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Amélie Nicolas, Julia Ramirez-Blanco

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Barcelona en Comú: Questions Facing a New Brand of Political Action

Amélie Nicolas and Julia Ramírez Blanco

Our sociological inquiry emerged in the process of crossing the border between France and Catalonia in 2016. Our objective was to understand the political, social, and activist trajectories of certain individuals who were elected to the new Barcelona municipal government (and of their supporters) as closely as possible to their personal dimensions. Having won the elections, in May 2015, in what the European media considered to be quite a surprising victory, Ada Colau, a figure from the social movements that were fighting against housing evictions, became the mayor of Barcelona and was steadfastly determined to “deglobalize” the city.

We decided to go meet this new political generation, which had been shaped by the “not in our name” intellectual and activist contexts of the early 2000s, and won over to the methods of empowerment and continuous deliberation, often learned in the framework of their professional experience in cooperation and development networks in Latin America. In the wake of the so-called 15-M Movement (15 May, 2011), the multiple crises (economic, financial, and of political representation), and the realization that urban services were being increasingly privatized, encouraged the implementation of a model based on municipal governance and founded upon this new political grammar.

Our inquiry was developed in the form of questions we asked these newly elected officials from *Barcelona en comú* and their supporters. The challenge of an ethnographic approach within the city hall of Barcelona was taken up based on a protocol we called “Pushing open the doors of city hall,”¹ which progressively unveils the numerous steps involved in the lengthy process that led up to the interview itself. “Pushing open the doors of city hall” means allowing oneself, as an inquirer, to not presume that the political and technical spaces of the city will necessarily be in a distant realm, nor that understanding them will require only objective analysis of political programs and public policies, strategies of action, and networks of stakeholders. It is a descriptive protocol that links analysis and personal narratives in the goal of “playing down” our relationship to political representation. Our inquiry does not seek to take sides or to do justice to some economic, political or “meta-critical” agenda, but rather to understand how knowledge and ideas circulate, through individual trajectories, through ways of doing that have been acquired and transmitted, and through concrete achievements. The challenge of “thinking from the border” was taken up based on a narrative that weaves personal narratives, stories of personal trajectories, the historical skills of those interviewed, and shared reflexivities, and made possible through a series of interviews. Our inquiry straddles the border between intimate citizenship, public citizenship, and the exercise of power, the border between militant action and institutional power, the border between the local and the inter- or transnational scale, as well as the border between memory and history.

Crossing the border between France and Catalonia also led to an encounter and an open, friendly, and serious dialogue between art and the social sciences. The opening up to the field of art called for by our collective research project, enabled us to meet Julia Ramírez Blanco, an art historian and critic, who lives in Barcelona. She proposed a counterpoint or extension in response to Amélie Nicolas’s study, based on her analysis of seven artworks which involve political devices for social and urban protests, and artistic utopias. Julia Ramírez Blanco, a specialist in activist practices and utopian visions in contemporary art,² proposed a new historiographical source that enabled her to reassess the political situation in Spain, Catalonia, and Barcelona in her own way.

¹ This protocol was utilized within an educational and research project “One Week, One City: Charleroi,” with the participation of Laurent Devisme, Pauline Ouvrard, and Elisabeth Pasquier, at the Nantes graduate school of architecture (CRENAU-UMR AAU) in 2015.

² Julia Ramírez Blanco, *Artistic Utopias of Revolt: Claremont Road, Reclaim the Streets, and the City of Sol*, (London-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

These seven works of contemporary art accompany and question in other ways the socio-anthropological reading of politics. In this process, the social sciences and art history listen to, share with, and complement each other more than being dissolved in a single heuristic or epistemological ensemble.

“Pushing Open the Doors of City Hall”: Investigating the Very Contemporary History of Barcelona

Our inquiry took place over a very short period of time, and at a very particular moment of Spanish history. Indeed, in 2016, no governmental majority could be reached in the general elections, because there was no coalition that supported Mariano Rajoy. Meanwhile, a sharp decline in support for the two political parties that had dominated the scene since the end of the Franco regime (the People’s Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE)) was also observed. Finally, two new parties were gaining power, Ciudadanos (a center-right party) and Podemos, which was presented as an alternative left-wing party. This period of political instability gave us the opportunity to recreate a complex history over a relatively short time: since 2011 and the 15-M Movements, and especially, in the context of the rise to power of *Barcelona en Comú*, from January 2014 to May 2015. The memories of those interviewed were very fresh, and they had an obvious desire to transmit them to others. We thus had the chance to conduct these interviews of political staff members who had little concern for political communication, or even better, organized their political communication based on an attitude of empathy and proximity, the guarantee according to them of true political service.³ “Pushing open the doors of city hall,” an “ethnographic” protocol articulated around reflections on the border, is an allusion to the main theme of the interviews requested, to the narratives of a personal, and often militant, history, to that of an institutional history, of political responsibility and partisan commitment. Starting from individual trajectories, sometimes in their intimate or affective dimensions and starting from periodizations and perceptions of watershed events, and from the key moments proposed by those interviewed, we question the possibility of creating a nascent historiographical narrative, and shed light on the tactics of legitimation and action being deployed by those already exercising power.

