

## **Round off your points, please**

María Mur Dean

We at consonni were recently phoned by a company that had been employed by a public institution to do some research on the cultural fabric. Were we involved in dance and theatre, they wanted to know. I replied that we were not and I explained to them the nature of consonni's work as an art producer and the productions it has been involved in. It was not long before they called me again. They were puzzled and had no idea how they should fill in their little boxes with my replies. Patiently I tried to be more precise. That afternoon, we got another call from them because their questionnaires did not include the option of 'art producer' and could they put us down instead as a gallery. Once again I told them no, that in that case they should put us in the category of 'others'. A few hours later, they called me again to say that according to their questionnaire, we could not be entered under the heading of 'art' if we did not work in the fields of painting, sculpture, photography or video, and were we sure that we did not mount dance performances. In my mind's eye, I could see the woman asking me questions sitting there, bemused by one of those classic toys where you have to put the right shaped piece into the right hole, trying as hard as she could to put a star into a round opening and asking us, given her difficulties, whether we might not be able to get rid of our points and round ourselves off to make ourselves fit.

## **Immaterial production**

The concept of the producer who operates as a mediating agent in an unstructured art system barely exists. Paradoxically, however, 'production' is becoming increasingly important in art, though not always in the intangible sense that consonni espouses and rarely as a praxis and a subject of reflection at the same time. consonni sees immaterial production as a process of communication between the consonni team itself, with artists, society, the local context and the world of art, and even as a lack of communication and deliberate silence, etc. Artistic practice shows that there is a need for someone to take on the task of production to ensure that it does not become the sole responsibility of artists who are insufficiently remunerated or of institutions that have no interest in immaterial processes and whose efforts are instead directed towards displaying and promoting the results that fill their vast expanses of white wall.

consonni invited the artists Iratxe Jaio and Klaas van Gorkum to work in collaboration with us in a joint venture in Barakaldo, since there was the possibility of arriving at a co-operation accord with the various cultural bodies there. Barakaldo has been severely affected by the

decline in industry in the province of Biscay and by its own transformation into a services hub now that IKEA, Decathlon, Mediamarkt and others have moved in, making it a fascinating location for reflecting on the consumer society. consonni presented this situation to the artists as the starting point for their proposal, for which there was no preconceived format. Jaio and van Gorkum decided to use the metaphor of the zombie, taking as their reference George Romero's film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). The art project began as an open process of sharing ideas and rationales and developed into "Stay close windows and doors". Launched in 2007 and continuing until 2009, this collaborative initiative between consonni and the artists has given rise to a number of events and products: specialist seminars on the subject, a march of the zombies and this publication.

### **Every project has a place of its own**

Initially associated with a disused factory on the Zorrozaurre peninsula in Bilbao, from which it took its name, consonni moved two years after its launch in 1997 from the premises that had given it a high profile to a small office from where it now directs its work. By leaving its original premises, consonni did away with the imperative for each project to culminate in an art object. In addition, each project can now be situated in a space appropriate to it. The art critic Peio Aguirre records in his blog<sup>1</sup> that the space is not a homogeneous construction but a battleground, a physical, mental and social configuration. As a result, each space presupposes and requires negotiations, knowledge and translations. In reference to artists who lack an interest in learning about the context, the anthropologist Octavi Rofes talks of parachutists<sup>2</sup> and states that works that fall "with parachutes" from the sky without any feedback from the place that is to receive them use a language of the world of art.

Translators capable of interpreting these 'languages of art' and the 'local languages' are extremely important if we are to avoid falling into the trap of exploiting the city, above all if we understand it as a social structure rather than as an architecture of representation. In Barakaldo, the role of the cultural bodies was essential as they took on the role of translators and explained our intention to arrange a zombie march around the city to the municipal authorities and citizens. With their help, we organised presentations and involved schools, youth associations, carnival groups, theatre and recreational groups, the BAI (Barakaldo drama school), etc. On the day of the march itself, the second-hand clothing supplied by the

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<sup>1</sup> See Peio Aguirre, <http://peioaguirre.blogspot.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Octavi Rofes, ¿Qué tiene de público el arte público?, in the catalogue *Identitat Arte, Experiencias y territorios en proceso*, Identitat Associació d'Art Contemporari Calaf / Manresa, 2007.

Berohi co-operative and the work of the make-up artists from the Gregorio Marañón de Llodio Institute added to the zombie atmosphere.

It is essential to work with a diverse range of professionals and to allow the communicative action to shape the content and format of the art project. In view of this, we contacted the organisers of the zombie march in Madrid, Sephiroth and Gorka Arranz, as well as the philosopher Jaime Cuenca Amigo, the film critic Jordi Costa and the artist Laurence Rassel, then running the Belgian collective Constant, and invited them to participate in specialist seminars that raised public awareness of their particular reflections. The aim of these seminars was to explore and discuss the use of the zombie in the construction of numerous metaphors of society. This publication includes essays by those who attended the seminars. In addition, it features experiences, reflections, anecdotes and examples taken from other contributions to the subject, films, books, websites and even songs, which are presented as extracts that complement the project's somewhat unstructured and fragmented idea of research.

### **Initiatives in the public space**

In its search for appropriate venues, consonni mounts initiatives in what has come to be known as the public space. We could, then, talk of 'public art', an ugly concept that has been the cause of so much confusion. Sometimes this term refers to a management and financing model, but it is also occasionally used from a more urban perspective to describe a spatial category and so explains where certain actions are located. Peio Aguirre says that the concept conveys the idea that 'something' is happening in an open space and notes that many advocates of public art descend into populism and demagogy when they talk of "bringing art out onto the street". Aguirre also comments on the need to rethink the public and the private domains (in both the management and spatial sense) as closed categories and calls for more hybrid situations that would give rise to more flexible concepts such as the semi-private and the semi-public. Ramón Parramón,<sup>3</sup> the director of the artistic event *Idensitat*, which explores new forms of involvement and interaction in the social space through art, declares that artistic practices in the public space can take on a wide range of forms with different objectives, from vast monuments to ephemeral actions.

