

Zehar/documenta magazines 12

Last year while I was preparing a piece concerning publication of art magazines with my partner Carme Ortiz, a number of events, which symptomatically influenced the tone of many discussions we had, took place.

Among others there were two events we believed to be central in the current situation of the industry. One of them involves an indicative *presence*: Documenta 12 magazine initiative. The project created a decentralised publishing tool allowing associated content production and distribution. Combining publishing technology, knowledge and practice, its is a sign of the changes seen in recent years in the world of publishing magazines on contemporary art and culture. We thought there was an idealistic approach and we are wondering about how we might establish a collaborative work between editors. Behind this question there is an attitude that inspires a common “cultural tactic” in the construction of discourses, taking into account the multiple viewpoint and the complexities of an open, democratic society, in which, rather than models to be followed, there are tensions and conflicts that need to be discussed, faced and made visible in order to advance through an understanding of difference, rather than the need to build new rules.

The other event was more an significant absence: the announcement that the emblematic magazine *Parachute*¹ was to cease publication. The closure reflects the difficult situation faced by Quebecois cultural organisations, although in an open letter to readers, the editor, Chantal Pontbriand,² argued that it was time to take new roads, “I do not wish to stop, being convinced of the need for the magazine”. According to its editor, the decision was forced on them by a lack of the public financial support it needed to maintain the publishing

¹ The magazine was created in 1974 and throughout its career won recognition among the international artistic community. In 2000, the management decided to change the format and sales increased. However, spending cutbacks made it impossible to maintain Parachute's quality and stability. The management finally announced that their attempts to keep the magazine in circulation had been unsuccessful and they were forced to close it down. Like Zehar, Parachute was one of eighty international publications in the Documenta 12 magazines project.

² Chantal Pontbriand participated in the magazine forum “Think publication”, the conclusions of which were published in Zehar 47 & 48.

structure. Is this symptomatic of the negative effects of “the society of the spectacle” policies, which abandon the most independent sectors of cultural production? Or is it just another sign of the structural weakness of magazine publication?

It would take a more extensive study to analyse the first of these questions in any depth. Instead, I will call on our intellectual relationship with *Parachute* to examine the Canadian magazine’s conceptual position. In doing so, we will briefly describe the reflections of Chantal Pontbriand, *Parachute*’s editor, had on our work.

During 2001 and 2002 I worked with Mar Villaespesa and Carme Ortiz on the “Thinking about publishing” workshop, which culminated with the presentation of a preliminary publishing project. One of the many activities, we organised during that period, was a magazines forum, coordinated by *Zehar* and published in the double 47/48 issue. *Parachute* was one of the magazines invited to the forum and its editor’s contribution It made us realise that we need to make a preliminary assessment of the publishing of art magazines in the Spanish panorama. In other words, we need to make a Benjaminian enquiry of the past, as Chantal Pontbriand³ put it, talking about understanding the origins and transformations in *Parachute*.⁴

With regard to the second question, on the uncertain life of magazines, about which we have also spoken on previous occasions, we have again decided to choose two examples taken from the editorials of international magazines.

³PONTBRIAND, C. “Parachute” in *Zehar*, Arteleku Magazine, 47/48, San Sebastián: Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, 2002

⁴ “In a world where so many disasters occur so frequently, affecting the history and memory of individuals and peoples, history and memory are becoming a worldwide obsession, a question which is being addressed by fascinating writers and artists whose work plays with history and memory. Plays? Shocking as it may seem, playfulness is a necessary attitude when dealing with a step outside of conventions, outside of prescribed conceptions and knowledge. Playfulness, invention, working out ideas and different points of view, are important steps in preventing us from getting stuck with the weight of history or memory, while developing analytical modes in thought and art that enable us to cut paths through the present which spring from our understanding of the past and project us into the future. This is an idea close to Walter Benjamin’s Theses on the Philosophy of History, where he says: history is the tiger’s leap into the future”.