The 15-M Movements and Partisan Historiography

Our meeting with Steven Forti, an Italian historian of European political cultures, based in Barcelona, and who works as a journalist and correspondent for various Spanish, Catalan, Italian, and Greek periodicals, and is interested in the socio-political analyses of the Spanish, and especially Catalan situation, made it possible to gain a broader vision for writing this very contemporary history. In effect, in February 2016, Steven Forti started writing a book about Ada Colau, with the Italian journalist Giacomo Russo Spena, for the magazine *MicroMega*.⁴ This work was anchored in the context of the municipal elections in Italy. It is a book that had to be written in a very limited amount of time, and he based his approach on a series of interviews in a way that was rather similar to ours. Today, Steven Forti is a member of the *Barcelona en comú* party, and admits that he fully assumes having crossed the border between journalism, which requires a certain critical distance, and partisan historiography, which is linked to his memory of engagement. Having earned his doctoral degree in 2011, Steven Forti told us that he both “observed and participated” in the 15-M Movements in Barcelona. For him, as for some of the other people we interviewed, the 15-M Movements constitute a founding event, which according to Ricoeur, “has the twofold function of breaking with [the past] and creating an origin.”⁵

³ Some people also refused to be interviewed because these newly elected officials were overwhelmed with work. Such was the case of Ada Colau, and her three deputy mayors: Girardo Pisarello, Jaume Assens, and Gala Pin, who were away from the city during our inquiry.

⁴ Steven Forti and Giacomo Russo Spena. *Ada Colau, La città in comune. Da occupante di case a sindaca di Barcellona*, (Rome: Alegre, 2016).

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, « Événement et sens », a talk given in 1971, and then transcribed and published in « L'espace et le temps », Proceedings of the 22nd congress of the *Association des sociétés de philosophie de langue française*. (Paris: Vrin, 1991), 9-21. Accessed on: http://www.fondsriceur.fr/uploads/medias/articles_pr/evnement-et-sens.pdf, 8. (In French).

For one year, Steven Forti participated in countless mobilizations, which included *mareas sociales*, major thematic events that focus on issues such as healthcare and education. He remembered how at that time it was the leaders of the social movements who organized the political and social debates during this intense period of mobilization. In Barcelona, the action carried out by the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) received attention, and was considered to be emblematic of an “alter-activism” that could unite people. At that time, Ada Colau was the spokesperson of this platform, which intended to offer support to families evicted by their landlords (particularly by the banks themselves) because they were unable to make their mortgage payments. Through demonstrations, such as *Caseroledas* (an urban event during which people bang on pots and pans), *Escratches* (actions that originated in Argentina, and consist in going to the home or workplace of somebody you want to denounce), and *okupas* (occupying housing), the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages developed a methodology based on general assemblies and the dynamics of empowerment, which would ultimately be used as a model for organizing the future *Barcelona en comú* party. The legitimacy acquired via the 15-M experience made it possible to write a new political grammar, and, even more so, a new partisan historiography based on fighting political corruption, denouncing the “revolving doors” phenomenon (shady relations between politicians and private corporations, lobbies, and institutions), questioning the rigid party-based political system, or in any case its incapacity to adapt to the contemporary world, and developing reflections and resources linked to the commons.

Guanyem Barcelona: Memory and Manifestos

In 2013, there was a decrease in social mobilizations, “the quite logical end of a cycle of mobilization” for Steven Forti. The leaders of the social movements started wondering about the future of the mobilizations, and some tried to “jump into politics.” The 15-M Movements had some influence on the positions of certain social movement representatives, who shifted towards a “we want to win” stance, which resulted in new reflections and a new political language, with the new *Podemos* party taking over the leadership.⁶ Steven Forti, shifting from his own personal memories to the writing of this history in Barcelona, told us how meetings were organized around the DESC (Observatory of Economic, Social, and Cultural rights)⁷ and “around Ada’s circle,” which together initiated the *Guanyem Barcelona* (Let’s Win back (or Take back) Barcelona) process, with the goal of creating political convergence to be able to put together a list of candidates for the 2015 municipal elections.

