

Grup de Treball and Vídeo-Nou / Two Collective Projects in 1970s Spain Teresa Grandas

This text will discuss two diachronic collective projects in the Spanish state that took place immediately before and after a significant event—the death of Franco in 1975. A study of the Grup de Treball (1973–1975) and Video Nou/Servei de Video Comunitari (1977–1983) will enable us to trace the complex relationship between artistic experimentation and the socio-political situation of the time. These groups cannot be understood as isolated cases. Instead, they acted as transmitters for permeable action and interacted as critical settings and stimuli for innovative attitudes, in which artistic activity goes beyond the mere formal fact and is insolubly linked to socio-political practices. In this regard, it is important to take into account that Grup de Treball evolved in the last years of the dictatorship, against a background of political repression and, in Catalonia, a reaffirmation of its identity. In the case of Video-Nou, the project was born already immersed in the pre-institutional democratic models of construction.

“DUE TO THE TEMPORARY absence of the country, direct information is wanted about the reality of same Visits 5–7 or write Muntadas Comercio 64, Barcelona 3. T. 3190930.”¹

Grup de Treball gathered together a heterogeneous aggregation that included artists, filmmakers, art critics and the occasional politician. Among its participants were artists such as Francesc Abad, Jordi Benito, Alicia Finguerhut, Xavier Franquesa, Muntadas, Àngels Ribé, Manuel Rovira, Dorothée Selz and Francesc Torres; the filmmaker Pere Portabella, the musician Carlos Santos, the poet and artist Santi Pau, the writers Carles Hac Mor and Antoni Munné, the historian Imma Julián, and others such as María Costa, Jaume Carbó, Josep Parera and Enric Sales. The coordinator of the group was Antoni Mercader.² Their involvement in the project was diverse, uneven and sporadic. There were also occasional contributions from the designer and artist Alberto Corazón and the artists Olga Pijuan and Luis Utrilla.³ Although they all continued to work

¹ *Anunciamos* was a series of 17 texts inserted in the classified ads section of the newspaper *La Vanguardia Española* between June and July 1973 by the Grup de Treball. The text combined the printed word with the characteristic red circle marking the parts that were deleted by the censor.

² The list of members was furnished by him.

³ They signed the reply to Antoni Tàpies as part of a public polemic (see note 4). This was not the only controversy that arose with other artists, although it received the most publicity.

individually between 1973 and 1975, they combined their activities with a collective project under the name “Grup Treball,” which revolved around a critical perspective of conventional artistic practices while stressing the social function of art.

The group was marked by its strong political commitment and emphasis on ideology. It was no accident that it took shape during the final stages of Francoism, precisely when the agonizing regime was in its most repressive phase, having ignored the ever-increasing need and demands for democratization both from inside and outside the country. In February 1973, in conjunction with the show *Informació d'Art Concepte* (“Information about Conceptual Art”) within the space of the Llotja de Tint at Banyoles, the guidelines and aims of the group were drawn up in a work about the circulation of information. This document appealed to the public to think about and discuss the situation. From his tribune as a collaborator in the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, the painter Antoni Tàpies branded them as “a naïve version that wants to be aggressive and politicized.”⁴ The reply, supported by a wide spectrum of people, was published in November of the same year in the review *Nueva Lente*, no. 21.

The group was formally presented in summer 1973 at the fifth Summer University in Prada de Conflent. During those years meetings were frequently organized in smaller towns throughout Catalonia, in which papers were read and artistic and political questions were debated. At the same time, experiences—in many cases short-lived—were presented that questioned the usual art circuits and reflected on the work of art per se, including the very notion of authorship, as an alternative and awareness of artistic anachronism and commercialization. These encounters acted as settings for creative and intellectual stimulation, not only strictly in the realm of art but also in music, architecture, film, design and politics.⁵ These were by no means isolated happenings, for they were also included places and events like gallery spaces or venues devoted to other activities as well as artistic presentations.⁶ At this point it is important to emphasize two negative factors in regard to these circumstances: on the one hand, the lack of freedom prevented a display of discordant or even critical attitudes; and on the other, there was a noticeable lack of infrastructures and an absence of supportive institutions. Nevertheless, these adverse circumstances actually facilitated a wider diffusion of ideas and a

