Indexes and Models

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Upon seeing the gallery's four walls in miniature size, the White Cube exhibition space dismantled, the fictional Statistics Centre, or the museum's floor plan replicated in a scale model, Mariona Moncunill's work immediately appears to us as a revisitation (of sorts) of the tradition of institutional critique. I assume the referent at stake in her work is the domain of the institutional, and her approach is based on criticality, but there is a further feature which – however obvious- I would not like to sidestep here: namely, that this is no longer a type of critique that involves an attempt on the part of the artist to confront or antagonize the art institutions where her work is inscribed, attacking the said institutions' social and ideological function[1], but constitutes rather an effort to understand the role institutions play in the structuration of meaning as a contingent, *linguistic* construct binding words and things in abstract relationships. The origin of the various institutional truths is not the issue, but rather the principles and mechanisms whereby *truth value* is achieved and deployed. Representation is thus problematised but not discarded.

Of course there is a sense in which Moncunill's work is also - and cannot fail to be- a commentary on the tradition of institutional critique, but that is an unavoidable starting point rather than the main focus of her art practice. Mariona Moncunill simply verifies the fact that every object that is represented (whether in a scientific, public or institutional context) is articulated in terms of a code and a set of conventions, and also in terms of its own history. Every narrative on the represented object- which may in turn contain a further narrative- is part of a discourse formation which models its own self-consistency, and simultaneously reflects and constitutes its own social functions. The artist highlights the conventions that both allow and limit our understanding of things within the confines of a given territory- conventions we can only understand if we ourselves are somehow circumscribed within their demarcation-, and suggests exercises in deconstruction that might enable us to see the ever-present code for what it is, in all its nakedness.

Let's take for instance Moncunill's *Cinc infografies,* a series of five foldouts imitating the aesthetics and the conventional language of newspaper graphics, but actually recounting *imaginary information*, of the sort made popular by modern myths or urban legends. What is being questioned through the use of this particular code (or the codes of architecture or statistics employed in other works) is the power of intellectual or scientific disciplines as principles regulating the limits of discourse: "A discipline is defined by a domain of objects, a set of methods, a body of propositions considered to be true, a play of rules and definitions, of techniques and instruments"[2]. By resorting to a set of techniques and conceptual tools such as newspaper graphics- whose very form seems to convey information with objectivity and veracity- the artist is only complying with part of a given discipline's *admission requirements*, so to speak, while simultaneously violating that discipline's rules concerning the domain of objects to be addressed, which in this case is constituted- against the principles of journalism- by fictional information. Through this mismatch, the artist's

[1] Simon Sheikh, "Notes on Institutional Critique", in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, London: Mayfly, 2006.
[2] « Une discipline se définit par un domaine d'objets, un ensemble de méthodes, un corpus de propositions considérées comme vraies, un jeu de règles et de définitions, de techniques et d'instruments» : Michel Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours*, Paris : Gallimard, 1971, p. 32. Eng. trans. by Ian McLeod "The Order of Discourse", in R. Young [ed.], *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader,* Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 59.

work situates itself outside the discipline whose exclusionary- at once self-enclosing and self-constituting- norms it endeavours to criticise, laying bare the conventional languages beneath its semblance of neutrality and truth.

If we now turn back to the question of institutional critique this brief reflection started from- once the institutional sphere is identified as the site of discursive reification-, we might want to focus our attention on the artist's fixation with the museum institution. For a number of reasons, it's no surprise that Moncunill, like many other artists, should address this subject: in its role as a site for double *re*-presentation, a site where representations themselves are (re)presented (*i.e.* a further narrative about them is enacted), the museum is a thoroughly discourse-saturated space. Art museums and galleries are, furthermore, an artist's own space, both in terms of art as discipline as well as physically, in the sense of the buildings themselves as sites for goal-oriented action. Moncunill touches on the architectural dimension in works such as *Godzilla* or *Tres parets mòbils a escala* ['Three scale moving walls'].[3] In the various versions of *Godzilla*[4], the buildings housing the installation (including the exhibition space itself) were replicated in scale models or drawings made with non-fixed pigment on the floor. Workers, staff and visitors could not avoid treading on them, ultimately trampling and erasing them. In *Tres parets mòbils a escala,* small cases containing serial reproductions of two scale models of a gallery's exhibition hall were sold for a low price. The scale model (of the building and within the building) thus exemplifies Mariona Moncunill's main strategy: it reveals itself as simulation, and simultaneously proclaims that- as a model- it is most emphatically *not* what it simulates- the space in question- but merely a conventional replica.