We met Joan Subirats at the *Ateneu Barcelonès*, close to Catalunya Square, a former neoclassical palace built in the 18th century, which had been transformed into a cultural center that is used today by Catalan intellectuals. Today he is an economist and a political scientist, who teaches at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, but Joan Subirats was first of all a major figure in the Catalan struggle against Francoism. He would tell us how, in 1973, he was imprisoned for several months, after having been arrested during an anti-Franco assembly, along with one hundred of his comrades. At that time, he was an activist in the “Bandera roja”, a left-wing group uniting the Communist Party—in coordination with France—and a left-wing faction of workers and farmers. At the end of his studies, he became a professor of “political law” at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, a “mixture of constitutional law and political science, which did not exist in Spain at that time.” An activist in the Communist Party, he participated in the process during which the Spanish Constitution was discussed. In 1980-1981, he left the Communist Party due to its internal dissensions and would not engage in activist activities again, in the sense of participating in political party activities, until the citizen-based candidacy of Ada Colau for the 2015 municipal elections. He devised the political manifesto *Guanyem Barcelona*,

⁶ Jeanne Moisand, « Espagne: de l’indignation à l’organisation », *La Vie des idées*, March 20, 2015.

⁷ The DESC is a platform created in 1998 that brings together intellectuals and organizations working to defend social rights. Steven Forti presented it to us as a place where “alter-activists” and intellectuals get together, a “kind of ‘not in our name,’ anti-austerity think tank, of left-wing individuals opposed to the Troika and in favor of people’s right to self-determination.”

the guiding thread of the campaign, which was significantly inspired by his 2011 essay grounded in the field of “common studies.”⁸ On June 26, 2014, the manifesto *Guanyem Barcelona* was officially presented in the El Raval district of Barcelona, and a campaign was launched in the different neighborhoods, in coordination with neighborhood associations.

For this race, *Barcelona en comú* made a clear allusion to a longer historical period, which included the anti-Franco struggle and a questioning of the official historiography of the democratic transition, and the presence of intellectuals and academics, who had been on the left since the anti-Franco combat, was accepted. Behind these names was the history of municipalism in Barcelona and the citizen-activist tradition in its neighborhoods (the *movimiento vecinal*), which was revived, thus confirming the prospects that a neo-municipalism (or *Ciudadanismo*) would be implemented by the new municipal government. The *vecinal* movement was born in the final years of Francoism, in a period of limited political freedom.⁹ From 1968 to 1971 it enabled the lower and middle classes to collectively engage in debate and action, as a form of possible resistance to the dictatorship, the only veritable political alternative during a period in which political parties could not be created. The new municipal government has endeavored to reactivate this history of the neighborhoods, particularly in the deliberation process it has put in place for making public policies, and with a firm commitment to neo-municipalism.

The Intimate and the Political

Our interview with Laura Pérez, who had organized and was the Head of a “Gender Transversality” Department, and was developing public policies oriented toward “life cycles, feminisms, and LGBTI” focused especially on the personal trajectory of this activist. From a family in southern Spain that moved to Barcelona, her mother was a housekeeper who worked for wealthy bourgeois Catalan families, and her father was a worker, so they were familiar with life in Barcelona and its outlying predominantly working-class neighborhoods. Having left for South America in 2008, she lived through the 15-M events from Ecuador where she was working for UN Women with indigenous communities from the mountains. In 2012, pregnant with her daughter, she decided to return to Barcelona with her partner. Neither of them had a job. Laura Perez joined *Podemos*, and was a militant in its gender group whose goal was to bring together and unite all of the feminist movements in Barcelona. She was invited to join *Guanyem Barcelona* in the “gender and sexual diversity” group, which was a clear sign of the movement’s intention to present a feminist platform and to develop a cross-gender argument on this subject. This is how, once they had won the elections, Laura Perez became the Head of this new Department whose goal is to speak of *feminisms* and of *care* rather than implementing policies that concern early childhood, youth, and old-age by sector (infants, youth, the elderly). Officially adopting and utilizing the term *Feminisms* (in the plural) in this new municipal government, so as to include all feminisms, no longer simply in their theoretical dimensions, but in militant and organizational ones, was at that time a major ideological and political change.

