Knitting the Net. Creative Experiences in the City

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In its role as a mediating artistic residency between artists and communities, what has most interested Jiwar (which in Arabic means neighbourhood) throughout its eight years of existence is supporting the creative processes and broadening the arenas of exchange and dialogue. Thus, added to the notion of a geographical and cultural neighbourhood of Mediterranean peoples is the neighbourhood between artistic disciplines and the shared work within the residency of artists with different languages. From this perspective and desire for connection, dialogue and openness, a series of projects have been developed, such as Entrellaçades and Xabaca, which have revealed that the living matter of the city, the heartbeat of its people and their involvement in artistic projects are the best tool to combat ignorance, stereotypes and solitude.

*In art it is difficult to say anything as good as saying nothing.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Beginning this article with Wittgenstein’s famous phrase is setting a trap for oneself and discrediting one’s own words, having to “explain” the ins and outs and aims of some of the projects that intensely marked us. However, it illuminates us like a beacon and reminds us that what counts, especially in small projects like ours, is the shared experience, the processes, what we go through and, try as we might, what we will not be able to explain. And that in art, what happens is more important than what is said.

During the almost eight years of activity of the international artists’ residency Jiwar Creació i Societat in Barcelona, what has sustained the project has been the recurrent obsession with building bridges of dialogue and interaction between disciplines, between people and communities, placing artistic creation as a vector of transmission of value and knowledge. Assuming our role as mediators between artists and communities, what has interested us most is supporting the creative processes and expanding the arenas of exchange and dialogue, which places us in a space of vindication along the lines of the well-formed expression “sharing the city”, which the thinker Marina Garcés has used on several occasions.

“What defines knowledge through art is the emanation of meaning through the pro-
cess of creative expression.” These incisive words by Shaun McNiff point to the universality of creative mechanisms and place the act of creation at the core of individual and collective expression, with the process as the bearer of all meaning. While speeches are aimed at passive interlocutors, who a priori position themselves on the statements, the creative processes, through the emotional and unconscious involvement that occurs in them, elicit a type of experience and intrinsic “listening”, embodied in the very act of creation. This, brought into the field of artist-community collaborations, has outstanding potential. In this respect, Jiwar has been interested in supporting the processes rather than waiting for a final result, the finished and “closed” work.

To this long-awaited and familiar neighbourhood, the neighbourhood and the city, two meanings are added that draw a dynamic equilateral triangle in which jiwar is the heart and, each side, a concretion

To this vision of art and creation we must add the ideological pillar of the project, which is the very concept of jiwar, which in Arabic means neighbourhood. This is the driving force, the primary substance of a project that asserts artistic creation as a tool for transformation of and reflection on the city, and also as a new possibility of forming a relationship with it. Artists from very diverse cultures have participated during this time with projects that, to a great extent, would not have been possible without the dialogue with the people who shape the city: the testimony of the older residents of the neighbourhood to inspire novels (Fernando Grajeda, 2013, or Serge Legrand Vall, 2018), the personal stories of refugee artists who seek their place in a new context (Esther Belvis Pons, 2015), the sharing of everyday spaces of the African diaspora in Barcelona (Sydelle Willow Smith¹, 2013), revealing community and individual experiences that occur in urban allotments² (Wil Weldon, 2014), the graphic depiction, through printing or street art, of what is home for someone (Israel de la Paz, 2015), the personal and politically incorrect testimony of mothers of all kinds (Deema Shahin, 2015) or the psychogeographical map of the city created spontaneously in a community drift (Moritz Ahlert,³ 2018). There is a highly diverse balance of formats, research, investigations and collaborations.

To this long-awaited and familiar neighbourhood, the neighbourhood and the city, two meanings are added that draw a dynamic equilateral triangle in which jiwar is the heart and, each side, a concretion. The neighbourhood per se is complemented, in the first place, by the geographical and cultural nature of the Mediterranean peoples, materialising in our active role of welcoming, as far as possible, artists and projects from this region. The proximity between artistic disciplines, promoting exchanges, and the common work within the residency between artists with different languages would complete the sides of the triangle. Thus, from this perspective and this desire for connection, dialogue and openness, a series of projects have been developed that have been our raison d’être.

By way of a practical illustration of this stance, we will next look at some projects:

². https://vimeo.com/user43573095
³. See the video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gs7Lr_ceegg&feature=emb_logo
Entrellaçades: teixint coneixement, desteixint prejudicis [Entrellaçades: Knitting knowledge, unpicking prejudices]

This was a project of which there have been two editions, in 2011 and 2012, in cooperation with the then Ibn Batuta Sociocultural Association (currently Ibn Batuta Foundation) in the Raval neighbourhood and the social centre Casal de Gent Gran in the Gràcia neighbourhood, where the Jiwar headquarters is located; two neighbourhoods with very different socioeconomic and cultural realities. Elder women from the centre, residents of the neighbourhood, came together every week with a group of young mothers from the Espai Dona of the Asociación del Raval, mostly Pakistanis, to knit together under the supervision of a textile artist, who suggested a final exhibition. The location alternated: one week they knitted in Gràcia, the next in a social centre in El Raval. This simple project has three outstanding aspects: a space of intercultural and intergenerational equality was created in which all the women shared skills, none knew more than the others, they discovered new stitches and naturally found new ways of working; a mobility within the city to go to the “other” neighbourhood, with a very different sociocultural reality; and, finally, lending value to the skill of knitting, considered essentially “female”, creative and socially undervalued. The success of the project was undoubtedly this diversity of factors that
intersected naturally and in a space of equality. Based on an artisan and artistic activity, new personal relationships were formed and, without any mediating discourse, the stereotypical image that, at first, some women had of each other fell away under its own weight.