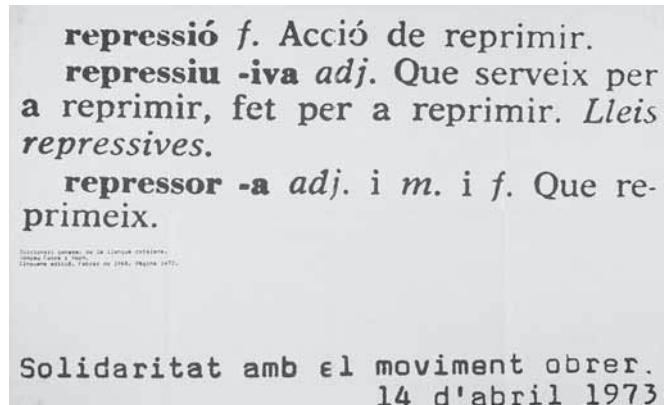
⁴ Antoni Tàpies, *La Vanguardia Española*, 14 March 1973, p. 13. He goes on "...but without anything to support it and so ill-adapted to the needs of our country that it ends up as a mere anti-establishment declamation, with all the typical childishness that is often counterproductive. Moreover, we should recall that while here they exalt the subversive side that runs contrary to the system that they claim for conceptual art, it is sold almost everywhere in galleries, collected in museums and admitted to the official competitions of that very system."

⁵ A good example of this is the congress of the ICSID held in Ibiza in October 1971. During its sessions there were artistic events such as a ceremony of colors on the occasion of the inauguration of the conference organized by Miralda, Dorothee Selz and Jaume Xifra, with the musical collaboration of Carlos Santos and the construction of a large inflatable structure by Muntadas and Ponsati. The *Instant City*, an ephemeral inflatable city was also built to house the students, and Jordi Cerdà presented his films within the framework of the congress. Muntadas, Selz and Santos became members of Grup de Treball later on.

⁶ A few examples of this are the Galerías G, Mec-Mec and Ciento in Barcelona, artistic spaces such as B5-125 at the Universidad Autónoma, the Sala de Personal in the Caja de Pensiones and the Espai 10 in the Fundació Miró in Barcelona and the Sala Tres in Sabadell. Venues devoted to other activities such as the Sala Vinçon in Barcelona also

series of events that linked together different types of creative activity and developed a methodology for work and visibility.⁷

Grup de Treball called into question the different artistic languages as a way of disseminating the dominant ideology. It also questioned the concept of style, the work of art itself, the autonomy of artistic activity and the art circuits; in other words, the art market. The “work” or artistic product was conceived as a form of political and social mobilization. Through their participation in various events they would analyze the organizational structures, the control mechanisms and their determining factors that influenced the participants and the opportunity and opportunism that they entailed. A good example of this was the work presented at the aforementioned session of the Universitat d'Estiu at Prada de Conflent, denouncing the system. In this work, they established a relationship between the name of the artists who had participated in the Kassel Documentas 4 and 5, and the value or price of their works. The interrelation between art and economic power was also the basis for their *Encuesta a 24 galerías de arte de Madrid* (Survey of 24 art galleries in Madrid) in 1974. On the occasion of the IX Biennale de Paris in October 1975, they presented *Champ d'attraction. Document. Travail d'information sur la presse illégale des Pays Catalans*, an important work on the illegal clandestine press in the Spanish state. The passing of the antiterrorist law in 1975 and the introduction of the state of emergency forced them to present the work anonymously, and it was excluded from the catalogue because of fear of reprisal (the last executions under the death penalty were still very recent).



included artistic contributions in their programs. The German Institute in Madrid and Barcelona and the College of Architects also played an important role.

