Polyphonic recounting

- Opening the institution; the case of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies Barcelona

Laurence Rassel (Barcelona), January 2014.

Today, November 17 2013, on the invitation of Jasmin İhraç, I will begin to write a text on the subject of "opening the institution"[1].

"Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée."[2]

What do we mean by opening?

I won't pretend here to give an exhaustive account of all the debates and experiments going on concerning the concept of "opening the institution". Are we opening an institution when we vote on You Tube and Facebook for the show to open the theatre or dance season? When we take part in choosing artworks to be exhibited? When we share responsibility for allocating arts funds? When we post comments about museum visits on social networks? If we participate in downloading the community's favourite picture to be printed on a skateboard?[3] The definition of openness often depends on who rules the institution: the marketing department, the politicians on the board, or the extent of its success (in terms of people, tweets, "friends", media attention, etc.)

Opening an institution can also be defined by how far the installations, the art works on display, are (re-)opened to interaction with visitors, who can choose, modify, and participate in what they encounter. It should be noted that the openness we are concerned with is limited to the artwork and has nothing to do with the institution itself. As a rule, the institution proceeds as usual, just maybe employing mediators, or animators, instead of security guards. It is interesting to note that the examples mentioned above all focus on "openness" to the audience, the tax payers, the consumers, and not to the artists, the arts workers, the researchers, etc. So why not open the institution to the cultural sector it is embedded in?

As I try and define the act of "opening an institution", that quote by de Musset springs to mind: "*A door must* be kept o*pen or shut*". Nowadays it takes a lot of effort to keep the doors of an institution open. Who is allowing, or helping, the doors to be opened and shut?

Present.

I have decided to approach the task by describing the various events I experience on this particular day. Is it an example of a special day? Or is it actually quite a normal one in the daily process of institution opening? Over the course of the day, I will encounter different examples of collaboration, hospitality, and work processes. I will confront these examples with concepts, definitions of what "open" can mean. First, and most obviously: opening the door. Then, what will come immediately to my mind for sure is "open source" like in "open source software", to give access to the source code. What is the source code of an art centre? Is there a source, an origin? I'll go back to that later, unfolding this conversation within the situation and the existing parameters of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona.

Allow me to map how we work, first, by describing my different activities in a day.

9.30 Opening the door.

Auditorium, floor -1:

A meeting of the *Open All Areas Network*, with representatives of different European organizations working against social exclusion. They begin their meeting in the Auditorium of the Fundació on the lower ground floor. A few hours later, a smaller group continues the discussion in one of the meeting rooms of the Fundació, on the second floor of the building. This conference is organized by the *Articket* [4] network of museums in Barcelona. They first came together to create a combined ticket providing access to all the museums in the network. Now, the network is expanding its activities. They organize regular sessions where they meet with other museums and cultural organizations to develop practices for attracting a more diversified audience.

10.00 Opening the main public entrance.

Floors +1 , -1, -2:

The launch of the newly installed exhibitions: a selection of Antoni Tàpies works on the first and lower ground floors, and the beginning of a cycle of activities, *FAQ: Zone of Frequently Asked Questions*, in the basement. These activities will include exhibitions, workshops, interventions in the public domain, conferences, performances, etc. The program is a collaboration and co-production with different groups, associations and cultural institutions (e.g. Sala d'Art Jove[5], Hangar,[6] Idensitat[7]), dealing with artists' residencies, production, actions with a social and urban impact, etc. With *FAQ: Zone of Frequently Asked Questions*, we hope to open up an area for active debate between different agents sharing a specific spatial-temporal situation (Barcelona, late 2013). By entering this zone, the agents suspend their own limits, and explore different ways of doing things and the possibility of experimenting within a shared practice.

The questions that we have elicited from this process include: What role do institutions dedicated to knowledge, reflection and artistic production play today? How should the relation between institutions, curators, artists, researchers, the public and other agents be rethought and re-established? How can

artistic practice play a part in debates on re-articulating social, political and economic bodies? How should processes and research be communicated? How can strategies be combined in the short and the long term? How can doubts and practices be shared? How should other people's questions and answers be handled? How can the act of questioning be made central? How can the different ways of doing things be articulated? What is the meaning of a collaborative project? Should we work together? How can solidarity and complementarity be activated? How should production, research, exhibition and debate be articulated? How and when are spaces for exhibitions, performances and workshops necessary?

