely inhumane thing. So we've had to do this. But our work above all is auditing, an auditing that there are various ways to do. In Cantabria we have representatives with very good intentions but zero competency, who when you talk with them, they ask you to suggest things, and you say, "Listen, the thing is that's your *job*. We're paying you for that." It's a farce, but even so, we've collaborated on things on an educational level. On a state level, we've had zero collaboration because the Popular Party government doesn't care about these things, it's in their DNA and in their ideology. They didn't fulfill their host commitments, we're one of the countries who has least fulfilled their commitments in Europe, without any sort of problem causing that. What's really bad is that the government has changed, the socialist party has entered and now they're demonstrating bad management. They're detaining Proactiva Open Arms and not letting them go out and rescue people. So that's our relationship with institutions, it's auditing and constantly proving their incompetence and how little they care about this matter. We come to the same conclusion, it's a massive irresponsibility because right now, there's a lot of right-thinking politicians getting scared about the boom in extreme right. But the thing is, if you sow winds, you reap storms. That's what's happening. That's the relationship we have.

19. You denounce the port authority of Santander, could you explain the context of this denouncement?

Mila: To explain a little, everything started March 8, 2018, when our colleagues at Ongi Etorri warned us because this ship, this cargo ship called *Bahri*, from Saudi Arabia, had for at least the past year come periodically to the Port of Bilbao. It would load up there on weapons to be used in the Yemen War. What happened? There were a lot of manifestations, and then one day -- March 8th -- when we were in the middle of a manifestation, a colleague told us, "Listen, the ship's here." Because the people in Bilbao who were controlling the geo-locator system and noticed that it was getting closer to Bilbao, suddenly their geo-locator malfunctioned and when it started working again, they saw that the ship was in Santander. So we started the action there. We moved to the port and we started to do a series of actions. Every month, we visited the port. We wrote to the port authority and then also to the online platform Change.org, and we gathered almost twenty thousand signatures, no more because we stopped asking in order to present what we had to the port authority. There, we asked for an explanation and so on, and they didn't respond to us. Every time there's a ship, we all gather on the port with a big banner that says "The war starts here!" and another banner of *Pasaje Seguro*, sometimes with people from *Pasaje Seguro*, other times also with people from other organizations, and sometimes neighbors from the area, as Patricia was telling me. It's not that it's a huge concentration of people. So this summer, there was really good media coverage through *El Faradio* [a progressive Cantabrian newspaper], and the most recent thing has been an interview. As they didn't give us the interview we asked for at first, we sent a letter to all of the council members and the port authority because they were going to have a meeting before long. It was a letter where we essentially demanded that they ask the state attorney about the legality of this sale, of this weapons trafficking from here, which breaks many laws, particularly 53/2007 about the control over maritime commerce and defense material and double use, and they break that because you can't use it when there are sufficient indications that they're being employed in the violation of

human rights, as they are in the case of Yemen. In addition to this law, there are many more; we also asked them about Automatic Identification System (SIA in its Spanish initials) given that at least on three occasions, the first time and two times after that, the ship didn't have its [geolocator] system functioning, which is very dangerous for the port and for other ships it could come across. They'd said that it was because it had been damaged, but there isn't any evidence of any part of that system having been damaged. Patricia, various other colleagues and I went to that meeting with Ina Robles, this basque firefighter who raised the issue when they refused to load up the ship when they knew that it was weapons, and he offered fairly exhaustive information about what conditions of security must be met by material held at the port to be loaded. So we'd already sent that previously to the members of the council, but what they tell us is that they aren't taking requests or even questions on the issue. It wasn't included as a point in the order of the day, but rather in the director's report, something that doesn't allow for any decisions to be made, it's purely informational. So, then we decided to bring it up again and request the minutes, which still haven't been given to us, to see how the issue is being treated.

Patricia: The response of the institutions has been null. Good intentions, everyone supports us on an individual level, as much the government delegation as the president of the port authority, but zero proactivity at the moment of proving that they're breaking laws, and that it's as illegal as it is immoral. So what we've decided to do after a considerable round of having exhausted all these paths is to turn to the legal side. If they're not following the law, we have a legal team of anonymous citizens working as lawyers who, well, I'm redacting here, we still don't want to say what exactly we're doing in order to not let the cat out of the bag, but we're going to go to the courts to settle this legal question because they can't just keep passing the ball, making us lose time meanwhile the weapons keep arriving. What's certain is that in December the ship *Bahri* was supposed to arrive, and it hasn't. So it would be really nice to think that as we're insisting so much on the issue of the disabled security system it had to be sanctioned and that costs money, and after a series of other flagrant, evident things, maybe the ship is thinking of getting supplies from other places. Our goal is not just that they leave here, it's that we the citizens keep kicking at them from all areas until they can't do this anymore, because in fact there are various european countries that have suspended the weapons trade with Saudi Arabia.

What is the value of the media coverage that's come from this complaint?

Patricia: The complaints we've lodged up until now haven't been through legal channels but rather administrative ones. What we've done is ask for meetings. And people do come to the meetings, because every time we write a letter or ask for a meeting, we make sure to notify the press; our job is to be completely transparent about our every move so that the authorities are revealed in their ineffectiveness. So we've met with the government delegate and alerted the press before and after. Through our social networks, email and such, we inform all the *pasajistas* in the world about every action that we carry out, and of course we send this information to the media as well. And I have to say that some of the media in Cantabria are really taking notice, as well as some of the national media who haven't been able to avoid it because the issue has grown since PSOE suggested that they might stop selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, and then backing out in that trademark political balancing move of PSOE. So various media and the state took notice [of *Bahri*]. All this is valuable because it sheds light and shows what they're not doing, that they're not doing their jobs. In that regard, media does have value.

From your experience and thinking of realities like the weapons trafficking or the causes for the search for refuge and asylum, do you think the people of Spain are well aware of these issues?

Patricia: Let's see. I understand perfectly well that people don't understand everything. In fact, it's not normal for us to have to understand so many things. It wouldn't be normal, or fair, or sustainable for us to spend our lives studying these issues -- I don't know if six years ago Mila or I knew the difference between refuge and asylum or if we knew the regulations for weapons of double use. The thing is, it wouldn't have to be like that. It's part of the context of this global disorganization where we're paying institutions which are super far from the people themselves, institutions that outside of the town level they don't have any idea of what... we don't have any idea what they do, and they don't have any idea about us. So it's normal for people not to know. It's great for the people to be concerned about things as they happen, and obviously we'd like to have more company, and the more people there are, the better, but we can't blame the people for not knowing about these things in a planet where we live globally. About 10-15 years ago, maybe there were things you had an excuse not to know. Now, today, you go on Twitter or you open the internet and you're informed about everything that happens on the planet, so we're in a moment of crazy planetary responsibility much bigger than ourselves. We know what's happening all over and we have this closeness over the internet with places all over, which is difficult to manage. It would be really good for the people to be concerned with some issue, it would be marvelous for them to relate to certain issues and collaborate more in others. But you also have to understand that the people have their own lives, and life doesn't give us time to deal with all the global absurdity.

Mila: I believe it also happens that our topics of concern, as much the matter of the weapons as the matter of the refugees and immigrants, are represented in a very contaminated way in the public opinion. I'm not on Facebook or Twitter, but really they present the refugees in a very contaminated way, of saying "They're coming to take our jobs." Above all, it's negative not so much toward someone who comes from a war, but toward someone who flees because their native land is being exploited in a way that we're benefitting from, such as in Africa for example, or they [Europe and the West] have stolen their lands, this happens a lot in Latin America, and they kill the resisters like Berta Cáceres. The way these issues are shown is very contaminated. They say things like "The immigrants and refugees are going to bring down our level of welfare and what's more, they're a security risk." That's the information that comes to the people. And regarding the issue of the weapons, they say they don't close the factories because it would mean losing jobs. Look how they presented the case of the Cádiz arms factory, how the people came out to defend their jobs. At some point, we'll have to go back to the beginning and convert these companies. They present this very contaminated information to the public, infused with fear, and because of this the people say no to refugees and immigrants. So I think a lot of responsibility lies in the field of communication.

Patricia: Yes, they're represented by certain media sources that we could point out in Spain like *El País*, *El Mundo*, the media with partisan bias, first to PSOE or the Popular Party and now Citizens, which is is the Popular Party in a more 'maxi-single' fascistoid version, but more or less it's the same. So, there are media sources that have a lot of money, and then there are other media sources that offer a different kind of coverage. In the Spanish state we have ElDiario.es which has a stupendous section called *Desalambre*, or *El Salto* for example, or here in Cantabria,

El Faradio which has some marvelous coverage. So it's not the media itself, it's that the same people in control on a political level are also in the media industry.

From your activity, I see that you work in the field of unregulated education in processes of unlearning stereotypes and cultural categories. Do you participate or collaborate with social and educational centers in the formation of these matters?

