

MAKING DO:
AGENCY AND OBJECTIVE CHANCE
IN THE PSYCHOGENETIC PORTRAITS OF JAUME XIFRA.

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Art has been traditionally marginal in the interest of social anthropologists. But in the last years it has come to the center of the theoretical debate in the discipline. This is often attributed to the single-handed influence of Alfred Gell (1998, 1999). Gell's basic contention is that we shouldn't look at art works simply as cultural symbols or texts, but as social agents. This radically unconventional approach has allowed a whole new generation of anthropologist to have a very innovative look at art - for example in the work of Octavi Rofes (2003, 2006).

On the other hand, contemporary artists and curators are increasingly interested in the discourse of Anthropology as a means to rethink their own practice. What has been called "relational art" (Bourriaud 2000) engages artists and public in events of exchange and reciprocity that become works of art in their own right. In Barcelona in the last years, artists like the 22A group (Mitrani et al. 2004) and curators like Rosa Pera (2006) have worked on the political implications of this approach to art as an event of social exchange, addressing issues of immigration, public space and real estate speculation,

Both ideas- that art works can have agency and that art can be an act of exchange have developed independently, but they are very close; in fact both have been inspired by the seminal text of Anthropology, Mauss' "The Gift". However, so far no active dialogue has been established between the new anthropology of art and contemporary practices of relational art².

The objective of this article is to initiate this dialogue, discussing the mutual relevance of anthropology and contemporary art, and the common ascendancy in Mauss

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2 In fact I first addressed this issue in a previous paper (Sansi 2002a). This paper is actually the continuation of that previous one, developing its theoretical implications much further.

is indisputably central to this end. But for that end we should go back to the sentence with which I have started the article: “Art has been traditionally marginal in the interest of social anthropologists.” Is that right in deed? Maybe it is not for all traditions of Anthropology. Ethnology and Surrealism were strictly related in its origins in France, and one of the things that brought them together was precisely the work of Mauss. The mutual influence of ethnology and surrealism should not be underestimated: it is not only visible in peculiar figures like Leiris, but also in sacred cows like Lévi-Strauss: the notion of “objective chance”, for example, is central to Levi-Strauss’ argument of the “logics of the concrete” in *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962).

If we want to set in motion a dialogue between anthropology and contemporary art, we should start by recognizing their common origins. In a final instance, what brings them together is a systematic doubt of the ontological distinction between people and things. This has been more clearly brought to light by recent theories of agency and relational esthetics, but it is implicit since their very foundation. In this paper, I will argue that surrealist notions of the “found object” and “objective chance” are in fact central not only to contemporary art, but also to the anthropology of art. The notion of “objective chance” can help us articulate theories of agency and relational esthetics in a single frame. As an example of the relevance of this approach, I will present the work of an artist, Jaume Xifra, with whom I have been working in the last years in a number of projects.

Agency

In *The Gift*, Mauss says that “On se donne en donnant” (Mauss, 1950: 227), one gives one’s self while giving. With that expression Mauss implied that social persons may not be just single minds in single bodies, but they can be constituted by an ensemble of elements, including bodies, things, names, that may be physically detached from one another while remaining the *same*.

These maussian discussions of ‘person’ and ‘gift’ have been reassumed and extraordinarily developed by Marilyn Strathern in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), where she introduces the notion of the ‘partible person’. Strathern affirms that “objects are created not in contradistinction to persons but out of persons.”(1988:172). Through gifts, people give a part of themselves. They are not something that *stands* for them, a symbol: but they are “extracted from one and absorbed by another.”(Strathern 1988: 178). This continuity between people and things is what she calls a ‘mediated exchange’, as opposed to the unmediated exchange of commodities, which is based in a fundamental discontinuity between people and things (Strathern 1988:192).

