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SantaM

MARCH⁰⁵

BACK ISSUES



MIND THE GAP

How can art achieve real projection in society?

"Mind the gap" is the message on the London Underground warning passengers about the space between the train and the platform. This message is employed by Montse Badia (exhibition curator and art critic, Barcelona) as a metaphor for the attention that must be paid in order not to fall into the separation opening up between art and society. This is, without doubt, one of the most widespread criticisms of contemporary art as well as one of the major concerns of art professionals. "Mind the Gap", in the Consultation space, is a preparatory work for the discussions and workshops which will take place in the QUAM 2005 under the title "How can art achieve real projection in society?" A long-held concern which has led to the search for ways of reducing that distancing from the social body, but which is also approached by artists from their methods and practices

MONTSE BADIA

"Mind the gap... Mind the gap..." reminds us insistently a voice that gradually fixes itself in your head. No, we are not on the London Underground, but I would like to begin this text by explaining a story that also occurred on public transport. It is a kind of "pocket play" included in the book entitled *Haircut*, by Thorvaldur Thorsteinsson. The action takes place on a bus. The characters are the bus driver and the passengers. The audience, who also form part of the performance, are aware that they are watching a play and are thus participants in a series of conventions (they accept that the bus moves and that the passengers have difficulty keeping their balance). At a certain moment the driver stops the bus, a passenger gets on and shows him a bus-pass. The driver grasps the passenger's hands and tells him that no pass is necessary on this bus – those who get on it are chosen. The passenger goes to the end of the bus, sits down and with extravagant gestures begins to chat to the other passengers, but saying things that are complete nonsense. Suddenly the driver turns to the passengers and begins to tell them that the incorporation of new members into this army of saviours makes him happy and that their final destiny is a glorious one. He drives so fast that the passengers find it increasingly difficult not to lose their balance. Chaos begins to reign in the bus; people grabbing at each other, some applauding the driver's words while others express their mystification towards an indecipherable discourse. Faced with the confusion of the scene and the difficulty in following what is going on, the spectators have been abandoning their seats for some time now. By the time the last spectator has left it becomes obvious that both the driver and his passengers have begun to believe the fiction they were representing; it is also equally obvious that they forgot they were performing for an audience some time ago.

The image may prove a little absurd, but how many times have we attended lectures or contemporary art exhibitions that claimed to hold the key to changing the world but which, in fact, turned out to be absolutely cryptic and self-interested? We often say that art is a kind of knowledge and that artists' work could be seen as a sort of seismograph of the changes being produced in society. Art can be understood as a form of interrogation which activates the mechanisms necessary to bring about surprise, arouse criticism and instigate a search for replies which help us understand the world and ourselves... I don't know why, but when I write these words it feels like I'm playing the part of the bus driver...



Many contemporary artistic practices work in the realms of reality; they insert themselves into other contexts and employ strategies, mechanisms, and production and communication devices different from those considered traditionally artistic. Often, the system of art is also converted into a space for reflection or discussion, or into the catalyst of processes which develop in other areas. We are speaking of an amplification in the concept of art, of artistic practice and capability, of reception and

investigation of new methods, of production and distribution, of different ways of shaping work, of new relationships with the fields of experience and socialisation, and of new circuits and places for development and exhibition. No, we are not talking about dissolving the boundaries between art and life as advocated by conceptual artistic practices in the nineteen-sixties. Among other reasons, because even though many current artistic practices are indebted to them, we can no longer resort to the refuge, or alibi, of ingenuity. In our mediatized world we know it is no longer possible to work in the land of a utopia written in capital letters; we can only speak of small-scale utopias, because the only possible radius of influence left to us is that which is found at the end of our outstretched arm.

