

DOSSIER

Musealization of contemporary artistic practices. Collections and files: new strategies for its management, promotion and dissemination

Musealización de las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas. Colecciones y archivos:
nuevas estrategias para su gestión, promoción y difusión

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Abstract

The sequence of movements and artistic practices since the second half of the last century leaves a set of creations whose productions have left the territory of the objectual and tangible. To the difficulty for being them collected and museographed, it had to be added the complexity of these new proposals developed by the artists during this period, who expanded the idea of art to limits that go beyond the traditional scenarios, questioning and modifying substantially most of the paradigms on which those were based. Therefore we now face a new and unprecedented scenario that calls for another kind of relationship with that we try to keep calling “work of art”. This new scenario demands new analysis and new methodologies for the study, dissemination and outreach of all these new art practices.

Within this complex situation must place the possibility of collecting all these new productions. The set of them constitutes a valuable heritage that, by itself, describes a particular time -the specific way we lived, thought and interacted with reality. The museum was invented to fulfill this role: providing public access to the story that inherently contains any art collection. Now arises the need to rethink it so that it can continue to perform this important function.

Key Words: Artistic heritage, Art collecting, Contemporary art museography, Media Art, Contemporary Art.

Resumen

La sucesión de movimientos y prácticas artísticas desde la segunda mitad del siglo pasado deja un conjunto de creaciones cuyas producciones han abandonado el territorio de lo objetual y lo tangible. A la dificultad intrínseca para su coleccionismo y musealización, se suma la complejidad de estas nuevas propuestas desarrolladas por los artistas durante este periodo, quienes han expandido la idea de arte hasta límites que desbordan los escenarios tradicionales, poniendo en cuestionamiento y modificando de manera sustancial la mayoría de los paradigmas sobre los que se sustentaba. Nos enfrentamos pues a un nuevo e inédito escenario que reclama otro tipo de relación con aquello que tratamos de seguir denominando “obra de arte”, exigiendo nuevos análisis, nuevas metodologías para su estudio, difusión y divulgación.

Dentro de esta compleja situación hay que situar la posibilidad de coleccionar estas nuevas producciones. El conjunto de las mismas constituye un valioso patrimonio que, por sí mismo, describe una época –la manera en la que vivíamos, pensábamos e interactuábamos con la realidad. El museo fue inventado para cumplir esta función: dar acceso público al relato que constituye toda colección artística. Ahora surge la necesidad de repensarlo para que pueda seguir cumpliendo esta importante función.

Palabras Clave: Patrimonio artístico, Coleccionismo artístico, Museografía del arte contemporáneo, Media Art, Arte Contemporáneo.



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1. Introduction, approaches and hypotheses

I would like to begin with an assertion which is the result of my years of professional experience in this field: no artistic patrimony can develop into a collection without a supporting narrative. This condition is currently quite apparent in relation to avant-garde contemporary artistic practices, and among these, particularly with those that utilize (or operate around) technological media and devices (known generically as New Media Art). These are especially conditioned by the absence of narratives that disseminate information about them, making them more widely known. Among other significant reasons, this has led to the absence of specific collections in contemporary art museums, and as a result, to a lack of New Media Art. For this reason, certain artistic institutions are currently demanding members of the international scientific community (through numerous calls for the publication of articles in scientific journals, papers presented at congresses, international seminars, etc.) to search for and build what is known as a Media Art History.

Six decades after they first came on the scene, movements surrounding Media Art, one of the most significant disciplines among contemporary artistic practices, and a paradigm of intangible art, have no grounding narratives, and no artistic literature to mythologize their practice and their artists. The problem, or the difficulty, lies in the fact that narratives are written in the first person (or in original documents that allow for the construction of such). They require context; a place in the History of Art. The classification of these practices and their conservation and museumization cannot therefore be established until their narratives are constructed and they belong at long last to the collective heritage, because none of them are neutral; there is always an implicit positioning, a will and political interests.

This is precisely the significant and necessary challenge currently faced by contemporary art museums, as well as those institutions and artistic production centers which, in the period between the 20th and 21st centuries, have focused on

intangible art (most of which is included within artistic practices related to media, and as such, clearly includes all (but not only) art known as technological art, given that, for example, artistic practices and avant-garde movements would also belong to this category, like performance art and conceptual art), exhibiting it, producing it and collecting it. Examples include Rhizome, ZKM, Ars Linz Electronica, the Whitney Museum, MEIAC Badajoz, and also individual collectors who provide a reference point and an exemplary basis for the development of this research project: MIDE/CAAC in Cuenca, and the Juan March Foundation with its Sound Art collection.