Mila: I believe that of the first actions in 2016, we wrote a letter to certain schools, primary, secondary, and high schools, saying basically that we existed, that we could collaborate with them, we could offer certain material. I always say it with a bit of humility, because really it's not like we have everything. And there's been interest, and we've worked on-demand. So I believe that we've been requested in four types of ways. The first I've already mentioned before, when the centers are going to put on a race in solidarity for example, or a flea market, and in different years they give the proceeds to different causes. So ultimately, on a few occasions they've called us to go visit all the classrooms in the school. It's almost always elementary school in these cases. Then, other times, sometimes parent organizations call us, in order to attend some center related to some week of cultural activities or activities of solidarity. Sometimes, not at the same time but sometimes other organizations have participated in these, like *Cantabria Acoge* ('Cantabria Welcomes' in Spanish). Other times, executive teams of centers call us for a subject called "Values," which is an alternative to religion in primary school. So we help in that way, on demand. At the centers' requests. Then another question is how the matter of immigrants and the values of welcoming or of solidarity or human rights are handled in the curriculum. There, you can see, is a point where the teacher could get caught up, working on this subject. I've interviewed people, some from the education faculty and others teachers or professors of secondary school, for them tell me a little about what it's like. It seems like in primary school, in all the courses, Values is about respecting groups of different origins, the issue of universal human rights. Then, as far as conceptual content, it appears a little bit in fifth and sixth grade in primary school as something relating to migration and immigration. What that means, according to a teacher I spoke with, is that there are points in the curriculum where you can get caught up in that if you want, to be able to deal with these topics and the impact that they're having right now. What happens is the curriculum is really broad, there's very little time, and you need a really conscientious professor to see where these issues are relevant at different points in the curriculum even if they aren't named explicitly. The issue is that you don't always have this, except in special centers. And in secondary education, there are more opportunities to talk about all of this. The person I talked with in secondary school told me that there are moments, particularly in ESO (obligatory secondary school) where they talk about human geography, population movements, and there they bring up the issue of refuge and asylum specifically, and also the UN, the EU, and the European Council. That is, there are points in that curriculum where you can work on these issues. What happens is that you still need a conscientious professor to explain the contemporary importance of the subject. I've been a teacher too, and I think that what we need to worry about is not the curriculum as much as the educators. And how do we do this? By training teachers to be reflective, by encouraging the formation of teams, even just of two people, to try to get rid of all the rampant rumors attached to migration, by selecting relevant content from a moral and social point of view -- because the teacher can select content, by putting together a vision of migratory movements from the perspective of human rights, that is, constructing a vision of migration that's more linked to consideration

of human rights. I think that that's where it is, that's where it's always been. It's nothing new. There has always been this issue of where things were going.

Patricia: One of the collaborations we've had in the general umbrella of cooperation which also concerned matters of education is courses of professional training. Two years ago, they were offered in the CEPAS (Educational Center for Adults in its Spanish initials), and then for example we also collaborate a lot with Amnesty International, in fact some members of Amnesty International are also part of *Pasaje Seguro*, and throughout various years we've put on a race, "Run for Syria," which in recent years, above all in the last two years, apart from including minors, it includes work in the educational centers, always with the doubts of if we're doing work that they need to do themselves. But, well, it's not being done, and it's necessary to somehow enter the sphere of the kids, which is where we have to work from, there's been work done in the centers and we've sent materials to the professors. In fact, throughout the time that we're working, we've made a kind of archive with videos, materials, PowerPoints, and things like that for professors as well.

Do you have an archive of materials that can be consulted online?

Patricia: I think so, we have everything stored, but not available for the whole world. We have a web page. Of course, what you want to do is one thing, and what you can do is another, but we have a web page where we've often talked about putting up the materials. Right now we're in the middle of organizing all the material, we have a lot of material generated by *Pasaje Seguro* throughout these years. A colleague focusing on the issue of the archives is going to organize it, we're going to select parts, and maybe then we could make them publicly available because here we really work according to demand, we do everything we can, so in the end, we've stored information but we have to analyze it, organize it, and so on, and we haven't gotten to that yet.

How do you think your work has been received in Cantabria?

Patricia: I think it's been good. It's been a gradual decline, because consideration of this topic has decreased, and, well, that's a tendency that shouldn't surprise us because I think that it happens in almost every issue. There's a boom period, then a period of decline, and then everything's still there, because it's all calmed down. But in general, as I'm in charge of the mail and social media of *Pasaje Seguro*, one of the things that has kept my hopes up many times is to feel that *Pasaje Seguro* is something more than just us, because of people write us asking if they can go to meetings or participate. They've offered rooms, they've offered jobs. So in the first place, I believe that people were really grateful that we existed. I get that feeling, as we said at the beginning of the interview, that there was a big response because people are seeing the images in their houses and, as busy as we are, these are images that are going to go down in history because this is an intolerable inhumanity. So I believe that the local media and the journalists have accepted that they're implicated in this territory, they've given us a fair amount of coverage. People are grateful for the work *Pasaje Seguro* does, I think -- and I first think of the journalists because I talk more with them -- but also people in general, because *Pasaje Seguro* is not sectarian; we're dealing with a subject that's absolutely transversal, so all kinds of people with all kinds of religion have collaborated with us. We've worked with atheist libertarians alongside Christians, and we've done that in the church of the Christians. I think that in general it's been really appreciated. With time, we've converted ourselves into something like what's here, something that worries me a little because

I believe new collectives need to keep emerging to deal the issues of refuge, asylum, and migration with other perspectives. Part of our work is not to act like this is our position, that *Pasaje Seguro* is there for all the needs of immigrants and refugees, because people with other perspectives are always needed, other kinds of actions and so on. But I believe that in general, people are grateful that, in the absence of more things, *Pasaje Seguro* is there, and they can go for instance to a manifestation and feel like, this issue, more or less precariously, is being covered by someone.

Mila: Yes, I think so. I also have the idea that you just mentioned, that there are people who just come when we organize some manifestation or demonstration, and I think to myself, *so these people were just waiting to see if we put something together?* So that seems good to me, because those are the people that we want to make aware, that we want to join in manifestations. Then there are other times when we've done actions that I personally really like, that seem interesting to me, and we've done them for varying purposes. For example, passing out flyers with different themes, for example, about the ship, or this summer, when they suddenly deported so many people from Ceuta, regarding the sudden deportations. So we distribute the flyers to the people, and we talk. I like that action.

Patricia: I should say that we don't pass out flyers in the typical way of political collectives. For example, we did a campaign through "pass it so it passes" it's a kind of game where you have a very pretty card with the phrase "Pass it so it passes" on the back, and we explained to the people, "Look, we give it to you, and then when you go to dinner or something, you give it to some friend, to make them do it," so people feel like they're participating in something. Or, for the flyer about the ship, we did a kind of game too. Basically, you go out on the street and there's so much publicity, and the people are so tired of boring pamphlets, ideas with a lot of writing and not much understanding of the people's reality. So the pamphlet distributions that we've done are kind of special.

Mila: Well, some of ours are kind of like that too --

Patricia: Some are boring, but others escape that fate --

Mila: But what I was going to say is that there's a big difference in how different people receive them. Of course, sometimes the people receiving them know us, others don't, and they say, "Oh, how great that you've gotten involved with this, thank you, this situation is so horrible." And others who don't know us, a fair amount of them, say, "Okay, but what is this going to do?" Sometimes they say really horrible things. Few times, but what it means is that the information hurts the people's souls, and many refuse it because they're thinking, "They're taking what's ours." And I think that that bad reception is due to this campaign that's so badly oriented, or so well oriented from one perspective, of making people think that this will be the end of everything, that we won't be European or Spanish any more, we're all going to be Muslims and Africans and so on. So in my experience, when they tell you these things in such a violent way, the best thing to do is stop talking and walk away. But it's necessary to reflect on everything we are and how our wealth is the product of exploitation, I don't know if it can still be worth something or not...

What you do is an unpaid job. How do you combine it with the rest of your life?

Patricia: Of course it's a job because it's a responsibility, and that's very personal for

everyone. From my point of view it's a responsibility, something that I do because if I don't do it, it feels unbearable. In fact, once you stop and try to distance yourself from it, you realize that you really need to feel connected with the world and you can't bear the injustice, that's what brings you to this kind of work. And as it's a job, I've spent various years thinking about how to make it sustainable, although that doesn't mean I always manage that in practice. And it has to do with what we were talking about earlier about facilitation. Also, working in a group, you have to think about sustainable dynamics because there's a lot of that revolutionary imaginary of "tomorrow we'll take the winter palace," but while you can work the maximum short term, when this is a constant work and there's a lot to do, you have to make it sustainable. So, I take it as work, I try to make it sustainable, and as it's also real work, I put a lot of discipline into it. And I would like, in general, for more discipline to be a part of it because I believe that with discipline and organization -- the importance of organization should never be forgotten -- it makes it more sustainable because the work is shared better, and you organize yourself better too. So yes, it's work, it's a work rooted in commitment to the world, but it's still work. It's a kind of work associated with the work of surviving. People sometimes think that activism is a profession. And it can be, in certain cases. But for the activists I've worked alongside all my life, none of them have had activism as a profession. I have my job as a professor, my job as a journalist, which oftentimes is in an activist capacity and is unpaid, which is to say that I have one thing to live off of, and then many more hours of my time dedicated to various activisms. It's difficult to do it all sustainably, because it's true that many times you cut yourself off from relationships, pleasures, and other things because, for example when you dedicate yourself to the issue of the press or networks, you're working all day. Furthermore, your job is to write, you have to just sit and write. But if you don't do it... it's a job that I've tried not to do, and if I don't do it, the injustice eats away at me. So at least you have the compensation of knowing that you're doing what you're doing because you have to. But of course, we need a job to be able to pay for the necessary materials of this work, which as we've already said we do for free.

Mila: My case is different because I have a pension, I'm retired, so I don't work right now, not in the sense I used to. But well, I do see it as a job for myself, if I compare it with the work that I've had during all those years, it is a work, because I can't just say "Well, now that I'm retired, I'm going to see what's going on in the library today, let's see, I think there's a meeting." No. Because you can't be like that. So I have more time than Patricia can have, but I am busy, my head and my time are fully occupied. And I'm not very good with social media because of my age, so I fight with it a lot, it slows me down a lot... sometimes I say to Patricia, "Look, tell me if you got the attachment I tried to send you, because I don't know if it worked." So I have my struggle, and I always have someone to help me, but I do think of it as a job. Regardless, it's not something that I can leave. I'm very much a traveler, I travel, and sometimes I turn down [chances to travel] because I can't leave work because I'd feel awful about myself. I want to do it. I do it because I want to. And it's enough, one day, to read an article and see what's new every day, just to charge your batteries a little. And then there's the group, because it's been a long time and you establish connections and friendships with the people, and at the end of the meeting, we finish by drinking a beer, that's something really important.

Patricia: Yes, it's good for the soul, that's the truth.