About thirty-six artists, two exhibition spaces and different presentation formats are involved in the program. For the first three months, we develop processes from the participating agents' questions.

The project group is described by a press conference assistant as "a bunch of squatters" ("occupas") installed in the Fundació. I will get back to this term, "squatters", later.

11.00

Floor +2:

Arrival of *Experimental Funktion*, a contemporary music ensemble, and composer Roger Goula. They will rehearse in the archive room on the second floor, as there is nowhere else available to rehearse that day. They are closely linked with the Fundació, so it was easy for them to contact us.

12.30

Floor + 2, offices:

In the meeting room on the second floor of administration, curator Soledad Gutiérrez is explaining to the whole team of the Fundació how we will develop the forthcoming exhibition *Allan Kaprow. Other Ways*. We cannot simply exhibit Kaprow pieces from 1959 on, we have to do them. Kaprow's works will be reinvented by other agents and artists, who then become responsible for the realization of those works. Obviously, we could show his first paintings, or display the documents accompanying his Happenings or Activities: videos, pictures, instructions, communication material (posters, flyers, booklets). Indeed, we will have to use those documents to follow his instructions to reinvent works such as *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959)*, Fluids* (1967) or *Sweet Wall* (1970), and some of his Activities. The emphasis here will be laid on the work process by which we reinvent them. It will be done publicly and not behind closed doors. The exhibition space will be dispersed across a variety of locations: a prison, the countryside, the street. Inside the Fundació, the exhibition space will be transformed by the different temporality of the pieces. It will become a gallery, a workshop, an archive, a rehearsal room, a meeting room, a storage space, etc. The institution is the mediator, the one to choose the works to be realized and attend their realization; the one to guarantee that it will be done in the best possible conditions for the work and the people involved. What will the implications for our work process be, how will it impact the daily life of the Fundació team?

14.30

Floor -2:

The team of mediators in the *FAQ* exhibition space in the basement changes over. The mediators are some of the artists exhibited. One of them is always there, welcoming the visitors and accompanying them through the project.

16.00

Auditorium:

The Auditorium changes into a venue for an evening course on culture for company directors, organized by a private business school in Barcelona.

20.00 The evening course ends.

21.00 Cleaning, rearranging the room and closing the doors.

Why am I going through this agenda? And I did not even mention the myriad of meetings and emails exchanged at each desk, on each phone, during the course of any ordinary day in any cultural institution. Because I was struck by the term "squatters" that came up previously, I was observing the flux of persons, projects, circulating in the Fundació. This flux is made up of different activities, each of them with its own intensity, temporality, but each connected to a person related to, or implicated in some way in the Fundació. Is the term "squatters" appropriate for these groups using the Fundació? It seems we are lacking a word to describe the act or possibility of occupying the institution, not against it, but within it; for using the facilities while respecting the premises.

A social contract.

The constraints that particular day, and in the *FAQ: Zone of frequently asked questions* area, are practical and pragmatic and they are mutual. While I can say that the institution hosting these activities has no intention to interpret, control or possess them, I confess that I am not sure how the different groups involved feel about the institution. Would they agree? Or do they have the impression they are being controlled, possessed, used? Sometimes they do articulate a certain interpretation of or prejudice relating to how the institution functions, and some might use that as the basis for an art-work. But for us at the institution, and for most of them, collaboration is based on the acceptance and consciousness of being part of the same ecosystem of artists, tools, spaces of production, residence, exhibitions.

A few weeks has passed. I had hoped to find useful references for this text in the world of open source and free[8] software. Free software can not only be used for no charge. It is written and licensed in a way that welcomes users to open, read, transform and redistribute the codes. If they do so, they are entering a chain of uses accompanied by a license that will determine rights and obligations. I was always struck by the fact that Debian - one of the first free and open source operating systems –, drew up a social contract[9] for its developers and users within the "Free Software Community". The contract starts by stating: "Debian will remain 100% free. We will give back to the free software community. We will not hide problems. Our priorities are our users and free software."