Handling and managing multimedia art and intangible art is therefore an ambitious challenge being taken on now by all those museums and institutions that have found pieces, projects and other productions in their collections which are related to these contemporary artistic practices. This challenge is neither unique nor uniform, given that it varies and has particularities in accordance with the typology of its various responsible parties. Thus, on the one hand we have the Curators, who can be credited with the task of building nonexistent narrative (or micro-stories), the establishment of critical policies and specific histories, and the implementation of new expositive and informational strategies. On the other hand, there are the Conservators, who are continually subjected to the need for training in new (and hard to access) technical and historical knowledge, as they are responsible for the establishment of solid conservation and restoration policies. And last, but definitely not least in the scheme of the museum hierarchy, the Gallery Staff, who are charged with engaging in continuous professional recycling, or with being in possession of a certain qualification, and needing to achieve wide ranging training that is both technical and documentary-based. They must also acquire a specific skill set which allows them to acquire the ability to adapt to the specific characteristics of these new avant-garde artistic practices in the context of their exhibition in the museum.

For the present paper, the author has drawn on his field work in the creation, management and dissemination of the patrimonial collection found in the Contemporary Art Collections and Archives (CAAC) in the city of Cuenca in Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. At the time of its creation in November 2012, the CAAC was conceived as a project for the renovation of the traditional museum model, with the understanding that it might serve as an example of the responsibility that comes with being an art institution for the management, preservation and dissemination of the artistic and cultural heritage that makes up the most avant-garde elements of contemporary art (those which, therefore, have yet to be assimilated by the art world) and which have managed to be generated around the diverse centers of creation and production created by these, and which have been managed for the last four decades in the period of time between the 20th and 21st centuries.

2. Development

2.1. Historification of avant-garde artistic practices. The role of the art institution

The succession of artistic movements and practices that have taken place since the mid-20th century has left behind a series of creations that have moved away from the territory of the objective, the physical, the tangible. In addition to the intrinsic difficulty that these new characteristics pose when it comes to collecting them and showing them in museums, there is the added complexity of new projects developed during the same period by artists who have expanded the idea of art, stretching the boundaries of traditional settings, substantially questioning and modifying the majority of the paradigms which once held up traditional norms. We are faced, then, with a new and unprecedented setting that calls out for another kind of relationship with that which we continue to call a “work of art,” demanding new analysis, new methodologies for their study and dissemination. Within this complex situation, we must therefore consider how these new productions can be collected. These works, taken as a whole, constitute a valuable legacy which, taken on its own, describes a time period – the way we lived, thought and interacted with reality.

The museum was invented in order to carry out this function, and it so understood by great thinkers and statesmen: as the finest tool, the best weapon, for building a cultural identity, for recording in our memories, in the collective imagination, the specific personality of a people, of a nation. Art consists of a narrative that museums have, until now, been able to tell and inject into the collective subconscious. Now there is a need (and therefore a challenge) to re-think the museum (the art institution) so that it can continue to fulfill this significant function, collecting, studying, embracing, managing, providing access to, and disseminating the important artistic patrimony left by all of these avant-garde artistic practices from the recent period between centuries. The museum is marked and conditioned by the transition between analog society and culture, and the digital version of these.

Great museums are not those which possess the highest number of artworks, but rather those which can boast the finest collections. That is, those that have done the best job (most intelligently, most astutely, most precisely, with the strongest will and passion) of building Narrative (those micro-stories that confer value to individual pieces and movements, mythologizing these works and their artists) through which the collections take on a specific personality, that functional autonomy through which History is transmitted to events and legends, granting them credibility, and therefore authenticity (giving form to the collective imagination).

In this way, the importance of (and as such, the need for) collecting, is closely

linked to the generation of narrative, the construction of micro-stories. These are important because they are the emotional vehicle that connects the work of art to individual and collective desire. The objective of an artwork is to affect us, to excite us so completely that it permeates our subconscious, that which identifies and distinguishes us culturally, as it becomes the witness to our contemporary state, as individuals belonging to a specific era, society and culture. The subject of the 2015 film *Francofonia*, from Russian director Aleksandr Sokurov, perfectly explains (with surgical precision) the essential function of museums in the shaping of our cultural identity, thus legitimizing the construction of every great empire, every nation.