Mila: So, like you said, sometimes when we're going to do something, I

put on the song *Canta el pueblo*² [both begin to sing: The town sings its song / no one can stop it / This is the music of a town that decides to welcome [immigrants] / If the beating of your heart / Echoes the beating of the drum / Then the future will be born when tomorrow comes]

Patricia: It's really good, that song.

Mila: It's really beautiful, it's from *Les Miserables*.

Patricia: It's a job that has many compensations. There's no financial compensation, but there are other forms. I don't know, it occurs to me that doing art or writing is also work, but they're work that you do because you want to do them, and many good things will come into your life because of it.

How do you keep up hope to motivate your work, and how do you deal with the impotence and political discontent of the majority?

Patricia: I think that for a time now, and this also has to do with that I'm forty four years old, I've been motivated more by discipline than hope, because there's something deep down that I believe in. I believe in common work for the common good, I believe in people, those are the faiths that are my foundation. So I keep on mainly through discipline. But in reality, there is hope when I see the video, for example, from Cabezón [de la Sal], and I see ordinary people, not people from hyper-conscientious collectives but ordinary people, it's people who come out from all over, all ages, all kinds of people, and they sing a song together. Those things make you feel hope, there are certain moments that give you hope. But maybe as time goes on, this is more discipline than hope. But within that discipline, there's also the state of constantly asking yourself, "Let's see, how do I like this?" "What am I getting out of this?" and if I see that I'm not getting anything, what do I have to change so that I can? Because making this work sustainable, it does require a bit of hope. This and everything else in life. Working for money to survive, there has to be an aspect of hope in that, every action has to have some hope in it, the art you practice and the things you do... so, when there isn't that hope, you have to look for it. There's no specific solution. It's just that you go looking for the handholds and footholds that support you, and there are many of them.

Mila: I identify with a good amount of what you're saying. Sometimes you don't always have hope. It's pretty easy for me to find hope. But you're not always hopeful, so I try to work on it, above all when I have to sit down at the computer and see how I'm managing such-and-such program and maybe it takes all of an afternoon, and I could have spent that time reading my novel. In those moments, I say, "Shh, stop, I'm going to work on it before," and I try, because I'm someone who believes in enjoying or at least trying to enjoy everything, I say, "Let's see how I can find some enjoyment in this!" And I remember to enjoy meeting or seeing the faces of the children when I go to the schools, or simply enjoying doing this because I really do like it, why should I see it as a black hole? So, I try to immerse myself in enjoying and connecting with a part of myself that knows how to enjoy things, and infuse this into what I do. Okay, sometimes it goes better than others, but it usually works.

² A Spanish translation of "Do You Hear the People Sing" from *Les Miserables*, adapted for contemporary activism

...And it's also hope-inspiring to see that now, after three or four years, you have these connections with people it's nice to find yourself with, and you say, "Ah, today I have a meeting and I get to see so-and-so." That's what it is to humanize what we do. What we can't do is work on the development of humanity and not be human with ourselves, each one of us, because I'm here in this world to develop myself as a person and to enjoy things and to forge connections with others. We can't forget this, or we'll become sad, tired activists.

Patricia: Deep down, we're fortunate people, because I see a lot of people in daily life that are alone, and I don't have that feeling, I haven't had that feeling in my life because I always have somewhere to go to, someone to see, of course all these things generate a common space within the general common world, and within the common spaces of all the collectives, of the people that connect with each other, and this is a lucky thing to have. And of course, it's hard work at times, but the thing is that if we didn't have it, we'd be a bunch of really lonely people. So we should be thankful, right?

Mila: Yes.

Fundación de los Comunes





Constellation
of the Commons

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Name of the interviewees
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Who are you and what is your relationship with the Fundación de los Comunes (Foundation of the Commons)?

My name is Marisa Pérez Colina. I work as the coordinator of the Fundación de los Comunes. We're currently in Madrid in Traficantes de Sueños (Dream Traffickers) which is one of the members of the Fundación de los Comunes.

What is the Fundación de los Comunes?

Well, Fundación de los Comunes is a network of collectives of action and political production. Right now we're in five cities: Málaga, whose headquarters are La Casa Invisible; Iruña, whose headquarters are Katakarak; Zaragoza, whose headquarters are Nociones Comunes Zaragoza and Barcelona where we have two headquarters: in the Ateneu Candela in Tarasa, and in La Hidra. Finally, there's Madrid with Traficantes de Sueños.

Who started the Fundación de los Comunes and why?

The Fundación de los Comunes is started by a network of activist collectives linked with political action in collectives in the Spanish State. We know each other from fighting for the freedom of the feminist movement. They're people concerned above all with the political area of autonomy, therefore also linked to the reclamation of social centers as spaces of political aggregation and as spaces reproducing the common in towns and cities. We've known each other for a long time and decided to get together to, somehow, try to better focus politically on what we do. That is to say we act in a spontaneous way as a collective, but in this way, we wanted to create spaces where we could think strategically together about how to better use our resources. For example, if we're creating courses, publishing books, we talk about what we want to prioritize as our main concerns. Afterwards, each territory organizes itself because, of course, each territory has very different arguments. It's not the same being politically organized in a city like Zaragoza as in Málaga or in Madrid. Each one has their own space, their own political alliances, they have different issues in their cities, but there are things that we have in common. So, the way to better sharpen our intervention tools and take political action together lies in the things we share. There's that on the one hand. On the other hand, it's also about not competing for resources. At that moment, just after 2011, the bursting of the real estate bubble has already started, the crisis is beginning, but maybe we aren't yet able to predict the extent of its consequences and we still thought that there are public resources, especially from certain cultural institutions, and that we're still going to be able to channel to do formation projects, publishing projects that revert to the common that we try to build in the network. The idea is to not compete for the Institutions' resources but try to direct them to the common sphere. So, if we have a

cooperation agreement with a cultural institution, we can think between all of us what we want to do with that money or who we want to invite, for example, if it's a trip from someone from the United States and it costs a lot, we invite the person and bring them here and they can go to the other cities. We try to decide together what we want to do with the resources and then distribute them in a way that benefits the whole.

Why did you choose a foundation as your legal entity?

The foundation form was chosen because of the administrative control it's subject to, because it's controlled by an administrative entity called a protectorate. It seems hard to believe because the biggest frauds are made from the large foundations, it's true, but our experience in this Foundation is that the poorer foundations are very controlled. Then, also the objectives of a Foundation guarantee very clearly that everything you build materially will never end up serving other purposes than those that the common assembly has decided to designate. For example, if we have an endowment fund right now of thirty thousand euros, being a Foundation gives the security and the guarantee of knowing that money will never be used for instance to buy a building here and use it as tourist housing, but rather when the collective project, for whatever reason, is no longer useful and wants to allocate to another network, that money will always be money used to feed, satisfy, and respond to the same purposes that we decided initially for the Foundation. So, the legal entity guarantees it. For public administrations, in general, the entity of a Foundation is a legal entity that's easier to establish cooperation agreements with. So much so that one of the main purposes of the Foundation is to defend the sustainability of social centers; for us, we're really interested in having a structure that gives us the real possibility of negotiating, of agreeing with the public institutions on a system for them relinquishing the social spaces that make up part of the network. In particular, La Casa Invisible (The Invisible House) has been negotiating with the city government of Málaga for many years to release control of the space. We as a Foundation can sit at that table, finally reaching agreements, hopefully, although right now the political context doesn't seem the most favorable to get that concession for what we see as something beautiful for the common good of the city of Málaga, which is where La Casa Invisible (The Invisible House) is.

What relationship has there been between Fundación de los Comunes and 15M?

The discussions and debates that led to think about the opportunity to create the network and the Foundation happened before it, and I think that none of us could imagine that an event or an insurrection, whatever you want to call it, would happen like the 15M. So, of course, it didn't have to do with the foundation's creation, but it's true that, when it occurred, our discussions were completely flooded by a feeling of happiness that happened to everyone at that moment that's difficult to describe. I would describe it in this way: all of us in the foundation came from spending a long time in collectives, in small battles where we'd thought about self-organized politics, not representation-based politics but rather the construction of spaces of counterpower and autonomous spaces that generate alternatives in the day to day, not in the future, and that are generating material resources so that these alternatives can function and be useful to movements. I've experienced that only in marginal instances, because the world in general isn't paying attention to this and doesn't care how things are going in this area. At least, I felt that upheaval and that sense of marginality and minority. When the 15M exploded into reality and the whole world started talking about non-representation, about assembly, about self-organization,

about rethinking everything because this wasn't working anymore, well -- you can see I'm getting chills all over again. You realize that we're all much more connected than we thought. That, for the Foundation's work, was a new source of motivation because everything suddenly made a lot more sense; it wasn't connected to this marginal thing we'd experienced, it was connected to a massive common thread.

Who coordinates this network and how is the coordination accessed?

In principle, the only coordination figure hired would be me, but we function organically, so there are people from each of the nodes or territories who come to a virtual meeting that we have every month and we do it through a tool called Mumble, which is similar to Skype, and we meet monthly to find out what is happening in each city, we talk about the most tangible parts of each social center where people are organized in these five cities, and then we talk about the political conflicts each node is involved in, whether that be in a feminist movement, in a housing movement, in the anti-racist movement ... We also tell each other what's being done in each place in order to motivate one another and spread information so we can develop ideas that can be implemented as a whole. That meeting is virtual. Then, every three months we meet face-to-face in each of the cities. The idea of rotating and not centralizing in any city seems obvious but difficult to do because it's different meeting in Madrid, which is geographically cheaper for everyone, than meeting in Malaga. We've decided to make that effort because, in reality, the Foundation is made up of a lot more people than those who actually participate in the discussion fora. What inhabits the foundation is much bigger, it's much more fluid then, so even though only one or two people come from Málaga to the virtual meetings, if we go to the social La Casa Invisible and do the meeting there, we know that we're going to see all the people who usually come to the meetings and many people who don't usually come, but who are friends with people who do a lot of work in the Foundation, or other people who we don't know but they come by La Casa Invisible and that's our chance to talk together, to mix it up, to get to know each other more, to kind of land in this concrete area where the Foundation manifests itself.