In former projects as much as in current ones- such as the paper cut-out drawing of the Pirenarium theme-park, which in turn houses a scale model of the Pyrenees-, Moncunill employs the language of architecture to miniaturise space and turn viewers into players who may destroy, dismantle or reassemble things- at home or wherever they wish-, also putting in play the idea of an authoritarian signifying space, capable of transmuting everything within its confines into art or into cultural narratives. Walls, floors or ceilings may thus be mobilised to represent an institution's cultural and political architecture in terms of the goals and values, and the professional rules underpinning its structure and its role in the wider context of the social fabric[5]. That was also Moncunill's intent when she dismantled the 'White Cube' exhibition space (the 'Espai Cub') at La Capella[6] in Barcelona in order to reveal its constructedness, and question an aesthetic ordering of space whose normality we usually take for granted and can no longer even see[7]. Actually, Moncunill seems to be pointing to what lies *behind* the 'cube' itself in some recent works such as *Menjadors* [dining halls], which shows us the canteens and dining halls where workers and staff employed by several art institutions in Barcelona usually have breakfast or lunch. The *Menjadors* project highlights these spaces through a publication in the style of an interior design magazine, plus a series of photographs linking the museum canteens in a sequence: in the canteen in each museum you visit, there is a photograph of the canteen awaiting you in the next museum[8].

[3] *Tres parets mòbils a escala*, Barcelona, The Private Space By, 2011.
[4] *Godzilla*, at Catalonia's Government's Sala d'Art Jove in 2007; *Godzilla 2.0*, at the Sala Soler i Palet in Terrassa in 2008; and *Godzilla 3.0*, at the ARCO Art Fair in Madrid in 2009.
[5] Michael Archer, *Miradas (sobre el museo)* [Exhibition catalogue], Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996, p. 183.
[6] *Requalificació del cub* [Requalifying/ Rezoning the Cube], La Capella, Barcelona Producció, 2009.
[7] Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
[8] *Menjadors*, Barcelona, Espai 13 –Miró Foundation, 2012. The seven institutions selected for this project comprise the Miró Foundation

Moncunill's approach would thus seem to operate with analytical tools capable of dealing not only with the art world, but with discipline-based spaces and institutions in general. Such is the case of the work presented here, whose various elements address discursive formations solidified in the corresponding institutions. Landscape and architectural heritage are discursively articulated through the choice of emblematic buildings or natural monuments represented (or ignored) by the scale models at the Pirenarium theme-park[9] in Huesca in Northern Spain. Traditional costumes from the region are not only recorded at the *Fototeca* Photo Archive, but also subjected to various interpretations through the practices emanating from the institution itself and its use of materials. Certain photographs- in exhibitions or publications- come across as authentic documents because they seem to portray ordinary people going about their everyday lives in their regular attire, while others carry less credibility because the scenes they depict have been deliberately staged for the camera (when, for instance, people dress up for a special occasion and the clothes, the carefully arranged setting and the postures are already riddled with- or functioning as- symbols). In discourses of this type, the layering of several levels of representationality, or traces of an all-too-evident authorial presence in the work, suffice to undermine a photograph's documentary value, distancing the image from the 'reality' it is supposed to depict. Confronted with these issues in the context of institutions which in this case do not belong to the art world, Moncunill nevertheless returns to the questions regarding the discursive processes at work in decision-making; the way discourses are put in practice, valorised, disseminated, deployed; the stories and the narrative strategies they generate. Traditional museums operate as ideological apparatuses and- much like the Fototeca Archive or the Pirenarium Theme Park- resort to historically recorded images[10] to consolidate a given society's myths about itself. For a number of obvious reasons, however, all those institutions do not quite function like a contemporary art museum. There is on one side of the divide a manifest will to explain and assign value to existence in terms of tradition and collections of things, while on the other side, there is an equally manifest hostility to accumulation, to stagnation, to fixed rules or, indeed, to anything that may oppose change: tradition versus permanent self-critique and deconstruction. When it comes to materialising their own self-narrative, institutions in charge of- or based on- classification and conservation work collect and *invent* the most significant stories and traditions through which collective identity is constituted, in an attempt to *musealize* them, to turn them into a common heritage, internalising the museum's language as if the objects of everyday life were naturally meant to become museum items. The self-narratives I am referring to involve a certain division between the *subject matter* as object, and the narrator as *enunciating subject*- a *look at oneself from the outside*; a certain interplay between sameness and otherness; or the fictional operation that storytelling always entails.

This brings us back to something already mentioned above: in Mariona Moncunill's work, fiction comes into play in the space that opens up when a given discipline's codes are rerouted towards a different domain of objects. This is variously achieved through the creation of new fictions- such as a whole fictional Centre for Alternative Statistics (*Institut d'Estadística Alternativa de Valls*[11]), together with invented

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and the other six museums included in the *articketBCN*, a season ticket for Barcelona's most visited museums. The public visiting the exhibition at the Miró Foundation may thus also indirectly access the spaces where workers and staff from the other six museums have breakfast and lunch.