Personal narrative becomes the point of departure for politicizing arguments. It is especially the role of women that marks this institutionalization of the “private life of convictions”.¹⁰ She referred to women’s conditions in terms of motherhood and political work, in particular, because many women between the age of 30 and 40 have been elected. Their personal narratives and the public expression of their conditions as mothers structure the debates and support “feminist” points of view of engaged politics. Speaking about her own condition as a woman politician in office, Laura Perez confided in us about the difficulties linked to her daily schedule. She is the mother of a 3-year old girl, but sees her very little. “We never were people who worked 8 hours and then went home. No, we come from the intense social struggles, with

⁸ Joan Subirats, *Otra sociedad, ¿otra política? De “no nos representan” a la democracia de lo común*, (Barcelona: Icaria, 2011).

⁹ For more information on municipalism and neighborhood movements, see the research by the Catalan journalist and historian Marc Andreu, who has also joined *Barcelona en comú*.

¹⁰ Anne Muxel (ed.), *La vie privée des convictions. Politique, affectivité, intimité*, (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2014).

meetings late into the night (...) None of us has had a cushy life (...) three days can go by without seeing your children, your family (...) I don't know if I can keep up with this pace, and I often tell myself that I'll feel lighter in 4 years, I'm trying to find psychological techniques. But I think it's probably worth it." "The personal is political," she reminds us, repeating the feminist slogan of the 1970s. Reactivating this statement has become the point of departure of our program and of the political action to accomplish. These recently elected officials are thus affirming the feminist perspective of their mandates. It is based on the collective and political translation of the intimate condition, henceforth linked to the challenge of a genuine "democracy of the commons," which is first of all, according to Subirats, to assess what affects us personally in our daily lives.

Deglobalization?

Eloi Badia's background lies in the struggles linked to water and energy. He was the spokesperson for the Alliance against energy precarity and an active member of the Catalan platform *Agua es vida*, which campaigns for the deprivatization of water networks. *Agua es vida* is also very closely connected to the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), and other similar activist movements whose guiding principle is the need to define basic common resources and denounce the privatization of basic services and rights.¹¹ Eloi Badia was elected because of his position and expertise on water and energy issues and his capacity to manage such contracts for the municipal government. He presented us the demands linked to the commons based on what he believes is a pragmatic observation:

There has been such a radical degradation of our public services and rights. The crisis and social inequalities, the corruption of our governments. In fact, we have just established a program: a law on mortgages, a condemnation of debt, stop cutting off people's access to energy, the end of corruption, and increased transparency. For us, that's asking for the bare minimum.

He presents his role as a very concrete approach based on knowledge and strategies for redefining power relations or adjusting the public sector to the private sector. He goes on to question the fatalistic discourse on the municipal government's lack of funds and the supposed need to set up speculative urban policies in Barcelona to offset it. Eloi Badia presented us the political and tactical challenges involved in deglobalizing Barcelona, which would require a return to public control of the resources about which the City has long-term expertise, and putting on the political agenda the demands made by social movements and citizen activists.

The question of habitat and tourism is undoubtedly at the heart of a metropolitan paradox in Barcelona. The municipal government has little room for action vis-à-vis tourism. It is based mainly on the municipal team's skills and authority on housing and public space in terms of land use, such as how it can regulate the rental of apartments for the purposes of tourism, with a current moratorium on the licenses granted, including for hotels, and administrative sanctions applied to informal rental "operations" via platforms such as Airbnb. Susanna Segovia, from the executive management of the *Barcelona en comú* party spoke to us about the challenge of "deprivatizing Las Ramblas" in the plan to reform this avenue, by closing the market stalls and refreshment stands and limiting the amount of area rented to cafés and restaurants for their terraces. "Because today, no people from Barcelona sit on these terraces. These are terraces for paella, tapas, sangria, and beer where you have to consume if you want to sit down. There are no longer any public benches—or very few. It has become a hostile place for children." Everyone feels like there has been an "invasion of 'mobile boards'" (kick scooters, Segways, and skateboards), those supposedly low-impact modes of transportation, rented in huge numbers to tourists. The appointment of the artist and activist Agueda Bañon, who is in the "post-porn" movement, as Director of Communication of the City of Barcelona is a move toward reversing the values attached to the touristic attractiveness of Barcelona. She analyzes mass tourism there as a

¹¹ Dominique Lorrain and Gerry Stoker, *La privatisation des services urbains en Europe*, (Paris: La Découverte, 1995). They remind us of the 4 kinds of "privatization" of urban services: 1) the sale of public assets to private companies, 2) the delegation of services via management contracts (concessions, leases, and others), 3) the transformation of public administrations into private stock companies, 4) the introduction of competition into the public sector by adopting private management principles.

form of urban pornography and commodification of bodies, which is linked to the festive ideology attached to the city. Her post-porn perspective, extolling sexual freedoms and feminisms, denounces the mercantile forms of pornography circulating in public space, and builds on the political and feminist perspectives associated with the “detouristification” of the downtown area.