You're employed as a general coordinator of the Fundación de los Comunes. What is the story behind the creation of the Foundation as a legal entity? How did you become its coordinator?

When the people in the collectives began to think about creating a Foundation, they also thought about creating a legal entity that would enable those communication pathways that we thought would be useful to obtain resources, including the self-organized spaces that we want to be able to stabilize themselves with local administrations ceding control of them. That's why the legal entity of the Foundation has been so useful as such. People had been debating and discussing why to create this Foundation and not another type of legal entity, or why to make a network together since 2009. I also think the Reina Sofía Museum had been a part of these debates because it was part of a collective discussion about what was an institutional relationship that would overcome barriers. On the part of autonomy, it was about overcoming mistrust regarding traditional institutions. It was about overcoming that ideal of purity of autonomy where we don't mix with anything that smells like Institution because it will corrupt us, it gives us money that forces us to deviate from the intentions we want to have. On the part of the traditional Institution, it was about overcoming habits of cooptation, instrumentalization or capitalization of things that are done in a self-organized manner and that the Institution exploits somehow.

So, somewhat overcoming that mutual distrust and thinking together, in this case with Reina Sofía, of if there was a common will to think beyond how there can be a collaboration that, without minimizing the undeniable asymmetries between an Institution like Reina Sofía and the small self-organized collectives that make up the Foundation -- collectives that although some have some material structure with certain strength like Traficantes de Sueños (Traffickers of Dreams), are nothing to the Reina Sofía compared materially. Is it possible to have a collaboration in which both parties win, and in what way, under what conditions? So, that's a debate that's been marinating for some time, and out of that they decided to create the Foundation. In 2011, that decision to make the Foundation was already made, we spoke to the lawyer, and from there the different groups were proposing nominees to be in coordination. They nominated me, and that was that. We've been working since 2012. That's actually when the legalization was formalized, but the decision was made in 2011 and when I started formally working as such hired as Coordinator it was March of 2012 actually, and I remember that I suggested back then that the position would rotate every five years but at the moment there has been no rotation; maybe at some point there will be volunteers and we will change it.

Is it common to hear a certain regret regarding the tendency of inbreeding within the social activist groups themselves? How do you ensure that a space like the Fundación de los Comunes is an inclusive, constructive, and democratic space?

This is difficult to explain, but I think it's important to try. I believe that any space that wants to be inclusive, constructive, and above all democratic, just because it wants to be, that marks out its limits and borders. That is, the Fundación de los Comunes isn't a network where anyone who wants to can enter, a space as absolutely open as 15M. No. It's a specific network with specific collectives; formally, there are four collectives on its board, because some things have to be formalized, but informally it's these five collectives with their five social centers, as political reference spaces of each city. How can more people join? Well, by working together. There was a moment, for example, where there was a collaboration with Cantabria, with La Voragine and La Repartidora in Valencia, and really, the only requirement to be part of the Foundation is that we have to work together. Working together means attending the monthly meeting and thinking together. What the requirement of attending meeting consists of is physically and virtually being present at the meetings and also seeing if what it's being done in the city at that moment matches with what is being discussed as a whole because, sometimes there are gaps with what is being developed in each city. For example, there are cities where devices or libraries startup like La Repartidora but that had very people, so then it's not sufficient simply attending a monthly meeting but also think about what you will contribute in those meetings. So, we're open to the organic growth of the network, but it's true that it's not like a party in which people affiliate themselves or that simply joins and that's it, but rather it's a network of affiliation and trust that people become part of beginning with a concrete collaboration. There's also a way of being part of the network that is absolutely broad and informal; we do not see it as necessary for the person to come to the meetings or be part of the Foundation's board. We're already in communication with a lot of collectives informally. For example, in Traficantes de Sueños (Dream Traffickers) through the bookstore, we're already connected with a lot of collectives from Madrid. There is a specific, daily, and useful relationship for everybody with the Foundation because you collaborate, for instance with the housing movement and you then know of that movement because you have that direct relationship in Madrid. We then know what materials we need, what we need to push forward, where we need to put our discursive forces, etc.

The whole time you're trying to make those resources useful to the movements. I'll give you another example, the Common Notions courses. One starts today related to feminism. What do we do before starting the courses? Before starting the courses, which is when you're thinking about them, well I put myself in contact with the feminist collectives in Madrid and I tell them the ideas we have regarding the course to see if they think they are priorities in the feminist movement or if they suggest specific people from the movement. In this manner, we make the devices that we set up and the resources that we open to others, truly serve the demands of the political movement that is around us. Each center in each city does it the same way, meaning we all respond to the things that happen around us that we're involved in.

Based on what you're saying, I understand that the Fundación de los Comunes, in some way, is a space of reference and brings together paths of citizen political transformation. How is it validated as a reference or authority?

It's true that the spaces become spaces of reference because they serve to channel, propel, and strengthen what is emerging in the city and in the specific territory where you organize. I would like to think that more than an authority or leadership figure, you're really useful to what is happening around you and reinforce in another way, and there are many more, what is being contributed to your city to make it more equal, more fair, and more democratic. In that way, other people and collectives contribute other things, and we try to contribute what we've dedicated ourselves to, the tools that we've developed, which is above all the political production of discussion, and that's why we have the books, the courses, the bookstore, and above all the physical space in itself, which is always open to the organization for debates, assemblies, those things that collectives need. They propose a press conference, an assembly, a workshop, and we offer all the resources that we have from the physical space to the production as well.

Thinking about the asymmetry of time, capacities and material resources as a product of capitalism and its way of organizing society in well differentiated social classes, how does the Foundation ensure that it brings together a diversity of positions and reaches people who do not normally appear in this type of course or in this type of Social Center?

Well, we don't have any protocol for this. The truth is that the Fundación de los Comunes has its strengths, but it's not so powerful as to think that it's capable of reaching -- we can't say 'the workers' movement,' anymore, but other social strata. What is certain is that the people who are part of the Foundation are part of the movements and collectives with the most plurality, not all there should be, but if I organize, for example, in the neighborhood in the housing movement, I'm with the people most affected by the housing problem. So I'm going to be especially working with women, with migrant women, with older women, with romani women, and there I make my heterogeneous space that translates to the Foundation because then in the Foundation we talk about this and I look for how this group can be supported with the resources that we have in the Foundation. Similarly, people who are in Vallecas' housing, through other types of networks, are linked for example with the Gay Pride people, and there they make other connections with other kinds of political efforts, with other types of conflicts, and that's where you get mixed in. You're tangling in the thousands of threads of self-organized spaces, where all of us are. There are people in wh atwe could call the anti-racist movement. A lot of people of the Foundation -- in fact it was one

of the things that united us -- were part of groups in the network El Ferrocarril Clandestino (Clandestine Railroad), a network at the time that later trailed into what we call social rights offices, whose main purpose was to fight for the freedom of movement. Many other things came from this network, including the first Association of the Undocumented in Madrid that worked directly with people with and without documentation to support, above all, the struggle at that time regarding decriminalization and to obtain better living conditions for sub-Saharan people that were arriving from 2007 onwards, basing their work on the needs the immigrants expressed in a shared assembly. So, we're connected to that as well. You end up naturally becoming linked to whatever comes up, and because each of us is working with a current issue in the city, and that's how all this comes together.

As far as the courses, it's the same process. They have their virtues; the discourse that happens has a certain heterogeneity, and the discussions that are held, from my perspective, transcend much more than they appear to, in the sense that not only are they enjoyed and used by the 70 people that fit in here right now, but also, when doing free access audio, they're downloaded and from there, the material circulates. We have a radio program where we try to make sure the information is heard. Now, how do you get it out of here? Well, for example, we did a course on neofascism last year and, from my point of view, very few people came in considering how heated an issue we saw it as. It was a very small course of twenty people who were very interested and it was very good, but that wasn't the plan, because what we had imagined initially was that all the young people who had organized an anti-fascist demonstration here 3 years ago would come. In that demonstration, the traditional way of anti-fascist fighting was broken in the sense that it was a very heterogeneous manifestation in which women and, above all, people of non-indigenous origin had a very powerful voice. I say non-indigenous and do not use the word "migrant" because that makes it seem like migrants are migrants for life and that isn't the case, from my point of view. They are migrant people who emigrated back in the day, but if they feel like they're from here, they're from here, and if they're born here, they're from here. So, young people from neighborhoods that have South American, Sub-Saharan and other origins were protagonists of this demonstration, where other voices could be heard as well. So, I thought that these people would come here, but, really as you say, this is the center of Madrid; it isn't that the courses are economically inaccessible, but yes, for a person who is twenty years old, paying thirty euros can be a lot and then there's the time commitment, and then the fact that at twenty years old, you don't attend courses downtown. We've now thought about traveling and doing another version of that course. So we want to organize it with people from Moratalaz, Alcorcón and people from Vallecas who have their organized spaces where these collectives usually meet, and be able to move ourselves from one place to another. It's true that this is a structure that has to be sustained materially. I say this because it's also important to take this into account. I would like to do many more things than we do, reach many more places, but we also have to make this replicable in the sense that we have to materialistically hold the physical space together, and that costs money; we have to support the people who work here who also pay their rent and eat and so on; and we have to keep doing that work. We have to support the publishing house, and people can download the books for free, but the reason the publishing house can sustain itself is because there are members who donate or pay money for the books. Those who can contribute financially do so for those who can't, and through that, we build free access, which costs money, for as many people as possible.

Can you explain what your experience has been with the Institutional reality?

