

Oriol Fontdevila

Performativity as a Modus Operandi

I'm not sure about the fact that you are now preparing a reader. It's as if the projects we've carried out were rendered legitimate simply because they ended up being set down on paper, which is what a museum inevitably produces.

Roger Bernat, 2016

There is a paradox that is constantly reproduced when art comes close to its non-representational substrate: this is when, stripped of its symbolic layer, it reveals an infrastructural layer that one never quite knows how to deal with. Despite the performative emphasis in works of art related to institutional criticism since the turn of the century, it is fair to say that these are in danger of being relegated to mere artistic genres if they fail to achieve a minimum of impact in terms of the structural challenges they repeatedly invoke¹.

Understanding this phenomenon is made easier by arguments put forward by different theorists with regard to three non-representational areas in which art has tried to play a role in recent years. These are the questions of the archival, education and material agency:

1 It would not be correct to refer to a “performative art” as such. As Dorothea von Hantelmann has pointed out, artistic practice always involves a performative component on the specific terms in which thinkers like John Austin and Judith Butler have formulated the concept: every sign has a capacity for action, and by updating or displacing the conventions organised around it can affect the realisation of what is rendered. Thus, “There is not performative artwork, because there is no non-performative artwork” (Hantelmann, 2010). Even so, in recent years there has been an increasing interest in this theory among artists, which has resulted in attention being paid to questions like the effectiveness and relevance of art, as well as new perspectives emerging in relation to aspects that go beyond the field of representation and were traditionally identified with mediation. In relationship to this trend, the text you have before you supposes an engagement between performativity theory and the discourses of institutional criticism, something that, in Hantelmann’s view, should not arise: “An art that is conscious of the efficacy of its own performativity could possibly replace [critique] with a more constructive and effective attitude.” Our position is, on the other hand, closer to a genealogy of feminist thought that sees in performativity a way of renewing the understanding of critical thought itself, so that it would result from actual contact – rather than from a distant positioning – and from matter and mediation, rather than from discursivity or representation. As Marina Garcés writes in “To Embody Critique”, “The problem of critique has traditionally been a problem of conscience. Today it is a problem of the body. How do we incarnate critique? How does critical thought acquire a body?” (Garcés, 2006). See: Hantelmann, Dorothea von (2010): *How to Do Things with Art*. Zurich & Dijon: JRP | Ringier, Les presses du réel; also see: Garcés, Marina (2006): “To Embody Critique. Some theses. Some Examples”, in: *Transversal*. 06 2006. EIPCP European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies. Online: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/garces/en>

Boris Groys sees the archive as the sub-media space *par excellence*². However, Jorge Blasco regretted the trend that has arisen among artists to *represent* without fully taking on board the verb “to archive” in all its complexity: “We are left with metaphor, representation, ‘form’.” Even though institutional criticism expected the archival to penetrate the art world and affect its taxonomic and expositional conventions, in the end it is the archive that tends to find its place as a new fixture within the established taxonomy; as Blasco puts it, as “a taxonomic category as powerful as certain styles and media: painting, sculpture, multimedia, archive and macramé.”³

Also well-known is the tension posited by Irit Rogoff, between education as a disruptive influence and the crystallisation of education as a new aesthetic convention in contemporary art: “On the one hand, moving these principles into sites of contemporary display signalled a shift away from the structures of objects and markets and dominant aesthetics towards an insistence of the un-chartable, processual nature of any creative enterprise. Yet on the other hand, it has led all too easily into the emergence of a mode of ‘pedagogical aesthetics’ in which a table in the middle of the room, a set of empty bookshelves, a growing archive of assembled bits and pieces, a classroom or lecture scenario, or the promise of a conversation have taken away the burden to rethink and dislodge daily those dominant burdens ourselves.”⁴

Finally, the issue is brought up to date by the recent arrival of the so-called new materialism: as Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey and Suhail Malik put it in the introduction to one of the first anthologies on the topic, “If realism and materialism are to follow through on their claims to radically reorganize modern epistemological and ontological categories (...) we should anticipate not only new themes for art practices, exhibitions and cultural production, but also starkly different ways of making, perceiving, thinking and distributing them. What is left relatively unexamined – and presents a much greater problem for current orthodoxies of cultural artistic production – is the systematic and methodological challenge that a thoroughgoing realism and/or materialism presents

2 Groys Boris: *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media*. Columbia University Press, 2012

3 Blasco, Jorge., “Ceci n’est pas une archive” in: Fernando Estévez González & Mariano de Santa Ana (eds.): *Memorias y olvidos del archivo*. 11 – 29. Cabildo de Gran Canaria, MHAT Museo de Historia y Antropología de Tenerife, 2010