In the summer of 2000, Kurt Hollander, editor of *Poliester*, explained why the Mexico City-based magazine was closing down after 27 issues. Unlike many of the artists it presented, he says, *Poliester* never entirely managed to make the leap to commercial success. The magazine's success can be calibrated by its failures: it failed to attract advertising or sponsorship, it failed to associate itself with those who make and break careers in the art world, it failed to be fashionable. "By remaining somewhat outside [...] good taste, *Poliester* has been able to contribute something fresh, something critical, to art appreciation [...] We are no longer interested in making a career in art, and for some reason we are more interested in the real world than in an art world in the hands of the experts, "insiders" and initiates.... "These two examples and others clearly show that there are many and diverse reasons for the closure of a publication, and that to understand better the true reasons for a closure, we need to analyse the social and cultural context in which the publication arose, and recognise the work of the agents who managed, promoted and closed them.

In both cases, the editors as experts in publishing, encourage us to think about the publishing scene today and ask ourselves again: what has changed in the way we publish? How are contents produced and distributed?

We have already known the ease with which we have adapted to the speed imposed by the dissemination of information. However, these changes are not affecting transformations in the areas of production and distribution in the same way. Although some libraries, such as the "La Caixa" media library in Barcelona, have understood that the information revolution involves creating platforms that combine production, dissemination and distribution of contents, and others, such as the Arteleku Documentation Centre and Zehar, are working to achieve this goal, content dissemination is still seen as a one-directional production flow in the Spanish publishing scene (and particularly in magazine publication). New ways of working, producing and disseminating are looming on the horizon. Indeed, electronic textuality raises some basic questions on the function of text and publishing: who owns the authorship? One or several

authors and the readers? How do we classify a moving, changing text? How do we establish copyright? There are many questions that need to be asked in this new setting, in which publishing projects and proposals developed from local contexts are stored in the “Global Village”.

As we have already know, the very evolution of the Internet dashed initial hopes that the medium would become a public network. However, this did not prevent the emergence of alternative proposals containing the seed of transformation. Although it is still impossible to tell where this debate and these practices will take us, we should not ignore the importance they are having at both a theoretical and a practical level, and the mutation of artistic methodologies and processes that has been made possible by collaboration between computer specialists, cultural agents, artists and lawyers. Speaking about this transformation, Nicolas Malevé⁵ remarked “the world of culture and art has begun to adapt legal ideas and tools to its own practices”. This artistic/legal/ideological/economic evolution is reminiscent of the panoptic notion that characterised the surveillance systems Foucault analysed, and leads us to conclude that control has become very sophisticated, along the lines of Donna Haraway’s “informatics of domination”.

However, these changes are not only affecting the production and distribution of contents – the latter under the effects of copyright and copyleft - but also the way they are stored. The technological development of the Internet has helped promote an archive culture. Once again, technology has given tangible form to ideas and notions previously analysed by different authors. Remember Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* and his idea that creation, participation and access to the interpretation and constitution of the archive enabled effective democracy. However, aside from any ideological reflection on the possibility of free access to the archive, enabling different approaches and interpretations, and in short, strengthening the critical capacity of intervention in an era of e-culture (the subject of numerous interesting articles), the notion of the archive enables us to view the publishing project as a great digital container

⁵MALEVÉ, N. *Les nouveaux habits de la copie*.
http://www.constantvzw.com/downloads/nouveaux_habits.pdf

and paper magazines as vehicles for selective dissemination of information - in short, to see that even today pixel and paper are complementary and related elements.

Internet has changed our whole approach to publishing. It is no longer just a place for looking up information, but for producing and disseminating it, as the boom in blogs and wikis under the Creative Commons effect proves. Contents, practice and technology all overlap, interrelating some of the questions we have tried to analyse in that article: the review of models and practices of publishing in the Internet era and free distribution of knowledge in the Post-Fordist era. Interviews, films, texts, photographs gradually make up the working processes and form the archive culture. This culture is based on the re-making and re-mixing that characterises the music (the samplerism) but also visual arts. Those archives that question memory while at the same time reactivating it. Some changes are already visible, others will be more unexpected.