[9] Pirenarium is a theme-park located at the foot of the Pyrenees mountain range on the southern side, in Huesca (Spain). The park's main attraction is a 100 m long, 20 m wide and 7 m high scale model of the Pyrenees representing both natural spaces and outstanding buildings (source: www.pirenarium.com) [Translators Note].

[10] John G.Hanhardt, "Acts of Enclosure: Touring the Ideological Space of the Art Museum", in M. Borja-Villel (ed.), *The End(s) of the Museum/ El limits del museu*, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1995, pp. 31-47.

[11] At the Sant Roc de Valls Chapel, in Tarragona, 2007.

characters and institutions-, or by mobilizing pre-existing fictions- as in the *Godzilla* project, where the public visiting the installation cannot avoid trampling the scale-models and thus becoming akin to the eponymous monster. Fiction thus affords a space form which Moncunill may highlight certain issues; but she also underscores how in the play of discourse and representation, 'fact' and 'fiction' cannot be told apart. If fiction is Moncunill's vantage point, then we might perhaps say that her strategy is that of the *index*. In an inversion of the museum's *indexical* role (in the double etymological sense of *signalling* [indicating] and *classification* [indexing]), whereby the institution both *indexes* its items as, and *indicates* them to be, *works of art*, Moncunill's projects operate as pointers, like deictic lexemes (*e.g.* 'this', 'that') whose sense can only be determined by external reference, often accompanied by gestures that isolate a fragment from the continuum of reality and fill it with meaning. The work can thus be seen as a cipher of the convention that fixes it and restores it to its proper place. This is what Rosalind Krauss termed "the operations of the index, which seem to act systematically to transmute each of the terms of the pictorial convention. [...] The edge of the work is redirected from its condition as closure (the establishment of a limit in response to the internal meaning of the work) and given the role of selection [...] The flatness of the support is deprived of its various formal functions [...] and is used instead as the repository of evidence"[12]. In a further sense, indexes/indications also operate as clues or traces of evidence pointing to events. This is exemplified in Moncunill's ongoing project *Unir els punts* [Joining the Dots][13], where numbered dots are tattooed, printed, painted, drawn and otherwise distributed across bodies, walls, and other fixed or moving locations. Each dot has the power to suggest, to somehow point to the larger object it belongs to, the bigger picture all the dots would hypothetically form if they could be joined; and at the same time, the dots constitute the material evidence of the process itself, the very trace of what they enact. There is also a constellation of dots in the project *Esculturització dels currículums dels 17 seleccionats a la Biennal de Valls* [Sculpturing the CVs of the 17 artists at the Valls Biennale][14], where the résumés of 17 artists are condensed into points representing the towns where those same artists have shown their work. Alongside their deictic function within the artist's project, the sculptured résumés also involve a work of synthesis akin to scale-modelling, statistics data graphics or blueprints: they exemplify information condensed to the point of illegibility, and at the same time, constitute the only trace of that same information.

Mariona Moncunill's work thus appears as the clear-cut, controlled synthesis of an entire process- a process where other people are sometimes invited to participate, perhaps to supply a measure of turmoil or disarray balancing the artist's *disciplined*, restrained approach. Moncunill fits the profile of the artist-as-project-manager: she may ask other artists to take part in her projects (for instance, young painter Rasmus Nilausen- a rising star in his own field-, was asked to paint a series of paintings for the work presented here; a graphic designer was asked to design the graphics for *Cinc infografies*; and a photographer was commissioned with taking photos of the canteens in *Menjadors*), to cover the edges and ramifications of a conceptual field she controls with carefully measured decisions. Projects tend to branch out into multiple aspects, and Moncunill delegates specialised production tasks in order to achieve sharply-defined results: the publication is well-designed, the photos are professional-quality; there are no cracks in the simulation giving away the game in the fictional publication or the leaflets or the scale models; no traces of anything

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[12] Rosalind E. Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 2", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986, p. 216.
[13] The *Unir els punts* project arose from the joint exhibition *4 x 12 i el gat*, curated by Amanda Cuesta at the Palma XII gallery in 2008.
[14] Valls Museum, 2009.

other than what we are supposed to see. This procedure- so common in art these days- involves forfeiting the possibility of becoming a painter, designer, scale-modeller or storyteller, and establishes a sort of instrumental relationship with the collaborators' work. Sometimes collaborators are just *hired labour* employed in the production of a given work; but sometimes they are not anonymous partners, but artists who bring their own rich, complex personalities into the project.

We are left in the end with a trampled scale model, scattered dots, doubts on whether a game's history has been told, and subtle photographs of photographs, as a kind of documentation-in-progress of an *art of few things*, where ideas are the themes, and austerity is the dominant regime.