4 Rogoff, Irit., “Turning”, in: *e-flux*. no. 0. New York, 2008; online: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/turning/>

to the way that exhibitions or artworks claim to produce meaning in their prevailing paradigms,”⁵

These remarks allow us to specify the paradox we pointed out at the start: approaches including clear input from performativity theory do not seem, in general, to be in a position to anticipate differential modes of production and the circulation of art and knowledge. While performativity deals with the question of representation from a pragmatic perspective and considers how a symbolic plane can have a disruptive effect on reality, this theory seems closer today to being absorbed by a traditional system of representation than one able to reconfigure it. Performativity is therefore in the process of becoming just another representation of contemporary art. Once again we find ourselves left with metaphor, while performativity is hardly to be found as a *modus operandi*⁶.

In this respect we feel it is important to highlight the *Arts Combinatòries* (Combined Arts) project by the Antoni Tàpies Foundation. After a decade-and-a-half of a consolidated, pioneering programme of exhibitions and activities at this museum, which have generated and introduced to Spain some of the most important ideas related to art and institutional critical thinking, feminisms and post-colonialism, it was only in 2007 that, with the arrival of Laurence Rassel at the helm, the possibility of transferring this whole critical baggage from the exhibition galleries to the operation of the institution itself was considered. Thus importance was attached to questions and issues like: can a cultural institution not only represent feminist thought, but decide to be guided by approaches derived from cyberfeminism or queer theory? And can institutional criticism serve to drive the working of a museum? In short, can the structure of an institution be consistently open to critical thought?

5 Cox, Christoph; Jaskey, Jenny; & Malik, Suhail., “Introduction”, in: *Realism Materialism Art*. 15 – 31. CCS Bard, Sternberg Press. 2015.

6 One explanation for this phenomenon could be that artists and curators have largely continued to see representation and discourse as those fields where they could make a contribution, while the translation into performativity of non-representational aspects such as mediation or infrastructure, which are barely touched on in their work, is sidelined. This is made absolutely clear in the above-mentioned essay by Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art* (2010). It is symptomatic that in what is probably the most perceptive approximation so far produced to contemporary art and the discourses of performativity, the structure of the whole argument revolves around the figures of four artists – James Coleman, Daniel Buren, Tino Shegal and Jeff Koons – who are in the end almost the only agents that Hantelmann describes with a certain agency. In our view, a theory or historiography of art based on performativity should present the role of artists alongside the capacity for the intervention of other actors, infrastructures and technologies that come into play in generating artistic phenomena. In Hantelmann’s opinion, the artist is probably the only actor in the artistic field with the ability to disrupt, while the others are relegated to the conventional background, which is also portrayed in his work as notably static.

The key factor raised in effecting this transfer of critical thought to the non-representational substrate of the institution was the creation of an archive, opened in 2009, which has made available to the public the documentation generated by the institution in its day-to-day work managing activities and exhibitions. The archive also enabled the organisation of ongoing cooperation between three of the institution's departments: under the name *Arts combinatòries* (Combined Arts), the Museum began a process of linking the archive department itself – run by Núria Solé Bardalet – with that of public activities – headed by Linda Valdés – and that of education – under Rosa Eva Campo and Maria Sellarès Pérez. The process of linking the archive to the public sphere led to the project *Open-Source Prototypes*, which I had the opportunity to curate, a platform for research and action that has worked together with different agents related to the educational sphere; as well as to *How to Do Things with Documents*, the Museum's contribution to *Performing the Museum*, which has involved inviting a series of artists and people of different profiles to spend time doing research in the institution's archive.

However, can this story also be told according to a *modus operandi* in line with the concept of performativity? For it is not a matter of portraying it according to an exegetic discourse, but of setting out some of the stress lines running across the project and trying to make them reverberate through this same exposition. This is attempted below by quoting fragments of thoughts expressed by some of the actors involved in the projects who have worked within the sphere of the archive over this time⁷:

“At that time [by 2007], Miquel Tàpies (President of the Board) and Nuria Enguita (then chief curator) invited me to consider what the institution could be like in 20 years, to open it to various publics and ask questions that had never been 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?” Laurence Rassel⁸

7 The following part of the text includes statements made within the context of assessments of *Prototips en codi obert* (Open-Source Prototypes) and of *Performing the Museum*, as well as in other contexts. The corresponding bibliographical citations can be consulted in the section on references. It is in any case important to underline that the description given of the projects is not exhaustive, and that they do not include the voices of actors who have been important to the carrying out of the project, yet whose testimony regarding the matters discussed is not available. See Appendix III: Diagram by Pep Vidal tracing the relationship between the three initiatives discussed in this text: *Open Source Prototypes*, *Performing the Museum* and *How to Do Things with Documents*.

