

DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT CITE OR QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Three traps many

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I could show three infinity in a nutshell
Roy Wagner citing Shakespeare's *Hamlet, An Anthropology of the Subject*

I could be bounded in a nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

My talk today takes this invitation to re-think the figure of the non-representational in a variety of ways. I want to offer you a playful engagement with three registers of non-representational practices. In doing so, I hope to elucidate some aspects of what non-representational epistemes can do, how they are organized internally, and even perhaps what the effects from rendering them describable might be.

The three non-representational practices that I will talk about are trompe l'oeil painting, experimental designs in science, and the prototyping cultures of so-called urban hackers. My underlying theme, however, will be the trap – though I should more properly say, 'trapping' – as an anthropological figure – as an anthropological trap, if you will. I am interested in the problems that the figure of the trap poses for anthropological description – in how description works as a trap of sorts, and the possibilities and difficulties that in this capacity it poses to social theory.

Trompe l'oeil

I would like to open my talk today by introducing you to a painting. It is called 'The reverse side of a painting' and was authored by the Dutch artist Cornelius Gijsbrecht (Figure 1). Gijsbrecht was relatively well known in his time as a painter of still lifes. In fact, as far as we know, he only painted still lifes.



Figure 1. The reverse side of a painting, Cornelius Gijsbrecht, c. 1670, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

Despite having a certain reputation whilst alive, his oeuvre gradually fell into oblivion. Recently, however, some art historians have returned to it, and in particular to this one painting that I want to talk about today. For Victor Stoichita, for instance, ‘The reverse side of a painting’ signals no less than the closure of a historical epoch (Stoichita 1997). The painting marks the culmination of that tradition of baroque art that inaugurated the conditions for meta-pictorial reflection. This was a time when the most cunning of artists (Velazquez, Vermeer) experimented with visual registers and inter-textual compositions, robbing spectators of the presumed privilege of representational awareness and thrusting this back into the interiority of the paintings themselves. Let me explain.

Take a look at Gijsbrecht’s painting. What gets represented here is quite literally the reverse side of a painting. Stoichita and other commentators have noted that in its original setting the painting would have likely been placed on the floor, leaning against a wall. Imagine someone walking into the room where the painting lies. They see a wooden frame, held together by six frail nails. The stretcher holds a canvas, and there is label with a number on it (36) that has been pegged to the back of the canvas, in all likelihood indicating that the work is one in a series of many, or part of a collection. So, as Hanneke Grootenboer has put it,

If we follow our inclination to turn this canvas around in order to see what is represented on its front side, its shock effect would reside less in the deception, and more in the discovery that there is nothing there to see. Nothing, except for the same image, back as front. (Grootenboer 2005, 59)

In a previous analysis of this painting (Corsín Jiménez 2013), I suggested that Gijsbrecht's work may be seen as signalling not just the birth of painting as a non-representational activity – for the painting does not stand for anything; it actually, quite literally, stands for itself. It is a self-standing object.¹

But as I said, it is not just the birth of non-representational painting that we encounter here. The painting may also be seen to endow this flipping compulsion – this need to reverse the canvas, back to front, and back again – with an epistemic status of sorts. Let me explain.

The reverse side of a painting (Gijsbrecht's work) and the reverse side of a painting (of any painting) both index the same presentation of the world (the reverse side of a painting) but they do so from, respectively, an epistemological and an ontological point of view; or let us say, a human and an object-centred point of view. Whereas *The reverse side of a painting* is the view we hold of the picture as viewers, that is, a view that obtains through the act of eliciting the painting as object, the reverse side of a canvas, on the other hand, elicits not an epistemological point of view, but an ontological position: an object (the wooden stretcher) that no longer requires the epistemological elicitation of a viewer to come into existence.

However, I would like to stress that this dazzling display of double relations (between representation:presentation; human:object; epistemology:ontology) is only temporarily held stable, if transiently and fugitively, through the *flipping itself*. The flipping makes the duplex of relationality visible as an epistemic engine. The relations 'double' as relations – they become visible to themselves – through the act of flipping. Oscillating between a human-centred and an object-centred point of view, between an epistemological and an ontological location, the trompe l'oeil's very 'reversible' structure emerges as the only possible comfort-zone for stabilizing the turbulence and confusion of all such double movements. It is the painting's reversibility that holds all such reversions meaningful. It is 'reversibility' itself that rises therefore to the status of epistemic operator.

It is worth stressing that the reversibility-effect is itself the outcome of a trap, in this case, the aesthetic trap of the trompe l'oeil. It is the trompe l'oeil that tricks reversibility into existence. The trap 'traps-out' (so to speak) an epistemic effect.

¹ And in this sense perhaps one of the most pertinent images for what Roy Wagner famously termed 'symbols that stand for themselves' (Wagner 1986).

Now I am no historian of art so I am really out of my depth here. I should note, however, that the tricks of the *trompe l'oeil* respond to a symbolic economy of production. The masters of seventeenth century baroque art (Velazquez, Vermeer, Saenredam, Rembrandt) sought to complexify, if not directly undermine, the traditional system of symbolic representations of the art world of their time. Up until the seventeenth century, artists aimed to have their works enter an established symbolic economy of pictorial and allegorical cross-references. The meaning of a painting was established through its emplacement in a larger historical economy of images.



Figure 2. The gallery of Cornelis van de Geest, Willem van Haecht, c. 1628

The paintings of collectors' cabinets that proliferated in the seventeenth century capture the paroxysm of this economy, such that the best a painting could do was to aspire for its own inclusion in the system of images that it represented. Willem van Haecht's rendering of van de Geest's pictorial gallery is a well-known example (Figure 2). This is the economy of representation that the masters of baroque art hoped to escape and undermine.