The edition of Zehar encourage us to think about changes that digital technology is causing regarding the creation and distribution of information. In this respect, changes not only affect working processes but also the main functional role of the publisher: the mediation between authors and readers. Although it is true that progressive technological changes in text and image reproduction have not eliminated previous reproduction systems, what has changes is the manner in which we work with information. We have to consider the characteristic of the work of the publisher/editor: connecting people with the “information system” should be rethought given that the canals of dissemination have diversified, and anybody (in the West, at least) can access them. We can no longer think that the main function of the publisher is solely to serve as a bridge between society and the system of thinking. Thus, it would seem necessary for us to rethink the editorial words of welcome written in Zehar in 1987: “Zehar bases itself on its name, itself – “through” or “by means of” – in order to define the purpose of being an agile intermediary between the place/institution of creation – which is Arteleku – and a society evermore alert to the development of contemporary art”.

In this respect, and influenced by educational practices developed at Arteleku, we believe that the work of publishing has to be contaminated by artistic practice. That is to say, converting also the publishing process into artistic practice or, in other words, uniting the theoretical discourse with praxis. Thus, this transfer had already occurred in other spheres such as the curatorial, but we should be thinking about it taking into account the very specificities of publishing, features that can be summed up in four general activities: research, promote, inform and disseminate.

When we were considering this change, the *Documenta 12 magazines* invitation to participate in a publishing initiative arrived. Being aware of the importance that education is having in contemporary societies and basing ourselves on the educational experience of Arteleku, we have taken the opportunity of the *Documenta 12 magazines* invitation to organise a debate on educational experience and practice as it is today. We have called this editorial experience, “The Open School”.

“The Open School” indicates the intention of creating a platform that initially had taken a printed form but later took other formats. On the other hand, it opens the magazine to all those who, over these past years, have direct relation with education. We believe that knowing about other experiences and other opinions will help us transform our publishing work. As regards the formats, Zehar’s “The Open School” has a first version on paper in which each collaborator will transmit their educational practice with the aim of their experiences, whether individual or collective, may be of use to create/instigate other, new ones, and a second version in Internet in which a common goal are organized. The debate on Internet attempts to encourage a common and active learning process, we hope will have a multiplier effect.

In the process of organizing “The Open School” we realized that the learning process we are interested in promoting is based on the idea of “*école mutuelle*”, an educational project based on collaboration between different entities and on mutual help. The debate was organized through three questions which were sent to all participants. In this respect, many contributions were in

tune with each other and, despite the fact that they are from different geographical contexts. They coincide in understanding education as a collective experience. Although we initially thought that questions “would limit the debate topics”, we had noted that the position spoken from (art historian, teacher, artist or curator), as well as the discipline and experience spoken from (architect, visual artist, teacher, musician, philosopher) conditioned the responses and the focus on these.

Some contributors have taken on the role of analysts of their context and have pointed to the conflicts within and the problems of educational structures or to those inherited from previous situations. Perhaps the theme that has made us aware of the importance today of rethinking education is that which authors have underlined - that the capitalist system is converting not only the artistic or musical product into an object of consumption, but also educational practice. Other contributors, on the other hand, have underpinned methodologies and have aligned themselves with cultural studies or with situated practices. Also notable is the degree of optimism of certain contributors when analyzing the influence of technological tools and their possibilities for social transformation. But, as we work from a small and flexible structure, what perhaps has influenced us most is what we have learnt from artists or ex-artists, who comprehend that the function of transmission of knowledge is based on the union between artistic praxis and educational practice.

As the contributions have been written from different geographical points, this fact has been determinant in the presentation of possibilities and the necessities of education today. Tony Chacar from Beirut alludes to fragmentation and approaches the function of teaching in art with skepticism. Anna Barseghian from Yerevan writes about education in a utopian tone, in line with a country undergoing transition and looking for a new identity. From the countries of Old Europe and the USA various contributors believe that capitalism has instrumentalised art and education, which is why they are calling for artistic and cultural production as a field of resistance. From the Spanish State the majority of responses are based on individual experiences, typical of a university educational system with great lacunas and with symptoms of

destructurisation still evident. Nevertheless, these experiences and the lessons drawn therefrom also hold the seeds for transformation. From the French State, with the change in the Statutes of the Art Schools, Francisco Ruiz de Infante underlines the need to work from the perspective of multidisciplinary training, in contrast to the super specialization of Bologna's proposal.