Alfred Gell developed further the idea of the “partible person” in *Art and Agency* (1998). Works of art can be seen as persons “because as social persons, we are present not just in our singular bodies, but in everything in our surroundings which bears witness to our existence, our attributes, and our agency” (Gell 1998: 103). This could be true of many kinds of things, and in fact many of the cases Gell uses are objects of magic, like parts of the body or pictures used in voodoo sorcery (“voodoo”) or religious idols. For Gell this is not only an exotic belief of Hindu priests and Voodoo sorcerers, on the contrary he affirms that works of art, in particular contemporary works of art, are the more accomplished objectifications of human agency. Gell’s proposal is to look at works of art, and objects used by humans in general, as indexes of agency. Indexes of agency are the result of intentions: “Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an “intention” lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of “agency” (Gell 1988:17). To have intentions means to have a mind. The “life” we attribute to things, and works of art in particular, is the result of a process of *abduction* or indirect inference of a “mind” in a thing.

Gell’s proposition is very courageous in many senses, because it confronts directly the interpretative/deconstructive tradition that has dominated Anthropology for many decades. He is not looking at art either as a “language”, an abstract code whose relation to the world is arbitrary. He is not looking at what objects symbolize, what they stand for, how they can be read as “texts” to understand a social “context”. He is looking at works of art and things in general as actors, as participants in social action. Gell has an extremely anti-intellectualist idea of “representation”: art works can be representations, yes, but also in the sense of ambassadors, heralds- tokens of a distributed agency that carry forward its intentions through time and space. What is central is not what they “represent” in the sense of what they symbolize or make reference to, but if this representation is effective – if they bring forward the interests, the objectives, the actions of the person they are an extension of. What matters is not what they stand for, but what they do.

In this sense, he is not saying that the artwork is just a “distributed agent” of the artist. He goes further than that: artworks can contain several different agencies- from the artist, to the person represented or the person who commissioned it, to the person who bought it, to the curator that is displaying it in a context- an art work can be a “trap of agencies” some times contradictory, some times complementary (1999).

Gell has fallen like fresh water in the field of the Anthropology of Art and in Anthropology in general. Many of the anthropological studies of art before Gell rumbled around issues of identity politics, questioning the legitimacy of certain forms of representation, using artworks as excuses or examples through which one could explain a political

and social context. There was nothing wrong with that, but the idea that art is not just a symbol to be decoded, but also a trap of agencies, has stimulated radically different studies of art. Looking at the life history of s Muntadas' *CEE project*, Rofes(2003) is not just elucidating what does the piece represent or symbolize for the author or what it can explain as a "text" about a certain political- cultural "context", but how through time and space it has accumulated representations, entrapped agencies, in ways that may not be even foreseen in its origin. As Rofes convincingly argues in this volume (Rofes 2006), the idea that art works can contain different agencies fosters our understanding of works of art not simply as extensions of an individual creator, or even a single cultural tradition- but they can also be seen as sites of mediation between individuals and cultures. In this sense, Rofes is certainly going much further than what Gell had envisioned.

Jaume Xifra is a Catalan artist of the same generation that Muntadas- in fact they are close friends. I have been working with him since February 2002, when he asked me to participate as an anthropologist in his project in the Centre d'Art Santa Mónica, in Barcelona. The project consisted in organizing a survey of the opinions that the visitors had about the center. A team of students of the University of Barcelona, under my supervision, had to collect the opinion of the visitors These opinions should be analyzed and organized in a number of ideas, or concepts, which would describe the center. Once defined, the artist would translate these concepts into forms, working with a system of emblematic transposition- through which he would make the "psychogenetic portrait" of the center (see Xifra 2002; Sansi 2002a).

In the following months, Xifra organized a second project in Barcelona, at the Metrònom gallery. This time the objective of the show was to display an ensemble of 10 portraits of people from Barcelona who would in a way represent the city. I coordinated another team of students of the University of Barcelona, who chose the subjects of the research, interviewed and filmed them. The final portrait was a result of the discussion between the ethnographer and the artist on the person. In exchange of their participation, the people interviewed were given a signed copy of their portrait- and the interviewers were paid for their research. The whole relationship interviewer-interviewee- artist was signed in a contract.

