



*NOMADISM, PERFORMATIVITY AND DEMOCRATIC
CRITICISM*

IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES

A project by Jesús Palomino.

DRAFT OF RESEARCH PLAN

By Jesús Palomino

DOCTORAL STUDIES PROGRAMME
FINNISH ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS
HELSINKY

RESEARCH TOPICS: NOMADISM, PERFORMATIVITY AND DEMOCRATIC CRITICISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES

ABSTRACT OF RESEARCH PLAN

The goal of the project is to analyze critically the links and interwoven effective relations of *nomadism*, *performativity* and *democratic criticism* in the field of contemporary art practices. It is a subject matter that interest me a big deal since I published a critical essay titled *Moving Around (On Nomadism and Contemporary Art practices)*. [1] It was a first critical attempt to relate physical displacement and travelling with *performative* modes of art production in relation to democratic conscious and *agency*.

This plan proposal is mainly based on my experiences and background as a visual artist.

The research plan is highly related to *Social Studies* approach to cultural production but, it is basically proposed by an artist working at the field of contemporary visual arts. Anyhow, the research is openly related to an important bulk of information and knowledge coming from the fields of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, Visual Studies and contemporary art theory and History.

The ambition of this research will be to render critical epistemological connections among those three important aspects of contemporary culture (*nomadism*, *performativity* and *democratic criticism*) in order to achieve a broader theoretical understanding of actual historical conditions in contemporary art practices.

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My projects are fashioned within the crossing of *Social Studies* research and the empowerment of *democratic criticism* at the field of contemporary art practices.

For several years now, I have been concerned with site-specific projects and *locational identity*. Since my aesthetics concerns have been related to places, sites, locations and communities where I have been invited to work, many of those art projects finally have become *social oriented*.

Each of those installations, video productions and specific art proposals were designed to act as an aesthetical comment on issues such as Human Rights, ecology, cultural dialogue and democratic criticism.

In many cases, I have confronted as an artist collective social struggles (for instance at Cameroon, Serbia, Venezuela, China, Texas, Spain, etc.). Since my art practice and its humble methods are not able to solve any real problem, I have conceived such projects, actions and installations as artistic tools capable to imagine ways of dealing with *suffering, stress, and oblivion*.

Some of my art projects emerge as creative actions (finally, no more than imaginative proposals) in the face of real current situations that demand urgent *reflection, resolution, and hopefully, transformation*.

NOMADISM

Faster and flower interchanges of information and commodities made possible to develop a new concept of contemporary *nomadism*. At the actual flow of globalized commodities interchanges, transportation, technology, global financial investments, communicational networks, international migrations movements, tourism, and so on and so forth; the figure of the artist has become a witness and an *actor* of his time.

Artists travel to work, to learn and to interchange with their new cultural circumstances and human environments. This nomadic approach to culture and sign production has converted the artist in a very sensitive and effective *actor* to translate the complex reality of *multiculturalism*.

Personally, I conceive artists as witnesses who take into account this challenging reality of globalization while generating his artworks critically. Actually, this contemporary approach to *nomadic practices* could be shared by many *social actors*, artists, scholars, economists, ONG's staff, etc. who work to confront critically any way of *domination*.

The research on *nomadism* could be oriented as follows:

1. How to conceive *critical travelling* meaningful for artistic production of signs and discourses?
2. From this mobile acting: How artists could afford effective insights on historical conditions through their practices?
3. Has *agency* a valuable role in contemporary art discourses and practices?

Related topics: Critical travelling, multiculturalism, cultural hybridation, epistemological turn, agency, human ecology, anthropological translation.

Related authors: Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Michel Maffesoli, Néstor García Canclini, Henri LeFebvre, Michel de Certeau, Nicolas Bourriaud and Joseph Stjeplitz.