Aware of this, certain artists take their discourse beyond the restrictions of the art audience and of the institution itself, creating alternative communication networks, especially via the Internet (such as Daniel Garcia Andújar and Superflex). They present fables or tales which, while occasionally seeming distorted, reflect situations in which



Francesc Ruiz, Soy sauce, 2004

we all see ourselves mirrored (Antonio Ortega); they infiltrate into different areas, transforming themselves into catalysts of processes which seem to evolve unaided (Christian Jankowski), offer products and services (such as Otto Berchem and Minerva Cuevas), develop their works in the cross-discipline space of sub-cultures (electronic music, fashion, design, advertising, performance, comic and so on, such as in the cases of Joan Morey and Francesc Ruiz), and intervene in the public space creating subtle movements which make us question certain assumed values (Jens Haaning, Francis Alys). In the same way, curators have different points of view as to what their area of action really ought to be, and invite artists to develop specific projects which are presented in formats and mediums different from the traditional. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Maria Lind, Peio Aguirre, Jacob Fabricius, Martí Manen and David Armengol, among others, bear fine witness to that.

Paradoxically, one of today's most significant areas of controversy is the distance between contemporary artistic practices and society. The title of this text (and of the next edition of the Fortnight of Art from Montesquiu (QUAM) which will take place in July of this year) is *MIND THE GAP*, a reminder of the distance, on occasions seemingly irretrievable, between art and society. But this is not a question of contemporary art becoming a phenomenon of the masses. I cannot imagine the press waiting anxiously at the airport for Douglas Gordon's arrival in the city as they do when Brad Pitt pays us a visit. Though I have yet to forget the image of Antonio Ortega in a sea of TV cameras during the inauguration of *Faith and Enthusiasm*, but this was of course a project that counted on the participation of Yola Berrocal.

And here is the point I was heading for. How much public notoriety do artists gain through the communications media? When and how does news related to contemporary art find its way into the press? I have already mentioned *Faith and Enthusiasm*, but we could also recall the media attention attracted by Sam Taylor-Wood's video, *David Sleeping* (the David was, of course, David Beckham) and the photographs of Jeff Koons with his wife *Cicciolina*. On other occasions, media attention is brought about by scandal, such as the exhibitions mounted by Robert Mapplethorpe and censured in the United States, and the extravagant details of some of the finalists of the Turner Prize. These are just a few of the ridiculous misunderstandings which confirm the total lack of comprehension that surrounds contemporary art (cleaning staff who throw away sculptures and other artworks because they mistake them for rubbish...) and the relevant statistics (such as the lengthy queues which formed to visit the new installations at the MoMA in New York).

"The confidence between art and its public must be restored and another step taken towards the freedom of both artist and spectator"

How can non-distorted visibility be maintained in a global communication society in which art is forced to compete with other, more impacting and accessible visual communications strategies? In order to attain such visibility, has art no alternative other than to become a product of mass consumption or a show? When artists enter complex areas of research, how can they avoid being labelled amateur

ethnographers, anthropologists or sociologists? Could art be the area in which economic and social alternatives are tested? Is it possible to carry out a truly inter-disciplinary initiative? How can self-reference be avoided? How can the codes of art be made more accessible? How can education in art be redefined so that it evolves along the same lines as those already being taken by



Christian Jankowski, Talk Athens, 2003

artistic practice? Could new forms of communication be explored? How can artists experiment with new forms of presentation in the public sphere? How can art attain real projection in society? Is art as an open field for creativity still possible? Can institutions and academic discussion help in this task or, on the contrary, are they creating new obstacles?

The confidence between art and its public must be restored and another step taken towards the freedom of both artist and spectator. Responsibility for this undertaking must be shared among artists, curators, critics, institutions, and educators as well as culture managers and those responsible for educational projects and cultural communications policies, and so on. Only with total commitment employed in conjunction with the greatest modesty and honesty will art be able to provide us with a renewed framework from which to observe the world and create unforeseen encounters, and in doing so, transform itself into a mediator, as fascinating as it may be critical, irrational, ironic and reassuring, but in any case, absolutely essential.