Barcelona, the model city for European metropolitan development, a city that has attracted attention and even been cited and copied for the urban and architectural strategies it has implemented,¹² at least since the 1992 Olympic Games. An international metropolis that has been both culturally and economically successful, a winning city in the development of its advanced tertiary economy, Barcelona has won a spot for itself in the lineup of top European or even worldwide metropolises. *Barcelona en comú*'s victory in the municipal elections marks a sharp break with the promotion of this metropolitan model, ultimately making manifest the famous fifth chapter (“Reclaiming the City for Anti-Capitalist Struggle”) in David Harvey's latest book.¹³ Ada Colau's government undoubtedly represents what remains invisible in the promotion of the “winning” metropolitan territories, whereas a polarization of urban society is occurring. Deglobalizing Barcelona means to tell the other history that would otherwise be completely overshadowed by the self-fulfilling prophecies of the “winning” metropolis. It means to rewrite the historiography of the city to the benefit of the invisible minorities. As we have seen, it also means promoting other historical characteristics of the city, such as the social revolution of 1936, which was in the minds of all those interviewed; that is, a different foundation than the history of the post-Franco transition. In opposition to globalization, it gives prominence to the history of municipalism in Barcelona and to the associative and political vitality of the neighborhoods.

There is a definite return to local concerns in the *Barcelona en comú* government, which makes us reflect on a possible fascination for the local, as the place for the “natural” development of democracy, especially in Spain, where the forces of determination present at the national level must be put into the context of the history of local autonomies. It makes us reflect on the deglobalization of the city in terms of closing borders, a localism that would ultimately raise fears about international issues. That is often the analytical and critical horizon that can be seen when regionalisms emerge in Europe. For example, in the case of figures such as Pasqual Maragall who wanted to resuscitate the myth of a free Barcelona, Georges Frêche who tried to resuscitate *Septimanie* in France, and Massimo Cacciari who reminded people of the virtues of Venetian forms of government in the age of the Most Serene Republic, thereby reactivating the Medieval myth of the autonomy of urban governments in Europe.¹⁴ “Tourismophobia” would thus be a term, which, according to Manuel Delgado, could lead to “touristophobia” and its negative xenophobic consequences.¹⁵ In this process, points of view become muddled, with demands for Catalan independence, others against capitalism, criticism about a desire to remain isolated and contempt for other places. This question provided food for thought in the discussions we had with our interviewees, and made us attentive to the question of new forms of circulation, beyond the local level—movements of knowledge, people, and episteme within *Barcelona en comú*—, as well as to the emergence of another transnational scene.

Between Here and Elsewhere: The Internationalization of Municipal Government

The professional and activist experiences in Latin America of those we interviewed¹⁶ are

¹² Jordi Borja i Sebastià, *Barcelona: un modelo de transformación urbana, [1980-1995]*, United Nations Urban Development Programme Oficina Regional para América Latina y El Caribe, (Quito, Ecuador: PGU-LAC, 1995). On the other hand, in 2009, he published a retrospective study that was critical of this idea that Barcelona was a model: Jordi Borja i Sebastià, *Luces y sombras del urbanismo de Barcelona*, (Barcelona: Editorial UOC, 2009). From 1983 to 1995, Jordi Borja was the deputy mayor in charge of international relations.

¹³ David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, (London, New York: Verso, 2012).

¹⁴ Patrick Le Galès, *European cities. Social conflict and governance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Manuel Delgado, « Turistofobia », *El País*, July 12, 2008.

