

Magali Arriola

In 1967, after deciding to give up poetry for art, Marcel Broodthaers wondered whether he “couldn’t sell something and be successful in life (...), finally, it crossed my mind to make up something insincere and I immediately got work”. One year later, he created his Musée d’Art Moderne Département des Aigles, u his own words, a “fiction, lie and refuge””; this would allow him to posit a series of questions about the institution of art the Birgit Pelzer, in an essay entitled *The Clues of Change*, summed up in the following way: “the museum’s activities will broach the act of utterance (wherefrom the speaker peaks), direction (to whom it is directed), production used as a medium (fiction) and its scope (conditions of truth)”.

To undertake an evaluation and diagnosis of art institutions’ functionality and the contradictions to which their various transformations have given rise, we must analyze art as an institution, in itself, in other words, each one of the elements that together from the complex art circuit- the artist’s connection with the work, the ways in which work is presented, its modes of circulation and finally, its reception by viewers.

Here I will refer to three art initiatives which, in creating a fictional identify imitating or replicating the various mechanisms that govern our environment, have coined their own “trade name”, understanding it as a speculative justification of the motives on which their interaction with their context are based and as the legal term with which they certify and define their existence. By registering their names as corporations, associations or companies which usually couple merchandise production with offering services, these manifestations questions a series of issues including the legal statue of artwork, the relations of authorship that the artist establishes with the work from his or her position as producer, the ways l which artwork is deployed, promoted and distributed within the –commercial or institutional- art circuit, and finally the real impact that they as companies have within the context that crated them.

Whether these projects are individual initiatives in the guise of corporations (Minerva Cueva’ *Mejor Vida Corp. or MVC*) or administrative ventures (the *Arte-Check* voucher system and Mario García Torres’ *Abastecedora de Galerías*, i.e. ‘Gallery Supplier’), or whether they are collaborations between various artists or cultural agents incorporating elements from other specialized social sectors (Carlos Amoraes’ *Los Mutantes*), the first thing they postulate is the recreation of socio professional models and the application of modes of production that do not necessarily result in the creation of an object. Thus, they manage to reformulate the scope of the artistic act by questioning its very nature and expanding the utilitarian function of what they are producing (whether this is an exchange network, the

offering of services, or a series of goods) furthermore, they let us suppose that by creating their own mode of operation, they no longer need institutional patronage or the structure that the latter requires to manifest itself.

In this sense, the already rather well-known and studied initiative *Mejor Vida Corp.*-launched by Minerva Cuevas in 1998- represents a kind of activism which inserts itself in the grooves of the inner workings of economic, political and social structures. By adopting a mimetic strategy and occupying space in a parasitic manner, it hopes to propound passive resistance to our country's typical inertia and failings, offering the community free services in order to improve, if not its members' standard of living, then at least the conditions surrounding their daily life. Among the many services that *MVC* offers such as cleaning public spaces, type-writing or the carrying out of polls and campaigns, we should also note the free distribution-at first in public spaces, and then over the web, in a similar manner to any other form of advanced capitalism –of goods such as subways tickets, tear gas, caffeine pills, barcodes and fake student ID cards; all of these things, though they might not be vital or essential, are still perceived as small luxuries which respond to basic needs that the population generates spontaneously. Though *MVC* appears to defy the market economy's production slogans like "Yes, it's free!" or by using graphic design as a tool in devising its ads.

By fabricating a corporate identity and choosing to express themselves and define their realm of action in public space (urban spaces as well as public communication forums in the media), initiatives such as this one, despite the fact that (or maybe because) they are based on an art platform do not seem to need the art institution's endorsement in terms of their process of legitimization, (self-) insertion and distribution; on the contrary, they manage to reformulate some of their operations given the fact that they function self-sufficiently in the same context that generates and harbors them. They thus establish a network of exchange defying the narrow physical limits of the institutional framework that hinders the mobility of the participatory relationships they establish with spectators. The fact that these art manifestations choose to seek out other types of structures to harbor them-like the web, which acts as an infrastructure and as an interactive means of promotion and distribution that is constantly growing and being update- makes it clear that we are no longer dealing with a sphere of deferred communication, but rather with a simultaneous and expandable one in which information, behaving in an apparently autonomous manner, establishes itself as a kind of architecture that can be detached, fragmented, transferred and propagated. In other words, these projects implicitly question modes of access to artwork. And modes of communication and interaction with it- within the framework of institutional space. While exhibition spaces still seem to require meditation devices, these pieces, presented as an interface, are directed at and directly address spectators, making them users rather than passive consumers.