It is a contract specific to using, licensing and accessing the code with some hints on how to behave: don't hide problems, meaning make bug-reports available, don't discriminate against persons, groups or fields of endeavour, and show transparency concerning the code development.

Let's remember here how free software is defined:

> "Nobody should be restricted by the software they use. There are four freedoms
> that every user should have:
> the freedom to use the software for any purpose,
> the freedom to change the software to suit your needs,
> the freedom to share the software with your friends and neighbours, and
> the freedom to share the changes you make.
> When a program offers users all of these freedoms, we call it free software.
> Developers who write software can release it under the terms of the GNU GPL. When
> they do, it will be free software and stay free software, no matter who changes or
> distributes the program. We call this copyleft: the software is copyrighted, but
> instead of using those rights to restrict users like proprietary software does, we use
> them to ensure that every user has freedom."[10]

I am drifting here, does it make any sense? Can we deduce any parallels from this definition of free (and open) source?

The Debian Social Contract is directed at one community: the free software community. What would our community be? Is the free software community all the people using free software? People using without programming, using without caring about the license, do they make a community? Could our community be the visitors? Is seeing a way of using? Is that enough to define a community? Or is a community only built by making something collectively? Is a community defined by the contract drawn up between its members? In the case of the various activities developed that day, there are clearly rules on how to use the "house", even if they are continuously expanded. Do those rules constitute a social contract?

Collective knowledge.

The Fundació has recently opened a space that facilitates the re-appropriation and analysis of, and active participation with, its archive. In parallel, the Fundació has begun a process of digitizing the documents constituting this archive, and is developing an online platform to access and use them as well.

We consider all the documents generated by the activities of the Fundació to be our public archive, and they will all be digitized. We are including the collection of Antoni Tàpies works in these activities. Indeed, an artwork generates documents by its mere existence. The types of documents in the archive include photographs, technical drawings, floor plans, loan forms, curatorial statements, catalogue proof readings, press clippings, restoration and conservation reports, correspondence, conference recordings, … These are collected as "physical traces", "leftovers", marks of existence of what we define here as events, events that are happening in time and space in the Fundació.

We gave the name *Arts Combinatòries* to the process of archiving, of digitizing and opening a space, real and virtual, that provides access to the archive in the institution.

But how can we reach potential users, people interested in the archive?

Collective memory in the context of the archive of a museum or an art centre is not an obvious concept. Most people regard the museum or the art centre not as the repository of collective memory or collective knowledge but as the owner of this content, as the provider of a service and an order: as a place that decides what is worthwhile preserving and displaying in terms of art and culture.

How can we make it understandable, visible, that the archive of the Fundació has to be opened, has to be used, can be questioned? Naturally, in the past, professionals of other institutions like curators and academic researchers have asked the Fundació to access the archive, but they were rare and specific requests. So, the first step was to open a space for work and consultation and make the archive become one of the Fundació's activities, with part of the team working on it; to bring the boxes into the building, and provide the project with technology, tasks and a budget. This activity was initially peripheral, and forced, but it gradually became integrated into the art centre's system when we began to contact potential target groups and digitize and classify the documents. We met art study groups and art worker groups, and groups involved in some other way in cultural practices. To reach those groups we created alliances outside the institution. An important one was with an independent curator, Oriol Fontdevila, interested in the systems of art institutions and the relation between art and education. We determined to work with persons organized in groups rather than individuals, since the Fundació team is also a group, and thus a balance is created. (The team involved in the project is Rosa Eva Campo, Maria Sellarés, Núria Solé and Linda Valdés). There are now various groups, organizations and training centres in a network of interest related to the archive of the institution. They are all working according to their own time frames, interests, resources and/or activities in the context of cultural practices and contemporary art. We offer the historical archive of the Fundació as a tool and a space to facilitate the process of collaboration and develop autonomous projects, while the Fundació is

intended to provide a frame, an object of research and one of the possible places for intervention, but not the only place. The first groups we worked with were students of a design school, a group of women dedicated to amateur painting, university master courses, an enthusiastic group of volunteers from the public, and a group of school teachers. And many more have come since then.