The institutional scope is very broad, it's different talking about cultural institutions than public administration institutions such as a city council. For example, with cultural institutions, we've collaborated the most with the Reina Sofía Museum and also with the MACBA in Barcelona. I think that there's always an affinity, an alliance, shared purposes and that asymmetry that you have to deal with all the time because of the rhythms, the ways of deciding; it's hard to adapt the resources that a cultural institution like the Reina has to the different rhythms, objectives, resources and ways of functioning and deciding that exist in collective spaces characterized by being self-organized and having way fewer resources, like those that come together in the Foundation's network. So, there are imbalances of the asymmetries, but we've carried out common things that I think have left us all satisfied. We've been experimenting with the Reina Sofía, for example, we've experienced a space of shared coordination that was called the Laboratory of Social Imagination and from there some concrete projects came out. For instance, a seminar of new democratic sections that came out right before the 2015 Municipal elections here, which were a step to what has been called the governments of change. That space helped discuss what "non-representation" was, or what it meant that grassroots movements made it to the Institution or what we were talking about when we talked about the Municipal movement. We contributed and continue to contribute in a public discussion seminar project that we organize with Reina Sofía. Then, we also had a link that came out of the Laboratory of Social Imagination, it was called the LIS at that time, which were the archives of the commons, thinking of what the archives of the commons are, who builds them, what are the conditions of accessibility, of material support, and what type of file will be part of this set of things. We've done specific projects that I think have been good for all of us. Now we continue to collaborate, and a joint tour has been made. We try to coordinate in what we do. For example, We're now working on the subject of mental diversity; the Reina Sofía is also interested in these issues, so we want to coordinate the date of a course we want to do to invite three people to have a panel or workshop with collectives that are now organized. We try to coordinate this as much as possible and we believe that it can help all of us boost the things we're already doing.

Being part of the non-formal education movement, what relationship do you have, if any, to the Public Education Institution?

Well, I believe that's an objective of ours because I don't think we've reached that far yet. In Barcelona, I believe they have more reach with the Institution to make a member-formed space that's also recognized by more formal institutions. Here, I think it's something that we're thinking about but haven't managed to come up with a concrete plan to connect it to universities. Secondary education, for me, would be a dream, but we can't get there on our own. We don't have the capacity.

Thinking about the sphere of labor, are there workers hired by the Foundation?

In the Foundation, the way it is now, there are only two people hired. One who is the coordinator, which is the position that I have, and then there's the person who now coordinates the online educational platform that we call the Foundation's virtual class, and is run by Álvaro Briaes. We're the two people that formally receive our salaries from the Foundation. The rest of the people depend contractually and materially on their own collectives.

The financing of Álvaro's and my salaries actually is part of the virtual class. That is, we have to make sure that the virtual class is absolutely self-sustainable and that it pays the coordinator's salary. My salary comes from the Common Notions classes. Almost one third of the salary comes from the in-person courses in Madrid. Another third from the donations from people that form part of the Foundation and some other people that generously want to contribute to sustain the space. Another third of the resources that we've been able to get is the collaboration agreements with the Institutions that still give us a bit of support. The golden rule, which is a bit difficult to get sometimes, is that we have to generate projects that can serve the city politically, but can be financially sustainable; that at the same time can generate a space of knowledge that's fully accessible, fully Creative Commons, and at the same time, for them to be materially reproduced which always is a challenge. At times, I swear I don't know how it's sustained. Sometimes I don't know if tomorrow we're going to get a salary, at least those of the Foundation. The bigger and more known branches like Traficantes, which are working and pushing forward, have taken root.

And within each of the nodes that support the Foundation there are people who earn a wage and others who don't, right?

Precisely, there's a salaried structure that depends on the capacity to generate structure in each city. Here, with Traficantes de Sueños, there's the editorial, the distributor, the bookstore, there are the training courses, there's the design workshop; now, if I'm not mistaken, there are in between twelve and fifteen people with salaries, but because the productive capacity permits the support of that structure with its payroll and wages. In Pamplona-Iruña, the same thing. In Katakarak, besides having their editorial, their courses, and their bookstore, they also have a business leg in a restaurant, and from these resources, the political assembly is able to sustain those people that form part of the political project. And in this way, each node organizes itself as much as it can. It's the same thing with the relationship with the Institution, where they can obtain resources, for example like what's happening with the Candela Atheneum. To be able to materially sustain the space, they have their own collaboration agreements with the City Hall to obtain any form of institutional financing, and then self-management.

What does it mean for you to work in this context? How does this change your perspective of the work?

Well, for me it's a luxury because it's really the activist life that I chose many years ago, but now it's backed up with payroll. We don't have excessive payrolls, but when you can earn a thousand or a hundred thousand Euros, well, that allows you to dedicate yourself to what you what you did before, which is forming part of the social movements and of the political collectives of your city and of your broad territorial space which is the Spanish State.

When I spoke to other activists about this form of making work compatible with activism, they warned about the danger of self-exploitation. Has this been your case?

I don't agree much with the hypothesis of self-exploitation. It's true that there's a demand and no real line between what's political work and what isn't, that is, political life, and what covers your salary. It's very difficult for me to make that distinction. What I mean is that I'm not keeping count. I'm not calculating if on the weekend, or in any moment that I can, I should dedicate myself more to reading books and magazines or to something that will allow me to educate myself

more to be able to produce new courses. To me that doesn't count as work. I don't distinguish it. For an activist life, it's a 24-hour activist life. It's connected to what you've decided to do with your life. It's connected with your relationships, with the mutual support networks that you build in your neighborhood, with the relationships you have beyond. What I mean is that we activists aren't Martians that stop having families, lovers, aging parents, our own children, or children from our friends that we have to support. But all of this is part of the activist life.

What does the Fundación de los Comunes mean by “common goods”?

In the Foundation especially, the work is centered in the production of political discourse. For us, the free access to knowledge is fundamental. Then, the space of the production of knowledge, whether it's in the format of courses or bibliographies, it's fundamental that it's universally accessible. That the access does not depend on your economic resources, on your mobility, on your functional diversity, on your stage of life, or because you have been displaced to a city without one of the five organizations linked to the Foundation. That you can access all the discussions, the production of discourse, of debates that have been made through the Foundation's capabilities. In the same vein, for people to be free and for democracy to exist, there must be a world where this is possible; for us, free access to knowledge is also part of having access to the physical, material spaces where knowledge is produced collectively because there are physical spaces like La Invisible, Katakarak, The Candela Atheneum, where people unite and create and reinvent, reimagine new collaboration projects. It's linked to the spaces of fighting in the city, and from there, to days of debate, seminars, contests, joint reading seminars, or the occupation of a new building. For all of this to happen, it depends on many things, but also on the existence of the material spaces where that open, welcoming congregation is possible.

How is a “common good” managed?

By setting limits. A common good is managed because one has to understand that it's not a space open to anyone and that anyone has the same legitimacy and authority to decide or to have a say about that resource. Then, for a common good to be sustainable, people who decide the limits, the how, the conditions have to form part of that place in a clear way. And that happens by collaborating and working every day; that's what makes it sustainable and what limits it, but at the same time, makes it replicable. Not everyone can be an organic part of the network of the Fundación de los Comunes, of Dream Traffickers or of Katakarak, because the successful businesses have many limitations in what they can provide. The goal has always been to expand them, but the pace necessary to expand hasn't always been in our control, and the things we do aren't in the price ranges that permit growth in that manner. But the formulas are definitely replicable and, in that sense, each of us is absolutely open to collaborate with any other type of project that can begin within the same terms we have here. For example, when there's a new project for a bookstore or a new project on self-information courses, we're asked, “Can I be a part of the Foundation?” I tell them that there's no need. Then, I talk with people and we travel to make courses in other cities to then explain how we do it, which surely improves the formula. We can't experiment, for example, with many methodologies of self-training, precisely because of the need to sustain what other projects can do more experimentally with their dynamics or self-training methodologies, because their space may require less resources or because they're more open to activist work. We, at this moment, can't allow ourselves that much. So,

it's open in that sense, that it's replicable, that we always have those collaboration resources and fellowships to the project that we can open, but each of the collectives, their assemblies and respective groups, especially business, aren't moldable.

Do you differentiate between the public, the common and the social spheres?

Well, for me, the public sphere, in its most classic sense, is what's still tied to the central state forms that, in some way, think of politics as something democratically decided through the vote, but in the day to day carried out by the people who represent us and who manage, in principle, based on the public interest or common interest. The problem is that this common interest, in the representative and parliamentary democracy that we know, we all know that it's very perverted and very skewed by the economic interests that in this country have to do with real estate, etc. That is to say that the public sphere in some way, insofar as it's state-centered, has enabled this economy that we call neoliberal and that's actually an economy putting public institutions at the service of international private corporations and diverting many programs/resources from serving the collective interest towards other purposes. As the public sphere has perverted or displaced what should be the common interest, we should define what this is, in contrast to the interests of the large private capitals in Spain which are the financial and real estate investments. What would differentiate the common? The common, somehow, and I tell you in the abstract because we should see how we're thinking about water, air quality, fundamental public services for a community such as the health system or the education system, etc... It's easy to talk about things and then it's difficult to carry them out, but what the common sphere adds is a space of control, in a good way, for the people who are part of the community so that, precisely, that public interest doesn't stray from the interests of the people directly impacted by that issue. For example, during the Marea Blanca¹ movement's big fight for public health, what they actually were fighting for, although there was talk of the public, was precisely to say, "Okay, healthcare here, as it's being privatized and beginning to respond to other interests, for example by extracting profit, is a resource that shouldn't be focusing on extracting a profit but rather one providing comprehensive healthcare for the entire population." It was requested to be a universal resource accessible to people, regardless of their administrative status, etc. What did the people fighting in the Marea Blanca tell you then? They didn't tell you, "We're fighting for our interests as professionals, as workers." No: "We're fighting for a resource that users and people who professionally work in this field, from doctors to cleaners, have to sustain for the good of all." What would that democratic addition introduce? Well, to begin with, it would de-privatize what's been privatized, and then it would allow users to enter the spaces of decision-making and configuration of possible reforms and improvements of the healthcare system, not just so-called health professionals but people from the neighborhood where the health center is who use it.