In an interview with Hans Ulrich Orbist, artist Minerva Cuevas explains that though "it is not (*MVC's*) responsibility to situate itself within an art context (...), it uses the museum for its production facilities and for the public presence it offers. "And in effect, when *MVC* presented itself at Rufino Tamayo Museum's Sala 7, Cuevas used the institutional space as a forum to display the various facets of the project

that she had developed until that time. While museum employees made visitors fake student ID cards thus interacting with user, the artist asked that no entrance fee be charged to the Sala 7- given the fact that the Tamayo Museum is a public space- a request that was denied. This allows us to suppose, on the other, that a project like *MVC* –which aspires to infiltrate the context in which it is begin developed by fabricating a fictitious identity and having its own corporate head-quarters-should at least in certain cases resist the fetishization of its politically-minded activism –e.g. *MVC*'s lottery (*Melate*) or statics (INEGI) campaigns. To thus be able to effectively become a mimetic element of the social sector at which it is directed.

Introducing this type of initiative within the museum as institution questions both the way some of these works operate and the legitimacy of space's presumed functions-first as a receptacle, and then as a conduit of meditation between the artist and the public. These projects also question the ways in which a series of devices and artifices are articulated- mechanisms that are necessary for the display, translation and dissemination of the material on exhibit, and that usually constitute the social connection that governs the artwork's relationship with the context that generated them.

It is from this point of view that we must understand the forthcoming launch of a project like *Abastecedora de Galerías*, this business venture's goal is to provide services and products to Mexico's museums though it does not wish to establish itself. Conceived by Mario García in 1999, *Abastecedora de Galerías*, like *MVC*, has used various kinds of media infrastructures as its own and adopted the latter's varipus codes of communication by advertising itself on the *Arte-Check* group's web-page as one more of this enterprise's services and inserting its propaganda among magazine ads. *Abastecedora de Galerías* sells itself with the slogan "making life easier for art-world professionals" and claims to be "an enterprise that is not satisfied with simply guaranteeing the better operation of its clients' businesses; rather, it attempts to innovate with each of its products to offer continuous improvement". The first products that *Abastecedora de Galerías* will launch are: write paint for galleries, water marks for videos standard wall labels, oil paint-scented room deodorizer, ambient music with subliminal sounds, special lighting equipment, signs and fonts. The *Plan de negocios* (Business Plan) installation project consists of showing prototypes of the products, short- and long-term financial perspectives and a scale model of the future premises. By insisting on its artistic nature, this project manipulates those elements which, though they are not officially art works, still form an integral part of the art circuit- white paint, deodorize, water marks- to thus demonstrate the commodification not only of the art object itself, but of the entire machinery that supports it. By claiming that these products are works of art and by referring to the art object in generic terms, it situates then latter on the same level as the institutional structure that harbors it and reveals the basic mechanism that sustains it as a commercial strategy. Thus, on the one hand, *Abastecedora de Galerías* breaks with the fetishization of artistic production, revealing the artifacts and artifices that its display requires, and other, it focuses on creating loyal competition between the work's statute and the market strategies and structures that sustain the latter.

This evaluation of art's commercial circuit is even clearer in the *Grupo Arte-Check* project. To quote from its web-page- consisting of self-promotional slogans, pictures of its products and photographs of its corporate headquarters- "the *Arte-Check* project operates as a voucher system for purchasing art. It will be an organization that distributes voucher to employees of our country's most prestigious companies. The vouchers can be exchanged for works of art in galleries affiliated with the system. The project tries to enable all the necessary mechanisms for this exchange to take place. Though *Arte-Check* is non-lucrative venture, its goal is to ensure that all the actual agents are in place so the entire system may be put in practice. In this sense, the company will become an organization that establishes ties between galleries, artists and buyers, among others, turning each employee into a possible future art collector".