We gave the name *Prototíps in codi obert* to the work we are doing with these different groups in the framework of the (online and offline) platform *Arts combinatòries*. As the name suggests, *Prototíps in codi obert* is a prototype. The process and methodology it involves is open to the experience, doubts, discoveries of the groups involved. Each group uses the archive for its own purposes and by its own rhythm: a group of 100 students working for 1 month, a group of seven researchers working for 3 months, a workshop of 30 people working for two weeks, a group of 20 people with no time limit, a class for a school year, a group of 30 teachers working 20 hours ... The results can range from a 5-page dissertation to an audio-visual presentation, a translation, a temporary two-day exhibition, a guided tour through an exhibition of the Fundació, an experience in a class room, some ideas and more questions … And recently, the Fundació team working with Oriol Fontdevila introduced a new level to the project, a process of investigation they named "El museu com a recurs" ("the museum as resource") in which the museum can be used as a tool, instrument, support. They arrived at this level as their work on the archive led them to work on the institution itself. Now they are inviting other researchers to join in this process of investigation and contribute their experiences of the process of *Prototíps en codi obert*:

> "This is it: a museum that becomes a resource appropriable and adaptable
> according to the interests and needs of heterogeneous social groups; a museum
> that is positioned as an object of research, multiple and complex; at the same time
> a museum that is positioned socially as an entity open and malleable according to
> specific social needs. A museum, in short, that is open to the deconstruction to
> transform itself, as well, by means of new acts of mediation."[12]

Does this make the team itself users, researchers of/in the institution?

What if?

When I began this text, I remembered that when I started working in this institution, I was always inspired by open source and free software as a work process model. In a similar way, we open a code, the source of the institution we work with, and ensure its usage by following a free license model. We invite groups and individuals to enter, understand, and use those sources, this knowledge and this institution. This, in a way, is the model for the *Arts Combinatòries* and *Prototíps en codi obert* projects described above. From the experience of programming the exhibition space I have realized that we are mostly playing with, testing the parameters, the limits of the institution: What if? And if?

I would now like to introduce a quote by Isabelle Stengers, a science philosopher, to this discussion of "opening the institution". She gave a lecture at the Fundació in 2004 as part of a series of lectures, projections and readings entitled *Stitch and Split. Selves and Territories in Science Fiction*. Here,

Stengers proposed the concept of "laboratoires de devenir" (laboratories of becoming) to test new relationships with extraordinary beings, considering, for example, mathematics as beings.[13] Could we be considered to act as a laboratory where the parameters that define an exhibition, a museum, an institution, are tested, not as beings, but through beings and actions, by the users of the Fundació, the workers, the collaborators, etc.?

Laboratories of becoming

It was in this spirit that our collaboration with the choreographer Xavier Le Roy was launched, which resulted in the creation of *"Retrospective" by Xavier Le Roy*. The project started as an invitation to the choreographer to research and experiment with the limits of the museum, the limits of theatre, and what a retrospective is; how a choreographic work can be seen, shown, within the parameters of the museum regarding time, space, light, audience mobility and how to address the audience.