8 Rassel, Laurence., evaluation process defined by Nora Sternfeld. Unpublished document, 2015

From a performative standpoint, the archive cannot be identified as the passive guardian of an inherited legacy, but as an active player in shaping both collective memory and institutional and governmental processes⁹. This is how Rassel saw the archive as a space from which it was possible to begin the proposed conversation with the public about the institution's own configuration, with the prospect that "the audience could become the user, an intermediary of the museum"¹⁰. It was not therefore simply a matter of democratising knowledge or making the institution transparent, but of approaching the archive as the interface through which the institution "would be disrupted and would so become unstable"¹¹.

"In a way, the foundation archive is the heart of the *Open Source Prototypes* project. Seen as a knowledge tool, the opening up of the archive documentation has been and is an attempt to provide the groups participating in the project with a review of museum management practices from a different standpoint. Approaching museum practices from an archive means shifting the usual centre of research from the field of art, the work of art, to the documentary world generated by the art, whether through the management of a museum's collection or through setting up exhibitions." Núria Solé Bardalet¹²

Placing the archive at the centre of a process of dialogue with the public sphere is something exceptional. Thus, while Solé recognises that a step beyond specialist research was required ("From the beginning another goal of the project had been to diversify the community of the archive,"¹³), people also believed that the framework of cooperation in *Open Source Prototypes* should focus on the educational sphere:

"In inviting the first few groups, particular attention was paid to the following question: which kinds of partners and collaborators might be interested in becoming involved in a project that takes as its starting point

9 Cook, Terry., "Archival science and postmodernism: new formulations of old concepts", in: *Archival Science*. 1. 3-24. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Organising team (ed.): *Prototips en codi obert*. Primera etapa. Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 2011; online: <https://issuu.com/lafundicio/docs/prototipsencodiobert-lae-tapa/3?e=1625986/2699846>

13 Ibid.

the historical archive of an institution and under what conditions would they be able to benefit from this?” Oriol Fontdevila¹⁴

“The documentation on exhibitions kept by the archive could provide us with details of how they were managed, to allow work and discussions on legal and financial aspects that would not emerge in any analysis of the exhibition as an end product.” Joan Vilapuig, teacher at the Escola d’Art i Superior Deia¹⁵

“With regard to the foundation, quite frankly, my initial expectations were so high that when I came up against the nitty-gritty of the question I felt a little deflated (folders and more folders and you didn’t know where to begin!), but it is good experience, as it’s not every day that you can go into the archive of an institution like this one.” Mireia Jou, student at the Fine Arts Faculty of the University of Barcelona¹⁶

“If there is one thing we consider to be entirely positive, it is the opportunity to respect and create a space in which different times and processes can coexist... [so that] we have been able to gradually build up our way of dealing with the archive, approaching it cautiously, taking the time necessary to rethink why, for what and how to construct this relationship.” LaFundició, members of CandeL’Hart¹⁷

Between 2011 and 2015, around 20 groups carried out research processes at the Museum, consisting of education projects jointly designed by teachers, students, researchers and the project organising team, and these have been disseminated publicly through different initiatives in different formats, as well as through interventions at the museum itself. Nevertheless, it has proved harder to foster dialogue between the different groups and generate meeting places, as well as joint presentation formats that would prove comfortable and sustainable for all of them.

As Marta Mariño, trainee researcher at the Inter-University Institute for Women’s and Gender Studies, pointed out: “In the case of *Open Source Prototypes*, to

14 Organising team (ed.): *Prototips en codi obert*. Primera etapa. Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 2011; online: <https://issuu.com/lafundicio/docs/prototipsencodiobert-1ae-tapa/3?e=1625986/2699846>

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

this must be added the major difficulty arising from the highly mixed nature of the groups making up the project... Despite the underlying idea of collaboration (...) behind the project, in practice mechanisms were not created that favoured feedback in the form of dialogue. Perhaps the foundation failed to highlight the possible commonalities, so that the only thing the groups had in common was their research of and using the archive.”¹⁸ Marta Mariño

“Despite all the work on genealogy, deconstruction and criticism that cultural institutions have done about themselves, concerning their role in relation to society and the historical processes that have shaped it, it is fair to say that they are still in debt to the enlightenment programme, and one of their main functions continues to be precisely that of bringing the light of culture to the ignorant. As we understand it, one of the goals of *Open Source Prototypes* is to short-circuit some of these disciplinary processes to generate new, anti-hierarchical forms of relations between practices and a variety of cultural actors (...). But it is too easy for the institution to repeat its habitual proselytising mechanisms with a group like Candel’Hart. Despite any guidelines and instructions that may be issued by the institution’s management or one of its programmes, the institution manifests itself and works through countless small gestures and ways of going about things that have been interiorised by its staff over a long time, and which are not easy to change,”¹⁹ LaFundició

