

24 Galleries, a Museum: The Survey as a Design Tool

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During the months of February and March 1974, the seminar “Nuevos comportamientos artísticos” [New Artistic Behaviors] [Fig. 01] took place in Madrid and Barcelona, organized by the German Institutes of both cities with the collaboration of the Italian and British Institutes, the Barcelona Architecture Association, and the exhibition space Sala Vinçon. Held first in Madrid and then in Barcelona under the initiative of the German Cultural Institute of Madrid, one of the most active cultural platforms in Spain¹ in the 1970s, it was curated by Simón Marchán Fiz² and considered by critics to be the most outstanding artistic event since “Encuentros de Pamplona” [The Pamplona Encounters].

A series of practices were exhibited during the two months that the seminar lasted. Linked to art and design, they crossed the thresholds of what was beginning to be known as an “extension of the concept of art”—challenging its very nature and promoting its expansion—while at the same time attempting to reveal and transform the conventional relations between art and the institutions that exhibited it. It proved useful in helping the Spanish audience become familiar with experiences of recent³ tradition in the guest artists’ countries, but almost unheard of in Spain. Aware of the limitations that the Spanish context imposed⁴, both culturally and politically, on the sensitivity and open-mindedness necessary to face conceptual art, curators proposed foreign participation as a catalyst that would open the way for subsequent debates, centered around the artists, the public, and the ‘use’ of emerging conceptual practices in Spain.

The Grup de Treball (GdT) was one of Spain’s recent conceptual practices, around which the collective work of a heterogeneous and multidisciplinary group was mobilized. Taking a critical perspective, they questioned the artistic practice and social function of art. Some of its members had previously collaborated in a more informal way, and had participated⁵ collectively, together with Marchán himself, in Documenta 5 in Kassel, directed by Harald Szeemann⁶. Attuned to the troubled general situation the country was going through in the early seventies, with multiple historical crises, many of the members had become responsive to socio-political-economic issues and were in open confrontation with the art world establishment. “Art to the street” or “art for all” were some of the proclamations under which the group began to manifest itself. It was under these slogans that its members

came together and actively participated in different actions, declarations, and interventions, including their contribution to the seminar “New Artistic Behaviors”, entitled “Encuesta a 24 galerías de arte de Madrid” [Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid].

The survey as a common language

As Valentín Roma⁷ points out, the historiographical account of the conceptual practices of the seventies defines them as an exclusively artistic language, placing other types of productive experiences, such as design and architecture, in incidental or eccentric positions. However, if we analyze the context of the period, it is easy to see how the emergence of conceptual languages took place simultaneously and heterogeneously in different disciplines, albeit with some shared roots.

“It seems difficult to certify that it was only artists who gave shape to a set of collective concerns, while the rest of the creative fields adhered in a subsidiary and delayed manner. [...] The dematerialization of the object, the questioning of the individual role of the artist, the antagonistic and political practices, the methodologies based on the document or the organization on the basis of working papers with members from different disciplines, were not the exclusive heritage of art; on the contrary, I would say that both design and architecture had already used these procedures before”⁸.

In the Spain of the mid-1970s, conceptual languages provided working principles and narratives for various disciplines with a concern for rupture. The workshop, the multidisciplinary exhibition, the encounter, or the exchange of information were not only characteristic working methodologies of the time, but also a reflection of the conditions of an alternative circuit to which artists, architects, designers, playwrights, or musicians indistinctly turned for support in the documents of other disciplines in order to open their consciousness to something outside themselves⁹.

Moved by the desire to contribute more substantially and actively to the construction of a cultural agenda, they shared the will for a closer connection with the spirit of their time. They sought different operating models, introduced new concepts, and began to work with unusual, invented, or borrowed tools. This expanded the space of architectural activity, blurred classical authorship, and moved the architectural project away from the built form as the sole outcome. It facilitated the development of more suitable forms for wide circulation such as: exhibitions, surveys, databases, publications, questionnaires, and research reports, for example.