PERFORMATIVITY

Act Speech Theory states that language has the possibility of *performing* meaning through a willful action using written texts, spoken words or even non verbal gestures. This revealing idea on language production was developed by John L Austin at the middle of the 50's. [2]

It is the intentional will of producing meaning through *action* that make *performativity* an affordable mode of language and sign production. Austin's *Performative Utterances* and *Act Speech Theory* were an effective tool for many social movements that struggled for their Rights. In fact, it helped on the construction of *identity* through the active expression, for instance, of Civil Rights movements at the USA, feminists, ecologists, anticolonialists, gays and lesbians, Afro-Americans, natives, etc. At the middle of the XX th. century, all those social movements of emancipation did their best to improve their conditions and free themselves from domination and antidemocratic practices. It was a collective achievement provoked by the emergency of a new political subjectivity.

Artists were at the front line of those social experiments that used *performativity* critically as a tool of social transformation.

The research on *performativity* could be oriented as follows;

1. In what different ways *performativity* has affected political and democratic practices?
2. What is it left of *performativity* transformational capability at the actual globalized cultural scene?
3. Are there any unexpected new forms of *performativity* in contemporary art? Have been

performativity removed from contemporary art practices?

Related topics: Act Speech Theory, performance, gender performativity, cultural emancipation, sign production, deconstruction.

Related authors: John L Austin, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Spivak and Hommi Bhaba.

DEMOCRATIC CRITICISM

My analytical approach to such a complex subject could be supported on these three main intellectual figures and works:

1. Karl Popper's "*The Open Society and Its Enemies*" [3] was one of the most ambitious critical attempts to set up a rigorous analysis on the dialectics of democratic processes. Popper's assessments on dictatorships and failed democracies still are considered fundamental critics for a complete understanding of contemporary recent History and politics. The book supposed a passionate defense of democratic freedom and *political liberalism*.
2. Edward W. Said in his essay "*Humanism and Democratic Criticism*" [4] conceives *critical consciousness* as an "*endless seeking of alternatives*". Said states that the aims of a genuine democracy should be to incorporate, emancipate, and enlighten individuals and society. *Self-knowledge* and *self-criticism* too should play a pivotal role on the maintenance and development of democracy.
3. "*Un nouveau paradigme*" [5] by French sociologist Alain Touraine. Touraine relates with a vibrant effort of analysis the end of the social paradigm. The idea of the *social* that we have known till the present has been vanished by a bunch of new historical and economical circumstances. We are now searching for new modes of acting and a renewed political subjectivity within a broader and expanded concept of worldwide democratic thinking. This reality of democracy should be applied to any cultural background and should be based on a flexible commitment to modernity, Human Rights and Cultural Rights.

The complex and multifaceted reality of *democratic criticism* in relation to *language sign production* and *visuality* could be attained as well with the help of many other thinkers and scholars that I consider important to grasp a rigorous insight on the subject. The list could be fulfilled with Hannah Arendt political essays on *totalitarianism*, Ernst Bloch essays on political and historical Hope, the research on *critical ethnocentrism* and *epistemological cultural turns* by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Souza, the proposal for a renewal of social horizons by Edgar Morin, etc.

Related topics: humanism, open society, postcolonialism, human rights, cultural rights, epistemologies, dominant culture and totalitarianism.

Related authors: Karl Popper, Ernst Bloch, Hannah Arendt, Edward W. Said, Alain Touraine,

The starting thesis of this draft of research plan is to define critically those epistemological connections among *nomadism*, *performativity* and *democratic criticism*. Those three categories coined by different disciplines (*nomadism* by ethnography and anthropology; *performativity* by linguistics and philosophy of language; and *democratic criticism* by sociology and Political Theory) have been used by other fields of research thanks to the nature of their conceptual power and intellectual potentiality to develop and structure new knowledge.

