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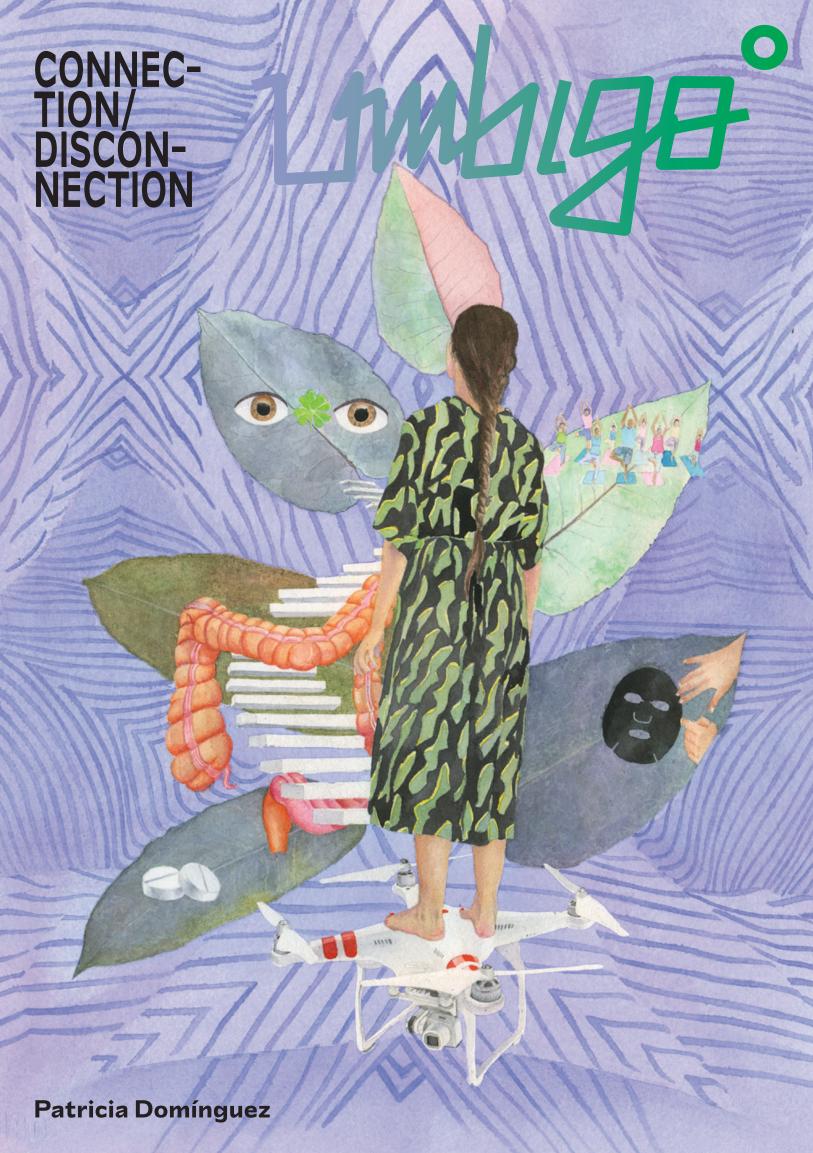umbigo°

Gabriel Abrantes

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Patricia Domínguez

Interview with Juan Martín Prada
Art, Museums and Digital Cultures Cluster

by: José Pardal Pina
art projects: Rodrigo Gomes

Coordinated by Helena Barranha, the Art, Museums and Digital Cultures Cluster was launched via an international conference in April 2021 with the grand ambition of studying the impact of Information Technologies on museums and the global art system. This anthology of testimonials – now edited in an e-book available on the cluster's website – constitutes a critical overview of the complex relationship between culture and technology.

The series of interviews that Umbigo and this cluster now embark upon, in the printed and online issues, will clarify, expand and investigate most of the topics already explored in that maiden effort, more precisely the post-digital condition, the challenges for democracies and the potential the digital and virtual represent for museums and the art world.