⁷ The magazine *Ajoblanco*, no. 4 (April 1975) published the text that Grup de Treball had presented at the *Mostra d'Art Múltiple* and was shown at the FAD (Foment de les Arts Decoratives, one of the forerunners of stimulating interest in design in Catalonia) at the end of 1974. It consisted of a criticism and protest against the opportunism of the competition and the acts associated with it. *Ajoblanco* was founded in 1974 "with a spirit of inquiry and out of necessity", with a plurality of interests (counter-cultures, underground and alternative movements, ecology, art, film, philosophy, etc.), "because we want to intervene, provoke, facilitate and make use of a creative culture". (Editorial no. 1). During these years other publications appeared such as *Star* and *Ozono*, which were interested in criticizing culture and daily life. Parallel to these magazines others appeared, such as *El Viejo Topo*, which were more theoretical-political oriented, even though they shared common concerns.

Grup de Treball,
poster of the Group
"Solidarity with the Workers'
Movement", 1973, printed
ink on paper, 50 x 80 cm
MACBA Collection.
Government of Catalonia
Art Fund, © Grup de Treball,
2012, photo by Rocco Ricci

Internal disagreements within the group, the sporadic commitments of various members and the new political situation that was opening up after the death of Franco all played a part in their dissolution, which happened in 1975.⁸ It is important to place the Grup de Treball in context in relation to other coetaneous artistic projects. Traditional histories have tended to group them all under the same heading of Conceptual Art in Catalonia. This, however, does not allow for individual differences and limits creative activity to the merely artistic, rather than taking into account the affiliations and networks of connections with other circles and in relation to clandestine projects and opposition to the regime.

Like Grup de Treball, Vídeo-Nou (1977–1978), which later became Servei de Vídeo Comunitari (1979–1983), grew out of the context of the struggle for democracy. But this time it appeared in the post-Franco era, precisely in the same year the first democratic elections since the Second Republic were held in Spain. This was “the first independent video collective in the Spanish state that worked in the field of social intervention to promote the contextual use of electronic communication”⁹.

This arose at a time when expectations of freedom and the need for transformation in the country were at their highest point. This collective saw its project as inseparable from the historical context and social mobilizations, as part of a process of the decentralization of power and social autonomy.

In this regard, the appearance of portable video equipment provided the technology that enabled the activation of projects involving communication in alternative spaces that were decentralized and on the periphery. We should recall the precursor work of Muntadas, who in July 1974 organized a “Workshop of works with videotapes in groups,” on the use, possibilities and projects with portable systems in the Sala Vinçon in Barcelona together with William Creston. That same month Muntadas did his *Cadaqués Canal Local* (Cadaqués Local Channel), which many believe was the first example of local television. Even if it was not exactly a television channel per se, it did, however, anticipate the community video projects of Vídeo-Nou. In 1976 he had already developed another similar project called *Barcelona Distrito Uno* (Barcelona District One), where he gave the neighborhood association in that district a voice with which to speak out, and utilized the space of the Galería Ciento

⁸ Antoni Mercader believes that the last public appearance of the group took place in 1977 when they presented their work on the illegal press at the Fundació Miró in Barcelona as a part of the exhibition *Vanguardia artística y realidad social en el Estado español, 1936–1976*. This work was shown a year before at the Venice Biennale. See Antoni Mercader, “Sobre el Grup de Treball”, in *Grup de Treball*, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona 1999, p. 8.