The exhibition *"Retrospective" by Xavier Le Roy* (2012) was conceived as a choreography of actions that were carried out by performers during the two months of its duration. It was a new creation combining the characteristics of an exhibition and a continuous event lasting several months; relations with the spectators were in constant flux. The project sought to recast material from Le Roy's solo choreographies in situations in which the apparatuses of theatre performance (e.g. seated audiences and scheduled time frames) and museum exhibitions (e.g. moving spectators and the continuous presence of objects) intersect in a live context. It sought to render palpable, alive, those issues that address the relationship of the spectator to the art object in an exhibition space. The retrospective is used here as a mode of production. The first phase: the work of an artist who uses choreographic practice is reviewed. The choreography is understood as an art of time and movement in a given space. Rather than presenting the work by its documents, such as audio-visual recordings, or by its residual or collateral objects, such as costumes and props (which are insignificant in Le Roy's work, often composed simply of table, chairs, stands, everyday shirts and pants) the works are embodied by the interpreters constantly present in the exhibition space. They are aware of the element of artifice contained in incorporating hitherto unknown movements. Having learnt fragments of Xavier Le Roy's solo choreographies, the performers present them to the visitors, intertwined with a narrative that describes the learning context: what they already knew and what they learned. When incorporating movement previously not included in their repertoire, they tap into their physical memory to associate the new movement with a movement already integrated in their body. They share this with the visitors, mentioning dates, memories, movements, stories. The second phase: the retrospective, a backwards motion in time and space. This movement in time is activated whenever someone enters the exhibition room. The interpreters stop whatever they are doing and run out. They come back on 4, replaying an accelerated, dreamlike evolution: from moving on all fours to standing upright, from animal to human, and face the new visitors. Then they recite dates: 1998, 2007, 2010 ... And in a retroactive movement they occupy those dates of the past, and show fragments of choreographies Le Roy created in the years mentioned. After showing a fragment of their retrospective, they stop and address the visitors: would they like to know more about what they have seen? And in this way they reactivate memory, movement,

stories. The exhibition space looks more like a playground where people are talking, playing, watching. On one occasion, visitors start performing too; on another, kids run all around the room; on another, the performers cannot be made out among the throng of visitors.

How can this example be useful for defining hospitality, usability, openness?

Somehow this project was initiated on the basis of trust in the artist. That he would know how to work through it. "It" being a museum and exhibition space. He would know how to transform it into raw material: time, space, visitors, walls, doors, floor. He would make the space a site for bodies, relationships, displacements, views, objects of viewing, memories: this is what is at play in the exhibition space. But there are also modes and conditions of production. They need to be visible, accessible, too. Does hospitality include initiating your guests into how you work, how you make it? This work by Xavier Le Roy was clear about its mode of production: it worked by transmitting experience and knowledge from one body to another, from one memory to another. As a review in Afterall[14] mentioned, the exhibition was a mutual project between the institution, the interpreters and the visitors. The visitors slowly realized that they were the source of the project's activation as their experience went from bewilderment to knowledge. Chris Sharp wrote this about the start of his visit:

> "The word 'bewildered' might begin to describe how I felt upon first entering 'Retrospective by Xavier Le Roy' at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, in the spring of 2012. It is perhaps a bit of an exaggeration, but it nevertheless retains a certain level of experiential accuracy. Why bewildered? Because I had no idea what I was looking at, no clear idea how to see what I was seeing, for, significantly, the 'exhibition' had not yet taught me how to see it, how to experience it."

And he concluded:

> "Curiously, such transition from authority to ignorance seamlessly reflects my own immediate and personal experience of Le Roy's Retrospective. Obliged to all but forfeit any critical authority I might have had on entering the space, I learned how to experience the exhibition in real time. But here, of course, is the pedagogical paradox: I did not learn because I was taught, but because the work itself learned with me, or reflected a learning process insofar as it reflected Le Roy's own experimental and open process, allowing me to learn with it. All that said, my initial bewilderment was merely due to an ignorance of *la règle du jeu*. Once I acquired this set of rules, Retrospective was a perfectly open game."

Could the words "I didn't learn because I was taught but because the work itself learned with me", hold a key to "opening the institution"? Could it be about learning with the institution, and reflecting the learning process?

The limits of the museum, the limits of hospitality.

Let me finish by trying out a last image, another tool to think with: Could we trade the term "open institution" for "hospitable institution"?