Author of *Prácticas artísticas e internet en la época de las redes sociales* (2nd ed, 2015) [*Artistic Practices and the Internet in the Age of Social Media*] and *Art Theory and Digital Culture* (2023), Juan Martín Prada – associate member of the cluster since its foundation – here debates these points whilst introducing further topics such as pedagogy, the role of Big Tech and Artificial Intelligence.

Rodrigo Gomes, *Estivador de Imagens*, 2017. Escultura Audiovisual, vídeo HD, 11'59", cor, som quadrifónico, 1080P, 4x4x3m, acrílico, espelho

José Pardal Pina: Thirty years ago, the Internet and most exploratory research into the digital were overridingly optimistic regarding the potential of technology and communication networks. Thirty years on, we see a growing vilification or mistrust of social media, chat rooms and media in general. How can we critically rethink that initial optimism for the digital and reposition it again for the benefit of democracy?

Juan Martín Prada: For the development of democratic values in the digital sphere, we need to take many steps, firstly, in the educational sphere, in pursuit of a digital literacy that helps to foster the ability to make proper use of these technologies and to confront disinformation. Also, to learn about and critically reflect on how the business models of large digital corporations operate, and how they affect us. It is essential that we are aware of how the digital environment is based on the increasingly complete colonisation of our vital interactions by corporate interests, and the many dangers posed by this economic parasitism of all our affective and communicative life that is channelled through connectivity devices. I also believe it is essential that there should be more transparency in relation to how digital platforms operate and how they obtain economic benefits, with more effective public supervision of their practices, to avoid abuses in the use of our data and to allow us to use their services more safely.

Likewise, educational practice must teach how to prevent the use of technologies from becoming addictive. In this respect, I believe it is essential that we understand the increasing machine-dependence of our subjectivity.

But it is also necessary to develop greater regulation at international level to guarantee the security and individual rights of internet users, including, of course, freedom of expression, but also to take measures to curb disinformation and cyber-bullying in all its forms. And of course, I also believe that greater support for the development of free and open-source software is key, enabling education, research and the development of digital creativity in less corporatised and more inclusive environments, also providing more opportunities for countries and social and educational environments with fewer economic resources.

JPP: If some see social media posts as a manifestation of freedom, others in fact regard this supposed freedom to be an unbridled work of the dark side of capitalism, which exploits our hyperactive online presence. Aren't museums risking going down the same path in favour of techno-capitalism by embracing this digital turn?

JMP: I believe that museums must respond appropriately to the digital revolution by taking advantage of all the possibilities it opens up. From my point of view, it is not an option to miss out on these new opportunities. What's more, I think that museums should take a leading role in testing new models of network use that encourage interpretative thinking, critical and meaningful communication and, in short, anticipate more creative, conscious and sensitive ways of inhabiting the network. As art centres and museums specialise in the image, I believe they have an important role to play in promoting, in an increasingly visual culture, a type of experience of images that demands interpretation and a much more detailed contemplation than we are used to in the digital sphere.

Moreover, it must be borne in mind that the public will very soon be composed, for the most part, of "digital natives". Museums must not forget that, as García Canclini once pointed out, audiences are not born but are made, but in different ways in the Gutenbergian and digital eras.

I believe that, despite this economic colonisation of our vital interactions on which the business model of social networks is based, these are a field of new possibilities for art institutions to become more open, more accessible, more receptive, more adaptable spaces, which, in short, would be contained in the idea of a "liquid institution", or what some prefer to call a "social museum".

The digital needs to be used to move from the traditional conception of the collection-centred museum to the mission-centred museum. Perhaps the most important challenge in thinking about its future consists, precisely, more in speaking "with" audiences than in speaking "to" audiences" as has traditionally been done. And in this, of course, I believe that social networks play a role that can be very relevant. They contain a potential, I believe, that is still largely undeveloped.

JPP: Many thinkers have warned of a crisis in mediation brought about by the Internet and digital media. How can museums and cultural institutions tackle this crisis and propose newer and more effective means of communication, participation and literacy?