The tricks of the *trompe l'oeil*² were therefore as much illusionistic as economic – and I use the term economy here markedly, in both its productionist and administrative

² And other baroque techniques, such as anamorphosis or *mise-en-abyme* (see Corsín Jiménez 2013).

senses. Their iconoclasm was as much aesthetic as sociological. The traps were aimed at bringing into existence novel conceptions of authorship; new economic relations of patronage and artistic enterprise; new techniques and styles of craftsmanship; a modality of participatory spectatorship, even a material and aesthetic basis for (political) consciousness and (relational) cogitation; as well as of course a wholesale new visual culture (see Alpers 1995; Wolf 2001). This is why I say that the trapping was epistemic.

There is one last thing that I would like to comment about Gijsbrecht's wonderful painting. This is something that I have only recently come to think about.

Think of the painting in its original trapping position: lying on the floor, perhaps leaning against a wall. In this position the painting has abandoned its pictorial qualities. It calls for its recognition, not as a painting, but as an object. It hopes to look just like any other piece of furniture: a wooden stretcher that solicits it being turned around and placed in a proper setting and position. We need to find a place for this painting. First, however, we need to pick up the frame, carry it, hang it somewhere. As an object, then, the painting no longer solicits our gaze. Rather, it mobilizes our whole body in an immersive environmentalisation. This is the work of interior design and decoration, which is both an aesthetic and a material project. The painting, in other words, enfoldes the pictorial moment in the atmospherics of objecthood. It becomes an object by trapping its own environment, us included.

This is as far as my first trap takes us. Somewhere in the seventeenth century, a group of artists discover in the *trompe l'oeil* an epistemic operator for describing de-centred worlds. Worlds in-between. Worlds captured in the turbulence of double relations. These worlds are neither visible nor invisible, neither wholly perspectival and geometrical, nor classical and mimetic. Rather, they are traps that thrust our bodies before our eyes. They enrapture the body and leave the gaze behind. They are also in this sense – but this is only vaguely intuited yet – worlds that come with environments attached. Perhaps it is the environment that traps us, but this is something that in the seventeenth century had not quite been formalized yet.

Environments that trap

I move on to my second trap. I am relying here on the work of anthropologist Ann Kelly, who has for some time now been studying a type of experimental hut that is used for entomological research in south-east Tanzania (Kelly 2011). Experimental huts are in fact a classic tool of entomological science. First designed in the 1940s by British researchers in Kenya they have since been used to monitor the flight patterns of malaria-inducing mosquitoes.

The huts are built emulating vernacular architectural models and are erected in the periphery of villages. The architecture, notes Kelly, 'serves a dual purpose: to isolate 'natural' mosquito behaviour on the one hand and to represent 'typical' village conditions on the other.' (Kelly 2011, 70)

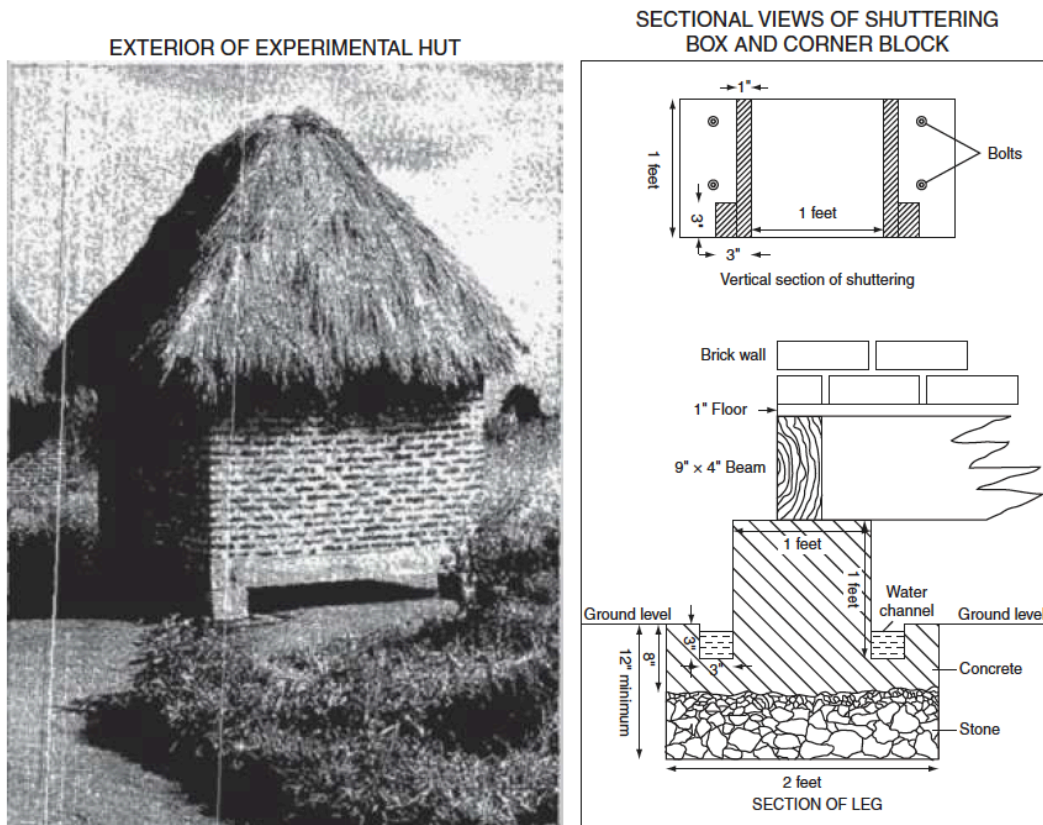


Figure 3. Experimental hut with shuttering (source: R. E. Rapley's *Experimental Hut with Shuttering*, 'Notes on the construction of experimental huts' (1961), reproduced in Kelly 2011).

