

## CUMMA PAPERS #16

CUMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

WE WERE  
SAYING  
WHAT IF...

AN INTERVIEW  
WITH  
LAURENCE  
RASSEL  
BY HENNA  
HARRI AND  
NORA STERNFELD

LAURENCE RASSEL, WE ARE SPEAKING TO YOU AT A CRUCIAL MOMENT: YOU ARE LEAVING BARCELONA'S FUNDACIÓ ANTONI TÀPIES AFTER MANY YEARS AS ITS DIRECTOR. WITH YOUR TEAM YOU CREATED A PLACE THAT IS MUCH MORE THAN A MUSEUM: A PLACE OF HOSPITALITY AND ENCOUNTER, OF EXPERIMENTS AND OPENNESS. CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE MAIN STRANDS THAT YOU FOLLOWED WITH YOUR DIRECTORSHIP?

The words that you are using such as hospitality, encounter and experiment were not purposes per se. They were named and became goals within the process of working as director. When I arrived at the position I had prepared an artistic programme: I knew I wanted to explore performances, sounds and feminist art practices; invite postcolonial authors and artists; and study new readings of the work of Tàpies. And I knew that first, it was necessary to address publicly what the institution is, what it is asking for, and what it might become. At that time, Miquel Tàpies (President of the Board) and Nuria Enguita (then Chief Curator) invited me to consider what the institution could be in 20 years, to open it to various publics and ask questions that were never asked. I decided then that it was important to open the institutional archives to the public, and for the institution itself to study how it works and worked—what are its main features, what does it know?

At the same time, once settled in Barcelona the first steps I took were to meet fellow colleagues of other disciplines like contemporary music and dance. I knew that we might work together one day, as I have always worked in between institutions and disciplines. The most important gesture for me was to weave together a context that would encourage people to be curious, bringing them to contemporary arts from a variety of disciplines. Almost every project was envisaged to test ideas around what is an exhibition, an institution? What if the exhibition site was conceived as a laboratory, or collectively, in public? We were saying what if...

Another question that was driving the programme and still occupies me is that any experiences we have as viewer, user and spectator is mediated through the body and our memory. How could we make the audience remember the active part they are taking in the process of seeing and living the art?

And finally, to come back to the terms of hospitality and encounter, the tendency nowadays in cultural practices and places is to define interactions with “a like” or “don't like”, with buying votes and opinions. How, within an exhibition context, could we create terms and conditions of encounters, and space for conversations within a museum? Conversations and encounters were central to a lot of exhibitions developed

these past five years.

INITIALLY WE WOULD LIKE TO ASK HOW YOU HANDLE OR APPROACH STRUCTURES IN YOUR WORK (EITHER AS A CURATOR OR A DIRECTOR)? WITH STRUCTURES, WE MEAN ANY PHYSICAL OR ABSTRACT CONSTRUCTIONS OR PRACTICES YOU ENCOUNTER OR MOULD IN YOUR WORK.

To handle and approach structures, I first need to see them to understand them. How could I encounter them? First, as mentioned, we opened the institutional archive. For me, this was similar to free and open source principles. To understand the way something works (it could be software, an operating system, a computer or an exhibition process or institution) and to share it and to document it, you need to have access to the inner structure and the decision-making process. Opening the archives was a way to be able to “touch” how the structures work. This was partly naive, as what is fundamental in an institutional structure is the way it is financed and how decisions are made. Evidently you can partly find this inside the archive, but I realised that the issue of understanding how the institution works was mainly occupying the team dealing directly with the archive and this knowledge wasn’t shared. The rest of the team became implicated when we were facing the fact that the dynamics of institution needed to be transformed. This, along with a difficult financial situation, began to affect its structure and programme. So Miquel Tàpies, Xavier Antich (the incoming President of the Board) and myself agreed to share the decisions and the financial and programme issues with the entire team. While it created empowerment, it also generated certain insecurities. It was a precarious situation, as the inherent power structure did not change. The Fundació is organised via a Board that is led by a President and features members of Antoni Tàpies’ family, representatives of public authorities and others from civil society. The Director is employed by the Board but is not a board member. Thinking collectively was a dynamic between me, the team and the President of the Board, but in that moment it was not a dynamic that could be exported more broadly to the entire Board.

Nevertheless, the work of the archive team (which included Rosa Eva Campo and Maria Sellarés from the Education department, Núria Solé who worked in the archive, Linda Valdés the coordinator of public and online activities, and freelance curator Oriol Fontdevila) did succeed in opening our processes, sharing questions and knowledges, and making the institution more readable (and therefore more accessible).

The way I approach structures is to ask publicly how they work and who they are.

Together we asked, what are we doing, what is our mission, and how can we maintain spaces of creativity, encounters, doubts and risks? But the entire structure should be asked and should be willing to go through the process of answering, not only those from the artistic and public programme.

IN YOUR TIME AS DIRECTOR, YOU BROUGHT ABOUT OR WITNESSED MANY CHANGES IN THE VERY FUNDAMENTALS OF THE INSTITUTION. WE ARE VERY INTERESTED IN THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT THE ORGANISING OF INSTITUTIONS, AND HAVE TO SAY THAT THE WORKING ATMOSPHERE IN THE FUNDACIÓ ANTONI TÀPIES GAVE AN IMPRESSION OF BEING DIFFERENT FROM OTHER PLACES. HOW DID YOU ORGANISE THE INSTITUTION?