JMP: Not a few exhibition institutions continue to view social networks with certain reticence, linking them, for example, to somewhat inappropriate forms of behaviour in art centres, such as the permanent and compulsive selfie, or understanding the sphere of social networks as a simple means of quantifying the visibility of the centre or the museum, measured by the number of "likes" received or by the amount of shares of their informative posts. But these approaches respond to a very poor consideration of social networks that tends to value them, above all, as a means of advertising diffusion with a low or scarce economic cost, at least compared to the very expensive advertising that museums, art centres and galleries used to have to do, almost necessarily, in printed magazines and newspapers. On the contrary, I believe that the communication and education units of cultural institutions should try to make use of the networks to establish a more personalised and, therefore, more relevant relationship with the public. The aim is to establish a closer, two-way relationship with visitors.

I believe that this is essential not only so that more people get to know and visit museums (that is, so that they manage to expand their audiences, in short, increase their "reach") but also so that those who have visited them return many more times in the future, and for this it is essential to establish a more active and lasting relationship between audiences and institutions and their cultural offerings.

The museums and art centres that make the best use of social networks today implement an infinite number of online dissemination strategies, such as campaigns around certain hashtags, posts that take advantage of certain special dates, commemorations, anniversaries, times of the year, messages or posts based on comments or interviews with artists and curators, curiosities about the museum or objects or works that make up their collections, about what happens behind their walls or during, for example, the processes of assembly and dismantling of the exhibitions. Something that I find particularly interesting is how many museums are becoming the protagonists or centres of attention of a kind of "reality", acquiring the condition of a subject endowed with a "life of its own" and offering a narration of its day-to-day life, under the continuous observation of many internet users.

Amongst all these strategies, one of the ones that I find most interesting as an object of analysis is the invitation to spectators to take photographs and disseminate them on social networks, sharing their experience of the exhibition, their impressions and experiences. I've always found of great interest, for example, those "micro-perceptions" that many record and share, those fragments or details of the works that we probably wouldn't have noticed and that, on occasions, are enormously revealing.

It is now mandatory for art institutions to actively seek out visitors themselves to help them expand digitally, to take advantage of the possibilities that open up when content generators and audiences share not only common interests, but also the same descriptive and narrative skills. And this is something really very important, given that visitors who share information on the networks about the museums and exhibitions they visit also do so in a very comprehensible and attractive way for their followers (something that not always the art or communication professional knows or can do) and also filling this information with elements of an affective and personal nature (in what we could consider a sign of a personal appropriation of the works of art) that can often be very inspiring for other internet users. Institutions should try to be catalysts of these processes, encouraging their audiences to disseminate their impressions which, through the networks, give a public dimension to the singular experiences produced by the works.

Because many internet users want what that other person (friend, acquaintance or professional we follow on the net) noticed in that exhibition, to see that exhibition (or see it again) following in their footsteps or even to reinterpret some of the works according to the comments and images that reach us through the social networks, believe that social networks can have a huge importance in the phases before, but even more so in the phases after the visit to the museum.

It is especially important that institutions take advantage of the fact that shared photography today has become, above all, an interface that relates us to others, and that more than a practice of memory production, photography is now, fundamentally, a connecting element, a form of social communication. In fact, I would say that the main value of the images circulating on the web lies, above all, in their capacity to interconnect subjects, that is to say, in their intersubjective nature.

In short, I think it is key that institutions, through digital media, promote something of which I am fully convinced: that any interpretation of works of art is always better if it is done collaboratively.

JPP: How can one assure the conserving and archiving of work in a space in perpetual upheaval, where software and hardware frequently face obsolescence? And, then, how can one ensure the safekeeping of said archives and projects, when, sometimes, they too are likely to be abandoned at some point given the lack of financial support or because Time's priorities have shifted to other areas?

JMP: There are many strategies that museums and art centres have been implementing since the beginnings of media art for the preservation of this type of digital artwork. These include the preservation of original hardware and software of the time necessary for the viewing and experience of these works, or the development of emulators that allow a current computer to reproduce with sufficient accuracy the behaviour of an older system (thus making it possible to view

Rodrigo Gomes, *Ariane*, 2020. Vídeo, 03'01", cor, estéreo, 1080P

works conceived for software and hardware that became obsolete), etc. It is true that many digital works, especially those designed for the online environment, pose great difficulties in this regard, but the creation of emulated environments that mimic older systems and browsers often allows net artworks to be executed fairly faithfully. More complex, no doubt, is the conservation of some works that were conceived as online participatory experiences, but in these cases the conservation criteria are not very different from those of many other non-digital works that incorporate collaborative processes and active participation (happenings, relational works, etc.). In relation to these, the preservation and study of the documentation generated around them is key.