Xabaca

The Xabaca project, 4 conceived and coordinated by Novact (International Institution for Nonviolent Action), the Al Fanar Foundation for Arab Knowledge and Jiwar, was also created from a female perspective. Xabaca, which means net in Arabic, is an emblematic project that has allowed us to host seven artists from different disciplines from the Arab world in residency in the two editions held so far. The first objective of the project is to connect the creative worlds of different women in a neutral space (the city of Barcelona) and allow them to create outside their usual, often tense and stressful, context. In addition, the political reality of some countries means that the meeting between certain nationalities is not possible in certain countries of origin, hence the interest in an international residency.

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Similarly, the project specifically supports Arab women creators for two reasons: because of their role in social transformation through their artistic practice and because of the dual pressure they face as they are artists and women. Often, artistic creation is a tool to highlight and cross the red lines of dominant values and power structures and to question the status quo of a social ecosystem through art. Women creators are subjected to multiple pressures: patriarchy, collective morality and, often, politics. The fact of having a “neutral” space and a time dedicated solely to creation enables artists to recognise themselves in a new approach to their own work and their own strategies of self-censorship and survival as creators. Moreover, the role that the coordinating bodies of the project played was fundamental to spread the words of these women in Catalan and Spanish society and help break down social stereotypes around the “concept” of the “Arab woman”. Thus, by bringing these women closer together through their art, the audiences in Barcelona, Seville and Valencia were able to listen to them and share the universal topics that move the minds and hearts of all in the search for personal freedom and achieving a way of being genuine, regardless of the context in which we have lived. The artists in residence during the two editions of the project have been filmmakers, singer-songwriters, visual artists, illustrators and playwrights from countries as diverse as Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan and Palestine. The personal and creative connections between them were so strong that a production company (Otoxo) decided to make a documentary (Borders and Promises 5) about the creative and personal process of three of them. Also noteworthy is the way in which the Sudanese artist Alaa Satir, once back in Khartoum, experienced the beginning of the political revolution in her country. Her graffiti on the city walls became part of the iconography of an uprising.

Finally, this project also aims to mobilise agents and organisations from the artists’ countries of origin to create a network from a series of nodes that support and accompany women artists in their own countries.

legacy of some of them has travelled and continues to travel in exhibition format through different Spanish cities, keeping alive the flame of their testimony and determination.

Both Entrellaçades and Xabaca provided a space that, through an act as simple and creative as knitting or specific artistic proposals, and based on personal interaction or interaction with the works, can break down stereotypes, firstly, of local and Pakistani women and, secondly, of the Western prototype of the “Arab woman”. In the diversity of all their proposals and views, the local public had access to genuine ways of understanding the world and interacting creatively with it, thus valuing people for their work and not for the stereotypical facets so easily attributed to them.

Beyond these projects, with a clear intercultural and gender perspective, we must highlight the photographer Elif Gülen’s proposal developed in Jiwar to continue a broader project already underway in his city, Istanbul, that had continued in Belfast and Paris, and that, in the Gràcia neighbourhood of Barcelona, through the photography project “The Locals”, sought the graphic testimonies of people over seventy years old who lived in the same flat where they were born. What began as a continuation of the original project reached such a scale and had such a positive response that it became the
project “Memoria y ciudad”, which received secondary support from Barcelona City Council. Always with the collaboration of the foundation Amics de la Gent Gran, which helped us find the contacts and create the environment of trust necessary to enter the homes, as well as photographs, the project included individual stories and interviews that I myself conducted, in which the personal relationship with the home was the core of the artistic and documentary work. This project is a good example of how artistic processes are not only tools but also subjects of knowledge: “Art, then, allows us to think and act flexibly and creatively; we build understandings that feed the possibility of designing objects and processes, anticipating ideas, asking ourselves different questions, finding alternative answers, explaining phenomena and communicating strongly (and, of course, other languages can do this) what we know, want, propose but, also and almost magically, what often allows us to refer to what we do not know. Art also allows us to see further, to say what has not been said, to ask boldly.”6

Hence, through words and photography we mined the memory of twenty-five people who opened their homes and their stories to us. Like an infinite echo, their words resonate, intertwining the individual and the group, personal stories with the big story, the everyday dramas of survival and resilience with a stereotypical image of a city hurt by predatory tourism and a globalisation of no return that gradually stole its soul. The people’s memory of the neighbourhoods re-emerges and, with it, the value of a silenced generation.