The survey as a platform for participation

In what could be considered the first draft of the questionnaire for “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid”, entitled “Aims of the Survey” and written in 1973 by another of its members, Carlos Hernández Mor—as part of the work plan that the GdT had

been developing at the German Institute in Barcelona since October 1973—the principles of the group's conceptual practice were stated:

“- The will to carry out a REFLECTION aimed at analyzing artistic practice in general and the process of artistic work, its specificity, and its environment, that is to say, the conditioning factors, connotations, and social implications at different levels of artistic practice and the products that result from it.

- The QUESTIONING and contestation of traditional artistic practice and of the environment in which it is produced and manifested.

- The SOCIAL impact, as opposed to established habits.

- The search for ACTIVE PARTICIPATION in the actions, research, and activities in general of the traditional spectator, in order to remove him/her from ‘voyeurism’.

- The exploration of NEW FIELDS of artistic possibilities through EXPERIMENTATION, with the will not to limit oneself to actions, documentations, and exhibitions but to promote, participate, and intervene, according to selective criteria, in debates, polemics, discussions, and other manifestations that concern the practice”¹⁰.

This roadmap meant the introduction of a new operational model in Spanish art, the “expository-informative” one, under which GdT launched a series of traveling exhibitions under the title: “Informació d’Art”¹¹ [Art Information]. These were collective exhibitions that deployed a program of “services” and disseminated the principles set out by the group, in particular those concerning the social function of art through outreach.

They also represented an advance in exhibition displays that ended up becoming canonical in Spanish conceptual art. With an intentional lack of mastery and the use of easily reproducible media, they were based on generous fully accessible documentation, and an on-site photocopy service, and books, booklets and offset editions for sale. The contributions from the guest artists, the special treatment of the visualization/representation of documents and information, as well as the first multimedia manifestations brought a renewed sense of the exhibition or the art exhibition that focused on “use value”¹² as opposed to its market value. All of this was displayed using a system of “stands”, inherited from trade fairs [Fig. 04], which revealed somewhat ironically their scarcity of means and the character of cultural resistance.

GdT’s “Art Information”, as a variation on the American tautological model, set out a political will to open up the community and the codes of contemporary art to the general public through its exhibition. Their subversive power and political relevance were expressed in very different ways, but they coincided in a common point: the creation of free spaces of thought that would make the production of art and knowledge possible, situated at the same time within and beyond the existing instances of political, social, and economic repression.

The survey as a means of information

Preceded by the “Art Information”, the “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid” consisted in

a 12-question survey sent to a group of art galleries in Madrid, previously chosen for their relationship with contemporary art. This action took place in Madrid on 20th and 21st March 1974. Although it was signed by Grup de Treball, it was Francesc Abad and Dorothee Selz who took the initiative in the selection and collection of the surveys, in close collaboration with Antoni Mercader in the mailing and presentations.

Iolas Velasco, Ingres, Gavar, Buades, Juana Mordó, Ynguanzo, De Luis, Rayuela, Seiquer, Círculo dos, Columela, Frontera, Redor, Biosca, Kreisler dos, Península, Novart, Aelee, Rottenburg, Lienzo, Skira, Vandrés, Sen, and Módena were the 24 galleries that received the questionnaire [Fig. 02].

Exhibited on a stand on the ground floor of the German Institute during the two months of the “New Artistic Behaviors” seminar, the work included a map of Madrid on which red stickers indicated the location of the 24 galleries interviewed, the questionnaires answered, the business cards of the galleries, and a sound recording of the interviews. These show the kind of intentionally open and vague questions used during the two days spent collecting the surveys, such as [Fig. 03]: “Do you agree that the gallery establishes and maintains the value of the work of art?”, “Would you accept that artistic practice is detached from an exchange value?”, “In a context like ours, do you think art is possible without galleries (prices) and without collectors (speculation)?”, “Faced with real transformation, do you think the gallery would make sense?”¹³. In the recordings made during the surveys, we can hear how Francesc Abad and Dorothee Selz themselves open a conversation with the gallery owners about the reasons for some of the questions, clarifying their meaning and inviting them to consider their answers.

