

Poetics of Opposition in Contemporary Spain

HISPANIC URBAN STUDIES

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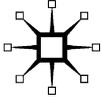
Toward an Urban Cultural Studies: Henri Lefebvre and the Humanities
Benjamin Fraser

Poetics of Opposition in Contemporary Spain: Politics and the Work of Urban Culture
Jonathan Snyder

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Contemporary Spain
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Urban Culture

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For Miguel

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Preface

After tugging at the wrists of his gloves, the artist opened an envelope of graphite filings, scooping them in spoonfuls onto an oversized sheet of white paper. He then suspended the material above a record player; on its turntable rotating at slow speed was a magnet and positioned next to it, an electric amplifier. Although he could hardly be seen over the crowd standing in the dark warehouse, the image of this apparatus, captured on closed-circuit video, was projected on the wall where it would remain for the next three hours. When the bassist plucked a chord the filings scattered around the paper, some standing on end as they drew wobbly, jagged patterns in circles. The band would play intermittently, amid screenings and other distractions to be discovered around the warehouse—projected slides of landscape photography in muted colors, videos of everyday objects presented as *trompe l'oeil*, a painted display of pop icons glowing under ultraviolet light, and so on. Occasionally, the digital silhouette of a monumental pack of elk would race around the perimeter of the wall where it met the ceiling and at other times, a flock of ravens. This warehouse was one of the many vast spaces in Madrid's former slaughterhouse El Matadero, renovated in 2007 to become the capital's largest cultural center, something of a small city housing several exhibition spaces, theaters, an auditorium, a cinema, a library, and a media center, among others.

The public invitation to this one-time event announced “No hay banda” citing the master of ceremonies from the unusual stage show in David Lynch's film *Mulholland Drive*. Curated by Abel H. Pozuelo for some ten participating artists and musicians, *No hay banda* promised “un experimento en el tiempo” [an experiment in time] in an announcement that told readers what *not* to expect, or then again, a rather playful denial of all that it would entail: “No es un concierto ni una exposición colectiva, no es un happening ni una performance ni tampoco una improvisación multidisciplinar” [This is not a concert or

a collective exhibit; it is not a happening or a performance, nor interdisciplinary improvisation]. The event delivered what it promised as both a (non-)happening and a temporal experiment, harkening back to the “radical juxtapositions” of unlikely assemblages, according to Susan Sontag, characteristic of happenings in the 1950s and 1960s. Much like them, it was unclear when the nonhappening started or ended while visitors would come and go as they pleased, with simultaneous events taking place around the room in overlapping succession. And the crowd, guided to move through the warehouse by interest or surprise, seemed as much to form part of the performance, too. As such, when the band took pause a spotlight focused on participating artist Fran Mohíno who dialed a number from his cell phone to activate the sculpture *We_Love_You*. Positioned on a crane above the crowd, a towering black cylinder spoke, in a thundering male voice, a random sequence of three words accompanied by flashes of strobe light: “We, Love, You.” Like Mohíno’s other work on childhood subjectivity and memory, this piece had spectators momentarily blinded and deafened, one might say smothered in most senses, by an overpowering iteration on love. The arrhythmic blasts at intervals long enough to ready oneself for the next flash also provoked some irritation and much amusement among visitors. The crowd retracted from the tower in a movement that seemed comparable (at least to me, looking away to see the projection on the adjacent wall) to that of the graphite filings shuffled around on paper.

Sometime later, I spoke with Fran Mohíno when I had the chance to ask him some questions about his own work and this group show. “This kind of event would have been unthinkable a couple of years ago,” he noted—if readers will allow me to paraphrase Mohíno’s words—that is, the invitation to experience this nonhappening simply wouldn’t have made sense. This observation on sense-making struck me, given that two parties could agree in conversation on what seemed to be sensible change in the present without knowing how to articulate precisely the factors at play in making this so. Under what changing circumstances did the occurrence signify in ways that seemed to “work” for its audience, if not *on* its audience? In what ways, if at all, did this sensible change dialog with the turn to the experiential, alternative practices of a collective bent becoming more commonplace in Madrid amid times of austerity? What did this assemblage of cultural works that resisted narrative and instead invited visitors to collective experience in this space, accomplish in form and function? Beyond the

context of the performance alone, these general questions prompted by sensing that “somehow” things are different than only shortly ago, could be said to outline the essays in the following chapters on cultural analysis and the political.

The global financial crisis and recent social mobilizations, such as the 15M mass protests in Spain, have inaugurated renewed interest in critically rethinking Spain’s present cultural, social, and political circumstance, from the democratic *Transición* to its adhesion to the European Union. In the wake of the crisis in Spain, critical readings of and responses to the present scenario take at least two main stages of activity: cultural production in urban centers, often of an alternative status, and protests and assemblies in public spaces throughout Spanish cities. The essays gathered in the following chapters address how recent cultural production in Spain (fanzine poetry, video performance, photography, theater, from 2008 to 2013) grapples with the conditions and possibilities for social transformation in myriad ways that dialog with the ongoing crisis, neoliberal governance, and political culture in Spain’s recent democratic history.