It is not easy to describe these psychogenetic portraits. They are not figurative: they do not resemble the physical appearance of the person. But they are not abstract either: they are made of ensembles of emblematic figures that represent the character of people and things. These ensembles of emblems represent the "interior", and not the "outside", the appearance: they are "psychic" portraits, portraits of the mind, of the soul. But they are not either a form of writing: the emblems are not ideograms that transpose a discourse about the person. This is not a language, but plastic forms laid

out on a space. These emblems have a color, a direction, and a position over a grid, a symbolic space and time, between hot and cold, the conservative and the progressive. However, the grid is not either a statistical graph, because it is not based on scientific data; psychogenetic portraits do not represent their object in universal and scientific terms, but in the particular terms of the object itself.

Xifra's project could seem extremely ambitious: to invent a new system of representation! But Xifra's objective is not to talk about the postmodern "crisis of representation". His objective is more basic and, as such, even more ambitious than that: he is encompassing the object of representation in the representation. Xifra, the artist, builds the system and provides the means. But it is the object of representation who decides what and how they are going to be represented. In this manner, Xifra rejects the critical question: who legitimates the representation? In this case, the answer is clear, simple: the object of representation itself.

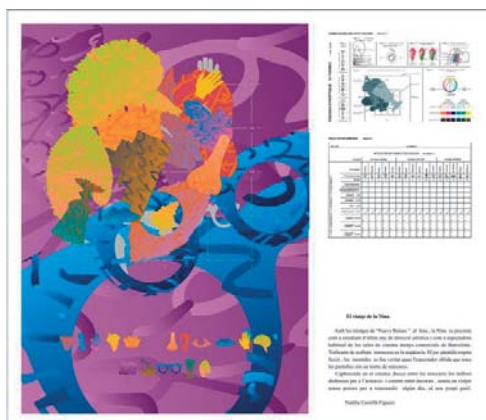


Figure 1, Nina, *Metrònom* April 2002.

In Santa Mònica, the objective was not painting a figurative portrait of the building, but to portray the social life of the building, through the people who were using it. In *Metrònom*, the city as a whole was represented by 10 people, who were interviewed and filmed by ethnographers and then transposed in the portraits. In the show, the portraits were complemented by the filmed interview and a short text of the ethnographer on the person (see Figure 1)

In these cases, Xifra delegated a part of his authority to the anthropologist, and through him to the subject that is represented. The relation between the artist who

delegates, the ethnographer, and the object of representation is a social relation formalized through a contract.

Xifra's work could be seen as a curious example of the art work as a "trap of agencies", or a trap of minds, in Gell's terms. It is a portrait not only of a "mind" or a "spirit", but of several agencies in interaction in a living space; in this case the people portrayed, the ethnographers who made the survey, the anthropologist who coordinated them, and the artist who transposed their work.

And yet it could be said that the final result is not only the result of a series of "abducted" agencies, either singular or collective. The artwork is something more—and something *else* than the abducted agency of the people involved in the project. I remember the first impression I had when I saw the portrait of the Centre d' Art Santa Mònica. It is indeed an incredibly bizarre painting. In a strange way it reminded me of the bottom of the sea: it was deeply blue in the background and the forms in the foreground were like corals and sea weeds. This made sense for me: in a way I could see the discussions that we had during the course of the definition of the concepts transposed in the figures. Two contradictory ideas emerged: "popular" and "elitist". On the one hand, the center was popular because it is free and in a convenient location in the center of Barcelona. On the other hand it was elitist because the art works displayed are extremely contemporary and often incomprehensible for a part of the public. An image of the bottom of the sea seemed to incarnate this contradiction: the sea is at once open, accessible for everyone in the coast, and full of hidden, inaccessible mysteries in its depths (Sansi 2002a).