All contributors, whether in skeptical or realist mode, share the idea that education and practice in art enables a culturally healthier society, although they underline that nowadays these are socially devalued while being economically instrumentalised. We have provided here the salient points from the various contributions and we invite you to read them in their entirety and to take part in the online Forum we are having at Documenta's webpage. Your ideas and your praxis added to those we already have will provide a new educational experience.

We decided to open the online Forum that is launched at <http://magazines-forum.documenta.de/> with an editorial from Irit Rogoff. We asked her to read through the latest issue of Zehar "The Open School" and try to put the contents of this issue together. In her words, "Syncretism as a tool and method of pedagogy, implicated rather than empathic or identified viewers and the collectivities of shared experience, are some of the many concepts that are gathered within this issue ...The experience of reading through it is extremely heartening, for while most of us have never met, although we work in different countries and environments, belong to different generations, have divergent practices that range from art and architectural practices, through music, filmmaking, curating, community organisation and institutional pedagogy, we are nevertheless clearly subjects of our time"

She wanted to give to the audience some new questions from which to start provoking new reactions and thoughts around the educational experience in the arts. She put this on the table: *I was wondering about how you thought we inhabit the cultural sphere we have been writing about ?*

Answers and reactions to this question and to the editorial text as a whole are typically embodied in another questions:

How can we continue to practice -and the many others who contributed to the Zehar issue on the Open School, with generosity, creativity and mutuality and not have these values expropriated (taken) from us? **Neil Critical Practice**

Why go to the Documenta at all? To meet some friends maybe, to network - which is facilitated by being physically present at one of the bigger nodes of the sphere of art. **Robin_critical pracrice**

Well, I wonder if you could suggest how this emancipatory potential, might actually be realised? **Neil Critical Practice**

But how to institute and resources these practices - forged in cooperation, gift economies, generosity, etc ? **Neil Critical Practice**

Could we perhaps open up the discussion even further and consider how we envisage creativity being manifested in an idealised future? Will institutions like Documenta and neoliberal museums continue to exist? What will be the alternatives? What will creativity look like and where will it be found? How will creative practitioners support themselves? What kind of action is appropriate at this stage in order to realise this idealised future? **Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt**

*Consequently, our peer-to-peer network of creative critical practice feels (to me at least) fragile -how can you nurture or guarantee generosity? We are hosts of an Institution, and yet don't wish to completely 'belong'. But perhaps this **is** how we inhabit the current cultural sphere.....* **Neil Critical Practice**

Between these questions, there is a continuous necessity to put experiences around concepts together, to think concept with another contents.

That is the case of the “cultural sphere” and the concept of creativity: as Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt writes:

... since this term encompasses institutions which we have decided have little or no relevance to our definitions of culture (including those immersed in the futile and disempowering Research Assessment Exercise) – perhaps it is more accurate to speak about creativity, with the emancipatory potential this implies. For me, creativity is manifested in everyday research, writing, dialogue and the sharing of information; it may be triggered by experiences in the public realm, through conversations and travel, in cinemas, at literature and music festivals and sometimes even in visual art environments; it need not be funded by the insidious outposts of the art world that rely on market logic. Creativity belongs to us and need not become institutional property; the beauty of creative thought is that it is not limited to those who are aware of Documenta and its progeny. It is through the acknowledgement and deployment of this potential that

*‘the new subjectivities that are the politics-to come’
will arise – an increasingly urgent task.*

The topic of funding is one of the issues at stake. Neil is replying to RGN: *Your last post returns to Robin's initial response, and a call to 'tell the truth' about the financial resourcing of creative or educational experiments.*

And that is as far as we have gone in our Forum. The Forum is open for you. Would you like make any new questions? Would you like to enter another topic? What is to be done?