In his proposal for microcultural studies, Chris Perriam argues that ephemera can prove a “weighty witness” to the times. “What the ephemeral witnesses and documents above all,” Perriam writes, “is the combination of the unknown cultural configuration which preceded it, surrounded it, and gave it momentary meaning” in the present of its production (2010, 292). Consider, for example, fanzines and some independent self-publications from the scene of cultural activity often regarded to be the urban underground. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, self-publishing in Spain has received renewed interest among amateur and professional creators alike. Augmented uses of desktop publishing software have facilitated accessible, do-it-yourself production supports for creative work in print and online distribution. Among the most fringe independent self-publications, fanzines today exhibit more polished layouts, illustrations, typesetting, and even binding than their predecessors from the 1970s and 80s (Compitello, 2013, 203–31), a circumstance attributable, in part, to digital production. Still, many retain the manual and analog practices, true to fanzine origins, in cut-and-paste design, mixed-media collage, cartoons, and illustrated fiction of an underground aesthetic (Duncombe, 2008; Librería Bakakai, 2006). Of a much wider panorama than fanzines alone, the great variety of independent print matter today—hand-sewn literary journals, artist books, and pamphlets categorized as ephemera—range in support

from bound cardstock to sleek, glossy color prints, which on the whole demonstrate that self-publishing has traveled in multiple low-budget projects from the underground to the commercial upstart.

Independent self-publishing today provides an illustration of Perriam's claim for its alternative status in relation to institutional supports and funding sources, and to the markets that make some established circles of cultural and literary production a more sustainable, if not at times lucrative, business by comparison. For many creators, self-publishing provides alternative, inexpensive channels to distribute work against the publishing crisis in recent years, which has writers and artists face increasingly limited possibilities to see their work in traditional print media (Martínez Soria, 2013, 12–14; Rodrigo et al., 2012). These practices hold an alternative regard and readership appeal that stand in opposition to the established, exclusive publishing circuits and their authors in the arts and literature (Acevedo et al., 2012). In this sense, although fanzines oppose and critique commercial culture for its potential to absorb almost any material of marketable value, as Stephen Duncombe has noted, it seems that in times of crisis, to the contrary, fanzines may have subsumed the commercial aesthetics of some independent self-publishing (2008, 159). On the other hand, many self-publishers and independent presses, though by no means all of them, are committed to the distribution of cultural material as public domain against copyright restrictions, known as the *copyleft* movement (Martín Cabrera, 2012, 583–605; Moreno-Caballud, 2012, 535–55). In these practices, there exists an oppositional tension between some official spaces of cultural production (sponsored creation, exhibition, distribution, publishing, and so on) and their alternative counterparts whose works seldom reach channels of public visibility, other than through local circuits of readers and collectors (Guirao Cabrera, 2013, 5). To return to the nonhappening of Pozuelo's group show, many artists, acutely aware of the material limitations and languishing institutional support in times of austerity, pool their resources collectively in order to continue practicing and exhibiting their work. Their production can provide a weighty witness to the times, as Perriam notes, a point I take up in this book, less from the position of how economic factors alone can shape cultural production with material limitations and contribute to emergent practices among artists, noted all too briefly here, than from that of questioning the *work* that cultural production accomplishes as it imagines worlds shaped by conditions and possibilities for change from the sociopolitical circumstances in which it materializes, at present.

What follows is an attempt to think through the relationships between cultural production and political culture in the urban milieu during this time of crisis. The gravity of the economic crisis and the still-emerging social mobilizations have incited a process of change that may yet amount to a paradigm shift, which raises the question of precisely how and why this is so. These essays aim to contribute modestly to this sense-making of the present circumstance in which over time, writes Lauren Berlant, “a process will eventually appear monumentally as form—as episode, event, or epoch [—] while living in the stretched out ‘now’ that is at once intimate and estranged” (2008, 5). At my time of writing, the essays take up this line of inquiry from a present sensed as one enduring historic change at great speed, for both everyday life in urban centers in Spain and possibly for scholarship on interdisciplinary approaches to contemporary Spanish culture, politics, and society. In this sense, they have also been written from a sense of urgency in order to address Spain’s crisis, neoliberalism, and the relationships between culture and politics at present, particularly where I view my own teaching and scholarship striving for the tools to address the current conjuncture. First drafted between September 2012 and February 2014, they date from the adoption of Spain’s deepest cutbacks to social programs in its democratic history, to elected officials’ first proclaimed indications of an economic recovery, the social effects of which have yet to be seen. To place a date on these essays is, referring to the work of interpretation in the following pages, to situate them within the circumstance of their production at a time moving with great speed.

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