The commitment to build the huts following local architectural designs (mud surfaces, thatched roofs, detachable windows, etc.) responds to an experimental exigency to model and 'keep the interspecies [human-mosquito] encounter intimate.' (Kelly 2011, 75) There are a number of reasons why this is so, not least because transmission vectors and epidemiological dynamics vary widely according to local circumstances. For example, by having one, two and up to ten volunteers sleeping overnight in a hut early experimenters revealed the effect of body mass on malaria transmission. Later experiments also showed that pregnant women were predisposed to malaria infection because of mosquito olfaction (Kelly 2011, 74). The spatial and sociological architecture of the huts thus conditions the type of data collected under their roof.

The huts are therefore conceived as 'experimental architectures' equipped with an array of 'techniques of capture' (Kelly 2011, 75). I do not think it does much violence to Kelly's ethnography to describe the huts as epistemic traps: experimental-cum-environmental traps, for mosquitoes, of course, but also for tracking epidemiological

data.³ I use the term ‘epistemic’ here advertently, because it is actually central to Kelly’s project to show that as experimental architectures the huts’ functionality depends precisely on tacking stock of their ‘built-in uncertainty’ (Kelly 2011, 78) The uncertainty is crucial to their experimental design. As she puts it

the provisional character of these experiments works to situate their claims. The huts’ aesthetic – their detachable traps, open eaves, wire baffles, automotive coils, sheets and meshes – interrupts the causal linearity of proof. Instead, these rooms provide a momentary resting place to observe and record the site-specific details of man–mosquito interaction. Their experimental framework allows for evidentiary expansion from model to home, but the wiggle room between the two suggests that these extensions are subject to revision and adjustment. (Kelly 2011, 78)

We could say therefore that the huts’ materiality functions as a sort of interface between environmental and social relations. The huts capture the environmental dynamics of mosquitoes in epidemiological terms, that is, their movement across time-space; but the huts are also designed to suspend momentarily – to function as ‘momentary resting places’, as Kelly puts it – human-mosquito relations. So in a sense the huts are really ecological traps. They are infrastructural space-time interventions in a cultural ecology. They open up a space of *différance* where the agentive capacities of mosquitoes, local villagers, entomologists, thatched roofs or public health research are temporarily suspended so that their relations can be re-assembled anew.⁴

Umwelt

The image of an experimental arrangement as a trap of sorts is actually a common epistemological trope (and ploy) in twentieth century science. In his historical epistemology of the development of twentieth century molecular biology, Hans Jörg Rheinberger has described for example the implicit rules of scientific experimentation as constituting ‘a kind of experimental spider’s web: the web must be meshed in such a way that unknown and unexpected prey is likely to be caught. The web must “see” what the spider actually is unable to foresee with its unaided senses.’ (Rheinberger 1997, 78)

Of course, the image of the spider web as a trap for epistemic things – for things that *matter*, for ‘agentive realism’, as my distinguished interlocutor, Karen Barad, puts it –

³ The huts, writes Kelly, mix ‘genres of experimentation and environmental management.’ (Kelly 2011, 71, fn)

⁴ Perhaps we could re-formulate this by saying that what the huts make visible is ecology as an infrastructure – as a trap. Which is why Kelly reprobates contemporary public health research on malaria, which has moved away from the use of huts and is promoting instead research on vaccination or genetically modified mosquitoes, for failing to realize ‘the epidemiological reality of malaria as being primarily infrastructural.’ (Kelly 2011, 83) I come back to the point about ecology being an ‘infrastructure’ below.

has traversed twentieth century scientific thought ever since its was most eloquently deployed by Jacob von Uexküll in his investigations into animal environments (Uexküll 2010).⁵ The spider web is a central – and arguably one of the most important – images in Uexküll’s book. It is regularly resorted to in the book as an analogy or trope for other forms of environmentalisation. When Uexküll describes, for example, how animals transform their homes into territories, he compares the structured tunnel systems built by moles to a spider’s web (Uexküll 2010, 103). When he explains the developmental rules that give form to the bat’s echo-locational radar he similarly draws on the spider’s web to make the point that ‘neither of them is only meant for one, physically present subject, but for all animals of the same structure.’ (Uexküll 2010, 167).

But the spider’s web plays more than an exemplary role in Uexküll’s text, for, as he puts it, ‘one can recognize the reign of Nature’s plans in the weaving of a spider’s web’ (Uexküll 2010, 92). Thus, the web stands for the self-elicitation of Nature’s designs. It is a cypher that holds within the intricacies of Nature’s meaning. Indeed, it is ‘the interpretation of the spider’s web’ – a dedicated epigraph in the book – that supplies Uexküll the ‘primal image’ with which to build his bio-semiotic metaphysics.⁶ As he famously put it, the ‘spider’s web represents a meaning utilizer of the carrier of meaning “prey” in the spider’s environment.’ (Uexküll 2010, 158) The spider and the fly, in other words, mirror each other in the environmental interface of the web. And the ‘meaning’ of nature – the meaning of the web, in this case – is but its surface tension: it ‘surfaces’ in the tension that ‘counterpoints’ the spider’s and the fly’s environmental relations:

the spider’s web is configured in a fly-like way, because the spider is also fly-like. To be fly-like means that the spider has taken up certain elements of the fly in its constitution... the fly-likeness of the spider means that it has taken up certain motifs of the fly melody in its bodily composition... The theory of meaning culminates in the uncovering of this connection. (Uexküll 2010, 190-191)⁷