As Pilar Parcerisas explains, this action is part of the group’s interest in opening a critical debate on the distribution channels of art, its audience¹⁴ and its often-opaque evaluation mechanisms: “Basically, the ideology of the Grup de Treball consisted of denouncing the romantic and idealistic conception of art, the elitism of its distribution channels [...], the commodification of art, and demanding a critical reading from the spectator”¹⁵.

It is in the second point of the decalogue enunciated by Hernández Mor where he openly points to the “questioning of the environments in which art is produced and manifested”, principally represented by the “White Cube”, the modern exhibition myth popularized by Alfred Barr. In this white, neutralized environment, seemingly suspended outside of time and isolated from the disturbances of the outside world, the Irish artist and critic Brian O’Doherty, identified in his series of essays compiled under the title *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*¹⁶, a veritable device designed by disciplinary power for the normalization and homogenization of completely disparate individuals or entities. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas would add, this restriction was all the more effective for its near invisibility: it is the institution that makes its effects felt, without it being necessary to express them or even to be aware of them¹⁷.

In a context of political repression, such as Spain in the mid-1970s, the essential tactics carried out by conceptual practices for the subversion of these spaces were based on what Jacques Rancière expresses as the reformulation of material and symbolic space, that is:

“to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible that defines the commonality of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to make visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals”¹⁸.

It was in this spirit that the survey format appeared as the most operative way to make visible, i.e., to know and transmit the opinions held by the groups or individuals in the country who practice so-called conceptual art, as well as the critics and individuals who were in some way familiar with these practices. Initially, the aim of the survey was to carry out an analysis aimed at clarifying the various aspects of the practice and theory of conceptual art. The questions and answers would then form a collective text that would, in some way, contribute to this clarification.

As the accumulated accounts of the surveys were subsequently published in the exhibition that accompanied their talk in the “New Artistic Behaviors” seminar, the participants, with “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid”, made a collective self-portrait in a participatory and self-reflexive process. They were invited to consider how much they have in common and how they differ from each other, and to speculate on how, collectively, their business vision and opinions compare with those of their colleagues. The data also offered the seminar’s audience the opportunity to recognize that art is not produced, viewed, and traded in a world apart, but in a continuous social universe that has a concrete presence in the city.

With this event, GdT had a double purpose: to acquire information from a specific group (the gallery owners) and to invite both the respondents and art spectators to participate consciously and implicitly—to take a stance—in questions related to artistic phenomena as social phenomena. The medium used is no longer just the survey, but the specific human group—almost always very specific: the gallery owners—carrying out a specific activity: answering a survey. Thus, new information is obtained—a new knowledge—on which to reflect, and which can be transmitted, in an attempt to raise awareness that transforms the individual activity of each exhibition space into a collective driving force for dissemination.

The survey as a form of resistance

According to Tony Bennet¹⁹, in his book *The Birth of the Museum*, “the new conception of the museum as an instrument of public instruction conceived it as an exemplary space in which the rough and raucous might learn to civilize themselves by modelling their conduct on the middle-class codes of behavior to which museum attendance would expose them”. The museum had, in its Enlightenment origins, of course, always been an exemplary, constituent space. This was, at least, the

theory. In practice, museums, and especially art galleries, have traditionally been the object of effective appropriation by social elites, so that instead of functioning as institutions of homogenization, as reformist thought had envisaged, they have continued to play an important role in differentiating the elite from the popular social classes.

“Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid” subverts this dynamic in an attempt to expose the cracks in these institutions’ aura of exemplarity. Through the exhibition of the results of its survey, GdT exploits the problematic nature of these galleries, which by attempting to normalize and homogenize the subjects, reveal the differences that end up shaping spaces characterized by the juxtaposition and simultaneity of incommensurable logics, generating an unsuspected potential for resistance to the norm that they try to impose²⁰.

The process becomes a task of reformulating the galleries surveyed into ‘other-spaces’²¹, as defined by Foucault, which are optimal for the practice of freedom in the reactionary immobility of the late Franco’s regime²². Places that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.