¹⁶ Laura Perez went to South America in 2008, where she worked for UN Women and other organizations on gender-based issues among indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian mountains, and then in Bolivia, El

particularly interesting in terms of understanding these theoretical and political circulations, and the development, still in its early stages, of new transnational political networks and movements which include Barcelona. All of these circulations result in the construction of scenes for political and social action at various scales, which make it possible to increase the number of spaces for individual and collective engagement, particularly thanks to the social networks. The multiple identities of the members of *Barcelona en comú* (political parties, social movements, and citizen-activist supporters) make it a party that is not very traditional. According to Joan Subirats, “It has a more IKEA identity, more modular. You are here one moment, and elsewhere another. That has to do with Internet and the conception of hackers. You can create a group, and just after divide it, you can move to join forces with others, unite around a project, and then divide up again.” The traditional and exclusive militant loyalty to the Party has now been replaced by a belonging to political networks that are at the same time local, regional, national, and transnational. The progressive creation of a network that reaches beyond the local level can already be found in a network of cities won over in Spain to the social movements, citizen-based platforms, and *Podemos: Ahora Madrid*, the citizens united platform; *Marea Atlántica* in La Corogne; *Valencia en comú*; *Zaragoza en Común*, *Por Cadiz si se puede*, and others. Beyond these considerations, it is Barcelona’s position within a network of refuge-cities that illustrates the internationalization of municipal governments, as well as the meetings bringing together intellectuals, activists, and elected officials based on their opposition to the international, national, and European policies that follow the rules set by the Troika (the European Central Bank, European Commission, and the International Monetary Fund).

It is probably within the pan-European, anti-austerity political movement, Diem25, founded by the philosopher Srečko Horvat, and inspired by Yanis Varoufakis’s Manifesto, that *Barcelona en comú* intends to get involved in the sphere of international or at least European action. Ada Colau is one of the founding members of this political movement, and her First Deputy Mayor, Girardo Pisarello, has published a book of dialogues with Yanis Varoufakis,¹⁷ according to whom “meetings must be held to discuss European democracy in all European cities.” In his speech to launch the Diem25 movement at the Volksbühne Theater in Berlin on February 9, 2016, Varoufakis declared that “The city council is at the heart of democracy,” and that “what Europe needs is a veritable network of the same kind of ‘rebel cities.’” Tracing back the historical development of urban struggles since the Paris Commune, in his most recent book, David Harvey gives credit to this historiography of urban, anti-capitalist movements demanding human rights. In his genealogy, he sketches out a historical map at the global scale: Barcelona in 1936, Prague and Paris in 1968, Cordoba in 1969, alterglobalist or antiglobalist gatherings (Seattle in 1999), and concludes by studying the movement of squares (Syntagma, Tahrir, Puerta del Sol) and the protests in Oaxaca and Cochabamba.¹⁸

In this way, the circulations between the Latin American political experiences, which were transmitted to Europe by a generation of student-militants and young professionals who went there for training, and the organization of a new transnational level of municipal experiences like *Barcelona en comú*, ultimately confirms a “return of European cities” through political action networks working from and in the local territories. *Barcelona en comú* seeks to share its local

Salvador, and Guatemala. Carlos Marcias, who was at that time studying political science in Barcelona, and is today the PAH spokesperson, travelled in Central America in 2011, where he met different social movement activists, which would subsequently strengthen his commitment to the PAH. Susanna Segovia is on the executive management team of *Barcelona en comú*. She studied journalism, before completing a master’s degree in Cooperation and Development, during which she travelled to Ecuador to study the issues of participative democracy and leadership training, notably for *Pachacutic*, the political arm of the indigenous movement. Iolanda Fresnillo is a member of the DESC Observatory, on the basis of her engagement in the citizens network for foreign debt cancellation (based on the Ecuadorian experience), and she supports *Barcelona en comú*. She told us how she joined the drop the debt movements that were gaining importance in Spain in the late 1990s, based on her experience in the movements that campaigned against the debt plaguing southern countries.

¹⁷ Yanis Varoufakis and Girardo Pisarello, *Un plan para Europa*, (Barcelona: Icaria, 2016).

¹⁸ David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*.

experience and to take part in a transnational network that is being organized, based on a political grammar that includes issues linked to deglobalization conceived of as a joyful process. Between neo-municipalism and international political alternatives, a new political space has been organized, linking militants and intellectuals engaged in social critique, who, since the case of Barcelona, have shown us they *can* take the power.

Curating Images. Seven Photograms Paving the Way to an Assault on Institutions

In reaction to the results of this inquiry, Julia Ramírez Blanco chose to analyze seven artworks, which taken together or individually, enable us to see and to think about the reasons behind the crisis in Spain with their international implications, and then the protest movements and organizations that tried to respond to them by providing other visions, alternatives, and socio-political projects. Her analysis shows the role played by art as a historiographical “mirror” of the political, and also as a place where new forms and practices of activism and innovative political mechanisms are invented, while revealing the ties between the art world and militant political practices. In particular, she alludes to the general assembly, a mechanism explored by many artists throughout the world over the past decade.