The spider web is for Uexküll, then, the symbol of an onto-ecology. It is the trap that entangles ecology in its self-determining vocation. Nature is a trap and ecology is its

⁵ It is perhaps worth pointing out, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, that Uexküll’s investigations were ‘contemporary with quantum physics and the artistic avant-gardes.’ (Agamben 2004, 39)

⁶ ‘The web’, he writes, ‘can... not be a representation of a physical fly, but rather, it represents the *primal image* of the fly, which is physically not at all present.’ (Uexküll 2010, 159, emphasis in the original)

⁷ Uexküll’s image of nature as a surface tension, of a contrapuntal harmonic of spider-fly likenesses, is picked up by Deleuze and Guattari in *What is philosophy?* to illustrate the ‘symphonic’ and ‘melodic’ dis/assemblages that punctuate processes of ‘territorialisation’ (Deleuze y Guattari 1994, 185). I have not dwelled on it here, but it should be noted that Uexküll himself describes his theory of nature as a ‘musical composition theory’ (Uexküll 2010, 172).

infrastructure.

I would like to dwell for a moment on this notion of trapping as an artefactualization of ecological relations: the trap as the infrastructural extrication of the mutual describability of spider-fly relations. I am interested in what kind of work this *mutual describability* is seen to do.

One of the few anthropologists who has taken the trap seriously as an anthropological problem is Alfred Gell. Gell approached the question of trapping indirectly, for he was actually examining how and what makes an artwork 'artistic' in the first place (Gell 1999a). Famously, Gell suggested that artworks functioned as 'traps', in that they successfully retained complexes of social relations within the vicinity of their environmental influence (see also Gell 1998). In this sense, Gell suggested, traps are little different from, say, Marcel Duchamp's readymades, for they both index forms of surrogate agency and model the world as a human-environmental entanglement. A trap, noted Gell,

is a model as well as an implement... The arrow trap is particularly clearly a model of its creator, because it has to substitute for him; a surrogate hunter, it does its owner's hunting for him. It is, in fact, an automaton or robot, whose design epitomizes the design of its maker... It is equipped with a rudimentary sensory transducer (the cord, sensitive to the animal's touch). This afferent nervous system brings information to the automaton's central processor (the trigger mechanism, a switch, the basis of all information-processing devices) which activates the efferent system, releasing the energy stored in the bow, which propels the arrows, which produce action-at-a-distance (the victim's death). This is not just a model of a person... but a 'working' model of a person.

But traps do not just model their creators; they model their targets too. Hunters manufacture traps to emulate a prey's environs. 'Traps are lethal parodies of the animal's *Umwelt*', says Gell (Gell 1999a, 201).

The parody, in Gell's unparalleled witty formulation, is not unlike what Uexküll described as the 'contrapuntal' spider-fly likeness. It is the sensorium of a mutual describability between spider and fly-worlds. It is lethal, however, because it 'traps' the likeness and makes it deadly visible. The trap artefactualizes the parody. It extricates the mutual describability of spider/fly *Umwelts* as *infrastructure*.

You may have noted the use that Gell makes above of cybernetic images in his description of the trap's environmental circuitry. Although he speaks of the trap as an 'automaton or robot', he is in fact describing a sensory and nervous system. The trap, for Gell, is a media and information-processing device. It is an interface, a binary switch code, which alternately contains and releases energy/information. However, it is still, ultimately, a trap: that is, an artefact modelled on, and that functions as a vehicle or

conduit for, exo-environmental relations. The trap may be an infrastructure for carrying information, but it is the infrastructure (of ecological relations) that matters.⁸

So this is as far as my second trap takes us. If the trompe l'oeil trap was used by seventeenth century baroque artists to make de-centred worlds visible, perhaps it is fair to say that some strands of twentieth century experimental thought have found the aesthetics of trapping useful as a tool for making ecologies visible. Or said somewhat differently, that ecological thought has itself been *trapped-into-existence*: that it has been bodied-forth as an infrastructure for making ecological entanglements visible. Moreover, intuited in the figure of the environment-as-trap there also seems to be the notion of information as a trapping-impulse, as something that jumps outside or ahead of itself.

Describable intelligences

I turn now to my third trap, which is also my ethnographic trap, the trap of my ethnography.

When I employed the phrase ‘mutual describability’ of spider-fly likenesses above, I was in fact echoing a description that digital art and media theorist Matthew Fuller has made of Uexküll’s spider’s web (Fuller 2011). Fuller comes to the spider’s web in an exercise to rethink the spatial and medial qualities of architectural structures:

In that “a subtle portrait of the fly” [citing Deleuze and Guattari’s synthesis of Uexküll] is drawn in the web of the spider, this is also a system that evinces proper medial qualities of integration and communication, whilst at the same time promising the dissolution of the domains previously internal to that which is drawn into communication. Sensual extension, capture and the precise delineation of space in a spontaneous, tirelessly reworked and cunningly arranged net is crucial to the medial trope of dispersal. (Fuller 2011, 176)

Architecture, proposes Fuller, works just like spider’s webs do. Whilst much recent media and systems theory has blossomed on the idea of the ‘mutual describability of media, information and space in terms of flow (Fuller 2011, 176), for Fuller, the crucial

⁸ Compare Sahlins’ description of traps as tools in *Stone Age Economics*: “a technology is not comprehended by its physical properties alone. In use, tools are brought into specific relationships with their users. On the largest view, this relationship and not the tool itself is the determinate historic quality of a technology. No purely physical difference between the traps of certain spiders and those of certain (human) hunters, or between the bee’s hive and the Bantu’s, is historically as meaningful as the difference in the instrument-user relation.” (Sahlins 1972, 79) Whereas for Sahlins the cultural significance of the technology-trap evinces in the relation between the instrument and its user, for Gell technology can only be understood if one attends to the ‘enchantment’ (entrapment, entanglement) of their relations – their likenesses or mutual describabilities (see also Gell 1999b). In other words, technology functions as a trap.

questions remains not how ecologies of information thrive on flows, but how they develop intrinsic capacities – how the flows are brought to a halt. Building on the ecological trope, he notes that ‘space is, in certain ways and to differing degrees, species-specific. Each landscape reveals affordances and dangers that, like the web to the fly, are significant only to certain sensorial natures, intelligences and capacities.’ (Fuller 2011, 177) Space, seems to suggest Fuller, is a trap which, if properly laid out, may result in the release of fecund intellectual energies.