Thus “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid” embodies what Isabelle Doucet defines as a ‘counter-project’²³, referring to the tools of resistance originating within the activism of the 1970s, which criticized an existing proposal or situation by offering alternatives. The ‘counter-project’ of the survey exhibition is an intentional way of visualizing the problematic aspects of these spaces for art trade—located mainly in the higher income neighborhoods of the city of Madrid—at a time when, as Francisco Calvo Serraller points out, there is a total lack of information on the subject in Spanish society²⁴. The aim of the action is to create a useful space for dialogue that goes beyond an act of protest and involves citizens in imagining the potential of their city.

The survey as a concept

The information derived from the answers, imprinted onto the plan of the city, illustrates an alternative scenario. It is an intellectual construct of the relationship between a real environment (the city of Madrid) and a conceptual one (the network of galleries as red dots) [Fig. 05] whose main interest is the activity of the underlying level of formal relations which, however subconscious, are present. These relations exist in what Peter Eisenman calls the deep structure, that is, the capacity of a certain deployment of form and space to suggest a level of formal information that cannot be understood from a marking of the actual geometry alone but rather is derived both from the implications, which are spatially inherent in the actual geometry, and from the capacity of the individual in space to receive this information.

This deep structure cannot model the nature of architectural space itself since in architecture all experience of space is real and our relationship to it is initially real. Now, if we understand that

“all physical reality has inherent in it a capacity for an opposite or virtual state”²⁵, because of the capacity of certain spatial relationships to present a potential continuum from actual to virtual, then somehow, we must be able to take this factor into account as a generator of an architectural space. It is precisely because the individual has the capacity not only to perceive and walk through the space but to conceive that space through all the information received. Thus, the articulation of this heterogeneous and fragmentary network of exhibition spaces is presented as a museum of dispersed galleries, a “conceptual architecture” that shows a possible alternative but does not aspire to materialize as a way of safeguarding its political credibility.

The “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid” is thus a demonstration of the tension between political action and its aesthetic-conceptual articulation. Provocative and propositional, it was not just an artistic gesture but a design project critical with the processes of commodification of art and the elitism of those agents involved. The result is a “museum that is an interrogation”²⁶. A concept in direct opposition to the modern idea of an institution that promulgates through its architecture the notion of the specificity of its collection, in halls connected and organized in an obvious and apparent sequentiality, unfolding along their path the canonical and temporal construct we have come to know as the history of art. The project “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid” leads us, however, to consider a museum as a conceptual device that allows us to free the works of art from time—as a linear chronological sequence—and from their place in the whole, making it possible for every individual to participate in the writing of the shared fiction that we call Art.

1. Rocío Robles. “El Instituto Alemán, espacio de excepción en el último decenio del franquismo”. *Desacuerdos. Sobre arte, políticas y esfera pública en el Estado español*, nº 8 (2014), 46–81.
2. Simón Marchán had been Professor of Aesthetics and Composition at the E.T.S. of Architecture, Polytechnic University of Madrid between 1971 and 1972. Invited by the School Director and Professor Víctor D’Ors, who followed the initiative taken by Oriol Bohigas in Barcelona to incorporate philosophers at the architecture schools. At the end of the course, he was expelled from the Faculty together with his colleague from the teaching staff, the philosopher Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, for having, in his own words, “consented in class to a kind of erotic-political happening, offensive to the Head of State; also, for being suspected of maneuvering in the darkness, real or imaginary, of subversion in some clandestine party”. He was reinstated to the same school in 1976 as Assistant Professor of Aesthetics and Composition.
3. See, for example: Lucy Lippard. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), pp. 14, 21, 33, 37, 105, 171–2, 186–7, 192, 219, 225, 228.
4. For a more extensive description of the repression during the Franco regime see: Rafael Abella. *La vida cotidiana en España bajo el régimen de Franco* (Barcelona: Arcos Vergara, 1985); Josep Fontana. *Spain under Franco* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1986).
5. A group made up of Muntadas, Abad, Benito, and Llimós, together with Simón Marchán, took part unofficially in Documenta 5 in Kassel. There, they devised different ways of measuring a field of grass in front of the Fridericianum. Llimós walking, Benito with his body, looking, Abad, programming the transformation of the space of action, Muntadas setting in motion what he called subsenses and communicating with the grass by touching, smelling, and eating it.