This is very obviously necessary, for instance, in the area of mental health. The only way to make the traditional hierarchy of medical power open to opinion, to experience, to the knowledge of people in mental health is to create spaces for discussion, organization and configuration of the system that must attend to all directly affected people. And in the case of mental health, people who are diagnosed as having some mental diversity, whatever it may be. So, the common sphere has

¹ One of several movements known as 'mareas,' or 'tides,' branching out from the 15M moment. Each tide was color-coded and associated with a specific issue, such as water rights, health care, housing, etc.

to do with thinking about spaces for setting up these systems, making decisions, and reflecting on and transforming them -- spaces including people either directly affected or directly interested because they're part of the issue being addressed or because they're part of the territory where this issue is taking place, etc. It's something at the same time very old, because everyone knows that forests being managed through the common sphere is still something alive in some small places of the Spanish State and of course in other countries, but it's something that we've forgotten in other contexts and have to recover and adapt to the new culture. It's something that you have to practically reinvent. One paradigmatic example of what the common could be also comes from understanding that the network has been an example of something that can't be controlled from a center, it can't be controlled by any one place set hierarchically above the rest. It serves us in some way as an example to follow, of something existing materially rather than virtually.

We're talking about the common sphere and really, we're referring to a project of non-capitalist society. Can you explain to us what kind of social-political project is thought from a Fundación de los Comunes? Is Municipalism your political commitment to achieve this social-political project?

This is very complicated because for me, they're experiences that don't have ... it's not like in the past when the big emancipatory models were part of closed-off utopias that the world was trying to reach: Well, state-centered communism has to be like this, the political subject is this and, in the end, society will be like that. I believe that now, partly because you have the experience of history and things are more complicated, you don't have an already pre-drawn out future to reach, but you do have the day-to-day experience and the experience of other places. I believe that right now, for example, as far as lessons of what common management of goods can look like, what a common management of decisions can look like, what an assembly is and when it should be open or closed and how community justice can work, we have these more in places like Latin America, for example, in indigenous culture. And in Europe, in a more distant past. The example of the Social Centers is a kind of prototype of common space since it renounces representative political decisions. In other words, no one is going to represent others anymore; now, you decide how the space you belong to is organized. You become part of those decisions by contributing and collaborating. It tries to put into practice what horizontality is and also question it, because it's always crossed by many more power relations. We talk a lot about counterpower and what counterpower is. And what counterpower is now in the new Municipalista (Municipalist) movements that try to think of the institution not as that Other that doesn't have anything to do with you and that you don't have to talk about it, but as an area to intervene in.

It's harder for me to speak from the representation of the entire Foundation, or what everyone thinks. I believe that the municipalist position, the municipalist movement, is something that there are different ways of handling in each of the territorial spaces connected in the Foundation's network, and there's discussion; it's not taken for granted, nor is there one singular position. I do believe that it's true, and I believe that we aren't deceiving anyone if we say that in its day, before 2015, from the space of the Fundación de los Comunes a book was produced that was *La apuesta Municipalista* (The Municipalist Bet) and there was an agreement, mostly shared that municipalism was the politically transformative bet of living conditions, although there were some people directly distanced from the idea who did not agree and did not trust this bet, but it was a bet that was shared basically by the entire network, and part of the people were involved in those municipalist projects of the cities. And in fact, now we're

trying to address this again, because we think they've been distorted by some so-called municipalist proposals. What's the tension? Well, differences aside, it has to do with what I was telling you before about the cultural institutions, because somehow those same asymmetries are manifested. That is, you're playing with fire thinking of the intersection between a self-organized space and an institutional space that has its own rules, its subjections to laws that have been decided in a certain way and that have certain applicable times and that serve interests comparable with organized spaces. But that isn't the intention. The intention of the Municipalist movement isn't to storm the skies, it's not to take spaces in the Institutions in order to transform from there, it's about being able to carry... I don't know how to say it, that that institutional leg serves precisely to strengthen our practices, we'll have to see which ones at each moment because I can't speak generally, but practices of disobedience; through practices of power, being able to give resources to the generation of free, self-organized spaces, which is what we call spaces of counter-power.

In reality, it's very interesting because when the crisis broke out and they started to dismantle what we call the Social Protection Institutions -- welfare institutions like health, education and social security, it was curious because what people and manifestations defended as a response was the commons, resources "for all." But it's never been "for all." It's a mechanism managed by public employees and, as we all know, serving a certain economy that's tied to the interests and objectives of the great elites, financial or economic oligarchies, however you want to call it. The key is to recover that "of all" and to put in question whether we can rebuild that "of all" in the same way from the state-based public sphere. That's not to say that from one day to the next you switch from the state-based public sphere, which is what we've been living for centuries, to perfect self-organization. It doesn't work like that. That's why, in that intermediate step, we thought and continue to think that the Municipalist movement is a tool that facilitates that transition. It might last until the end of the world -- it has no clear end goal or final utopian stage, but it does have to do with returning those Institutions to the service of the common based on the practices of disobedience, based on the voice of the living conflicts of cities, towns, territories where that institutional structure is organized, what is heard and that power is gained, in the sense of distributing it in those Institutions and not vice versa. Whether this is possible still remains to be seen, right? Because, it's true that things have been obtained from working with the Institutional position, but it's not entirely true, from my perspective, that in a city we've managed to create a Municipalist movement as such. That is, a movement capable of ensuring that elected officials within the institution are really governed by the needs and wishes of the population. What does that mean? Well, those people are going to have to hold certain people accountable; that they're really linked to what's happening in that city; that they're not held back by the 'It-can't-be-done's, the 'We-didn't-know-it-was-like-this's, the 'We-don't-have-the-skills-for-this's, the 'This-is-harder-than-it-looks's. No. Instead, the 'Yes-you-can' keeps expanding, lending more strength to street organizing because that's what lets you push and make that power relationship between the institutional sphere and the organized common sphere change balance. And the self-organized can say what the policies of the city need to be.

Given the climate of political discontent and instability, what keeps hope and energy alive in the Fundación de los Comunes?

Well, we talked before about the communal, which is so difficult to explain, but when you live it, I don't know, it's very clear. The change you make when your life is no

longer an individual project, and when I say individual it doesn't have to be alone, it can be in a family or as a couple or it can be in pairs and with children, but when you make that change so that your life is affected by the collective, the link with life, for me, is much more powerful and I would tell you that, in some way, it helps you fight feeling discouraged because all the time, you're building communities that give you energy where you don't have it. For example, at one point I was involved with people without documentation, so you think of life not so much as just something that happens to you, if you're less lively one day, if you're better or worse in health, but rather you're surrounded with a collective energy where what affects others affects you as well and rather than weakening you, that gives you strength. I'm just with others, and they give me the energy that many times I don't have. They give me ideas to think of another possible society that I couldn't think of by myself, because they're people who come from other cultures, from other countries or because they are younger or because they are much older or because they have other problems that I don't have. I'm neurotypical and not differently-abled, and a differently-abled person is going to give me a vital focus that I've never thought of. So, all this nourishes you and gives you much more strength. We're living in very difficult times of precariousness and difficult conditions of existence, so if you don't think it can change, I know, you'll throw yourself out the window, and that's not what we're here for.

What does it mean for the Foundation to “grow”?

Well, to be able to extend experiences like this or the ones that exist in many other cities: Collective spaces where you can see that it's possible to function cooperatively, make decisions as a whole, distribute resources in a democratic and non-hierarchical manner, based not on exploitation, on the extraction of surplus value, but on the fair distribution of decision-making power and of resources, and making that useful for the world and the environment that surrounds you. So, for me it's these experiences. Well, I don't know, each one is its own place, so growth would mean to replicate them, to make them translatable to different contexts, to different territories. And above all, something Raquel Gutiérrez always says and that I like very much from her experience of the community in Mexico, in Latin American societies: generating caring communities that produce material resources that short-circuit the paths of accumulation of capital. Because you short-circuit every time when you join the neighbors to fight for the house that one of them was losing. At that time, you're clearly short-circuiting the subtraction paths of capital. At the same time, you're creating a caring community that materially deals with the day-to-day life of the people who are part of it and that caring community transcends that specific problem of that neighbor that day and will deal with many more issues that will be brought to the common focus in assemblies, because no specific problem is isolated within the greater issues that are being fought. I haven't known any space of fighting that starts fighting for housing or that starts fighting for documentation and doesn't end up talking about the problems of gender violence and other things that you end up worrying about, because when you generate collective spaces you generate politically caring spaces. The thing is, material conditions and what happens to others isn't something that you can close the door to. Something like that. I have been very serious about that.

La Bancada Municipalista





Constellation
of the Commons

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Who are you and what's your connection with the La Bancada Municipalista (The Municipalist Legislators)?

I'm Susana Albarrán Méndez. I'm a resident of Madrid although I was born in Mexico City and I've lived in Spain for 20 years, I got involved in social movements primarily in the feminist movement, in which I had already participated in while living in Mexico. I was also part of the community radio movement in Mexico as I have been here, and in 2011, when 15M happened, I was with some people and we really threw ourselves into 15M. From there, my activism in feminism was also very active because there was a very active group of feminists in the Plaza del Sol, and from there we derived other groups. When 2015 came, in the months leading up to the municipal elections, I joined many people from 15M to make a list of candidates called *Madrid en Movimiento*¹ ("Madrid in Motion") within *Ganemos Madrid* ("Let's Win Madrid") and then all the others converge in *Ahora Madrid* ("Madrid Now"), and after those four years of government, we became this group called *La Bancada Municipalista* ("The Municipalist Legislators").

Can you explain what Municipalism is?