When it comes to imagining and developing such spider-architectures Fuller proposes that we attend to designing spatialities capable of becoming at once interfaces and placeholders for very different ‘kinds of intelligence’ (Fuller 2011, 181). I quote at length:

Firstly, one of the most urgent means of developing such an approach is by engendering a sensitivity to the urban in which multiple kinds of intelligence, including those of non-human species and their spatial practices in all their fundamental alienness to humans, have a significant place... Secondly, to recognize that in the generative development of spatialities that intensify intelligence, specialization takes place... Cities can be characterized as a concentrated process of the gathering, enfolding and dispersal of such spaces. In becoming strange themselves through such specialization and congruence, they create mutant fitness landscapes for forms of intelligence to interpret, cohabit, or to disperse from. (Fuller 2011, 181)

What we have here, then, is a proposition where the spider-architecture is no longer simply imagined as a surface-tensor of ecological relations, the infrastructure enabling/enabled by mutual describabilities, but as a lively episteme in its own right. The spider-architecture functions as a web-of-intelligences – ‘mutant fitness landscapes for forms of intelligence’, as Fuller puts it.

This notion of landscape-intelligences interests me because along with my colleague Adolfo Estalella over the past three years we have been carrying out fieldwork with architectural and digital and new media artists and activists who, amongst other idioms, also describe their own practice as being concerned with the documentation and production of ‘*inteligencias colectivas*’ (collective intelligences). These communities include, for example, groups of self-called ‘prototypers’ at a Medialab in Madrid, who use open-source technology to design and develop sensors, networks and data-visualisation software programmes to (for example) measure the quality of air in the city; architectural collectives who experiment with open-source industrial design to generate novel forms of participatory urbanism; or the ‘popular assemblies’ that cropped up in the wake of the Spanish Occupy (locally known as 15M) movement. Although made-up of a variegated and heterogeneous number of collectives, in Madrid it has become quite common to hear people speak about these initiatives as doing *procomún* – as contributing or being related in some way to ‘the commons’. The notion

of the commons, however, has acquired a bit of a teratological character in social theory lately, so for the sake of argument I shall speak here of ‘urban hackers’, a term which some of them also use.⁹

Description: a prototype

I would like to introduce you in particular to some recent collaborative work that Adolfo and I have been carrying out with two architectural collectives based in Madrid, called Basurama and Zuloark. This work began just over a year ago, when we realised that our interests converged on a number of fronts. I will get to this convergence of interests in a minute, but let me first introduce you the collectives.

Basurama and Zuloark are perhaps amongst the most reputed architectural collectives in Spain today. Although their members are all quite young (in their 30s), the collectives have been around for about ten years each. Basurama, for example, has over this time developed a research and interventionist agenda focused on re-articulating the commodity and public circuits of urban trash (in Spanish, *basura*). In this line of work Basurama has designed inventive collaborative interventions aimed at re-spatializing the city using not so much constructive techniques as ‘de-constructive’ (waste, garbage) materials. Zuloark’s interests have focused in turn around rethinking collaboration in urban contexts as an interstitial process: a challenge imagined in terms of finding crevices in the contemporary metropolis that allow for *building-up* collaboration – quite literally, by constructing open-source architectural objects.

A good example of the work that Basurama and Zuloark do is a series of workshops that they have jointly been organising for two years now called ‘Hand Made Urbanism’. The aim of the workshops is to invite participants to implode the grandiloquence of urban designs by making their own urban equipment. They call this practice ‘brico-urbanism’. Brico-urbanism is all about designing and making objects. But as they put it, ‘brico-urbanism workshops are not industrial design workshops. They are rather laboratories on the urban condition. For urbanism today is made from things (*el urbanismo se hace desde las cosas*).’

⁹ This signals to a complex economy that I cannot afford to go into detail here, but would be happy to talk about during the Q&A session. Briefly, it echoes aspects of the rise of a ‘Big Society’ discourse that (mirroring developments in the UK) has taken hold of public administration in the arts and culture in Madrid, in particular a very pernicious mobilisation of ‘social innovation’ as a vehicle for cutting state funding and promoting ‘community empowerment’ instead; the importance of the housing bubble in the current economic crisis in Spain, which has hit the architectural profession particularly badly, and which has encouraged a migration of young architects away from the construction sector into experimental art-engineering-design collaborations; or indeed the complex sociology of new forms of digital activism, which in the Spanish context have assumed considerable prominence.



Figure 4. Poster for a 'Hand Made Urbanismo' workshop

The objects made at a Hand-Made Urbanismo and other similar workshops are all assembled by recycling trash or abandoned materials. To this effect, in the early days of a workshop participants engage in a 'trash safari' around the local neighbourhood in the hunt for wood planks, plastics and other types of materials that might prove useful in future design and construction sessions. These safaris take out to the city at night and offer participants an opportunity to engage with the otherwise invisible materiality of the city's residual wastelands. In homage to the Situationists urban deambulations, the term *dérive* is applied to these drifting walkabouts around a neighbourhood, which in Situationist fashion are also therefore somewhat aimed at recuperating the psychogeography of neighbourly that lies outside the circuits of capital (Wark 2008).