I recognize that this may be a silly metaphor. But the important point is that this impression is something beyond the description of the network of agencies it contained; for me it was an effect of the painting itself. There is always something new, unexpected in an artwork. There is something that goes beyond a theory of "agency" here: this is not just a transposition of persons or agencies. What is this "something else", this "new thing"? Perhaps the exchange, the social relation? Maybe it is not just a network of agencies but an objectification of social relations?

Relational Art

Nicolas Bourriaud has described "relational art" as "Art taking as its theoretical horizon the whole of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" (2002a:14). In *Relational Esthetics*, Bourriaud talks about the work of artists like Félix Gonzalez-Torres or Rirkrit Tiravanija. Gonzalez-Torres made piles of candy that resembled minimalist sculpture;

but his intention was to allow people take the candy away, therefore transforming the installation by taking tokens of it. Tiravanija's installations are made of a very simple, transportable set of tools, like camping tools that he uses to cook food. The real object of the installation is invite people to eat and talk to each other, to build a social relation. For Bourriaud, art nowadays is a *situation of encounter* (Bourriaud 2002:18) That is to say: "All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or might be conveyed by it." The form of the art work is in the relations it establishes: to produce a form is to create the conditions for an exchange. In other terms, the form of the artwork is in the exchange with the public.

In these terms, the artist becomes more a mediator, a person that fosters and provides situations of exchange, than a creator of objects. For Bourriaud, relational art practices are looking to establish particular social relations for a particular people; the artist tries to keep a personal contact with the public that participates in the exchange, fostering what he calls a "friendship culture" (Bourriaud 2002a:32). According to Bourriaud, the objective of these practices is to offer an alternative to the mass production of the culture industries, the society of spectacle which transforms culture and art in commodities addressed to an impersonal, undifferentiated and massive public. Relational art on the other hand would not see the public as a passive consumer but as an active partner. Latter on Bourriaud has complemented his writings on relational art with a second book on the subject, *Postproduction* (2002b). If *Relational Esthetics* was discussing practices that involve interpersonal relations, as opposed to the impersonal relations of consumption produced by mass culture, *Postproduction* discusses artistic practices that involve processes of re-appropriation of this mass culture, or better, the means of production of the culture industries, to produce relational art forms – or simply, social relations. Technologies like sampling and the internet have made available a wide range of cultural products that can be re-appropriated, transformed, and re-distributed, autonomously from the formal market of intellectual property and copyright laws- or better, in direct contraposition of it. The culture industries paradoxically provide the spaces through which artistic practices can contradict its foundations on property laws.

The relational esthetics that Bourriaud is describing, these forms of exchange that create personal relations, friendship, are in many ways familiar to anthropologists. That is what Marcel Mauss called the "gift". This model of exchange would be opposed to the model of the commodity, in the sense that commodity values are not personal values, but the result of a universal equivalent: the value of a commodity is perfectly external to the subjects of exchange, and this ensures the impersonality of this exchange. There is no necessary personal relation between the seller and the

buyer. The commodity does not produce personal relations; it only renews the validity of a contract, the contract that ensures its conventional, external value. Gifts, on the other hand, are a form of exchange in which we give something with a personal value (something ours) without asking anything in exchange, to produce something new, something more, essentially a personal link between people who are in fact giving part of themselves by exchanging values.

Relational art can certainly be seen in the terms described by “The Gift”, as a sphere of personal exchange through which people create society. And yet which society are they creating? This society could be restricted to the artist and his friends, an elite, not very differently to what Bourdieu (1994) describes as the typical movement of distinction of the cultural field in regards to the culture industries.

If the artist really wants to make a “social” statement, it is clear that his activity as a social mediator has to go a bit beyond his immediate sphere of activity. In this sense, ethnography becomes an invaluable resource. Ethnography is precisely creating a sphere of social exchange based on personal relations with a community of total strangers; nothing more, nothing less. It is not at all fortuitous that one of the first things that anthropologists discovered when they started doing ethnography was “the gift”. Ethnography is based on the gift: the creation of situations of social exchange that may end in personal relations between people that previously were total strangers. As a result, the ethnographer somehow appropriates the culture of the other: the knowledge of the other provided by ethnography is a means of understanding the anthropologist’s own culture.