Arte-Check presents itself, on the one hand, as an answer to the competitiveness within the art market by directly incorporating itself- as an art project- in the commercial circuit and by legitimizing itself within the operation of 'its own circuit's machinery it also appears to question strategies for the circulation of the work both inside and outside the institution. On the other hand, by fabricating a corporate identity, it tests its own capacity for resistance within the social field in which it inserts itself. It thus creates a kind of resistance that allows it to measure itself against the monopoly of large companies in the field of advanced capitalism; at the same time, it is a concrete answer to the abstraction created by a globalized world economy's complex financial systems.

As Danish artist Henrik Plenge Jacobson suggest in his text entitled *The Economy of the Spectacle*, the inflation and speculation that characterize the current art market do not seem to be anything but a replica of a way globalized financial markets operate. "The exchange on which the economy is based shares certain similarities with what is happening in a work of art, an exchange of ideas, from the idea's producer to the idea's receiver. And the same happens with the companies that dominate Nasdaq composite index –they do not represent a use/utility as such, but rather an idea or a service that can be profitable in the future/lead to long-term profits (...) the current art market and art practice in general are analogous to the economy of the spectacle. One, an investor in art, invests in a hypothetical value, since the canvas as such or the sculpture do not represent a material value in and of themselves.

Vis-à-vis this situation and the constant increase in cultural offer, García Torres has stated that "contemporary art producers must question the ways in which their ideas should manifest themselves in order identify which are the best tactics to follow so that they may insert themselves as sales agents whose actions yield positive results for their venture". What projects like *Abastecedora de Galerías* and *Arte-Check* seem to suggest is that the strategy we must follow in order to face the flow of visual information and the proliferation of fetishized goods is not so much the accumulative production of objects –whether or not they are art objects- but rather advocating the latter's dematerialization without incurring the loss of their essence as an art manifestation, inserting oneself within the system of production to foster their circulation; in other words, by infiltrating the system –by introducing and legitimizing themselves- these ventures have to adopt the very strategy that they are subverting, as *MVC* did in creating its own circulation and distribution network.

For its part, the *Arte-Check* system flaunts –with a hint of irony- its deliberately utopian character in its goal of promoting the sound, fluid operation of the contemporary art market’s complex circuit –particularly in our country where there are few devotees and only a limited number of galleries and exhibition spaces. In asserting that the aforesaid system will allow to turn “any employee into a possible future art collector”, and inserting a section in their web page with the most frequently-asked questions about their operation as well as a section of interviews to users where the latter describe how they felt about this novel experience, *Arte-Check* is also referring to another fundamental component that allows these ventures to turn the art machine into a functional profitable business: interaction with the public at which they is directed.

Using public space to manifest itself does not only allow the aforesaid system to expand its field of action, but also introduces a form of altruistic activism that seeks to encourage the average citizen to acquire a work of art, even if it is only to decorate their place of business, as *Arte-Check’s* web page proudly states. This statement suggest that the art object’s commodification is the price to pay for cultural production’s process of democratization and dissemination within an unspecialized audience. However, the modes of exchange and dynamics of dissemination implicit in projects like *Arte-Check* and *MVC*, in addressing and involving viewer-users lead them to measure and evaluate the work’s relevance in terms of the actual effect it has on their daily lives. In discerning that the market economy’s encroachment has transformed the parameters governing society –and especially consumer society-, these initiatives point out that art manifestations must diversify modes promotion and insertion. Faced with their potential clientele’s own expansion, diversification and specialization, these projects are directed at more and more specific sectors of society –something that happens to any commercial strategy that tends to create new consumer habits- questioning the notion of the public as a single, homogeneous being that might share collective interests, and pointing out at the same time the inequalities of a culturally and economically fragmented audience. This remits us to the need to reformulate the function of mediator between the work and the public that institution such as museums profess, as well as the ways in which museum measure their sphere of influence and exercise their didactic vocation by translating, articulating and contextualizing very diverse cultural manifestations.

It is in this sense that an experience like the one that Carlos Amorales began creating the collective project *Los Mutantes* in 1999 is significant. “*Los Mutantes* is an independent initiative organized by artists serving as a link between the participating artist’ reality and specific social issue. (...) the project consist of various direct interventions where conceptual tools related to the work *Mutantes’* distinctive features is that its roster of artists changes (with the exception of its founder, Amorales), one of the project’s most alluring aspects is that its ooperational parameters also change in the process.