Starting in the second half of the 20th century, many public and private institutions founded and opened to the public centers of artistic production where cutting-edge programs for creation, reflection and production could be developed around new artistic practices. Due to their technical complexity, these centers required expensive infrastructures that made access to them difficult for individuals, and their creative methodologies required collectivization, thereby falling outside the traditional individualized structure. The complexity of certain proposals and the objective imprecision of many of the projects developed in these centers generated an artistic legacy that has remained under their exclusive control and exploitation. Over time, and faced with the need to reflect on the creative panorama of the last fifty years, art critics and historians have begun to demand access to these works of art (most of them alternatives to traditional artwork, and not exclusively object-based). But they have found that, sadly, very few of these centers and institutions took precautions, or had the simple capacity to understand that they had become the exclusive holders of these pieces. And this is where the problem begins (the issue which is the main objective of the present research project). Possessing a valuable artistic heritage, which is still not included in general historiographical studies, perhaps because it has still not entered into international contemporary art collections, requires various complex museographical, historiographical and theoretical-critical tasks which must be developed in tandem. For one thing, it is necessary to organize all of this unknown artistic material, which has most probably been produced within the typical underground surroundings of avant-garde artists. And for this reason, a description of the evolution of the different lines of action must first be carried out, reconstructing the domestic minutia of its history and its creators, organizing them hierarchically based on their status and significance, and analyzing their incidence in the universal context of the construction of an emerging new cultural. For another thing, it is necessary to attempt to connect the rich proactive and unprecedented world of these alternative artistic practices, not only through the studies of specialists and experts, but also with the general public (very important when generating a new “public,” which will come to fruition in the future, a new “collector”).

The engagement of art institutions is essential for reaching this goal, because only with their help can we achieve the necessary normalization of these artistic practices, which remain unassimilated. The art institution (like the museum, the research center, and art collections and archives) has a responsibility to preserve “collections,” to provide public access (to specialists and enthusiasts alike), and to work towards the goal of historical projection. It initiates the formation of a “patrimony” (physical and/or virtual), generating the necessary outlook for insertion into the official art market. For artists who are actively participating in these artistic practices, the incorporation of the art institution into the general scene brings with it a series of reciprocal advantages. On the one hand, the museum/art center provides enthusiastic audiences, while in parallel, the artists join the art institution within the most avant-garde culture. But this demands a change of mindset on both parts: the art institution must allow the use of its online servers, free of censorship, and adapt to the new and necessary economy of distribution (focused on accessibility), while the artist, through his projects and his own personality and the influence of his “thought group,” guarantees audiences and prestige, as well as essential and desirable artistic credibility.

As these are quite recent avant-garde artistic practices, they generally suffer from a necessary distance in time, meaning they lack perspective which would generate theoretical-critical analysis and relevant historiographical studies. This is why, in the first phase, the localization, compilation and classification of all available material is useful, as well as the transcription of narratives (micro-stories) told in first person. In other words, the collection of explanatory documentary materials that can accompany these micro-stories lend emphasis, selecting and distinguishing between the whole as it is localized and becomes available. For this first task, perhaps the participation of the artists themselves is most appropriate. Their great sensitivity, their fine sense of smell, their direct knowledge of the piece at hand, and their personal experience make them the ideal trackers and discriminators for this material, which remains hidden and without “apparent value.” In addition, it is quite probable that they have had direct contact, or could even be co-protagonists, with the artists or pieces in question, which without a doubt will lend their micro-stories plausibility and credibility. Today, this work must be carried out in the research departments of museums, contemporary art centers and universities.

In the particular case of media practices, which have shaped what art historians have generically defined and labeled as Media Art, they have been developing since the mid-20th century, coinciding with the appearance and commercialization of the first great audiovisual technologies, namely: the portable video camera, the photocopier, and computers with graphics capabilities. Pieces which the most radical avant-garde artists create using these tools have been difficult to include in museum collections owing, mainly, to the break with traditional parameters that

had been used up to that point to define museumization (exhibition and distribution) and how collections are amassed. It is no wonder that their breakthrough onto the avant-garde art scene brought about the appearance of disturbing elements on a grand scale. Media Art artists immediately understood that these new pieces would require new systems of distribution and exhibition, but when they could find no viable alternatives (as the cinema was able to do in its day), they ended up feeling seduced, and laughing at the advantages offered to them by traditional museums and art institutions, advantages which included glamor, social empowerment for the enshrinement of art and their vast capacity for dissemination in the era of mass media and cultural industries. Although in order to do this, they had to make enormous sacrifices, like a perverse adaptation to the initial objectives of their revolutionary creations and the omission of many of the programmatic points in their Manifestos. But, given that the museum quickly came to understand the advantages of contemplating and acquiring these new creations, in a way that was incompatible with its principles and operational systems, it also made sacrifices, which brings us to that intermediary point where, as we have already stated, both parties find mutual benefit in this “relationship of convenience.”