Relational art has to involve ethnography if it wants to have a social relevance. In Barcelona, the exhibitions organized by Rosa Pera or the 22A collective have demonstrated a clear engagement with ethnography. In the project *Jardín del Cambalache*, Colectivo Cambalache and Rosa Pera organized a whole network of reciprocity in the pation of the Fundació Tapias. The project was the result of an ethnographic research on the *colonos*, old immigrants from the countryside who came to work in the industrial sector in Barcelona and who, after they retired, cultivate plots of land in the wastelands of the periphery of the city, most of the times without permission. One of these *colonos* was invited to transform the backyard of the Fundació Tapias in a *borta*, a space where to cultivate vegetables. The vegetables were then offered to the public in exchange of some object- whatever they wanted (see Sansi 2002b).

These relational practices have also been developed by the 22a collective (Mitrani 2004; Sansi 2000; 2002b), taking a more clearly political stance, stretching the definition of artist as “mediator”. One of the members of 22A, Pep Dardanyà, has developed several projects with African immigrants. One of his projects, “Modul d’

atenció personalitzada”, presented at the Palau de la Virreina in Barcelona, reproduced the space of an immigration office, in which the immigrant was occupying the place of the immigration officer, and the public was taking the position of the immigrant. Then the immigrant would explain his trip from Africa to Europe to the people sitting in front of him. The “relation” here, is not just taking candy or eating noodles, but something more politically charged.

In another project, in a room at the Metrónom art gallery- a room called “Africa”, Dardanyà presented the “Sucursal” (“local office”) project. One of the immigrants he worked in for the previous project became his friend. And he introduced Dardanyà to his church - the Pentecostal Church of Ghana. The church is at a walking distance from the art gallery, and yet they are in totally different worlds. Dardanyà’s plan was to open a “local office” of the Church inside the Gallery. It consisted, very simply, of a desk with information about the church, a map that showed how to go from the gallery to the church, and a video of a mass.

The objective of artists like Dardanyà is to question and criticize certain social institutions and the divisions between them through artistic practice. By transforming the art space in an immigration office and a church Dardanyà is asking which the limits between these places are. By forcing us to confront directly people who wouldn’t necessarily talk to each other in the street he is forcing us to face the social barriers that divide us in an unexpected manner.

We could question the “seriousness of the anthropological method” of these projects: they may not be based on a thorough, systematic fieldwork³. But this is beside the point, since question here is not the truth of the representation: these are works of art. Colectivo Cambalache or 22A are not pretending to represent the “colonos” or the immigrants in the whole, “true” complexity of their lives. Their objective is different: they are proposing a situation of encounter, of unprecedented social exchange between two different realities that don’t normally meet. What they are interested in, after all, is in the encounter; it is the truth produced by the encounter what they are looking for.

3 I am not saying that the field work of relational artist is “scientific” enough nor on the contrary, that anthropologists should learn from artists and be more innovative in their forms of representation. These are methodological questions that don’t have much sense- since in our society, art is art and it’s made with installations, performances and events in museums and galleries, and anthropology is anthropology and it is made in universities writing papers. Trying to mix the two is a noble endeavor, but I have doubts about its outcomes. In any case, “methodological” discussions often are distractive from the real issue- that besides the methods, it is the questions what art and anthropology have in common: and the question is how objects and people mix, not how art and anthropology mix. What we need is dialogue, not necessarily “experimental ethnography” (we probably had enough of that already).