⁹ As defined by one of its members, Carles Ametller. Quoted in Carles Ametller, “Vídeo-Nou. Servei de Vídeo Comunitari,” *Banda Aparte. Revista de cine. Formas de ver*, no. 16, October 1999, p. 46.

as an information centre. The journalist and cultural activist, Josep M. Martí i Font, underlined Muntadas's contribution with an opportune reflection in relation to Vídeo-Nou:

"With his artistic activity Muntadas was filling a gap that should have corresponded to the neighbours themselves, that is, the unmasking of information by proposing to the individual the inevitable comparison with official television. When would there be a community television? Would it ever be possible for television to revert to the hands of society and free itself from official power? Because an artist's work can only indicate a road to follow at a certain point; it only sets down the guidelines for action, but it does not actually carry them out."¹⁰

In fact, Vídeo-Nou was born out of the will to foster an alternative type of communication in a country with only two public channels, both controlled by the state. It would be similar to the local television models in the Francophone regions of Canada, France and Belgium, rather than a guerrilla-type television. VN/SNC arose out of the VII Encuentros Internacionales de Vídeo organised by the Centro de Arte y Comunicación-CAYC of Buenos Aires that took place in the Fundació Miró in Barcelona in February 1977. Margarita d'Amico and Manuel Manzano, two Venezuelan experts in social communication and new technologies who participated in the symposiums on art, architecture and communication, offered to organize a workshop with Muntadas's portable equipment, and Vídeo-Nou was born.¹¹

This project of collective communication was made up of people of diverse backgrounds and training, a fact that made for great versatility and intersecting interests. Many of its participants were former students of film from the CIPLA of the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona. Carlos Ametller had a degree in Fine Arts and Graphic Arts; Esteban Escobar was trained in anti-psychiatry; Albert Estibal studied medicine and journalism; Xefo Guasch was an architect and photographer; Marga Latorre, a sociologist; Pau Maragall (Pau Malvido), an economist; Maite Martínez, an urban planner; Luisa Ortínez, a lawyer; Lluïsa Roca, a school teacher; and Joan Úbeda an engineering student.¹² What they all had in common was their will to participate in social and political transformations of the time and an interest in appropriating the means of production of audiovisual information. While the mass media was being

¹⁰ Josep M. Martí i Font, "Alternativa a la TV", *El Viejo Topo*, November 1976, p. 66. *El Viejo Topo* (1976–1982) was a journal that dealt with cultural topics from very marked sociological, philosophical and political points of view.

¹¹ They used Muntadas's portable system in their first interventions until they were able to buy their own equipment in Germany.

¹² Carles Ametller, see above, note. 8. Other participants mentioned in "Vídeo-Nou. Dossier 1977–1978" are Genís Cano (psychology graduate and research worker in educational sciences), Juan Cardona (electronics student) and Sylvie Poissenot (a television producer who had collaborated on projects with Muntadas). The academic and professional references of the members of the group refer to their occupations at that time, even though they may have worked in other fields later on.

manipulated and controlled according to the interests of those in power, this group was interested in the possibilities for transformation offered by the new technical resources.



Vídeo-Nou, Photograph of the campaign of the Catalan League for the towns of Girona. Vídeo-Nou, 1977, left to right: Lluïsa Roca, Lluïsa Ortínez and Marga Latorre. MACBA Collection. Study Center. Vídeo-Nou Fund

Vídeo-Nou began working in social intervention and mediation with close ties to the industrial belt of Barcelona and immigration. Its aim was to create a network within local popular communities who, in turn, would become active participants in helping to transform their daily lives. They were also closely linked to popular culture and underground circuits in the city.¹³ They spread out their activities in different fields of video application. One sector concentrated on social animation, that is, the study of forms of life and popular culture in the different sections of Barcelona. Films were made in which the participants became very involved in the subject matter, and they were then shown in cultural centers, bars, civic meetings and neighborhood associations.¹⁴ A second field of action was the diffusion of information about politics, given that it coincided with the years when political parties and labor unions were being legalized and the first democratic elections were held.¹⁵ A third activity was the making of documentaries on various subjects.¹⁶ A fourth section worked in the artistic sphere, in particular, activities relating to the counter-culture and underground scenes.¹⁷ The fifth activity involved the actual integration of audiovisual media in the field of teaching and in conjunction with

¹³ Pau Maragall, one of the members of Vídeo-Nou/Servei de Vídeo Comunitari, signed his articles with the pseudonym "Pau Malvido". These chronicles, which were published under the heading "Nosotros los malditos" ("We the Damned or Cursed Ones") in Star magazine, contained a brief rundown of the counter-culture of the country. Vídeo-Nou/Servei de Vídeo Comunitari also recorded many of the activities of people and venues, galleries and spaces within this counter-cultural context.