In spite of this meeting point, in spite of this mutual conviction of being seen and respected, the panorama is not very encouraging. Today, there are still practically no Media Art pieces on view in the world’s most important contemporary art museums, because they are hardly even present in their permanent collections, and even if they are, these cannot be shown because for one thing, it is too difficult and complex to mount and maintain them, and for another, and this is perhaps even more important and decisive, they have still not been accepted by the general narrative of the History of Contemporary Art, as they have not generated the necessary micro-stories that lend these pieces an artistic literature which mythologizes their artists and other pieces, creating a necessary level of interest and desire. What’s more, only a half dozen centers in the world are currently maintained and functioning, which are exclusively dedicated to producing and supporting Media Art. Medialabs, the heirs to the Centers for Art and New Technologies from the second half of the 20th century, who grew markedly in the big city with the coming of the new century, are no longer centers for Media Art research and production. They are now laboratories for cultural mediation (where artistic creation is only one tangential, not to mention residual, aspect of its full range of objectives and activities). That is to say, centers where the use of technological media and devices (today digital and electronic) is generally in the service of social necessities and challenges, or, the supposedly more favorable option defended by certain leaders in current media labs, in the service of an art that has pushed its limits and scope of action so far that they have blended together in a transdisciplinary manner with all other scientific disciplines.

The appearance of the internet and the formation of Net.Art as an artistic

movement in the early 1990s changed most parameters for artistic practices, resulting in an entirely new alternative artistic patrimony, completely different from the traditional one found in contemporary collections and museums. The new rules of the game put forth for net-artists and the virtualization and relocation of their pieces have created a huge upheaval in the art world, disorienting those who manage art collections and pushing critics and historians away from their field of interest.

To the clear difficulty of undertaking the artistic heritage of the intangible, which has been and continues to be produced by the many diverse manifestations of Media Art, especially if the same working rules and parameters are used as those that are applied to traditional objects, we must add the slowness that has always been demonstrated by art institutions, which in addition (once again, in the History of Art) have stumbled on the formal complexity of their approach. Even when Media Art is formalized through installations that are object-based (or hybrid in nature), coinciding with the Museum's highest level of ambition, objectualism, mounting the show can be extremely complex, requiring spaces and infrastructure that museums cannot generally provide, and there can be a lack of adequate equipment and highly specialized technical and maintenance personnel. Further, and this is no less important, there is a constant series of ethical and moral clashes between the concepts and attitudes of media artists (most notably net-artists) and those who head up art institutions. In addition, we must also consider the ongoing tirade kept up by the new (and alternative) Online Communities against the old Art Institutions.

2.2. Collecting the Immaterial. The need to construct new museographic strategies for the management and dissemination of patrimony coming from avant-garde artistic practices in the period between centuries

Within this difficult and complex context, we must place the intention for the management and preservation of artistic patrimony, and not only the intangible, but also much of the output produced by new avant-garde artistic practices, among which we must highlight (if only for their sheer numbers) those creations that utilize technological devices, and which are grouped together under the general international denomination known as Media Art.

As justified above, museum-based contemporary art centers must assume the institutional responsibility for the preservation, promotion and dissemination of these types of pieces, which implies the need to re-think their function and operation. For this reason, we must consider the difficult task of adopting a consistent collection policy, and with this comes a series of phases that must be coherently conceived of and executed. On the one hand, those responsible for the museum and its trust must embark on a *selection* process. That is, choosing significant (exemplary) pieces, and questioning this decision in each case,

asking whether this is Art and whether the piece being considered is potentially historically significant. On the other hand, we must redefine the role of curator, as filter and facilitator, and accept that in this process the art institution will act (in historical terms) as a force lending legitimacy to all of these works, pieces and productions (appealing to its unquestionable socio-cultural prestige). In a later phase, the art institution must face the problems inherent to every process of *acquisition* (property), when acquiring selected works and pieces of art. The setting remains the same, as does the invariability of the desire for property transactions. But, in the particular case of intangible art, new problems come up (or at least, new variables come up, which have never before been contemplated), such as acquiring the rights for the re-circulation of information; the still inefficient legislation of copyrights, intellectual property and reproduction; and the creation of preservation environments that ensure ongoing accessibility, conservation and maintenance (fighting against the very obsolescence of technological devices). In contrast to these are, for example, the constant push by artists to systematically alter conditions surrounding authorship, production, and the flow of information; the impossible task of tailoring the new situation and conditions to traditional commercial practices; and the need to implement and manage a new concept of Artistic Patrimony given that, in most cases, the art institution is not just acquiring pieces, but is aspiring to obtain the rights to circulate these new productions, within a new economy that is not sustained by the material concept of an artwork as a good, but rather as a point of access, and therefore strategies and policies for their distribution and dissemination must be considered. Another concept that ends up substantially modified when acquiring these new artistic practices and productions is that of *organization* (having to do with classification and conservation). Now new problems and challenges come up, like for example, the difficulty of drawing a certain possible taxonomy (the absence of a specific vocabulary), which comes up against the vast diversity of projects, objectives and attitudes, and the difficulty of being a user of these pieces and works of art, owing mainly to the diversity of the design of their interfaces and browsers, and their multiple levels of interaction. To this, we must add the ambition on the part of creators to escape normalized discursive models (aiming to continue and exploit as far as possible the maxim introduced by the avant-garde artists from the second half of the 20th century, that ART = LIFE). There is also a significant lack of critical and methodological studies, perhaps because it is so difficult to directly access these creations. Classification? On more than one occasion, even the concept itself of this kind of new artistic practice has been questioned by some of the very few specialized art critics. Spanish philosopher, critic and Net. Art curator José Luis Brea asserted that “the internet is not an archival space, it is a performance space. It makes no sense to use it for memory and recovery, but rather for intercommunication, inter-textuality, for the effects of process