“I thought the institution and art could be tools, instruments, are a system. But some of the groups, users, were claiming that the system should work as it is. Not being users of the tools, they wanted to have the same relationship to the institution itself: visibility, acknowledgment, money, but not interaction, or conversation... But some others did converse, convert, transform the institution.”²⁰ Laurence Rassel

Despite Rassel’s goal of disrupting the institution, it is a fact that the links between the project and the institution have taken time to fashion. As Linda Valdés, head of public activities and project coordinator, admits, at some points it has even been necessary to separate the project from the institution in order to guarantee its efficacy: “So, trying to be flexible without asking for more work

18 Organising team (ed.): *Prototips en codi obert. Primera etapa*. Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 2011; online: <https://issuu.com/lafundicio/docs/prototipsencodiobert-1ae-tapa/3?e=1625986/2699846>

19 Ibid.

20 Rassel, Laurence., evaluation process defined by Nora Sternfeld. Unpublished document, 2015

from our colleagues, we have temporarily suspended some aspects of the working protocols. So, in a way, very early on, we became a self-sufficient project. Later, we began sketching out new, different protocols, incorporating our work into the dynamics of the Foundation and developing an interdependency.”²¹

“Opening the archives was a way of enabling us to “touch” the structures and how they work... This was somewhat naïve, as what is fundamental in an institutional structure is the way it is financed and how decisions are made. Evidently you can to some degree find this inside the archive, but I realised that the issue of understanding how the institution works mainly concerned the team dealing directly with the archive, and this knowledge wasn’t shared... Some parts of the wider 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,” Laurence Rassel²²

In 2015 cooperation began within the framework of the European *Performing the Museum* project, something that made it possible to raise funds to finance a research residency programme at the archive for six actors of different profiles. While many of these again identify with the educational sector, this time the budget available made it possible to invite artists and more independent agents. Some of the issues that had arisen with *Open Source Prototypes* came up again, though in a different way, while new ones appeared, arising from the structure of a framework for work and presentation that was quite confined in terms of time and processes²³.

“We do have to say that as Experimentem amb l’ART (Let’s Experiment with Art), this process of research and experimentation offered us many positive things. In fact, at present it is causing us to ask whether there should be more groups within Experimentem devoted permanently to experimentation and research,” Dolors Juárez and Isaac Sanjuan, members of Experimentem amb l’ART and interpreter of *Performing the Museum*

21 Valdés, Linda., evaluation process defined by Nora Sternfeld. Unpublished document, 2015

22 Rassel, Laurence., evaluation process defined by Nora Sternfeld. Unpublished document, 2015

23 Many of the quotes shown below come from a conversation held with some of the collaborators involved in the *Performing the Museum* project shortly after the staging of the presentation of their research, *How to Do Things With Documents*. The following took part in the conversation: Roger Bernat, Mariló Fenández, Oriol Fontdevila, Dolors Juárez, Judit Onsès, Núria Solé i Baralet, Jara Rocha, Isaac Sanjuan and Pep Vidal.

“There was a lot of autism among us. We were all linked to the archive in some way, but among us we were unable to establish a dialogue... I have the impression that we saw the archive as a mine rather than an agora. That is to say, we all went to get what we could out of it, like the great land-grab of the American West. Everyone looked for gold on their own account – whoever found it got rich and everyone else could get lost. Perhaps there was a little of this in our minds – a piece by Mozart is still found every six months in some archive, isn't it?” Roger Bernat, theatre director, interpreter of *Performing the Museum* ²⁴

“The part that maybe didn't quite fit for me is the title of the scheme, *Performing the Museum*. At no time did I feel myself to be performing the museum. I felt myself getting involved in the archive, rethinking the archive, searching the archive, working on the archive, but I don't think I ever performed the museum.” Pep Vidal, artist, physicist and mathematician, interpreter of *Performing the Museum* ²⁵

What caused the most discomfort among the interpreters is the joint exhibition that was held to present the outcomes of all six research projects, *How to Do Things With Documents*. This was envisaged as a three-week event on the premises of the archive itself, for which Núria Solé and Linda Valdés themselves undertook to deal with the public throughout the period. Even though the exhibition followed the initiatives each interpreter decided to present their own respective research projects; in general, the exhibition/intervention was not seen as an opportunity for the processes to reverberate through the museum structure.