Decorative ornaments—or what Manuel Delgado<sup>4</sup> has termed the adoption by urban policies of art as pure make-up used for the purpose of self-glorification by the authorities that

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<sup>3</sup> Ramón Parramón, "No Public Art", in the special issue of *EXITBOOK* on public art.

<sup>4</sup> Manuel Delgado, "la obra de arte como signo de puntuación y señal de tráfico", in the special issue of *EXITBOOK* on public art.

awarded the commission or as a means to mask structural failings—have founded Culture as the new state religion. However, this exploitation of culture can be signified not only through monumental objects but also by ephemeral actions. The philosopher Amador Fernández Savater<sup>5</sup> says that the new cultural system has been imposed on us under a regime of “capitalism of the spirit” that no longer sells products so much as experiences, lifestyles, ambiences, emotions and desires, etc. consonni is a small private management organisation that does not provide services. While this may mean that its continuing existence is at times uncertain, consonni does as a result have the freedom to control the conceptual development of the project hand in hand with the artists. Working together, consonni and the artists remain in charge of each of the stages involved and even the way in which the initiative is publicised, an essential aspect if it is to avoid becoming a municipal propaganda tool. As a result of the mixed public and private, local and international financing that consonni has managed to raise, the project has not been completely financed by the city council. The active role played, for example, by the Arteleku art centre (run by Guipúzcoa Provincial Council) and the financial support it has provided have been crucial to the development of the project and have made it possible to pay the artists’ fees agreed over the course of the process and to mount all the proposed events and activities.

At the same time, working with a municipality on the ‘periphery’ has proved to be a very interesting formula for consonni since the involvement with the inhabited environment is greater than is the case in a large city such as Bilbao. Having the support of cultural centres also put consonni in a better position in negotiations with organisations such as Megapark, which were initially hesitant about granting us permission to enter their immediate surroundings. In this respect, it should also be noted that the avenue occupied by the shopping centres is ‘public space’ and hence they do not have the power to grant or refuse permission to use it. Once again, the boundaries between what we understand to be the public and private space are blurred.

### **Fictions as social research**

The architect Josep María Montaner<sup>6</sup> says that the artist of the early 21st century has become a social pedagogue and a technician, to which I would add that he also uses the language and tools of art. Montaner also states that creation is not a specific work but that it can be a multidisciplinary project that seeks to actively involve citizens, thus overturning the notion of the passive public. Even though the formats in themselves are not innocuous, their starting

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<sup>5</sup> Amador Fernández Savater, “La noche en vela” in *El Público* newspaper.

<sup>6</sup> Josep María Montaner, “Más Idensitat”, in the catalogue *Idensitat Arte, Experiencias y territorios en proceso*, Idensitat Associació d’Art Contemporari Calaf / Manresa, 2007.

point, their objectives and the person or organisation behind them have an impact on their possible significations. The zombie march organised by Rebelact, the Dutch collective of activist clowns, which expressed an uncompromising critique of consumption, was very different to the one arranged in Madrid by the make-up company LKM as a tribute to zombie films, or to the *Eastpak zombiwalk*—named after its sponsor—mounted as part of the Sitges Film Festival. By using the specific nature of art, Jaio and van Gorkum have set out to extract every possibility from these fictions of social metaphors and have been able to explore each of these possibilities without giving rise to sniping value judgements. They have conducted empirical research into the potential uses of the figure of the zombie which, even though it might at first sight seem facile, frivolous and even controversial due to the violent and bloody image recreated, has proved to be extremely complex and useful as a way to discuss the masses, consumerism, dystopia, alienating practices, distorted images of the exemplary citizen, etc. The artists examine the examples of Barakaldo and Utrecht, two places that are very different in character yet comparable as case studies. This dual focus came about as the artists participated in a residency in the *In Overvecht* art programme while they were working on the project, giving them the opportunity to add other elements to their explorations.

Directing the march of the zombies through the out-of-town shopping magnet of Megapark was in this respect fundamental. This retail mecca covers 137,000 m<sup>2</sup>, making it the largest commercial centre in northern Spain. Sending a zombie march through this terrain was no trifling matter. We encouraged people from a wide range of backgrounds to participate in it and endeavoured to ensure that the motivations were diverse and that the event contained an essential element of fun. The artists insisted that we organisers (the cultural centres, the artists themselves and the consonni team) should dress up as zombies like all the other participants who turned up. Jaio and van Gorkum pay very close attention to these details which, though seemingly straightforward, also add ideologically to the project. We marched as zombies, an event that was part performance, part street theatre, and presented a particular interpretation and critique of the drift that has turned ‘playtime’ increasingly into passive consumption time. As Francesco Careri<sup>7</sup> observes in his publication *Walkscapes. El andar como práctica estética*, the Situationists saw psychogeographical wanderings as a playful way of reclaiming the territory. The city as a game that can be used as much as you desire; a space in which we can live together; a space where we can experiment with and experience alternative behaviours; a space where we can waste useful time and turn it into fun and constructive time. A place where we can slobber and drool, groan and drag ourselves about without fear or trepidation, with no concern for our day-to-day cares; a place where we can

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<sup>7</sup> Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes. El andar como práctica estética*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, SI, Barcelona 2002.

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produce a distorted image of ourselves through an act of collective catharsis far more effective than any session on the psychoanalyst's couch.