Municipalism is really a grassroots movement, it's shaped from a grassroots movement, in one of various incarnations. It's a movement based in the collective sphere, trying to respond to democratic, horizontal dynamics from the ground up. It sees the Institution as more of a tool of their fight or their fights to advocate politically, but it recognizes that the Institution always has its limits, and that every fight, proposal or way of doing things will eventually clash with the way the Institution is politically structured in this country. So, municipalism considers the institution as a way to amplify political advocacy and make changes in the cities, in the little towns that we're a part of, but it's not an end in itself; it's only one tool of political activism.

What specific social project does municipalism suggest?

This tool seeks the improvement or transformation of a specific situation or of the city in various sectors that impact the majority of people. It focuses more on what the majority lacks, seeking equality in the city. It involves thinking a lot in local terms, keeping in mind our global context. It believes that the local sphere should be the principal one, and facing a pretty adverse context in terms of climate change, it puts life and caretaking center stage. Also, after the housing

¹ *Movimiento* here refers both to the state of movement and to social movements, *movimientos sociales*.

bubble we've experienced in the cities, a goal is definitely to not keep expanding in terms of short term profit. The goal is for the 99% to benefit, and not the 1%.

What group of political forces make up or represent the municipalist movement in Madrid?

The neighborhoods of Madrid have always been very active in spite of the fact that we've lived through twenty-something years of PP (conservative) government where movements have been pretty invisibilized, so to speak, but that doesn't mean that the towns didn't mobilize. Really, a lot of current municipalism comes from the 70s and 80s. So, it feeds off of many of those social movements. I'm a local in Vallecas, in the Vallecas neighborhood, and for example Vallecas experienced a very strong social mobilization in terms of building houses, putting in drainage, having an electricity company... We drew, of course, from all of that social history and that of other neighborhoods in Madrid. So we really came from that. Then, contexts have been changing, and we've been reformulating ourselves in terms of regrouping around other priorities, but basically we come from the past movement. It's true that more recent municipalism, I think, is born from the housing movement, the anti-eviction movement, with the Platform for Victims of Mortgage (PAH in its Spanish initials).

What other municipalist battles are on the table?

Well, there's also everything with social services and municipal services that have been privatized, and because of that, one of the principal struggles of municipalism has been to remunicipalize basic services. Then there's also the matter of guaranteeing the health of people who, although their towns don't have the capability to do so, do have that capability in terms of doing community health education and meeting the sectors that are totally outside the regional health system, for example. I think that feminism has also contributed a good amount although we still can't identify a municipalist feminism, but there are a lot of us working on municipalism coming from the grassroots feminist movement.

Can you explain what the process is like for a group of people on the endorsed list to end up governing a council?

I can only explain what I've participated in, which has been *Ganemos Madrid*, which does draw heavily from 15M. Almost the vast majority of us have been there, we've been in the plazas of our neighborhood, in our neighborhood meetings, and seeing that force and that these were urgent issues, like the housing movement, a core group was formed called *Municipalia*. I wasn't a part of it at that point, but I joined some months later. That group became *Ganemos Madrid*, and then people from occupied social centers in Madrid and people from the university... In the end, it was a call, a convention, and a meeting. Once we'd proposed the list of candidates, because it's true that we were pretty fed up with the twenty-something years of PP government, the mobilization was very interesting. There were various groups, various lists, and we went on to shape what kind of organization we wanted, what kind of voting we wanted for our primaries, etc. I always say that it was like getting a master's in political science, and we did it all in the moment.

Ganemos Madrid was really the motor of the municipalist candidate list. We made our appearance more or less around the same time as Podemos, and Podemos gave their candidate lists to the European Union in 2014. As that

went very well and many of us participated in that first effort and in many of Podemos' efforts, many people came from that experience and said that we should focus on the local, on the municipal level, and see what we could do from there. So that's another place a lot of people came from.

Then *Ganemos Madrid* made a big effort to introduce themselves before forming a coalition with Podemos. They created their own participative electoral program, which took us several weeks and a lot of effort, people were really inspired. Then, once the program was established, Podemos was interested in it as well and that was when it was proposed that we would work in a coalition on a municipalist candidate list like *Ahora Madrid* (Madrid Now). From there, we ended up with various lists, and the ones of us with the least possibility of getting elected ended up in other positions, and of the 20 finalists we had five of us from *Ganemos Madrid*.

When was Manuela Carmena first suggested as the head of the *Ahora Madrid* list?

Manuela came once the process was already kind of advanced, and it was the suggestion of Podemos to put her at the head of the list, and that's how it happened. In our list, which was *Madrid en Movimiento*, we had our own head of the list, who is now Councilman Pablo Carmona.

How is *La Bancada* related to *Ahora Madrid*?

Well, once our councilpeople got on *Ahora Madrid's* list, we joined up with the neighborhood-based campaign, and it's not that we won the council, because by votes the PP won, but due to the structure of the assembly in session voting on who would be the mayor, the majority fell to the PSOE so Manuela ended up as the mayor. We have five councilpeople from *Ganemos Madrid* who are actually in the government, so we're participating pretty actively in the issues closest to our candidate list and most closely related to the social movements. It's true that from the beginning we saw some business that didn't fit our philosophy, including from the electoral campaign. For example, we weren't in agreement with the focus on the personal interests of Manuela in the campaign, but we accepted it. Then, in the first few weeks after the candidates had been elected, *Ahora Madrid* was supplied with a decision-making body made up of diverse people who were our councilpeople and like-minded people in *Podemos* and *Ganemos*. We called this decision-making group the coordinating committee, and on day one of the coordinating committee, Manuela said she wasn't going to attend. So we already saw that she was going to govern freely and nothing was going to constrain her when, really, one of our principal convictions at the moment of creating the candidate list was for people to be held accountable pretty closely in terms of how municipalism was going to always be in contact with its representatives, trying not to forget that they had a base and that was why they were there. So when Manuela announced her refusal to participate, we already saw that it wasn't going to go very well. In fact, in the entire government none of the principal topics that we'd proposed as the five basic ones, practically none of them have been completed. With this as motivation, we decided to separate from Manuela's government.

Why the name *La Bancada Municipalista* (The Municipalist Legislators)?

Choosing a name is always complicated because you want to be innovative, you want to have a fresh impact, and the elements don't always lend themselves to a name that synthesizes everything we want. Really, we took the name of a legislative

bench in Sao Paulo, I think it was called *Bancada Activista* (The Activist Legislators), and we liked that 'legislator' part. Here in Spain, there's not much good press about legislators, but in Latin America, it sounds like a team, a group. In the end, we took on the name of our Brazilian colleagues and made ourselves *La Bancada Municipalista*.

Who makes up La Bancada Municipalista?

Right now, La Bancada Municipalista is really a bunch of individuals because it's true that many of us have our own activism, often a diverse array of them. For example, the housing movement has its own organizations and it's also experiencing a complicated moment with the whole housing situation and the evictions that keep occurring and the act of getting involved in another site gets complicated. In the end, we sent out a call to the individuals who felt that they weren't represented by the *Ahora Madrid* government and who wanted to try something else; many of us came from *Ahora Madrid*.

What's the distinguishing feature of La Bancada?

The distinguishing feature would be that we've come to reclaim the municipalist flag that drew us into *Ahora Madrid* and that means being in communication and connected to our base and what impacts our base; another thing would be not having individualistic motivation, that is, we're against any person who sets themselves up as, like, the idea of what the government could be. Municipalism in itself doesn't have a single face, we try to make everything rotate and have people have various faces in mind, various people. Another point would be to condition our chosen candidates to adhere to and carry out the plan, and for the plan to be a commitment to complete within the government.

In the Manifesto that you've shared on the web, you signal that La Bancada got a feeling of apathy from its experience with *Ahora Madrid*. What have you learned from that experience that serves now as limits for La Bancada?

Well, exactly those, practically. This is being connected to your bases: not selfishness, carrying out the plan, fighting for a city and not for the wealthy.

Thinking about the text from the January 29th meeting stating that La Bancada was born as a regrouping of strengths, from a procedural and representative frustration, can you contextualize this "frustration" that has been experienced?

Really, as the plan had been working so well and the truth is that the document was really worth it, it's also true that we've found the limits of the Institution, of what it can't do or reach; basically, what we wanted was that if we couldn't do everything, at least we wouldn't abandon those ideas that were possible, even if it were on a municipal level, it would be worth it. There are many rivalries in the autonomous community, but then there are little things that you can apply on a local level to make a difference and be braver in some things. Then, some frustrations that we were experiencing in the sessions, for example there were decisions that were pretty against what we'd laid out as objectives. For example, things regarding heritage that didn't seem like a vital need, exactly, but that have to do with maintaining the history of the city and having it belong to everyone. For example, with the carriages of Cuatro Caminos, there was a decision in a council session that we disagreed on because they were thinking of throwing them away; there was another property called El Taller de

Artillería (the artillery workshop) which also had a high historical value, but they were also against it; or the issue of the Chamartín operation,² that whole real estate long shot that we've insisted many times can't be good if it's going to negatively impact the surrounding neighborhoods, which still lack adequate services and to whom we owe a social debt. The operation says it's going to benefit the financial district, and we doubt that this will lead to economic growth in Madrid. So it was the sum of these things plus the way they work in the council. You have to recognize that the council has rules made by the PP leaders, by Esperanza Aguirre, Gallardón, etc. The first thing that many of us who didn't know how the council worked did was look at the rules, and honestly, the rules are terrible because it gives total power to the mayor and they can veto things, they have the deciding vote in assembly, etc. It's even in how it's drafted: "The mayor will be able to... the mayor will be able to..." So, it's true that we hit a limit there, but we could have proposed to change many of those things, and we think that Manuela embraced it all very calmly, without objecting at all. It's true that she comes from a different environment, the judicial sphere, and we understand that it was a good match for her, but it was definitely not a good match for us. Neither were their ways of saying certain things that we didn't agree with, and above all, from the start, they didn't want to recognize the coordinating committee that we'd provided. It was the only organ that she was going to have to recognize, and when she denied it, that was really frustrating from the start.