The question of encounter is central also in the work of Xifra. Although not as directly political as Dardanyà, both artists are choosing to actuate as mediators, to give their space to others, transforming the public in the author of the work. Xifra is not just interested in making an objectified work of art in itself, but in “making do”, making others produce something for themselves; and yet to make them reflect, through this method, on things that maybe they would not have seen otherwise. These new visions, in their turn, can help them see themselves in another way. This element of relational esthetics is especially evident in his later show in Girona, *Criptus*. There, Xifra simply allowed the public unrestricted access to the psychogenetic grid, through a questionnaire in a computer. The result was printed out and then posted on the wall. (Figure 2)

«Making do», the final result is neither just a transposition of the «mind» of the artist, nor of the person represented: it is both, and at the same time, something else, something that is brought about as a result of the encounter, the process of mediated exchange.



Figure 2. Criptus, Girona.

Talking about “making do” and “mediated exchange”, I am making reference not just to Strathern (1988) but also, and specially, to Bruno Latour (2001). For Strathern, a mediated exchange is an instance of distributed agency; but for Latour it is something else, it is an *event*- something that is not reducible to the sum of agencies that intervene in its production. Events are defined by their historicity- by the fact that there is a before and an after of the encounter; they bring about something new, something unexpected- the work of art in this case. This event is not reducible to the intentions of the agents, because these intentions- if they ever existed in the first

place- are mediated by techniques. And these techniques, in their own turn, “make do” unexpected things, that are never reducible to intentions. In this sense we can look at art works as places of transcultural mediation, as Rofes suggests (2006), but always keeping in mind that this mediation takes the form of an encounter- in which something unprecedented is objectified.

Each psychogenetic portrait is the result of an unprecedented encounter between the artist, the public, and the technique. Never do two psychogenetic portraits look the same, even if they involve the same people: they are unique events.

Therefore, it may not be enough to talk about agency, or about exchange, to understand art: we also have to understand works of arts as events. And to understand art works as events, we have to go back to the very foundations of modern art, well before relational art became fashionable: we have to go back to surrealism.

Objective Chance

One of the essential axioms of surrealism and the avant-garde in general is the emphasis they give to art as encounter, an event, more than an object. For Duchamp, art is in the eyes of the beholder. What is important from then on is not the material “production” of art, the actual work and craftsmanship of the artist-artisan that builds objects, paintings or sculptures, but the event in which the artist finds the objects that move him. Aesthetic value is an outcome of this encounter, it is revealed through this encounter. What is important is the actual relation that is established between artist and object, and what comes out of it, more than the fact that the artist “made” the object. The value of the object, more than in terms of production or making, could be described in terms of appropriation. Which is not necessarily the same as consumption: appropriating the objects, the artist is not necessarily buying or acquiring something, but just recognizing something of one’s own in the object, recognizing what is strange as familiar, and the object as a part of the subject.

This shift from production to appropriation allowed artists to abandon the circumscribed spaces of institutional art (the museum, the gallery, the workshop) to look for these encounters in the street nearby or in a foreign country. It is not so important if these events happen in a flea market, or a tropical island, what is more important for the avant-garde artist is the *outcome* of these events, their revelatory nature. These things, these *objets trouvés*, or “found objects”, for Leiris come out of “these crisis moments of singular encounter and indefinable transaction between the life of the self and that of the world become fixed, in both places and things, as personal memories that retain a peculiar power to move one profoundly.” (Pietz 1985:12).

At that point Anthropology and Modern art shared a common project. The anthropological criticism of museum practice was based on a valorisation of context and events, and how they were irreducible to museographic objectification. After the ethnographic revolution of Boas and Malinowski, the work of an anthropologist was not to collect objects, but to experience events in context. The anthropological project can be understood also in terms of appropriation (Schneider and Wright 2006): the knowledge of the other provided by ethnography is a means of understanding the anthropologist own culture. The task is to describe the exotic as familiar, to render evident how our own culture can be incredibly strange. The surrealist project is in many ways complementary to this: the exotization of the familiar is one of the keys of surrealist practice.