The recent History of those conceptual categories (*nomadism*, *performativity* and *democratic criticism*) has been closely interwoven, probably due to their richness and flowing connectivity. Those categories have demonstrated an appealing potential to perform language and sign production in relation to historical demands of emancipation and democratic development. Jumping from ethno-anthropology, *nomadism* became a tool for new utopian figures coined by philosophers, (Deleuze & Guattari) and then, useful for art theory (Nicolas Bourriaud, Néstor García Canclini, etc.) to explain how those utopian attitudes became real at the field of contemporary art practices on the hands of artists themselves. *Performativity* coming from linguistic and philosophy of language jumped into sociology and art practices becoming an effective tool for social movements struggling with identity construction and antidemocratic domination (Edward W. Said, Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, etc). Finally, *democratic criticism* have been used by political theory, sociology, comparative literature and humanism, philosophy, Communicational Studies, and of course, artists and contemporary art theory, as a repository of an immense bulk of knowledge and experiences coming from those disciplines and fields of research.

Those relates of jumping categories describe how knowledge travels from one field to another (in the same way that travel individuals and commodities); how some discourses can interweave to develop unexpected knowledge through emerging practices; and how, finally, a multi-faceted view on reality structures a more accurate understanding of epistemological processes.

I am convinced of transversal and comparative methods of research among knowledge and disciplines in order to achieve a richer account of Historical circumstances of art practice. I value as well the attempt to define rigorously the epistemological frameworks that operate on language and sign production within contemporary art practices.

This will be the ambition of the proposed thesis on *nomadism*, *performativity* and *democratic criticism* in contemporary art practices. A subject matter that I consider full of possibilities and potential intellectual achievements.

Sincerely yours.

J E S U S P A L O M I N O

Notes:

[1]. *“Moving Around (On nomadism and contemporary art practices)”*. An essay by Jesús Palomino. Los Sentidos Publisher House. November 2010. Only Spanish version available. [162 pages]. *Moving Around* is a critical essay and a travel book that narrates Jesús Palomino's reasoned account on his art projects showed at, for instance, Serbia, USA, Venezuela, Canada, Cameroon, China, Panama, Ireland, Brazil, Germany, etc. The book has 13 chapters and one epilogue on the issues of *critical travelling, artistic agency and democratic consciousness*.

[2]. *“How to do things with Words”*. John L. Austin. (1952), Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[3]. *“The Open Society and Its Enemies”*. Karl Popper. (1945) Routledge Classics. London and New York.

[4]. *“Humanism and Democratic Criticism.”* Edward W. Said. (2004). Columbia University Press.

[5]. *“Un nouveau paradigme. Pour comprendre le monde aujourd’hui.”* Alain Touraine. (2005). Fayard Editeur, Paris.

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A summary of the research plan would be presented as follows:

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Prologue of issues and general introduction.

Acknowledgements

NOMADISM

1. Utopia and Nomadism.
2. Critical travelling and *agency*.
3. Differences, inequality and disconnections on actual globalization multicultural processes.
4. Multiculturalism and sign production at the field of contemporary art practices.
5. Critical travelling and translation: Why an amplified epistemological approach to cultural production is needed?

PERFORMATIVITY

1. A seminal approach to language production: "How to do things with words" by John L. Austin.
2. *Speech Act Theory* and artist's *agency*.
3. When action generates signs: *performative* sign production and emancipation in contemporary art practices.
4. A brief and reasoned account of emancipatory artistic movements since the '60 till the Age of globalized Economy and finances.
5. How *performative utterances* can be applied for? Gender, race, and cultural struggles today.

DEMOCRATIC CRITICISM

1. “*The Open Society and Its Enemies*”. Karl Popper’s contribution to political theory.
2. The turn of the political subject.
3. Globalized struggles, Cultural Rights and subjectivity.
4. Politics of knowledge and democracy. Edward W. Said’s democratic criticism.
5. New cultural paradigms towards emancipation. Alain Touraine’s renewed concept of actor and
6. Politics of knowledge and *critical conscious* in contemporary art practices.

Conclusions.

Notes, bibliography and index.

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[1]. *Moving Around (On nomadism and Contemporary Art Practices)*. Jesús Palomino. Los Sentidos Publisher House). November 2010. Only Spanish version available. [162 pages. Moving around is a critical essay and a travel book that narrates Jesús Palomino’s reasoned account on his art projects and artistic experiences.