6. Simón Marchán is considered today one of the members of the Grup de Treball.
7. Valentín Roma. “Conceptual Art, Design and Architecture”, *Temas de disseny*, nº 27 (2011): 13.
8. Ibid. 15.
9. Simón Marchán. *Del arte objetual al arte de concepto* (Madrid: Akal, 1986), 252.
10. Grup de Treball. “Propósitos de la Encuesta” by Carlos Hernández Mor. 1974. Series “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid”, March 1974. Section 1974. Grup de Treball Fund. Sig. A.GTR.0161. MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium. Donated by Grup de Treball. Barcelona.
11. It began in one of the most celebrated events of the Catalan collective, “Informació d’Art Concepte”, in Banyoles, between February and March 1973. Subsequently, two more “Informació d’Art” were held, one in Tarragona in November 1973 and one in Terrasa in December 1973. The introductory text to the catalogue, divided into three parts (avant-garde and communication, artist and work, artistic trends in the sector), would be the basis for discussion of the paper that the GdT prepared for the course at the German Institute of Culture. It was finally entitled “Art i Context” and was presented at the “New Artistic Behaviors” seminar. The work that the collective carried out in parallel was “Survey of 24 Art Galleries in Madrid”, carried out personally by Abad and Selz with A. Mercader.
11. Grup de Treball. “Arte y uso”. Paper presented at the “New Artistic Behaviors” seminar, by Olga L. Pijuan, Lluís Utrilla, Carlos Pazos, and Manuel Trallero”. 1973. In “Documentos sobre arte conceptual”, 1973–1974: Instituto Alemán de Barcelona. Text in Spanish. BIB BIBLIOTECA MNCARS NORMAL DEPÓSITO NORMAL Arch. M/Q C032 175936 CDB. 195943 MNCARS. Marchán / Quevedo Archive. Library and Documentation Centre of the Reina Sofia Museum. Madrid.
12. Grup de Treball, *Encuesta a 24 galerías de arte de Madrid*, 1974.
13. The geographical locations, concentrated in a couple of central neighborhoods, gives an indication as to the position of the art market within the city’s social spectrum.
14. Antoni Mercader, Pilar Parcerisas, and Valentín Roma. *Grup de Treball* (Barcelona: MACBA, 1999).
15. Brian O’Doherty. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1986).
16. Mary Douglas. *How Institutions Think* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1986).
17. Jacques Rancière. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 24–25.
18. Tony Bennet. *Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. (London: Routledge, 1995), 27.
20. Jorge León and Julia Urabayan. “Heterotopia and Capitalism in Architecture: The Ideological Function of Heterotopias as Own Discourse of the Architectural Discipline in the Age of Biopolitical Governance”. *Arbor*, vol. 193, nº 784, (April–June 2017): 4.
21. Michel Foucault. “Des espaces autres”, Conference at the Cercle des études architecturales (CEA), 14 March 1967, published in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no. 5 (October 1984).
22. José P. Lorente. “Los nuevos museos de arte moderno y contemporáneo bajo el franquismo”. *Artígrama*, nº 13 (1998): 313.
23. Isabelle Doucet. “Aesthetics between Provocation and Production: Counter-Projects”. *Oase Journal for Architecture*, #97, (2016): 91–97.
24. Francisco Calvo Serraller. “La política oficial y el arte contemporáneo entre 1980 y 1995” in *Mercado del Arte y Coleccionismo en España (1980–1995)*. (Cuadernos ICO: Madrid, 1996), 69.
25. Peter Eisenman. “Notes on Conceptual Architecture II A”. *Environmental Design Research Association*, vol. 2, (1973): 323.
26. André Malraux. *The Imaginary Museum* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2017), 139.

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