Remembering Jacques Derrida on hospitality, the latter concept presupposes some kind of mastery/property of the house, the country or the nation. Because to be able to be hospitable you have to possess the right to open the doors, the borders, or the rules of the house, in order to welcome an outside entity. Derrida proposes the concept of "unconditional hospitality" (hospitalité absolue):

> "Pour le dire en d'autres termes, l'hospitalité absolue exige que j'ouvre mon chez-moi et que je donne non seulement à l'étranger (pourvu d'un nom de famille, d'un statut social d'étranger, etc.) mais à l'autre absolu, inconnu, anonyme, et que lui donne lieu, que je le laisse venir, que je le laisse arriver, et avoir lieu dans le lieu que je lui offre, sans lui demander ni réciprocité (l'entrée dans un pacte) ni même son nom".

Thus unconditional hospitality demands an abandonment of judgement and control with regard to who will receive that hospitality. In other words, hospitality also requires non-mastery, and the abandoning of all claims to property, or ownership, which paradoxically creates an impossible hospitality.

The "absolute" hospitality described by Derrida is impossible for us. While practising the different modes of doing, of welcoming described above, we have to establish rules for how to use the "house". Nevertheless, this use is being continuously expanded and negotiated. Negotiated, tested, performed, we might say, the way Kaprow saw it at play in children's games. To quote Jeff Kelley:

> "Kaprow began noticing how his three small children played together in an unscripted yet completely participatory way. [...] Roles would be negotiated, after which the playing would commence without an audience. [...] Kaprow wasn't interested in mimicking children's play in his art, nor was he inspired by sentiments about childhood. Rather, he began seeing 'child play' as an attitude towards playing that he could imagine in adult forms. (...) The job of the artist, in other words, was to play, and the pay off for playing in, and with the world, was to feel part of it."[15]

Let's play institution.[16]

Laurence Rassell is Director of Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, institution created in 1984 by the artist Antoni Tàpies to promote the study and knowledge of modern and contemporary art. (www.fundaciotapies.org)

From 1997 to 2008, she was member of Constant, a non-profit association, interdisciplinary arts-lab based and active in Brussels dealing with free software, copyright alternatives and (cyber) feminism. (www.constantvzw.org)

[1] Jasmin's email, October 3, 2013.

[2] *A Door Must Be Kept Open or Shut (Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée)*, 1845, Alfred de Musset.

[3] All these examples emerged from various conversations in different institutions throughout Europe.

[4] http://www.articketbcn.org/

[5] http://saladartjove.wordpress.com/

[6] http://hangar.org/es

[7] http://www.idensitat.net/

[8] According to the Open Source Definition: http://opensource.org/docs/osd

[9] Debian Social Contract: http://www.debian.org/social_contract.en.html

[10] http://www.gnu.org/licenses/quick-guide-gplv3.html

[11] Part of this text was already written at the invitation of Andreja Hribernik, in the context of the Seminars: "Digitizing Ideas and Common Knowledge" at Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

[12] From the document written by Rosa Eva Campo, Oriol Fontdevila, Maria Sellarés, Núria Solé and Linda Valdés "El museu com a recurs", 12/2013.

[13] Isabelle Stengers, Dépaysement, 2004, Stitch and Split, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, http://www.stitch-and-split.org/: "Pourquoi n'avons-nous pas créé de laboratoires de devenir, où l'on expérimente avec d'autres types d'êtres, des êtres dont l'existence ne se prouve pas, mais s'éprouve à travers ce qu'ils rendent possible lorsque l'on apprend à s'adresser à eux? Nous savons convoquer les électrons, créer des dispositifs expérimentaux qui les rendent capables de prouver leur existence. Mais dans les écoles, on ne sait pas convoquer les êtres mathématiques, on fait comme s'il était normal d'apprendre à compter. Que seraient des rites qui cultivent la rencontre difficile et exigeante avec le cercle qui a suscité tant d'imagination mathématique, ou avec tous ces savoirs qui deviennent des armes de sélection parce que l'on considère qu'il est normal d'apprendre?"

[14] Chris Sharp: "Xavier Le Roy: La Règle du jeu". In *Afterall* nr 33, Summer 2013 (http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.33/xavier-le-roy-a-discipline-of-the-unknown)

[15] Jeff Kelley, *Childplay. The art of Kaprow.* 2004

[16] This text wouldn't exist without the everyday work of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies team, and Nicolas Malevé's presence.