

The Experience of the Us

Espai en Blanc is the name of a project created in Barcelona in 2002. The goal, as we said at the time, was to “make thinking passionate again”. By “passionate” we meant that we put our lives into it. And that happens when thinking becomes collective, when it affects our very way of living and challenges the clichés on which our everyday reality is founded.

A project like this has to have a broader aim than simply creating a critical discourse to hold up to the world. From the outset, we felt there was a need to experiment with the conditions of such production: the places, relationships and tools of its creation, communication, education and intervention. As well as creating a collective author, we also wanted to set in motion a whole machine of thought; a device which, by altering the recognisable maps of theoretical production, would lead to a new politicisation of thought. The crisis in the traditional forms of political affiliation and organisation have invalidated the old idea that politicisation requires consciousness and the transmission of a proper discourse. In a globalised world, everything is visible (injustice, lies, cruelty, exploitation, etc.), yet nothing hap-

pens. Disclosure and denunciation is valuable in the ambit of information but not in that of social transformation. The enlightened proposition of illuminating consciousness—subsequently taken up by the worker’s movement as class consciousness—has thus lost its subversive potential. What then does the production of critical and shared thinking consist of? How do political transmission and formation occur today?

Espai en Blanc has tackled these questions head on, staging a very wide-ranging series of projects. These include the *Symposia on the War-State* (September 2002), the folder “Programmes of Subversion” (*Archipiélago* magazine No. 53), the *Barcelona Report 2004: postmodern fascism* (Ed. Bellaterra 2004), collaboration with the film *El taxista ful* (Jo Sol, 2005), the investigation *The Autonomous Struggles in Spain* (in progress) and publication of the magazine *Espai en Blanc* offering “materials for the subversion of life”, first published in October 2006. All of these mark experiences of situational thinking, associated with our own practices and the groups we form part of. They are practices of self-interrogation, in which the subject and object of the discourse are not clearly separable.

Thinking means imagining (thinking up) ourselves. Addressing the problem of the world means jointly involving ourselves in it. The world is what globalisation has stolen from us; what it has placed in front of us as a mirror of the



Jo Sol *El taxista ful* poster from the film 2005

impotence, whereby we are reduced to mere spectators, consumers or victims. In this threefold condition, criticism is neutralised by using three ways of sterilising the discourse: the aesthetic way (a game of positions), the moral way (judgement) and the psychological way (wellbeing/discontent). The three leave us in a depoliticised relationship with the world. Politicising thought therefore means re-appropriating the world. Or to put it another way: learning to see the world that exists among us. What other teaching could be more urgent in today's world?

It was this approach that led us to organise a series of meetings or gather-

ings between January and May 2006, under the title *No-Man's Land in the Network of Names*. This initiative is an example of how critical thought occurs *between us*; in other words, that the elaboration of critical thought involves breaking down the thinker-audience hierarchy to constitute a thinking Us, a collective word capable of making progress on real problems. In this piece, we want to concentrate on this experience and what it can contribute to a reflection on the challenges currently posed by an open education.

On the last Thursday of every month, over a five-month period, Espai en Blanc organised meetings in a bar in Barcelona

(the Horiginal). Each gathering looked at a specific problem (Social Discontent; Civic-mindedness against Politics; the Frontier Space; the Experience of the Us; and Speaking Up) and was based on a series of questions and materials, launched through a blog. These gatherings were open to everyone. There were no advertised speakers, no coordinating committee and no question-and-answer session. Over the five months, more than a hundred people, mostly unknown to each other, met up to think together. This anonymous self-organisation opened up a space for politicisation of the word and life itself. What are the key features of this experience and why do we consider it to be both formative and transforming?

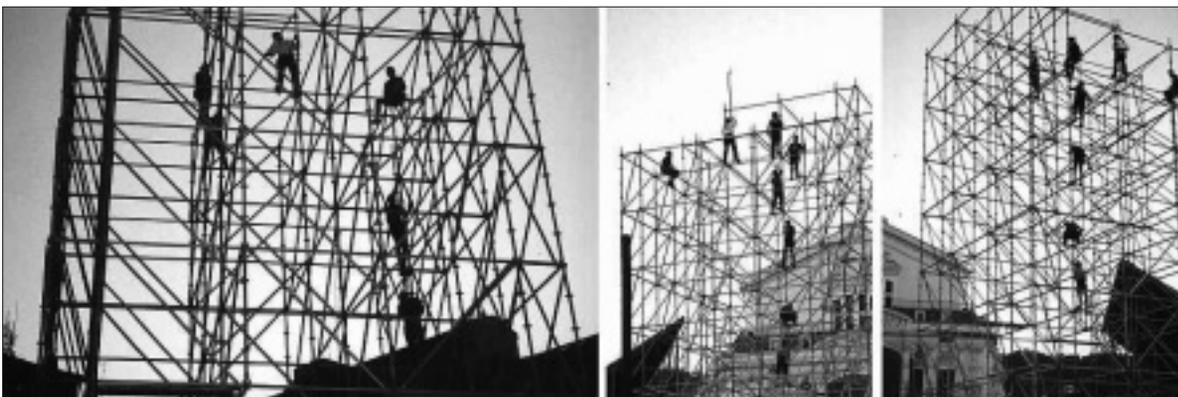
Our assessment is that at these encounters we managed to begin breaking down the dynamic by which critical thought is neutralised. And we did so in two main aspects: on the one hand, by making the collective event self-organising and on the other, going from formulating criticism to embodying criticism. It is worth looking more closely at these two issues to reflect on the possibilities of a (self)educational action today.