and communicativity” (Brea, 2003, p. 58). It is in this tremendous mess that we find ourselves immersed at present. Finally, the always complex and changing field of *dissemination* must be addressed. Promoting this art and sharing it with the world furthers the goal of making it something understandable, of making artworks and artists lovable and therefore desirable, so that they can be easily accessed. These aspirations can only be achieved if the viability of the works is recognized. This requires that all of these alternative artistic practices are capable of being incorporated within a generalized school of thought, one that is universal and independent of changing “fads”. The art institution must work toward the attainment of a Rule of Popular Will in order to attract audiences, as well as the formation of a new concept, creation and design of a future “gallery-museum-laboratory” that can house and manage all of these practices representative of avant-garde artists from the period between centuries (whether virtual or not). In any case, among the challenges and difficulties that are now being presented for the adequate dissemination of this entire patrimony of intangible art, we find the creation of suitable legislation that protects all of these performances, keeping in mind that the laws covering new media are laws in “real time,” where the concept of “presence” is incorporated and adopted as a guarantor of the “time of occurrence.” It is no longer about providing the necessary devices for screening said productions, but rather simply making them visible. In the words of José Luis Brea: “In 21st century society it will not be necessary (nor even possible really) to collect works of art (as is the case with the spurious collection of cinema or music) and the function of public institutions with respect to new practices, with a view to guarantee their inclusion in the public sphere, will rather be to promote or optimize the social circulation in protected environments of those contents which would otherwise be dismissed by the free market in cultural industries with their self-serving regulation of audiences through the law” (Brea, 2003, p. 123).

In the 1990s, the first artistic centers began to pop up in most developed countries, which were dedicated exclusively to the production of projects headed up by artists who utilized or reflected on new media and technological devices. Just one decade later, the majority of these centers closed their doors and only a select few were able to maintain their activity moving into the new century. Among these were centers like ZKM in Karlsruhe, *Ars Electronica Center* in Linz, the *Daniel Langlois Foundation* in Montreal, and the International Museum of Electrography – Center for Innovation in Art and New Technologies (MIDECIANT) in Cuenca. In addition to their continued support for the production of New Media Art, they became aware of the institutional responsibility they had to manage the vast patrimony of Media Art that they had been building up in their workshops, classrooms, departments and laboratories. The artworks, productions and documentation which make up the collections they manage feature specific characteristics that set them apart from other art collections amassed by

contemporary art museums. Most notable among these is the virtual nature (or more precisely, the non-objective or immaterial nature) of many of the creations and pieces within the collections and archives, particularly the ones created using electric technologies, and later, digital and electronic technologies. Video art, computer graphics and the most varied manifestations of electronic art are just some of the most representative disciplines. But other immaterial works were (and still are) produced by action and performance artists, by the manipulation of sound as a raw artistic material, and also include those which come out of the majority of projects developed within conceptual art. Likewise, although its contribution was not nearly as radical as those we have just mentioned, given that, unlike those, the nature of these projects was not immaterial, but rather object-based, we must include among these new practices whose museumization is difficult those in which artists took into consideration or made use of electrographic technologies for their projects. Also, processes involving the multi-reproduction of images, which led during this same period to international movements of great activity and influence, like the especially significant and relevant copy art and fax art. These movements borrowed from the conceptual contributions that had established (slowly and with extreme difficulty) a more mature version of photography, which, after more than 150 years in existence, had finally achieved acceptance as an artistic technique and language, introducing new parameters that collaborated decisively in the process of dismantling (or at least, questioning) of some of the main paradigms of traditional artistic practices (that of western modern art, that had dominated since the 14th century); namely: the dialectical original-copy, the concepts of authorship and spectatorship, and the end of the dominance of the image, among others.