In the first instance, the project appears as a communicative link between different social sectors and cultural media, seeking to test the relevance and efficacy of art manifestations and their underlying structure by facing them with an untrained audience, an audience of “neophytes” –a group of young homeless people.

Though *Los Mutantes'* first intervention- the fruit of a collaboration between Amorales and performance artist Joan Jonas –was sponsored by an art institution (the Carrillo Gil Museum), the latter was not used as a mediation device; rather, the artists contacted other social spheres, like that of medical professionals, El Caracol, which would also serve as a bridge allowing the artists to gain access to the specific social sector at which their project was directed. As a result of his involvement with El Caracol, Amorales, who at that time was showing his work at the Carrillo Gil, decided to invite a group of (formerly) homeless kids to the opening of his work. In his own words, “during the visit, the kids were harassed by museum guards who kept a close watch on them and controlled their movements. This first experience in the institutional space, besides being uncomfortable for the kids, brought up a fundamental question: were they treated because they look like they are homeless or because they were really behaving like they were? This question sparked the discussion Joan Jonas and I proposed to them”.

This first collaboration consisted in a workshop “discussing the problematics arising from the creation of a fictional identity from the point of view of performance with these kids who make a living off their own performative activities in the streets”. Basing themselves on the fact that, in Amorales’ words, in an extremely codified society “a dirty face becomes a mask”, *Los Mutantes* decided to invert the voyeuristic game implicit in a constructed identity that plays with the limits of marginalization, transforming the homeless kids into a group of tourists wearing the right kind of casual clothing, sunglasses and equipped with disposable cameras. The project consisted in going around the city for several days visiting various tourist attractions as well as certain cultural institutions.

The fact that, on the one hand, these young homeless people lived on the fringe of dominant social and economic structures and that, on the other, art manifestations often remain isolated within the spaces that house them in spite of efforts made to disseminate and promote them allowed *Los Mutantes* to confront the art milieu’s own tools, codes and languages with these subcultural agents or new observers and analyze the real ties existing between the artist, the work and its potential public. One of the many stops on the aforesaid tour was the Carrillo Gil Museum a few days after the opening, during office hours. According to Amorales, one of the first problems he had to face was defining to which spaces in the museum sponsoring this experience the homeless kids would have access in order to further develop the project, given the fact that: on the one hand, it was an initiative whose realization did not necessarily lead to the production of an art object but rather focused on questioning the nature and efficacy of art practice; and that, on the other, having reintroduced the experience into the museum under the status of a work of “art”, the situation would have been inverted again through a voyeuristic act, turning the homeless kids once more into objects of contemplation. By altering the parameters of consumption by which the art institution seems to govern itself, a first question arises regarding what role this institution plays when, beyond exhibiting a result, it commits itself to sponsoring and supporting experiments that strive to infiltrate determined rifts or gaps in the social body.

Los Mutantes' second project was the fruit of Amorales' collaboration with artist Michael Blum –whose work broaches the issue of corporate culture- and took place at El Caracol's headquarters, this time without any institutional assistance. Having set himself the task of establishing a new bridge of communication that allowed him to make up for cultural differences, Blum taught the kids responsibility of teaching Spanish to their supposed teacher, demonstrating their will to participate and commitment to the project. As Amorales himself notes after carrying out both experiments and establishing kind of balance involving the directors of that they trigger lessens their impact and in time, they might become "an isolated experience within the total process same could be said of the museum's work: by not obeying specific guidelines and interests that represent a continuity in the long term, it would be hard for them to offer members of the public the necessary tools for them to develop a critical outlook on their surroundings.

In this sense, if the institutions that play host to contemporary art appear as devices surveying the field and mediating the context, they must undertake, parallel to their art research, an evaluation of the sociocultural conditions that are generating these projects. This is why the museum should perhaps not only open its "in" door, letting people in and lending its space to these kinds of experiments, but also its "out" door so that, as an institution, it may be able to reformulate its functions, allow itself to expand and take part in these manifestations.