Claire Fontaine, P.I.G.S. (2012)

This story begins with the economic crisis caused by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008. PIGS is the acronym that the International Monetary Fund would use in reference to the first countries that experienced a crisis: Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain. This term was, however, far from innocuous and it inspired various mobilizations against austerity during which demonstrators wore pig masks.

P.I.G.S. is also the title of a work that the Claire Fontaine collective “restaged” in various contexts (image 1 p.?). It is a map of these southern European countries hanging on a wall, and because it is made of matches appears to be three dimensional. Before it is unveiled to the public, somebody lights this geographic representation with a flamethrower. The videos show how Portugal and Spain, then Italy, and finally Greece burn. Using the flamethrower, the “scorcher” flares up the islands while the fire remains on the continental part as a red contour of incandescent embers. Once the flames have died, a black trace of the dense column of smoke remains on the wall. It is too late when the viewers enter the room. They can only make out the charred remains and see a video of the process, which according to the collective “defines the tragedy of the economic crisis.” Linked in its early stages to the Invisible Committee (the author of the famous essay *The Coming Insurrection*), Claire Fontaine and its members allude to the destruction linked to the crisis. Perhaps they also allude to the insurrections, linked to different forms of “austericide,” ranging from utopia to confrontations.

Cassie Thornton, Physical Audit (2012)

The economic crisis in southern Europe was closely linked to banking organizations. The North American artist Cassie Thornton incorporates the idea of auditing the debt into her work *Physical Audit* (image 2 p.?). In this project, a group of women enter banks offices and perform a choreography that opposes affective and corporeal elements to the aggressiveness of financial transactions. By touching objects such as ATMs, the women dust the banks, dirt being a sign of human presence. In a series of actions based on trust, they withdraw money collectively from ATMs, while the cardholder is blindfolded. In small groups, they ask the banks to open a collective account. At that moment, they also begin dancing while caressing different objects. These performances took place in different banks, almost every day for a month. These actions remind us of the performances of the activist collective Flo6x8, which also entered the banks to perform anti-capitalist Flamenco dances, one of which is called *Es que no hay crisis, se llama capitalismo* (There is no Crisis, Capitalism is its Name).

Marco Godoy, Reclamar el eco (2012)

In Spain, the major reaction in response to the crisis took place through what has become known nationally as the 15-M Movements, because the first erupted on May 15, 2011, when, after

a demonstration, a small group of people decided to camp out on Puerta del Sol Square, in Madrid. For almost one month, a complex encampment was set up there, forming a kind of city within the city. Organized according to the model of *okupados* (squatted social centers), a multitude of commissions and work groups held meetings on the Square focusing on pragmatic, political, and cultural issues. Coro 15M was one of these groups.

In his video *Reclamar el eco*, the Spanish artist Marco Godoy brings together a chorus of activists in the conference room of the Law School at the Complutense University of Madrid (image 3 p.?). In this royal hall, the group forms an ensemble that seems to be from another age. It then begins to sing. The slogans shouted in the streets since the beginning of the economic crisis ring out against the Baroque music adapted for the work: “que no nos representan” (you don’t represent us), “se va a acabar la paz social” (social peace is coming to an end), “no tenemos miedo” (we are not afraid).

Oliver Ressler, Take the Square (2012)

When Godoy shot his video, the occupation or takeover of public squares had spread, first to all of Spain, and then throughout the world. The video installation by the Austrian artist Oliver Ressler, broadcast on three different channels, focuses on certain aspects of the general assemblies after the encampments in New York, Athens, and Madrid (image 4 p.?).

Through interviews of militants from the 15-M, Syntagma Square, and Occupy Wall Street movements, Ressler’s movie shows us the discussions of work groups that speak directly in front of his camera. Their reflections take up theoretical issues, such as horizontal power and forms of organization, as well as the means for producing social change. As an artist linked to the mobilizations, Ressler affirms that his work “seeks to contribute to improving the organizational knowledge of the movements and to translating the processes between these places in transition.”