When a collective event becomes self-organising, it is the *Us* that gives meaning to the event. There are plenty of collective events in today's metropolitan life. Indeed, most events are collective; the difficult thing is to be alone. However, the city has lost all power of

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self-organisation because these events are empty of *Us*. Whether it's a lecture, a football match, a concert, a demonstration or a popular festival, we go as spectators, as an audience, as participants, customers, etc. Each of us goes home with our dose of knowledge, fun, emotion, but none of us has stepped out of our singular persons, our experience-consuming I. We know that knowing [*saber*] and knowledge [*conocimiento*] are being subjected to a strong process of privatisation, in the form of dissemination and transmission through increasingly closed institutions, and patenting. But closer to the root of this, it should be remembered that not only knowledge but also experience has been privatised. Social ghettoization goes hand in hand with ghettoization in life and experience, which is one of the key problems that any educational project must face today.

How do we break down the walls of self-referentiality which, paradoxically, organise and compartmentalise the information and communication society? At the Espai en Blanc meetings, we did it by leaving the place of enunciation of the word empty. That empty place was not the neutral space of opinion. It was a space of tension in which a specific problem could be tackled—or not. The questions Espai en Blanc had posed through the short presentation we posted on the blog might affect us or not, they might trigger a word which would take on a meaning for us or leave us indifferent, drawn into our accustomed individuality. In that space of tension the only thing that made sense was a word capable of sustaining itself, a word which would advance from person to person in an exercise of collective and anonymous thinking. The word can be justified from many angles (academic, cultural, police, prestige, authority, etc.) but when does it tell us anything? When does it do something with us? Precisely when it moves the walls of our self-referentiality, when it sets us in motion. Not when it allows us to say what we think, but when it forces us to think what we do not know.



Images from *No-man's Land in the Network of Names* Barcelona 2006

And because of what happened at the gatherings and based on the assessment of the people who took part, we believe this landslide did actually take place. We didn't go home, then, with our private dose of knowledge and recognition, but instead with the vacuum of a breach which, having pierced us all, had become our common dimension. When the call to the meeting ceases to be just another offer on the stage of the metropolis which has to be met by a certain amount of demand, and becomes the true self-organisation of a thinking us.

In that collective exercise the critical potential of thinking departs from its habitual anaesthesia because—as we said—we go from formulating criticism to embodying it. When we approach common problems in that space of tension in which the word sustains itself, not only is the I torn from its self-referentiality, but the theory is torn from its legitimated spaces of circulation: the academic discourse with its referenced author, the channels of information and the forums of opinion. In them, criticism, when it does exist, can only be formulated. That is its limit, the threshold of impotence against which we must measure ourselves every day, and beyond which any commitment to a transforming education must aim. We said before that the problem of politicisation has traditionally been a problem of consciousness. Today one might say that it is a problem of body. How should one embody critique? How do we make critical thinking take a body of its own?

In our experience, putting the body on that space of tension that we have so far portrayed as a space of the word took on an importance which not even we could have imagined. While the blog that went with the gatherings never went beyond its “transmitting” function—in other words, it served merely for sending out invitations, reminders and associated material, and did not at any point enter an interactive dynamic that might extend our previous conversations, the act of *going to the gathering* became the central action of each gathering. *Being there*, even without speaking, became the key moment and the most transforming part of the experience. Why? Because the effects of critique cannot be measured only by what is said but

by what is happening (to us). And, as we have said that possibility of thinking together opened up an experience of the Us based through which each person could be something more than themselves. Is this not the key experience of education? Does being educated not involve coming out of oneself to enter a no-man's land in which a common world can be created? That “no-man's land”, as we called it in the title of our meetings, is the one that sabotages “the network of names”, the order of that world which is seized from us and in which each person has to occupy their own node of connectivity and availability.

At the end of *El taxista ful*, the film in which Espai en Blanc participated, the main character asks: “How can we drill holes in reality?”. These gatherings have marked an attempt to do just that. It is an unexhausted attempt: the experience—which we began blindly, our stomachs knotted with questions—has convinced us that, to some extent and in its fragility, we have managed to drill a few holes in reality and we have done it together. We can continue trying to do it, extending this experience and inventing other ones yet to come. With them we will not create a new consciousness, nor will we disseminate any new truth. You do not educate anyone that way. But exercising ourselves in this experience of the Us we will perhaps have a body that is more prepared to fight fear, more exposed and less isolated: a body that knows that its life is not only its own, and that it stakes everything on that which goes beyond itself. ❧

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