The Situationist reference gestures to a larger concern of Basurama and Zuloark, namely, that the pieces of furniture become boundary-objects for the communities they work with. For both collectives, the furniture must materialize the community of relations wherein it is to be emplaced. Thus, they go at great length to source their building materials locally, to have local craftsmen and technicians join the project, and to document as much as possible the socio-economic context that has led to the community expressing a need for a particular piece of furniture.

I noted above that just over a year ago we found that Basurama, Zuloark and ourselves shared a number of interests. At that point Adolfo and I had been doing fieldwork with the popular assemblies of the 15M movement for eighteen months. We had come to think of them as urban installations: pieces of mobile urban equipment that took temporary residence in the open air of plazas or streets. We had written for example about how the assemblies had developed an infrastructural, archival and methodological regime that warranted their durability as social open (air) forms (Corsín Jiménez y Estalella forthcoming). We were interested in the assemblies as socio-political forms, but also in their internal recursion as infrastructural processes. Over these past two years, assemblies have also reinvigorated neighbourhood life, and assembly-goers have cultivated an identity for themselves as ‘neighbours’. The urban persona of the ‘neighbour’ has thus acquired new prominence in public life through the work of assembling (Corsín Jiménez y Estalella 2013).

It is therefore perhaps hardly surprising that we found in Basurama and Zuloark congenial interlocutors, for their practice, as seen, revolves too around re-thinking the infrastructural conditions of urban life, such that the material furnishing of these conditions elucidates in turn the very shape that forms of neighbourly or community collaborations might take.

About a year ago, then, we sat down with Basurama and Zuloark and developed a joint research programme that we called *15Muebles*, ‘15 pieces of furniture’. The name was intended to evoke the 15M movement, but more poignantly we wanted to elucidate what new forms of urbanism the occupation of streets, plazas and squatted centres had given birth to. If the urban condition was terra-forming anew under the aegis of the Occupy spirit, we were provoked to re-imagine it instead as a *terre meuble* – a furnishing of the territory (Cache 1995). Urban life as a *meuble*, as furniture-that-moves.

For over a year we met with Basurama and Zuloark regularly, every two weeks, sometimes weekly. We spent long mornings together, first introducing ourselves, our trajectories, our research and empirical sensibilities; and over time simply talking about Madrid, about developments in the 15M movement, about new legislation regulating public space, about on-going changes in City Hall’s cultural and urban agendas.

I have to admit that eight months into the project I began to have concerns about it. I felt we weren’t really doing much, except meet, talk, and attend each other’s events, workshops and seminars. It did transpire eventually that Basurama and Zuloark were talking about us outside our encounters, for we often found our names mentioned in websites or blogs or Twitter exchanges managed by other architectural collectives. And word of our project had also reached a number of well-known cultural and art centres in Madrid, who sometimes spoke about the project with a confidence that, given our accomplishments to date, I frankly found a little off-putting.

So that was our situation until roughly September last year. Then something changed. A couple of months previous, Madrid's City Hall had set in motion a consultation exercise for a new strategic plan for its cultural industries' sector. The consultation process received severe criticism for availing itself of a 'commons' and 'social innovation' rhetoric and yet failing to open-up to serious debate. In response, the Hall asked the Medialab to organize a call for 'citizen panels' whose proceedings might inform the final consultation document. The Medialab approached Adolfo and I informally, inquiring whether we would be interested in organizing one such panel on '*gestión ciudadana de lo público*', citizen-led initiatives of public resources.

We were kindly surprised by the invitation and agreed to organize it with Basurama and Zuloark. We sent a call out to a very wide spectrum of community-led initiatives in Madrid: squatted social centres, urban community gardens, architectural collectives, neighbourhood associations, and cultural centres. At the meeting different collectives narrated their own experiences in taking over (legally or illegally) the management of a public space. We talked about how the various initiatives funded themselves over time and sought sustainability; about the management of infrastructure (electricity, water, toilets); and about the difficulties of finding suitable interlocutors inside City Hall.

The encounter was on the whole rated a success. It was felt by many that the occasion to have various collectives share their experiences was a rare one and that it therefore ought to be repeated. We met again in a fortnight's time, and then again two weeks later. By mid November the encounters had been institutionalised and were widely known as '*La Mesa*' – the citizen's roundtable.

Roughly at the same time Basurama and Zuloark received (and accepted) an invitation from City Hall to design the Hall's stand at the National Environmental Conference that was to take place in Madrid later in the month. The stand was built by reusing wood that belonged to historical city benches (which are heritage pieces in their own right). It recreated an urban community garden, whose plants were transplanted from existing community garden projects in Madrid. (Importantly, it should be noted that urban community gardens are to this day illegal in Madrid.) Each plant symbolized a community project, and had a label attached explaining the initiative. Moreover, the whole stand was described in the label welcoming its visitors as a 'space of collective creativity, built with an evocative character, and with the aim to promote a diversity of perspectives and reflections.'

When I first saw the stand it took me a while to get my head around it. It was a beautiful and indeed evocative piece of furniture. It literally blossomed amidst the tedious commercial and corporate landscape of electricity and gas companies', or even NGO's stands. Further, it made me wonder what exactly had City Hall seen in the stand so as to assume all the connotations of its symbolic infrastructure – with all those references and nods to urban community gardens, squatted social centres or guerrilla architectural collectives. As it turns out, although much of the stand's publicity had all the rhetorical

inflections proper to the empty rhetoric of political ventriloquism, the preparations leading to its construction anticipated and rehearsed a number of future developments.