Peter Sloterdijk, Gesa Mueller von der Haegen, and Dierk Jordan, Pneumatic Parliament (2005)

This sense of permanent debate was one of the main characteristics of the different forms of mobilization leading up to the occupation of public squares. The metaphor of democracy as an agora can be expressed through works like *Pneumatic Parliament*, which was designed by Peter Sloterdijk, Gesa Mueller von der Haegen, and Dierk Jordan (image 5 p.?). This object is an inflatable edifice that can be used anywhere in the world to house parliamentary meetings. Its light structure would enable it to be transported easily, and it has a 160-person capacity. According to its description, “the Pneumatic Parliament can provide the architectural conditions required for democratic processes in 24 hours.” Even if the project is a bit ironic in the current context, it can be interpreted as a means for pointing out the shortcomings of the democratic system today.

Las Agencias, Protective Wear for Demonstrators, Ready-to-Revolt Series (2001)

Not without paradoxes, one of the consequences of this cycle of mobilizations was political institutionalization. In a certain sense, we can also say that institutional experimentation in the field of art preceded its incorporation into politics. One of the first examples in Spain took place in Barcelona, in the framework of the *Las Agencias* project, organized in collaboration with the MACBA (contemporary art museum) (image 6 p.?).

In 2000, a group of activists worked with the museum in the goal of creating objects and organizational networks that could mobilize people in the context of the anti-globalization movement. These activists set up the local chapter of Indymedia, made shields and protective clothing, and created signs that would flood the city to prepare for the protests they wanted to organize for the 2001 IMF meeting. Even if the IMF meeting could ultimately not be held in Barcelona, the mobilizations were nonetheless organized in order to use the objects made by *Las Agencias*, which resulted in the police actually charging on the demonstrators in the museum. Although it ended in conflict, this experience was perhaps one of the first occasions that enabled activism to imagine a way of incorporating its goals and ways of taking action into the context of a public institution. Ada Colau, the future mayor of Barcelona for the *Barcelona en comú* party, was one of the members of *Las Agencias*.

Shaun Slifer, Just Seeds art collective, Teach History from Below (2015).

In this process of politicizing and reflecting on activist practices in themselves, most of the studies and other documents were prepared by the participants themselves. In this setting, the idea of activist research emerged, because the different voices could not hide the fact that they were part of the history they were telling. As an imperative, Shaun Slifer, who was in the art collective Just Seeds ([image 7 p.?](#)), exhorted participants to: “Teach history from below.”

Decentering

The encounter and dialogue, initiated through the processes involved in conducting and writing an inquiry, between a sociologist and an art historian, will have enabled us to experience the decentering involved in any new research approach. This decentering was made possible by the different phases of the inquiry, and by the playful processes of listening, transcription, and translation. It is a decentering also produced through the eyes of art.

Our meeting constitutes a fundamental questioning of history, of how it is written and reconstructed, its ways of approaching events, its corpuses and biases, as well as how it is publicized. Choosing to reconstruct the “institutional leap” made by activists who were elected to office, based on an inquiry that gave preference to personal accounts, made the sociologist in this study reflect on the role she chose to take on—as a public letter-writer, journalist, or official historiographer of the new party? In this history, the field of art occupies a position that is definitely not external. Julia Ramírez Blanco writes about certain activist processes invented in art world institutions, such as the *Las Agencias* initiative at the MACBA, where important figures, closely linked to the new political party *Barcelona en comú*, can be found bustling around and preparing themselves for action. Art, of course, raises questions and makes commentaries, but when friendship also comes into play, it can provide specific tools needed to express the concerns of these political and social movements and the issues they address. From this point of view, the field of art does not neglect to work on history from the overlapping perspectives of the intimate and the political, and political commitment based on affect. After having engaged in this interdisciplinary dialogue, reflecting on the place of friendship, at the border of the intimate and the political and of the arts and the human and social sciences, would require us to reflect back on the origins of a political group founded upon a friendly relationship and the same engagement in social movements. “Friends,” “camarades,” “brothers,” and “*compañeros*”: all of these words elicit reflections on forms of political associations, which, according to the contexts, are publicly acclaimed, alluded to, or instead concealed and discredited. Reflecting on friendship, means in this context rethinking “*philia*” as the first step in forming a political group as Aristotle presents it in *Book 8 of Nicomachean Ethics*,¹⁹ or to consider it, on the contrary, as something suspicious or even deviant, because it would be, for example, an opaque and illegitimate element undermining republican equality. Whereas the human and social sciences have to a large extent failed to account for the role of friendship, either because it does not seem to be an apprehendable social phenomenon, or because it is considered to constitute a bias, we could envision the places and practices of the arts as the means that can grasp and recreate the immanent organization of political action entailed by friendship.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, Books VIII and IX*, trans. Michael Pakuluk (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).