Surrealist looked for the “magic that surrounds us” in their everyday life in Paris. These *objets trouvés* are not just objects of art, but objects of Magic. Interestingly enough, surrealist authors and anthropologists developed very similar theories of magic. In *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande* (1937), Evans–Pritchard described how magical thinking is not ignorant of the laws of nature, on the contrary, it knows that these are exceptional facts, but in this exceptionality it perceives an intentional correspondence between human and non-human (natural or spiritual) events. Magic does not question that tree branches fall because of natural laws, but magic asks, why then? And why did she go there? This connection does not deny natural laws, it only complements them.

Almost at the same time that Evans-Pritchard, in *L' amour Fou* (1937), Breton defines of “objective chance” as a correspondence between the natural and the human series of causality. These events of objective chance have a revelatory nature, in which the total is not only the sum of its terms. These events mark a before and an after in a personal (or general) history, since they bring to light something that wasn't clear before.

I started thinking about objective chance in the work of Xifra while I was working with him in our second project, *10 Retracts de Barcelona*. It was quite obvious for me, as the “anthropologist” that was coordinating the project, that the 10 portraits could never represent Barcelona in its true diversity. We were constrained by time, space, knowledge, numbers...Contingency. I accepted this fact as a part of the game; and in fact I came to understand that this was central to the game: the representation can never map the totality of the represented, but it is still a part of it; they system of representation always operates in terms of what Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*.

In *La pensée sauvage*, Lévi-Strauss introduced the metaphor of *bricolage* to address how the limits of our knowledge are in correspondence with the limits of our world. We can only work with the things we find in our way; the elements with we organize our world are necessarily “pre-concrete”, subject to contingency. This contingency forces us to adjust our project to our possibilities. “Once it is done”, says Lévi-Strauss,

the project “will be inevitably in disproportion with the initial intention (which is always, in any case, just a project); an effect that the surrealists rightly call “objective chance”(Lévi-Strauss 1962:35)

The objective chance that Lévi-Strauss finds in the savage mind is systematically applied in the work of Xifra. His portraits can be arbitrarily generated by starting up the program, like the combinatory books of Borges’ Babylon Library. But what is more definitely the result of objective chance is the final form of the portrait. As if the program had become the unconscious of the artist, organizing the sensory data of his experience, a sort of empty organ, a stomach that absorbs and structures, a fetish-machine.

The emblems look like they have been thrown on the graphic grid, like one throws the cards of Tarot or the cowry shells in the Oracle of Ifá, like cuttings or prints of a template (“pochoir”), creating a collage effect that is precisely central in what Lévi-Strauss calls the poetics of the bricoleur. Taking elements from here and there, the bricoleur builds an organized ensemble. This ensemble is the result of chance, but this chance is not seen as arbitrary, but necessary- as any signifying process; hence its objective character.

Again, it is in the *Criptus* show in Girona where these elements of objective chance are more developed in Xifra’s work. Instead of selecting a number of people to describe the city as a whole, *Criptus* leaves the computer opened to everybody’s access. The accumulation of portraits thus becomes a sort of collective and random landscape of the city.

Conclusion: art beyond agency.

In this article, I have proposed to explore three central questions in the Anthropology of Art: agency, relational esthetics, and objective chance, through the work of a contemporary artist, Jaume Xifra. I have tried to show how these three questions are strictly related, and how they can help us building an active dialogue between anthropologists and contemporary artists.

These three questions are linked by a common thread: since Mauss and the surrealists to Alfred Gell and relational art, anthropology and modern art have shared a critical approach to the ontological separation of things and people established by modern discourse. Discussing practices of magic and gift exchange, anthropologists and artists have always been interested in understanding how people can become things and things, people.

I started by addressing the issue of the distributed person and agency. The central idea of Gell’s distributed person is that we can extend our “person”, our social agency, beyond the borders of our actual body. These processes involve an exchange in the

terms exposed by Mauss in “The Gift”, through which we give ourselves while giving. The more elaborated examples of this process are works of art, in which we can perceive different agencies trapped in an object.