This is a question that should be shared with the team. You are also alluding to the only part of the team you met, who works on and from the institutional archives. Some parts of the larger team were not happy with a programme that for them was too open to the uncontrolled interventions of the artistic sector of the city, including different communities and students. In some cases, they also disagreed with some of the exhibition projects. But let's just say that I do hope my seven years work brought about more knowledge about the institution, how it works, how it is funded and who is its audience.

What was peculiar was that most of the time, the collective work happened in between the director and the archive, public activity and education departments. Rarely do these groups work together in an institution—we have noticed a growing interest in our work from other institutions. On an operational level, I decided to organise a weekly meeting with all the team including administration, technicians, and museum staff. We all spoke for one hour a week and nothing was too unimportant to discuss. I did trust the engagement they had with their work and their commitment to their working hours. Moments of conviviality happened

or weakened according to will. I trusted the desire and the energy of people to propose and programme activities. Meanwhile the communication was fluid between us, and we mutually trusted which decisions and desires could be developed. If we had the finances for what was proposed, most would have led to more experiments, resulting in staff who were more confident facing changes, risks and uncanny situations.

IN MANY PROJECTS YOU ENGAGED WITH ARTISTIC PRACTICES IN AN EXPERIMENTAL WAY. WE WOULD SAY THAT AS A CURATOR, YOU ACTED WITH MORE CARE REGARDING THE IDEA OF THE ARTISTIC PRACTICES RATHER THAN IN THE CONVENTIONS OF DISPLAY. COULD YOU DESCRIBE ONE OR TWO OF YOUR FAVOURITE PROJECTS AND PROVIDE AN INSIGHT INTO YOUR APPROACH?

Most of the Fundació projects were based on questioning how an exhibition or an artist works and functions. This was evident in the *Studioworks of Eva Hesse* and the showing of Tàpies' private collection alongside his own works. Of course, there were projects where this questioning was more palpable because it was at the core of the artistic process. This was the case when we approached Allan Kaprow's works, or extended an invitation to artist choreographer Xavier Le Roy. What was driving us was that the works of Kaprow are not meant to be seen but are meant to be lived. What happens at the museum and to the exhibition under these conditions? In the case of Le Roy, he literally took the word "retrospective" and made a retrospective by engaging other performers. He considered how performing his works affects other people's bodies, what the work means to the performers and the visitors, and again, what is happening at the museum and the exhibition in that process?

We also developed projects which invited collectives who worked amidst art or design schools, mental health centres or children's workshops to base themselves directly within the archives. It was interesting to see how those interventions entered the interstices of the exhibition institution and how it destabilised part of the team. It was important to make the "visible" part of the museum porous, not only as a vitrine of interaction but as a result of a real interaction happening somewhere within.

Projects like *Re.act feminism* (a growing video library on feminism and performance art that travelled through Europe from 2011 to 2013) or *FAQ Zone of frequently asked questions* (a meeting point between the Fundació

Antoni Tàpies and other Barcelona-based institutions (Idensitat, Sala d'Art Jove and Hangar) guaranteed that exhibition spaces could be used and made hospitable to communities, groups and individuals, providing space to meet, exhibit, perform and debate. I deliberately gave up control. To open the spaces demanded a lot of confidence and complicity from the Fundació team, especially the aforementioned Linda Valdés. We could also count on the collaborative spirit of Yones Amtia and Sebas Guallar from the technical team, as well as the open-mindedness of our security staff. The programme was a matter of responsibility for all of us, including agents outside the institution.

THIS BRINGS US TO THE RELATION BETWEEN YOUR EXPERIENCES AS AN ACTIVIST AND THEORIST, AND YOUR WORK AS A DIRECTOR. WHAT CAN AN ART INSTITUTION LEARN FROM FEMINISM AND OPEN SOURCE ACTIVISM?

It is difficult to answer that as I am not in a position to affirm that engaging someone with my type of profile was useful to the institution. I do hope that knowledge and experiments were collectively shared. In regard to open source principles, we used free and open source software to design a web platform that provides access to digitised documents—free and open software is the basis of other Fundació projects like the official website and projects the Fundació is working on in a European framework. We also invited the artists, translators, photographers and authors collaborating with the Fundació to sign a Creative Commons license on their works. We regularly organised debates on questions related to author rights and the rights at play in the archives together with fellow institutions. And when invited abroad to participate in conferences or workshops related to these issues, those institutional practices were shared and commented upon.

From a feminist standpoint, for me it is synonymous of never taking anything for granted, never considering something to be “natural” and always questioning who, what, what for and under which conditions? Never opt for a dominant position of knowledge from the outside, and always be able to be accountable or answerable for it (as we learned from Haraway in *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*). I also think that my sensitivity towards hospitality comes from my acquaintance to feminist networks and mailing lists who were reflecting on those terms in virtual spaces: how to be hospitable online, how to maintain a shared space, and how to develop care were the questions driving some of them, which is far from what occupies the “hosts” of the so-called social networks nowadays.

I hope that opening ways of working, the modes of production and literally opening spaces made the institution closer to the workers and different communities of Barcelona. Recently a lot of smaller Barcelonian spaces shared with me that they appreciated the path we walked together in different times and for projects. I have also witnessed how other institutions and groups were interested in this process of working: opening the structure, opening the space, opening the archive.

For me, it was a way to realise that together we have to take care of and depend on each other to maintain the diversity of the ecosystem of the art sector in the city. We need all sort of institutions and spaces for different moments within the creation and knowledge processes.

#### CuMMA PAPERS #16

*We Were Saying What If...*  
An Interview with Laurence Rassel  
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