Figures 5 & 6. City Hall's stand at the National Environmental Conference.

The commission of the stand to Basurama and Zuloark had in fact been facilitated by a couple of City Hall employees who were also assiduous members of various community projects in Madrid, and who had been attending the meetings of *La Mesa* since its inception. These people had taken upon themselves the task of trying to open up a political space within City Hall – tenuous and fragile as it certainly was – that would make the construction of such a stand feasible.

More importantly, coinciding with the on-going celebrations of *La Mesa*, these City Hall employees suggested to some of their colleagues that the stand could perhaps be a good place to rehearse an informal meeting with some of the radical collectives who were responsible for building the stand, as well as others whose spirit was 'evoked' by the stand's celebratory blurb when speaking of 'space[s] of collective creativity'.

The suggestion to hold a meeting between radical collectives and City Hall representatives was accepted. A message was sent out to the members of *La Mesa* that some representatives from the Hall were keen to meet us in order to initiate a conversation about our diverse interests and stakes over the management of public spaces. The meeting was scheduled to take place at City Hall's stand in the National Environmental Conference, although it was strategically removed from the conference's programme so as to, as the Hall's delegates put it, 'not to draw too much political attention'.



Figure 7. La Mesa meets City Hall at the National Environmental Conference.

The meeting was by all account a success. The members of Hall all insisted in making clear that their presence there was on a personal capacity – they were not on official City Hall business, and their words were not to be taken as representing City Hall views. Notwithstanding, they all agreed that their presence was a reaction to a failure on the part of the Hall to understand ‘new models of urban governance’. We agreed that we all had a great deal to learn from each other. There was palpable excitement in the air.

On our part, members of the various community projects were eager to understand the intricacies of City Hall's bureaucracy: how legislation was drafted and interpreted; how different kinds of paperwork inscribed particular bureaucratic regimes, and therefore how best to circumvent or deflect the attention of such disciplinary regimes; or simply the names of particular individuals within City Hall who were known to be receptive to requests from radical collectives. As for City Hall's delegates, they were much impressed with the collectives' capacities for self-organisation, and in particular for their use of digital media and online collaborative platforms to garner 'distributive energies'. They seemed rather worried with the current political pressure for 'participation', and felt that that the collectives had a much better understanding of how 'participation' worked, including knowledge of actual tools and methodologies.

Recursion

The meeting closed with a decision to set up a permanent '*mesa de aprendizaje*' (learning roundtable) that would meet periodically with a view to identifying questions of urban governance of interest both to City Hall delegates and ourselves. We have met two times thus far. I am afraid I cannot go into the details of each meeting here. Let me just say that on each occasion we have experimented with the format of our encounter. For our first meeting, for example, we staged a 'role game' in order to provoke what one of the members of *La Mesa* dubbed a 'pedagogy of ignorance'. The idea was for a couple of City Hall delegates to take upon themselves the task of reporting on the history and development of two community projects; and for two representatives from the latter to assume a governmental role, and justify and explain in turn the nature of two City Hall interventions.

After our first meeting with the delegates from City Hall at the National Environmental Conference, Manuel, a member of Zuloark, noted that this truly marked an unprecedented development in the configuration of urban public space in Madrid. 'It is unheard of', he said, 'of City Hall wanting to establish some kind of dialogue with radical collectives like us.' Others tried to caution his words, noting that City Hall had in fact taken good precaution of erasing our meeting from the conference's programme, or that the whole rhetoric of 'social innovation' and 'creative collaboration' was but the latest of fads in the arts of political persuasion. 'Sure', he retorted, 'but here we are: seating around a gigantic piece of furniture, playing a game of seduction with them.'

I have been pondering about these two images – furniture and seduction – for some months now. I have been reminded, for instance, of Tim Choy's ethnography of environmentalism in Hong Kong, and his description of the various citizen-expert forums that tried to pulse the effects of environmental change in the region, as they figured-out how to reconcile metrological, scientific and experiential narratives, and in so doing set in motion what in a most evocative idiom he calls 'ecologies of comparison'. For, as he nicely puts it, [e]cologies work through comparisons, and comparisons work through ecologies.' (Choy 2011)

The furniture and the seduction mobilize no doubt an ecology whose specificity is being elucidated through our meetings with City Hall. But the furniture and the seduction make also for a strange-object. An object that is struggling to materialize its own affordances and capacities. An object whose community remains somewhat in suspension, still trying to figure-out an ecology for itself.

For we are to this day not sure what *La Mesa* is for and who its members are. Our members multiply and contract, with people appearing and disappearing, and sometimes re-appearing again when *La Mesa* forks into specialized taskforces. We are experimenting with the format of our meetings: where we meet (at cultural centres, in bars, we even met once at the Spanish National Research Council!), but also with how we conduct a meeting. We take turns taking minutes, which we call *relatorías* (storytelling), and which sometimes read like ethnographic accounts, whilst at other times they look like architectural sketches. Sometimes the remit of our activities seems defined and taken over by the concerns of architects (who are over-represented at *La Mesa*, which has become a concern in itself), whilst on some occasions it is the voice of cultural agents, or of urban gardening communities that assumes the wisdom of political praxis. Sometimes, even, it is the anthropologists that everyone turns to for inspiration.

Perhaps this is what Fuller meant by a spider-architecture: what a species-specific media ecology might look like when experimenting with the urban commons in Madrid. In this sense, however, *La Mesa* can hardly be said to work as an interface of mutual describabilities, for the project of its own description seems for some reason something that people insist to be kept at bay. In retrospect, I can see how *La Mesa* has both modulated and re-rehearsed over time the materiality of a very long conversation, across different types of media and spaces: from our long conversations with Basurama and Zuloark, followed-up in Twitter and online exchanges, in workshops and seminars, to the organisation of the Medialab's citizen panel and the making of City Hall's stand. Which brings me back to the question of furniture.