Finally, we could not finish without mentioning the importance of the public space as a setting and subject of action. Jiwar has turned neighbourhood squares into creative spaces on different occasions. In this respect, probably the most emblematic project was La plaza invertida, by the Québec artist Camille Rajotte. This was a temporary installation that consisted of a geometric structure made up of a platform and small modules that as an inverted topography of Barcelona’s Plaça del Diamant and the surrounding buildings. The base of this structure represented a fictional rooftop. The height of the platform and the modules was proportional to the distance between the fictional roof and, respectively, the square and the buildings, thus representing the void left by the square in the urban fabric. In other words, the structure translated the architectural environment into an inverted and small-scale version.

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Halfway between sculpture and urban furniture, this project was conceived as a pause in constant movement, inviting people to stop, question themselves, sit down and, above all, pay more attention to the urban environment they occupy. Thus, in an entertaining way, residents of the neighbourhood, as well as passersby, were invited to look at a space that they inhabit in everyday life through different eyes. It should also be said that this work was not only a sculpture that occupied a place but was conceived at the same time as furniture. People gained this new structure as part of the square and freely used it to sit, lie down, play music or have fun. Thus, a new space of conviviality and recreation was created.

Walking in the square is essential because of its community meaning, of being together and

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sharing. Based on this cultural neighbourhood that gives meaning to Jiwar, we adhere to the Arab concept of the square, more dynamic than the Latin one, much closer to a fixed and stable concept than a fluid one, to develop our actions in the public space. The Spanish word plaza (square in English) comes from the Vulgar Latin plattēa, which derives from the Greek ἑλατεία plateía “wide street”, “square”; literally “wide”. The Real Academia Española (Spanish Royal Academy of Language) dictionary provides, among others, the following definitions: 1. Wide and spacious place within a town or village, linking several streets. 2. Place where diverse items are sold, there is common contact with other residents, and fairs, markets and public festivals are held. 5. Fortified place with walls, bastions, etc., so that people can defend themselves from the enemy […] 5. Space, site or place.

Through our initiatives in the public space, we were interested in the Arab Mediterranean meaning of the word, as so well explained by Ahmed Ghazali in the prologue to Tombuctú, 52 días a camello7: “Sahat is the Arabic word

for the French term place (square). The word platea of Latin origin, which has become common in Western languages (plaza, place, plaça, platz), is related to what establishes the movement in the space. In contrast, the Arabic word sahat comes from the verb saha, usually applied to fluids to mean to flow or to spill over. It is also applied to humans to mean wander, meander, travel, walk around . . . Hence the word saih for traveller or wanderer and siyahat, the official word for tourism. It is known that the Sufis behave like saihoun fi ardi allah al wasiat (wanderers in the vast land of God). The word also has the meaning of stage, sphere or any space of movement, tension and confrontation with the other.

Thus, from this hybrid Mediterranean perspective, we conceive the public space and the square as a place that flows, passes, transforms and cannot be controlled. This is where we have been interested in working, opening possibilities and sharing with people: the perfect place to connect with that universal dimension intrinsic to the artistic practice that discredits discourses in favour of experiences. There is not enough space to name the numerous projects we have carried out there over the years, but we would like to end by mentioning two actions, two gifts we gave to the neighbourhood through a Japanese artist and a Moroccan artist, both calligraphers.

In spring 2016, Sachiyo Kaneko, with her performance Ola, wanted to show a hybrid form of one of the more renowned crafts in her country: shodo calligraphy. With a large brush, barefoot on a large canvas measuring ten by three metres fixed on the ground, she accompanied her movements by soaking the brush in a fountain with ten litres of ink that she let run as if it were possible to control her movements, which in every moment she did. Two musicians, Pavel Amílcar and Mireia Zantop, improvised with violin and percussion to the rhythm and silence of the brush strokes. Like a wave, the artist hoped, in this way, to involve the casual public in her creative dynamics, going back and forth from the canvas to the fountain, from the fountain to the canvas, and from one side to another. It was a resounding success. A year later it was the Moroccan artist Sadik Haddari who, accompanied by the sound of the Hang, developed his own calligraphy, this time Arabic, also barefoot, in the exact place into which the previous year Sachiyo had taken us as if enchanted by her writing with her rivers of ink. In a short time, the artist wanted to leave a message in the heart of the square: “The earth is my home and humanity is my family.”

The living matter of the city, the heartbeats of its peoples and their involvement in the artistic projects are the best tool to combat ignorance, stereotypes and solitudes

“The earth is my home and humanity is my family.” This phrase serves as a conclusion to say, once again, that the living matter of the city, the heartbeats of its peoples and their involvement in the artistic projects are the best tool to combat ignorance, stereotypes and solitudes. And that one after the other, these proposals for interaction and dialogue have been knitting a net of experiences, outcomes and lessons that endure in the stones and spaces, as well as – we are certain – in the deep and transforming memory of the beings who experienced them.