The result of all of these new creative approaches was the appearance and development of a full series of experimental artistic practices that infiltrated “official” avant-garde art in the period between the centuries, providing new parameters for traditional discourse and language, and generating a scenario full of fractures and dissonance, being built as they were atop new paradigms that dismantled the more traditional ones that had held up the art world for the previous six centuries. Everything was unprecedented and in need of new and alternative ecosystems: the ideas, practices, languages and disciplines that would be fostered by another profile of artist and viewer as a consequence of their application in the creative processes, and would therefore encourage other systems of dissemination, assessment and distribution. Video art, action and performance practices, sound art, artistic electrography, digital and electronic art and (as a specific movement that resulted from these) net art.

Together with the aforementioned centers of “technological art” which, in the period between centuries, became aware of their responsibility as collectors of these new experimental practices, a variety of university centers came on the

scene. Many experimental creations were generated, beginning in the 1950s, around art and design departments in the most advanced western universities, within an elitist and radically avant-garde context facilitated by new centers for artistic creation, which were financed by public and private institutions, as well as multinational corporations (almost all of which were dedicated to making and selling technological products).

2.3. The museographical model of the Contemporary Art Collections and Archives (CAAC) in Cuenca

One of the most relevant examples on the international scene was that found at the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca. Founded in the mid-1980s, the new fine arts school was financed by the government of the newly formed autonomous community of Castilla-La Mancha and was located in a rural area in central Spain. The school featured a highly experimental curriculum, which was initially intended to tie in with the innovative ideas of artists from the Spanish abstract art movement, many of whom had settled decades before in the same city. To this end, and with the intention of lending continuity to the ideas of those who founded the revolutionary Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca, the regional government, through a team charged with the creation of the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM), named a commission made up of several of these abstract artists with ties to Cuenca (including, among others, Gustavo Torner, Lucio Muñoz, Julio López Hernández, Luis Gordillo, Rafael Canogar, and José María Yturralde), who were asked to design and set up the school. The artists made the wise decision to hire as professors some of the youngest artists, critics and historians on the Spanish scene, who were specialists in the most avant-garde and alternative artistic disciplines, languages and movements of the day. No sooner did they take up their teaching positions, than they put into action a series of initiatives and activities presided over with great passion and activism, which led to the founding within the School itself (or outside the School, in the case of MIDE) of experimental workshops and laboratories where projects could be developed around all of these new artistic practices, which were alternatives to the “official” avant-garde.

Beginning with its inauguration during the 1986-87 school year, the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca would place special attention on the development of all of these new practices and languages, creating an experimental space, as radical as it was alternative, which inspired other art schools and departments throughout the country. But the advantage of this new school as compared to others was precisely its unapologetic youth. With a faculty whose average age was barely over 30, but which was even so made up of well-known artists and activists who were active within some of the aforementioned disciplines, the alternative avant-garde atmosphere that was palpable in its hallways, classrooms and studios

was impossible for the majority of the “great” Spanish art schools to copy. This generated an exodus from many of these centers to Cuenca, of students who were looking for that “fresh air,” which, at the time, could not be found in Barcelona, Madrid or Seville. With an ongoing open-door policy, and complementary activity schedules that would attract the most avant-garde artists, professors and students at the time, resulting in activities that were highly creative, inspiring and infectious, the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca unveiled its experimental workshops and centers, and even a museum that was permanently open to the public, located in one of the city’s most emblematic historic buildings. Thus, through the development of bustling artistic activity running parallel to that of local contemporary art museums and centers, the International Museum of Electrography of Cuenca (MIDE) was created in 1989, followed by the Center for Experimental Creation (1990) and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Audiovisual Communications (1996). Free public access resources were also developed, like the experimental radio station Radio Fontana Mix (1993), the net.art repository Aleph-Arts.org (1996), IDECA (Research and Development for Audiovisual Content) (1999), and the Virtual Archive for the Performing Arts (part of the ARTEA project) (2003). Public events were also organized on a regular basis, including a congress called “La Situación” (1993) and, the following year, the festival Situaciones. A vast and varied set of resources for practical experimentation and theoretical-critical research, operated at full capacity throughout the 1990s, a time when, for other art institutions (especially academic centers) artistic practice was still limited to traditional disciplines such as painting, sculpture, printmaking and the fields of design and advertising, considered groundbreaking and controversial at the time.