In a very recent correspondence over email, a member of *La Mesa* circulated a message inviting other members to participate in the design of an 'urban cultivation table': a model for a transportable urban greenhouse. The table's project had been initiated by a sustainable architectural collective called Pinha, who wished to experiment with this 'prototype' by open-sourcing its design. 'We want to start a participatory process on the internet', they explain on their website, 'to design a prototype urban cultivation table.'¹⁰

¹⁰ See <https://community.studiolabproject.eu/group/urban-cultivation-table>

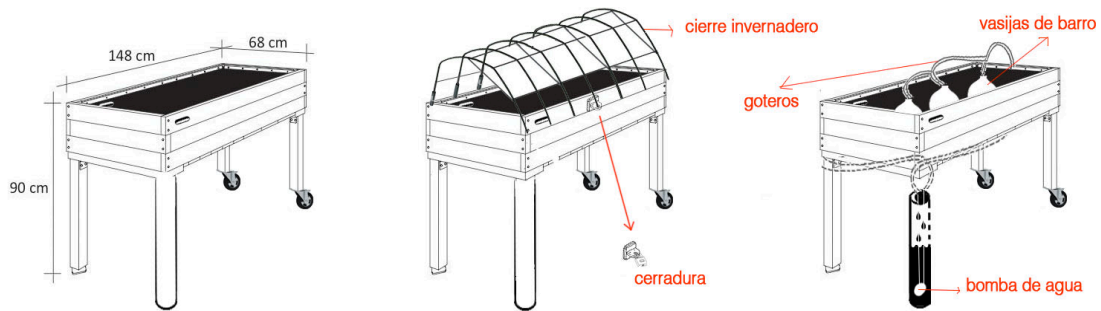


Figure 8. The urban cultivation table.

Some members of *La Mesa* found the request for participating in the design of the table rather amusing, for it made visible a curious coincidence of purposes: *La Mesa* had finally found its own *mesa*, its own table. Our experimentation had finally doubled-backed upon itself.

The urban cultivation table aims to ‘prototype’ its own re-appearance as object and as community. It performs a sort of ‘recursive’ movement (Kelty 2008), such that the making of the furniture furnishes itself the community of makers. A strange-object, then, trying to catch a community for itself. Perhaps it is not unreasonable to think of this type of furnishing of the social as a trapping impulse, yet one whose trick lies in jumping ahead of itself. In this vein, the furniture seems less intent in trying to trap an environment, the way spiders’ webs do, as in trying to trap its own capacity for description. It aims less for mutual describability as for describability itself. I am reminded here of Roy Wagner’s uncanny description of human knowledge as ‘a predator that learned to stalk its own image... Like the false nonpresence that the cat pounces out of.’ (Wagner 2001, 63) The urban cultivation table, *La Mesa* or the pieces of furniture of the Hand Made Urbanism workshops are all prototypes for a city that does not yet exist – or maybe it does, deployed as the false nonpresence that the meubles pounce out of.

Conclusion

I have introduced you to three non-representational techniques of description (pictorial, experimental, political), and have suggested that in the making visible of their epistemic effects what these techniques may perhaps have in common is a trapping-impulse.

There are of course different kinds of traps, and it has certainly not been my intention to subsume these under one overarching notion of epistemic trapping. Much to the contrary, I hope to have shown that trapping is a productive anthropological technology *because* it has so many different ways of generating ‘suspension without releasing the

hold of context', as Debbona Battaglia has put it (2012, 1094).¹¹ Traps carry context and let it go – although the different techniques of capture, containment and release will of course inflect how an episteme is seen to be doing any work to start with.

Traps capture, caution and captivate; they provoke wonder, suspension and elicitation. Traps can make the world spin slowly, at least for those who are awaiting rescue; or they can accelerate our impatience, if preys never show up. Some traps, even, are falsely triggered by a whisper or a hiss, and jump off ahead of themselves. Traps have spatial, temporal and existential effects.

In this vein, the three modalities of trapping that I have described have allowed me to centre a number of questions. The aesthetic trap of the trompe l'oeil allowed us to see how epistemology and ontology are 'doubly encompassed' by a notion of relationality that is itself unstable.¹² In the trompe l'oeil, relations double themselves and – with a nod to Marilyn Strathern's Sawyer seminar three weeks ago – open-up the relation to novel forms of description.

Traps, of course, are also well-known environmental artefacts – we can think of them as ecological toolboxes. Traps, we have seen, artefactualize the interior design of an Umwelt. They extricate from Nature its interfaces, the infrastructure of its mutual describabilities. And in this capacity they would seem to place the project of onto-ecology once again in the hands of description.

Last, traps embody the interiorizing and exteriorizing recursions that accompany the location of an environment. The prototypes of urban furniture work just in this fashion: they help assemble and furnish the conditions for social seduction. Pouncing out from the shadows of their nonpresence, the meubles prototype their own re-predation. They are trying to fascinate and seduce a community into existence. To trap it out.

A trap for relations, then, and a trap for ecologies. And a trap for description's own re-appearances. Three traps many.

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¹¹ Battaglia is describing the 'exo-surprises' that cosmonauts encounter when confronting zero gravity. They are captured or 'arrested' by the ingravity of space.

¹² 'Double encompassment' after Roy Wagner (2001).

have proved invaluable sources of inspiration. Debbara Battaglia and Marilyn Strathern read early versions of the paper and it is to their on-going support and encouragement that I owe its (perhaps rather) flippant – trompe l'oeil – articulation.

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