

SOME 'DE-CONSIDERATIONS' REGARDING THE GRUP DE TREBALL AND ITS HISTORICO-AESTHETIC CONTEXT

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If we analyse the successive overviews of Spanish conceptual art that have been carried out in the last fifteen years, we perceive a number of paradoxical aspects that are repeated in a symptomatic way and somehow outline a certain stereotypical 'model' of interpretation when it comes to framing these same art practices in historical discourse.

In the first place one's attention is struck by the imbalance between the number of museological treatments and the scant number of studies devoted to the subject, which raises the question, at a very basic level, of whether the review of conceptual art has a resonance beyond the museological field, its rhetorics of re-presentation and its mechanisms of historicist address.

Quite clearly there is a major exercise of canonization and popularization in the exhibition as such, but at the same time it is worth questioning the exhibition as a format of revision for various reasons: in terms of its own determinants 'as a genre', its being framed within excessively particular dynamics of programming and, finally, its participation in the global trends and tendencies of the dominant discourses.

In second place, and again in terms of the relationship between exhibitions and bibliographical analysis, it is instructive to observe that while the museum shows are articulated around generic or purely historicist parameters, the few studies that have been carried out focus on extremely specific aspects, on significantly individual issues, as if the museum could only undertake revisionist extractions that continue to validate categories such as generation, group, collective, event, etc, which operate within prefigured and seamless chronological discourses.

In this same sense of the museification of conceptual art as revisitation, at times isolated and not very complex, we come up against one of the great problems that affect any engagement with this kind of radical breakaway practice: the reconstruction of those same activities as a confrontation with the contexts that fostered them; that is to say, their representation as a phenomenon that confronted a particular time and particular conditions —social, economic, political, ideological...— rather than as an 'archaeology' or a set of artistic forms or styles.

These considerations afford a basis for the analysis of conceptual practices in Catalonia, which have generated a great number of exhibition projects that in numerous occasions masked some deeper analysis of the conditions than implicated them.

In the first place it is worth noting that there is an almost automatic association,

within the historical discourse, between the conceptualism of the mid 1970s and the Catalan context. To a certain extent the project *Desacuerdos* [*Disagreements*] (MACBA-Barcelona, UNIA arteypensamiento-Seville, Arteleku-Donostia/San Sebastián and Centro José Guerrero-Granada) attempted to extend this association toward other territories within the Spanish State. However, both in this and in other projects with a similar object of study, the surrounding conditions that undoubtedly marked all these practices are still more or less unexplored. If we take as an example of these issues the Grup de Treball, which has perhaps been the most fully canonized, most fully glossed and even most widely exhibited of all the phenomena that emerged in this period (even being included in the show *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* at the Queens Museum of Art in New York), we can clearly see the aforementioned collateral effect of ‘over-exposure’ (v. ill. 1).

Symptomatic, here, is the isolation of the truly exceptional conditions of the Catalan context that we find with the Grup de Treball; that is to say, the nationalistic elements of specific resistance within a broader realm of protest at the end of the Franco dictatorship. It is true that the unstable composition of the Grup itself (unstable in that its members lived in various different places) contributes to this omission, but it is no less true that the group’s sphere of action territory was developed in the Catalan context, where the dictatorship was engaged in repressing not only freedoms but also many aspects of Catalan identity. There has as yet been no in-depth study of the ways in which the Grup de Treball contributed to the heightening of nationalistic defiance that accompanied the death throes of Francoism, one of the last acts of extreme violence perpetrated by which was precisely the assassination of Salvador Puig Antich on the 2nd of March 1974 (v. ill. 2).

The introduction of the anti-terrorist law of 1975 and the proclamation of the state of emergency made it necessary for the work to be presented unsigned, and after the close of the XI Biennale de Paris this fact precipitated the end of the Grup de Treball’s activities (v. ill. 3).

Another unexplored aspect of the Grup de Treball —or one that is at least equivocal in its successive manifestations— is the nature of the linkage between the group and the specific context of Barcelona. There is thus a tendency to circumscribe its practices within a metropolitan and somewhat centralist confines with regard to what was happening elsewhere in Catalonia at the time. This is not only untrue, in that some of its most notable activities were staged outside of Barcelona, specifically in Terrassa, La Roca del Vallès, Prada de Conflent (Girona) and even Madrid, but also ignores a general state of effervescence of the conceptual that in those days extended well beyond the big cities (see ill. 4, 5 & 6).