JPP: In *Prácticas artísticas e internet en la época de las redes sociales* (2ⁿᵈ ed, 2015) [Artistic Practices and the Internet in the Age of Social Media] an attempt to map the different tendencies and sprawling networks that feed artistic practices is evident, not only since the so-called post-digital or post-Internet age but also in its early days. How do you see, since then, the emergence of new lines of investigation and research, such as memes, the challenges of the pandemic, the omnipresence of apps, and, most recently, the free flow of Artificial Intelligence?

JMP: Many of these new issues I have worked on in my two most recent books, *Seeing and Images in the Time of the Internet* (2018) and *Art Theory and Digital Culture* (2023). But, among them, the questions that seem to me to be most relevant are those related to the challenges that Artificial Intelligence technologies are bringing with them.

The appearance in recent years of AI-based generative image production systems is a revolutionary milestone in the development of image creation technologies; their impor-

tance allows us to speak of the beginning of a new phase of visual culture in which a large part of the images produced will have their origin, to a greater or lesser extent, in this type of AI-based generative systems or, at least, will have been edited using some of these new technologies. There are already estimates that in the near future 90% of new content on the Internet will be artificially generated. In my opinion, the emergence of these generative visual media is as relevant a phenomenon in the evolution of visual culture as social media was at the beginning of this new century. I find exciting the problematisations of the concept of creativity that the use of these new models of visual creation based on AI systems is giving rise to.

However, in the face of the extractive modes of images, styles and aesthetic guidelines that we see operated by these models, of their effective syntheses, I am particularly interested in how many artists today focus their work on the critical problematisation of AI. Just as in the eighties of the last century the appropriationist practices of the more eclectic and historicist postmodernism, in which old and new fashions and styles were recycled and reused, were confronted with a critical appropriationism (which saw in the other a denial of the historicity of forms and materials – in reality a post-historical escape or escapism), we are now seeing a similar critique develop in relation to AI. These are artistic practices that, far from being satisfied with what is offered by this technological appropriationism based on the gimmicky combination and derivative transformation that is characteristic of AI, choose to critically refer to the very discourses of AI, often appropriating them, making this ethical questioning their thematic centre. Probably, these other proposals, which can be framed within the so-called "Critical AI", can serve as an incentive to emphasise the essential

differences between the intentional human and the autonomous machinic in the field of artistic creativity.

JPP: There has been a growing weariness towards the world unleashed by the digital. Suddenly our digital persona has become a burden - replying to e-mails, the effort that goes into keeping our social media profiles up to date, participating in video calls and online meetings has become a gruelling task. Is it too spur-of-the-moment and absurd to ask for the world to slow down? Is it impossible to live one's life with little to no digital presence, without feeling cut off from the rest of the world?

JMP: Certainly, it is difficult not to feel that sense of weariness. Our usual condition is that of being permanently distracted, multi-occupied. In our time, the principle of instantaneous switching between transmission and reception prevails, making any delay between the two very difficult. We have no time in our time. And in relation to this, I think that suspicions always hover over the link between distraction and regression (something which, probably, would not be difficult to relate to the conformation of the "docile" bodies of which Foucault spoke). In short, and as I mentioned above, I believe that we must make a more conscious consumption of digital media and avoid, above all, that their use ends up becoming addictive and harmful.

On the other hand, and again in relation to the themes of the image and the gaze, it is evident that we are becoming accustomed to living in an ecology of vertiginous visual flows. Hence it seems necessary to think of a new visual "kairology", a new pedagogy about where and when to stop looking, where to fix our attention on this flow of a multitude of images that pass rapidly before our eyes. This is, I have the impression, the most important demand in the process of training new spectators in the digital era. //