¹⁴ Examples of this type of video intervention are the films of the petrol station strike (1977) and intervention in the Can Serra district in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat (1978) in which neighbourhood associations were closely involved.

¹⁵ Campaña por la Lliga de Catalunya (Campaign for the Catalonian League), April-May 1977; Las Jornadas Libertarias Internacionales de Barcelona (Barcelona Libertarian Days), June 1977, with a political and festive component; and the meeting of the U.G.T. Socialist labour union at Montjuic, Barcelona, December 1977.

¹⁶ The first political elections held after the death of Franco in 1977; the first legal celebration of the Diada Nacional de Catalunya (the National Day of Catalonia) 11 September 1977; the demonstration for gay rights demanding the repeal of the Law of Social Danger for homosexuals (1977); and the bicycle demonstration by ecologists (1977).

schools.¹⁸ Finally, the group worked in the professional sphere in advertising and film production.¹⁹

In 1978 they had already realized that it was impossible to attend to all the requests they received and that the material they had produced lacked a steady outlet for distribution. Thus, the Servei de Vídeo Comunitari (Community Video Service) was created.²⁰ Its purpose was to put at the disposal of cultural entities and community associations the training, loan of equipment, technical assistance and orientation of distribution at accessible prices. Following the line begun by Vídeo-Nou, its purpose was to present audiovisual language as a dynamic factor in the cultural life of the community. Its point of departure was the potential created by the city councils arising from the new democracy. At the same time, these proposals formed part of a criticism of the institutional processes within the politics of social planning. They conducted workshops to train people in the use of video as a means of communication in Barcelona and in other cities around the country. As Pepe Ribas, one of the founders of the magazine *Ajoblanco* pointed out,²¹ Pau Maragall's contacts with the Socialists enabled them to establish relations with the new political leaders. An agreement was signed with the Barcelona city council between 1980 and 1982 to finance their activities in the different districts of the city in relation to everyday problems and topics of popular culture. Nevertheless, the agreement was not renewed in 1983, because the Socialist municipal government curtailed the autonomy of social initiatives in order to centralize them. This marked a critical moment within the associative movement and signaled the end of SVC. At the same time, several members turned professional and some became incorporated into the new autonomous television network of Catalonia. The end of the activities of this collective coincided, to a certain extent, with the institutionalization of the experimental cultural projects initiated under the democratic governments which, in turn, put an end to the expectation of possibilities for change.

Translated from the Spanish by Selma Margarettens.

¹⁷ The taping of a parody of the official television program with a news broadcast by Montesol and Onlyú (June 1977); participation in the Canet Rock music festival (July 1977); Ocaña's exhibition in Galería Mec-Mec in Barcelona (1977); Mariscal's exhibition *Gran Hotel* at the Galería Mec-Mec (1977); Lindsay Kemp's rehearsal at the Teatre Lliure (1977); the recitals of Sisa in the Saló Diana and Casavella in Zeleste (both in 1978), and Pau Ribas's performance in Zeleste (1978).

¹⁸ Didactic programs for a kindergarten (1977) and a pilot school (1978), and the introduction of video media in a highschool (1978).

¹⁹ Publicity casting, translation and dubbing of a tape, television movies for a film, taping of a fashion show, collaboration on a film by Bigas Luna and the Muntañola report on urban games for the Colegio de Arquitectos.

²⁰ Núria Font, Josep M. Roca and Francesc Albiol joined the group at this time.

²¹ See Pepe Ribas, *Los '70 a destajo. Ajoblanco y libertad*, Ediciones Destino, Barcelona 2007.