After more than two decades of intense activity, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca faced a profound identity crisis, as it reached maturity. The moment was worsened by the brutal paralysis of the Spanish economy, which forced the shutdown of the majority of the school’s workshops, laboratories, resources and experimental activities. Following an exhaustive collective analysis, and a healthy process of self-examination, the faculty decided unanimously, in November of 2012, to put into operation a new and revolutionary project: the creation and development of the Contemporary Art Collections and Archives (CAAC) of Cuenca (www.caac-uclm.es). At the time, the School also had a series of new collections donated by well-regarded outside entities, which highlighted the center’s relationship with leading players from the contemporary art world. For example, in 2010, the prestigious gallery owner and contemporary art collector Helga de Alvear donated two significant collections to the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca. These had previously been entrusted to the Reina Sofía Museum (MNCARS) but given their low return and the lack of attention they were receiving, they were removed from the national museum and donated to the university center, after securing the promise that they would be on

permanent display there, turning them into living resources for artistic education, and yearly exhibitions and shows would be organized around this valuable collection. Thus, the Collection of Art Multiples published by the international contemporary art magazine Parkett (based in Zurich and with additional offices in New York) came to make up part of the collections, archives, documentation and resources derived from all of the activities developed in the centers, laboratories and activities at the Cuenca school, described above. In addition to the Parkett Collection, the Contemporary Print Collection from the Juana Mordó Gallery was also donated. These pieces that had been owned by the gallery throughout its active years had been inherited by Helga de Alvear from their first owner (as she had taken over as head of the Madrid gallery during its final years), and were now gifted to the School in Cuenca.



Image 1. Detail of the Parkett Room. *New research approaches in the CAAC. Past, present and future*. Exhibition curated by Beatriz Escribano and Cristina Peña. In the 1st Conference of the CAAC, Fine Arts Faculty, Cuenca, April 26, 2016. Image provided by the CAAC_Cuenca.

Once the CAAC_Cuenca project was launched, its representatives located and incorporated the Cinematographic Archives from the film producer El Deseo, donated to UCLM by director Pedro Almodóvar, a native of Castilla-La Mancha (and his producer brother Agustín) in a gesture of appreciation after being named Doctor Honoris Causa by UCLM in an official act proposed by the Art Department at the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca. Likewise, and with the purpose of expanding the narrow university context of the archives and collections belonging to the

CAAC_Cuenca, linking it to the natural geo-historic setting, which makes the School of Fine Arts the heir to that avant-garde spirit unveiled in Cuenca by artists from the El Paso group through the creation of the visionary Museum of Abstract Spanish Art in Cuenca (created 20 years earlier), other collections were incorporated which had been created outside UCLM. Such is the case with the historic Center for Electro-Acoustic Music (GME) of Cuenca, which was put into operation and financed by the Regional Government in the early 1990s, and was originally housed in the city's Conservatory of Music. Following a complex effort carried out in the early 21st century by the AVADI and ACUOSO associations, then starting in 2014, by "Acción GME v2.4," and culminated by "FUZZY Gab .4," a research group from the UCLM Art Department, they began to secure funding, infrastructure and equipment for GME. After almost two years of complicated dealings with the rightful owners, officials at the CAAC_Cuenca earned their trust by negotiating the signing of a Collaboration Agreement among the academic leaders at UCLM and the President of the Regional Government of Cuenca through which the government would endow the CAAC_Cuenca with management, promotion and dissemination responsibilities, and by which the GME would be housed in the Sound Art labs in the School of Fine Arts. The famous *Synthi 100* synthesizer (unique in nearly all the world; only one other such instrument has been conserved, which is located in France), and all of the electro-acoustic music it was used to create during the 1990s by the world's most prestigious musicians (including, among others, Luis de Pablo, César Cano, José Iges, Concha Jerez, José Manuel Berenguer, Eduardo Polonio, and Gabriel Brnčić, the director at the time) were finally rescued from ostracism and the most absolute state of abandonment. They were at long last adopted by the collections and resources at the CAAC_Cuenca near the end of the 2016-2017 academic year, and began to be managed by the group FUZZY Gab .4, thanks to funding made possible by MINECO research projects par excellence (HAR2013-48604-C2-1-P) and the multi-annual projects at the Regional Government of Castilla-La Mancha, using European FEEDER funds (POII-2014-002-P).

The CAAC_Cuenca is the result of the individual and collective efforts and commitment of a variety of artist-activists and professor-researchers at the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca for taking on, as an art institution, and as representatives of such, the responsibility of managing the new *Artists Museum* (curiously unveiled on the international scene by the Museum of Abstract Spanish Art in Cuenca exactly one century ago) (1). The goal is therefore to strive to relate all of these artistic practices, as well as their experiments and research, to the museography of contemporary art, adopting, managing, promoting and disseminating them, thus fostering their integration into the general narrative of the History of Art, in such a way that facilitates the formatting of a series of collections that can be integrated in a standardized manner into the museum, although in order to achieve this

goal, the art institution must do its “homework,” meaning that it must update and reinvent itself. This is what is being proposed and developed by the International Museum of Electrography at UCLM in Cuenca, in particular, and in general, and all the other collections, archives and resources that currently make up the CAAC in Cuenca as micro-museums for 21st century artists. For all of these entities, their consolidation, projection and repercussion must involve the ability to build the narrative (or more specifically, micro-stories) that connects the History of the School of Fine Arts and of the various collections and archives generated in its own laboratories and workshops (together with those inherited from individual donations) to the unique history of different avant-garde art movements from the second half of the 20th century which played a prominent role and were linked to the city of Cuenca and its geographical and cultural surroundings, in an effort to connect them definitively with the general “official” narrative of the History of Contemporary Art and its various avant-garde movements.