The same report says that the net impact of *Ahora Madrid's* cycle has not been positive, emphasizing as the worst errors "the inability to avoid the appropriation by a few people of a collective project, the failure to complete the electoral plan, and the lack of willingness to implement politics of real transformation." From what you've learned, what mechanisms should be implemented in the council to avoid the repetition of these errors?

Since September of last year, we've been meeting, trying to talk with more people to see how they perceive it and from the beginning, we've thought that this group, which is now called La Bancada because we had to give it an identity for people to follow us, has objectives that are more mid- and long-term. That is, we aren't meeting up to elect people but rather to continue building something we believe the council still needs. So, in principle, the candidate list wasn't really the end goal. Right now in this path, we've met many people who wanted us to participate as candidates. Now, well, we participate as a citizen-based endorsement list, coming to this cycle already tired. So, as we saw this was what the forces were, then it was time to put in work, and maybe a lot of people don't have time, we're still in the process of deciding if we're going to present ourselves independently or as a coalition of candidates with other forces that are also undecided on how to present themselves. As I understand, for some people it was almost like a game of who would stay with Manuela, and eventually people saw that she was pretty much making all the decisions about her course of action, and they decided to form their own coalition.

In the same text, there's a certain sense of distrust towards the Institution, but no position is specified regarding them. Can you explain how La Bancada conceives of an Institution under municipalist conditions?

We imagine it carrying out a real role, a bold one. Daring to suggest things or

² An economic revitalization and architectural project 25 years in the making; see https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/05/22/icon_design/1558535671_389532.html

changes, which could be too much to ask of an Institution but that's the idea... Trying to break down those ideas of the straitjacketed institution because there are also things that could be changed from there with more daring proposals. For example, the issue of the Chamartín operation, which is very much cooked up by the oligarchy, and I think we've been brave, although that's not how most people see it, but all the questioning that there's been regarding the operation has been from us, from the movements that have brought this to light and insisted that this contract that the BBVA³ made with Adif⁴ with the government as mediator hasn't been transparent. We've counted the whoppers and this is a negotiation filled with them.

The fact that it's being talked about more now has really been the result of our work, with the scope we've been able to have. We've also organized a lot of talks, we've organized tours in the area so that people know how things are going; we've insisted, and they agreed, on making public the request for documents that haven't been presented and for the sake of transparency should have been done aboveground by the people who made the contract. The idea is to be there but always be hands-on and distinguish ourselves in that sense, and if there's a chance to propose, for example, a bolder housing rule in terms of guaranteeing the right to housing in the terms where only the real estate agency can do it, then it's about going for that. That is, a housing regulation was proposed that would strip any family that had (illegally) occupied a house or apartment of their right to obtain a house, without understanding that maybe occupation was their only option. Not even mentioning the thousands of houses that are empty right now.

So in the end, we imagine that the institution could serve to bring to the arena and to that general level things that maybe general politicians wouldn't think of, and that we, as we really didn't have much to lose, could propose them to those above us in terms of something maybe unreachable but that has a certain coherence with a real need.

And for example, where does the aspect of self-management come into play? It's that a municipalist government believes that many things can be self-managed and that people organize themselves and people can carry things out, like a social center, for example.

It seems like Institution is somewhat disinclined to think of itself as a tool co-managed by the public. In your experience, have you observed any problem with this co-management model?

No, I think that people do organize themselves. It's true, because I've also had this other experience of participatory budgeting, and the first were ideas that sometimes clashed with the capabilities of the council. Of course, there was no previous pedagogical effort made, in terms of, "This is the instrument we're working with, these are the limits, and these are the capabilities." I remember that a participatory budget had been approved to make a new homeless shelter, and no one wanted it to be built in their neighborhood, and we said, instead of a shelter, why don't we come up with a mechanism that supports homeless people so they can become independent, etc. I found myself in the middle of this, and the money approved for that site was like 4 million euros or something, which seemed crazy to me and the other people

3 Large bank "Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria"

4 Spanish initials for the Administrator of Railway Infrastructure, a branch of the Ministry of Development

in the committee because, why don't we use those four million for the people? Of course, we're used to it seeming like the Institution has to "solve our problems."

I also remember the issue of garbage: so, I come from Latin America, and everything is a little more chaotic there, so I saw it as kind of strange that in the campaign, people defended the issue of the cleanliness of the city. I mean, there are more important things... I'm not saying that it isn't a good thing for the company in charge of cleaning to do it well and fulfill their duties, but our central interest isn't that the city stays clean; we try to position urgent things at the center of our campaign, and not something that's practically solvable just by everyone putting their little bag where it's supposed to go.

Considering that La Bancada spreads out in various fronts (feminist, anticapitalist, environmentalist, antiracist), how do you make decisions within La Bancada?

Really, we haven't spent much time making decisions because there have been many months of trying to see what we wanted to do, to get to know each other and see who each other were. So, we didn't have our first open assembly until January. Before, we were meeting on Wednesdays every two weeks in this space, which is our typical meeting place, and that's where we've come to consensus. Then, there are the open assemblies to try to come to agreement about certain things, bring them to the public and see if people are in agreement. But on Wednesdays, we make decisions through consensus. Up to this point, we've never had to take a vote.

How does La Bancada assure the representation and active participation of the public?

In the open assemblies we do offer childcare so that that isn't an obstacle and actually it's worked pretty well, and the truth is, Wednesday being in the middle of the week does complicate things. This leads to some lack in participation, and we also have the issue where people can't come the same day each week, etc. So we draw on an email list, we have a channel on the social media platform 'telegram' where we send the documents. Also, it's people who we've met in other spaces, and if someone's not in La Bancada, you text them to see if they're in agreement. For more definite decisions, we're working on a digital tool that would be easy and accessible. In any case, we think that any kind of vote would have to be in person.

And how do you ensure good outreach in the neighborhoods or among older people who aren't online?

I think we're going to think about this the way we did with Ganemos Madrid; no one knew us there either. We made neighborhood groups that organize themselves for local outreach. Right now, we're hosting neighborhood talks with the idea that people in the neighborhoods themselves form the groups so that they can bring their social networks, have meetings if needed, if not everyone can go then elect a few people to go to the assemblies or the wednesday meetings. It's true that we're running a little tight on time, but we do something else on the horizon for the longer-term, so we always say that if we make it, great, and if we don't, we still have months to keep working.

How do you see the pronounced lack of immigrants in the reality of some social collectives?

Well, it's not easy, it's not easy. I've also been an immigrant, but really I'm pretty involved in the social movement life, but it's true that there are a lot of people who don't have the idea that they could change something from their position; there are also many limits in terms of if you have a NIE (Foreign Identification Number in its Spanish initials) and not a DNI (National Identity Document), that also limits a lot. In fact, one of our colleagues who was on the *Ahora Madrid* list had legal residency but not a DNI, so she was in a place where she would have been a good councilperson but she couldn't because as a just a resident, she couldn't run, she didn't have that political right, and that limits people's engagement. There's also the meeting schedule and everything, and that is complicated too. With the immigrant population there's still a lot to be done.

And how do you see the participation of young people?

Young people are a whole other matter, but it's true that certain mechanisms aren't incorporated here that are more incorporated in Latin America. I'm referring to having debates in school or creating situations that more or less have to do with making decisions once you come of age and are expected to participate.

What does La Bancada understand as “common goods”?

We conceptualize the environment of the common in terms of specific matters. For example, the *La Ingobernable* (“The Ungovernable”) Social Center could be a good example of the common sphere. That is, it's a building where before it becomes another speculative property deal, before it's given to a rich person to make a hotel or whatever they want, before this example of early twentieth century architecture gets demolished, before any of this happens, there are people who can give it another use, people who have met for that purpose. It's not one specific group or political party, it's a group who meets for that purpose and manages that space as a common good. Which is to say, the group works for the commons. So, in that sense we understand the commons as something that should be part of the council. It won't be able to adopt this completely, but it can aim for things to be for the common enjoyment of the people.

When we talk about re-municipalizing public services, what are we talking about?

This basically means that basic services that the council has historically been in charge of and has little-by-little privatized will end up being more affordable as part of the council than as outsourced to a company.

What issues are there still to be worked on in municipalism?

Basically, there would need to be a pedagogy of municipalism, which is what we're responsible for and I think that could be worked on very effectively in the neighborhoods and it would have to do with a political pedagogy as well. It's also about kind of expanding the theme of the commons and not independently searching for individual satisfaction, that “solve *my* problem” idea. Because for a long time, that's how we've functioned, asking the council about what affects me but then not really caring about what affects other people in my neighborhood. It's true that now we're connected with other candidate coalitions on a state level in the *Confederación Municipalista* (Municipalist Confederation), and we met with them two weeks ago, and we found that this confederation could also help us all

amplify this municipalist culture, not just supporting us in terms of visibility but also with the founding charter that explains what a municipalist candidate list is and what it has to cover, the minimums that must be laid out because what if some right wing person says they're a municipalist? Then they have to fulfill the stipulations in the charter. Now, if they're from the right and they fulfill this and do it well, then we'd have to see... maybe we haven't confirmed it, but I don't really know. I think that having that charter will help us because it's really gone beyond the boundaries of the individual autonomous communities, that is, we're more aware of each other in different councils and different towns, there's more recognition and that's really good because it breaks out of the logic of the autonomous communities.

Considering the climate of political discontent and insecurity, can you describe how you sustain your hope and energy to bring yourself to participate in this new coalition?

For me, what keeps hope and energy alive is that other people are also here, that is, that's something we say a lot both in feminism and 15M, this idea that we can't do it alone, but together we can. So, while you're with people, it helps you believe that something else is possible, not right now but maybe in the future, and there are no recipes but maybe we can recover something from before or imagine things that could be in the future; I believe that as long as there are people in this movement, I'll join in their efforts. It's harder for me to think of starting something myself. So, I think that right now, that's what motivates me, in spite of our disillusionment. We've found people who share those disappointments, more or less similar ones but in different aspects, and that lets us think of something else moving forward, together.