But are art works just traps of agencies? Is there something else in them? If we see art works simply as surrogates of human agency and intentionality, as “secondary agents”, we may be missing a part of the picture. A theory of agency, and a theory of the “mind” in more general terms, does not help us overcome the divide between persons and things in an ultimate instance, because things remain surrogate seconds to the primacy of the human “mind”- as primary origin of all social action, all social value. In an ultimate instance, is it enough to trace back the intentionalities that have produced an art work? Maybe we are more interested in is in the effects that the art work produces.

A theory of minds, intentions and agency is not enough to understand art. Maybe relational aesthetics can give a different account of its strange effects: if we look at art works as acts of encounter, we are taking a different perspective. We are not only interested in the origin of the artwork, but also in the social exchange it is producing. This exchange, however, is not just a contract- a symbolic social ritual that objectifies a partnership. It is also an event; something that produces something unprecedented. The object of exchange is not just a token of the other: it brings about something new. It has a historicity.

A theory of art based on the notion of the event has to be in many ways different to the notion of agency. One common misreading of structuralism is that it opposed structure to agency (Ortner 1984), when it fact what Lévi-Strauss was distinguishing was structure from event⁴. For Lévi-Strauss, the savage mind was constantly trying to encompass events into structure. What Lévi-Strauss didn’t discuss, though, was if these events would eventually change the structure. It was only a generation later that anthropologists like Sahlins’ (1981) argued that structures are constantly changed by the conjuncture in history: that by encompassing events into structures, these structures change. And so does history. Objective chance is that moment of uncanny encounter between the life of the world and the life of the self. An event in which a strange object reveals something that was hidden, or forgotten, repressed. And by this act of recovery, the self is changed. If we think about artworks as events, we can think about them as embodiments of structures of the conjuncture. As objects they are encompassed in the self, and by this act of encompassment, they transform the self.

Now, it may seem a bit pretentious to say that the psychogenetic portraits of Xifra change history. If we think of history in terms of revolutions, wars, catastrophes, and

⁴ the structure was not just an imposed “system” that didn’t allow any margin of agency to individuals.. This is a reductive reading of structuralism from a functionalist perspective, that has unfortunately survived structuralism.

miracles, it is indeed pretentious. But it is not so if we think that the small events which actually change history in the everyday life are most of the times imperceptible in the big picture. The small events of everyday life make the world change in the long run. The work of Xifra, regardless of its position in the grand narrative of art history, makes history with small words, by creating a whole new world in its own right- a world that is neither inside or outside of us, neither totally his or ours, not science nor poetry. It creates an intermediate, slightly disturbing middle space. In Barcelona, Girona and other places these intermediate spaces has been shared already by some people who have seen themselves through other eyes thanks to the psychogenetic method. It is difficult to say to what extent they have been moved, shocked, or changed by it, probably even for themselves. Probably for most this was just one small event that added up to their life histories. But maybe for some it helped seeing certain things in a different way: for example, contemporary art.

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Abstract

The anthropology of art has been radically renewed in the last decade with Alfred Gell's proposal of examining the agency of artworks. On the other hand, contemporary practices of "relational" art are increasingly inspired by anthropological theories of exchange and reciprocity. This article explores the mutual engagement of anthropology and contemporary art practices in the work of the Catalan artist Jaume Xifra. His work investigates the articulation of the questions of agency and reciprocity through a third element: objective chance.

Resum

Fer Fer: Agència i atzar objectiu en els retrats psicogenètics de Jaume Xifra. L'antropologia de l'Art ha estat radicalment renovada en l'última dècada per la proposta d'Alfred Gell d'adreçar l'"agència" de les obres d'art. Per altra banda, les pràctiques contemporànies d'art "relacional" estan cada cop més influïdes per teories antropològiques de l'intercanvi i la reciprocitat. Aquest article explora la implicació mútua de l'art contemporani i l'antropologia en l'obra de l'artista català Jaume Xifra. El seu treball investiga l'articulació de les qüestions de l'"agència" i la reciprocitat a través d'un tercer element: l'atzar objectiu.