This tendency closes the door on, or at least hinders, the particular and localist historiography of many conceptual practices in specific contexts, ensconcing itself again in a centralist, hierarchic and exclusively urban vision of the activities of conceptualism in Catalonia. By way of example here it is worth emphasizing the projects carried out by the collectives Tint-1 and, above all, Tint-2, which mounted three ‘manifestations’ or thematic exhibitions in the Llotja del Tint in Banyoles (*El kitsch doméstico, un piso de la provincia de Girona* [‘Domestic kitsch, a flat in the province of Girona’], October/November 1974; *Cromolitografía doméstica. Dulce*

imagen del culto doméstico [Domestic Chromolithography. Sweet image of the domestic cult], March/April 1975, and *Terracota negra* [Black Terracotta], October/December 1975), all of which were closely linked to the creation of the so-called *Assamblea de Catalunya* (v. ills. 7, 8).

Another neglected approach to the Grup de Treball is the analysis of the actual composition of the collective. In this respect, in keeping with a characteristic rhetoric of the exhibitions, there has been a tendency to see it as movement or group when it would perhaps be more interesting to regard it as a work platform. In fact its various members were not exclusively associated with the art world; some of them were primarily involved in direct political praxis, others in the theory of the art and others still in teaching. Thus, the exclusive artistification of the Grup de Treball is a collateral consequence of the circuits within which its practice has been transmitted and, to a certain extent, of the artistic careers of some of its members. Perhaps this reformulation of the group will enable its particular working methodologies to be understood and situated in a more specific way; that is to say, how its members negotiated, decided and formalized proposals that had to be constructed not only within the parameters of artistic activity but also by means of other elements of action and protest utilized in territories beyond the bounds of the art world (see ills. 9 & 10). Finally, the last aspect to be taken into account as a context for the practices of the Grup de Treball —alongside the vindication of Catalan identity, its implantation within a wider territorial area and its inclusion of people who were not strictly artists— is their relation to other types of creative activity being carried out in Catalonia at the time (v. ill. 11).

At this point we must refer to the incipient movements in the field of design and a certain architecture of a social character. Barcelona and, by extension, Catalonia have fashioned much of their creative stereotype on the basis of design, which has come to constitute a kind of globally recognized ‘brand image’ and, in a way, a caricature of other more conflictive dynamics in political and identitary terms. However, this linking of the Catalan with design, especially characteristic of the 1980s, seems to ignore what happened in the previous decade, in what we might interpret as a certain ‘interrupted tradition’ of reflection on and practice of design. To this end, and not to address the question at undue length, we will consider five significant instances where the disciplines of art and design intersect and where we can discern a certain common context with some of the concerns of the Grup de Treball.

1) The projects of bibliographical recovery and theoretical homologation carried out by the Editorial Gustavo Gili publishing house under the direction of Yves Zimmermann, and the designer Alberto Corazón’s ventures with the publishers Ariel (1967), *Comunicación* (1969) and *Comunicación XXI* (1973), bearing in mind that Corazón was actively involved with the Grup de Treball in what could be called the Madrid faction of the Barcelona-based collective (see ills. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 & 18).

2) The opening of the design schools Elisava (1963) and Eina (1967), which not only participated in a certain project of re-education and pedagogical reflection carried out

by the Grup de Treball (it is no accident that some of its members were teachers) but also provided the contexts for various congresses and other events devoted to a reflection on central concerns within the group's activities.

3) In 1971 the seventh annual ICSID Congress was held in Ibiza. At this meeting of the international council for the regulation of design practices some members of the Grup de Treball presented individual projects that exemplified points of convergence between conceptual practices and design proposals (v. ill. 19).

4) The creation in 1963 of Ricardo Bofill's Taller de Arquitectura, composed of architects, sociologists and engineers, which was in its way a correlative of many of the Grup de Treball's ideas about interdisciplinarity and the rejection of formalism in the field of architectural practice (see ill. 20, 21 & 22).

5) Finally, the opening of the Sala Vinçon in March 1973, within the Vinçon design shop, hosting workshops, seminars and exhibitions in which Antoni Muntadas, Wolf Vostell, Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, Jordi Benito, Manel Rovira, Jordi Galí and others all took part.