This daring and innovative proposal as a new alternative model for museographical contemporary art strategies is capable of placing value on, managing and disseminating the prolific (yet unknown) artistic patrimony favored by some of the most radical and alternative artistic avant-garde movements that took place (and are still taking place) during the period between the 20th and 21st centuries, which began in the 1950s.

3. Conclusions

The artistic practices of the most radical avant-garde artists from the period between the centuries have left an endless series of creations that are difficult to museumize, fundamentally because it is challenging to address their new parameters with respect to the more traditional ones that contemporary art museums have had to operate within to date, and because there are hardly any narratives in this realm, those micro-stories which feed the artistic literature that promotes the various styles and avant-garde movements that nourish art collections.

Currently, there are very few art museum-centers which have addressed this need, and which have taken the institutional responsibility to collect, manage, conserve, promote, provide access to and disseminate these experimental creations, so difficult to find in today’s contemporary art museums.

Among these centers, is the Contemporary Art Collections and Archives project, managed by the School of Fine Arts in Cuenca, part of the University of Castilla-La Mancha. Since it was approved by the center’s Board of Directors in November, 2012, the CAAC_Cuenca has sought to take on this challenge through its own patrimony. An extremely rich and varied collection of art works, creations, archives and documents, heterogeneous in nature, it was produced in the workshops and labs created with passion and exemplary engaged conviction

by some of the professors, artists and researchers contracted since 1986 in order to create this new (and revolutionary) Spanish School of Fine Arts.

The museographical model proposed by the CAAC_Cuenca exists somewhere between an open-door experimental production media-lab that takes on new challenges for accepting new artistic practices, and a center for experimental teaching that functions as a permanent agora for the exchange of creative ideas within a structure that is a mixture of the horizontal and the vertical. It allows for the contribution of innovative ideas, thus joining the very few initiatives that currently assert themselves as timidly as they do rarely in the developed countries of the world. These take form around the principle issues, including, among others, the management of copyrights and intellectual property; the management and conservation of these complex pieces; the classification, taxonomy and vocabulary of these creations (especially in what is known as Media Art); possible expositive strategies; and the need to implement new policies for dissemination and, generally speaking, for museums.

Notes

(1) This term was used for the first time by Manuel Fontán, Exhibition Director for the Juan March Foundation, to refer specifically to one of the particularities at the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca, as he explained that this concept is an invention of the Museum in Cuenca, created and conceded by artist Fernando Zóbel (a wealthy descendent of Filipino landowners), in 1966.

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Biography

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José Ramón Alcalá Mellado (Valencia, Spain, 1960). Professor of New Media Art at the Fine Arts Faculty, University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM). Director of the MIDECIANT (International Museum of Electrographic Artworks-Center for Innovation in New Media Art) Cuenca (Spain) <http://www.mide.uclm.es>, since its creation, in 1989. Head of the “Collections and Archives of Contemporary Art. Fine Arts. UCLM. Cuenca” (CAAC) www.caac.uclm.es. He is the principal investigator of the research group “Cultural Interfaces; Art and New Media” at UCLM since 2006. In 1999, he received the Spanish National Research Award of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (to Museum of Electrography) for its innovations related to graphic art. In recent years he has led various international and national Excellent Research & Development projects related to the New Media Art and the Virtual Museum Studies. Autor of: *La piel de la Imagen* (Valencia, 2011); *Ser Digital* (Santiago de Chile, 2011); *¿Cómo se cuelga un cuadro virtual?* (Gijón, 2009); *Monstruos, fantasmas y alienígenas. Poéticas de la representación en la cibersociedad* (Madrid, 2004); o *Ars & Machina. Electrografía Artística en la colección MIDE* (Santander, 2004). Director and curator of Art biannual and prices like International Observatory of Electronic Arts (OOH) of Gijón <http://www.jornadasooh.net>, Digital Art Awards *LÚMEN_EX* (University of Extremadura) <http://www.lumenex.net>, Electronic Arts Festival of Valencia *Digital Media 1.0* <http://www.digitalmediavalencia.es>. As an artist, he created in 1983 the team Alcalacanales (with Fernando Ñ. Canales), whose exhibitions and artistic creation related to new media activities continued into the international circuit until 1994.