On the contrary, in some cases the exhibition was seen as something that contradicted the dynamics followed by the interpreters themselves – “For our part there was disagreement when it was proposed showing the research in an exhibition format, which also conditioned certain ways of working” (Experimentem amb l'ART, 2016) – or it was seen as a “toll imposed by the institution. This is how we initially saw and interpreted the exhibition proposal. Once we understood (and accepted) exhibitions are mandatory components for art institutions we no longer saw them as a burden – nor a reason to change our way

24 Bernat, Roger comments as part of the evaluation meeting of *Performing the Museum*. Unpublished recording, 2016

25 Vidal, Pep., comments as part of the evaluation meeting of *Performing the Museum*. Unpublished recording, 2016

of working. Nevertheless, the spaces we need to socialise processes are neither institutions nor museum people” (LaFundició, 2016).²⁶

“With regard to the exhibition, I think we all slipped into performativity formats that nobody was comfortable with, but as they were the formats we were used to... it’s very easy to end up doing an opening with all the typical features, with the typical audience... there was the right music for a few beers, a bit of fun, a nice atmosphere; wow, there are people here, our mates have come... and it’s good music, eh, but I don’t think we voluntarily composed it ourselves.” Roger Bernat²⁷

“I thought it was great that there was beer everywhere – it was a way of invading the whole thing. I thought that weird mutation of an exhibition that actually wasn’t an exhibition was interesting. It was an exhibition in an archive, and that’s something.” Pep Vidal²⁸

The Experimentem amb l’ART initiative within the framework of *Performing the Museum* consisted of generating a space for dialogue between two institutions in the process of rethinking the concept of opening up to the public. One of these was the Tàpies Foundation itself, with the archive project; the other was the Dovella primary school, in the process of redefining its master plan on the basis of rethinking the potentiality of the school playground. The contact day that was organised took place over most of a day at both locations. Experimentem amb l’ART asked cultural activist and artist Lluç Mayol to provide his thoughts on it in the form of a summary. This focused precisely on two points at which institutional resistance to the opening arise:

“The first of the settings in which resistance to the opening manifested itself was the school, at the very outset. We were invited to lunch at the Dovella school at 1.30pm on an ordinary school day. You might imagine this meal in a dining room or a space shared with pupils (who at that time of day might also be eating or have just eaten). At least you might imagine that at some point the activity would be interrupted by movement in the school (children coming and going, surprise at coming across thirty

26 LaFundició comments as part of the evaluation meeting of *Performing the Museum*. Unpublished recording, 2016

27 Bernat, Roger comments as part of the evaluation meeting of *Performing the Museum*. Unpublished recording, 2016

28 Vidal, Pep., comments as part of the evaluation meeting of *Performing the Museum*. Unpublished recording, 2016

strange adults invading the school, etc.), but on the contrary, lunch was in a windowless classroom, cut off from all physical and visual contact outside the room. No risk of the school's activities interfering with our day or vice versa. Strangely enough, even when the strange adults moved around the school, from the classroom to the playground, we never came across any pupils or teachers in their daily routine.

Another time when this resistance manifested itself was at the end of the day, at the Tàpies Foundation, when the people from Experimentem amb l'ART suggested a picnic inside the building, together with a debate about where to have it. The few spaces proposed were rejected by the foundation staff on grounds of internal security and curating rules, or simply on sensible arguments (not "bothering" other staff at the centre). In any case, the picnic ended up happening in the *Arts Combinatòries* room, the space directly related to the activity (as it hosted the exhibition within which it was framed: *How to Do Things with Documents*) and seemed ready to host us without causing any disturbance. The foundation was closed to the public at the time, but if it had been open our activity would not have interfered very much at all with its routine functioning, in terms of either visitors or work." Lluç Mayol²⁹

In fact, opening up the archive did not put an end to either opacity or resistance. When the background becomes the subject, a new, hitherto unseen background is always to be supposed. When a relationship is established, this is inevitably accompanied by exclusion. When a new displacement is generated, it is very easy for this to end up becoming the rule.

It is therefore important to point out that access to the non-representational substrate of art provided by *Arts Combinatòries* and the projects derived from it was not problem-free. It is precisely in this setting that art and its institutions see one another above all as a problem. However, for the same reason, these are the spaces where significant learning can be generated and possible alternatives can begin to develop, both in terms of artistic thought and in relation to the institutions themselves that make this openness possible.

29 Mayol, Lluç., "Obertures controlades en trànsit". Unpublished document related to the Experimentem amb l'ART's project *Fissures institucionals de l'obertura*, 2016