

The School for the Deranged

Belén Sola Pizarro

University of Burgos and MUSAC (León) / mbsola@ubu.es

Translated by Ángela Sanz & Nicholas Callaway

Abstract

This paper is a first-person narrative of a project entitled “*La rara troupe*” (The Strange Troupe), a space for creation and co-existence between a group of people both with and without diagnosed mental illness. This space has been taking shape since 2012 in the Educational Department of the MUSAC (Contemporary Art Museum of Castile and León). The paper combines first-person narration and film-based analysis through the audiovisuals created by the group. It is a self-reflective attempt at praxis, where artistic research methodologies, the pre-eminence of the affective over the discursive, and the politicisation of discomfort are the tools we have authorised for a necessary, open and changing investigation aimed at considering contemporary cultural practices centred on approaches to reality.

Keywords

Mental health; art education; art museums; community art; self-representation; affective politics; audiovisual.

*Riot at the psychiatric hospital,
the weather man was hanged for forecasting
hail, lightning, thunder and howling wind.
The Convention of the Deranged has met.
The Convention of the Deranged has decided that
tomorrow will be sunny and fine.*

Kortatu

After repeated attempts to burn down the museum where I work (figuratively but intensely), one day while having a drink with a friend and regular collaborator, I saw the light.

We will go to work at the mental hospital before some doctor comes to pick me up at the museum. That must have been my thinking while Chus¹ and I were devising an audiovisual project that encapsulated suffering and mental illness.

The year was 2012. The place: León, the capital of a northern Spanish province, and with a population of just 130,000. Its public health system ran a psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of town, the Santa Isabel Mental Health Hospital, which had a small supporting network through primary and psychosocial care centres². Meanwhile, the León Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill (ALFAEM) was gaining strength on the basis of a protective discourse that drew funding for the creation of supervised flats, residences and other resources for people diagnosed with mental illness.

Bearing several voice recorders and small home-video cameras, we began by giving presentations at the hospital and different mental health centres, teaching those who approached us the main aims that we had set for the project. We framed it as a workshop that would teach people how to use audiovisual media in order to narrate, together, our own life experiences in the first person.

We started the workshops at Santa Isabel Hospital and within a few weeks we realised that we were running a characteristic risk with this type of approach for museums that attempt to work with people out in the real world: we were being used as an occupational resource by the hospital or by those who approached us, who often had no interest in audiovisual media and who showed an unwillingness to speak from the first person. The proposals we were confronted with included radio programmes with guests, song dedications, or discussions with medical teams and other healthcare professionals, despite our efforts to broadcast something different that went beyond customary radio formulas.

Programa Piloto



Este es el programa con el que comenzamos a andar, una experiencia piloto cargada de ilusión.

Rara pilot radio program. 2012. Audio. 40': <https://raraweb.org/programa-piloto.html>

In a few months, we decided to leave the hospital and started to work in a stable, continuous manner at the museum. We regarded this as a neutral³ space for those from the hospital or ALFAEM centres. It was "a space without a diagnosis", as one colleague said afterwards (Sola, 2015, p.234, paragraph 5). The museum therefore became a space that convened from the "normality" of an artistic workshop, in which diverse people "enrol": local artists, students, those known through their other activities at the museum, and others who learned of the workshop from the experiences of users from the hospital, ALFAEM, or even the medical teams themselves.

It was then that the project took its first unexpected turn; the desire arose in us to remain together, to continue with the workshop, but considering what we "could do" and therefore what we as diverse people "could be" if we continued to meet and work collectively. This gave rise to the group of people who would become the driving force of *La rara troupe*. It stemmed from the desire to share a space of truce and to break with our daily diagnoses, marking out paths that are not only connected with mental illness but also with the social dissatisfaction that brought us together.

We named the workshop *Yo/nosotrxs* (I/We) to express not only the illustrative but also the communicative purpose of the act of making audiovisuals. But beyond projective proclamations, the bodies that came together were able to generate the confidence that we belonged to something that was still to be done, and in particular something that was to be done *by us*. This was perhaps the feeling that encouraged us and surrounded us at meetings, and that ran transversally through all the workshop's actions in this second year.

In this first stage, the methodological approach was the exchange of video-letters, first with each other, and later on with other groups outside León. These exercises achieved their purpose; they returned a state of equality to the different voices that had been stripped of all authority because they were small, invisible or confused. We became aware of the minimal differences that existed in our desires and fears, which opened us up to the modesty of feeling bad. This entailed an awareness that this unease was coming from the feelings and reflections elicited by the images, as a result of the depth present in a prolonged silence or a histrionic laugh.

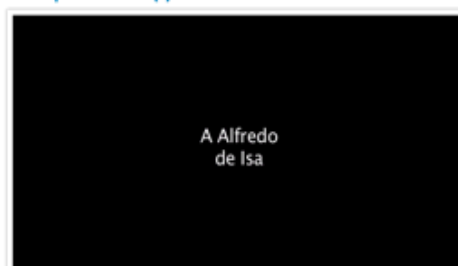
Yo/nosotrxs became a space made possible by the coexistence of those who otherwise could not coincide in the same space. We had won a battle: the right to be together, to create a "community of alienated bodies"⁴. However, this was not enough for us; we also needed to obtain the means to create, investigate and produce knowledge from our encounters, and to do so on our own terms. Listening to another person and recognising them, this was to be the first step to coming together, renouncing the good

manners of inclusivity because, according to Aracil (2016): “the reason or idea of inclusion plays the leading role in most clinics and therapies for the mentally ill. It is as a victimising practice which aims to neutralise the know-how of the other”. At our meetings, the very fact of our being together entailed deactivating victimised individualities through the enhancement of the vulnerable, anomalous, sick or rare, opening up a space for the knowledge of bodies that suffer, and starting to work from a common point of departure. For us, this meant expertising life and politicising discomfort, inscribing it in the accumulation of disregard for contemporary ways of living.

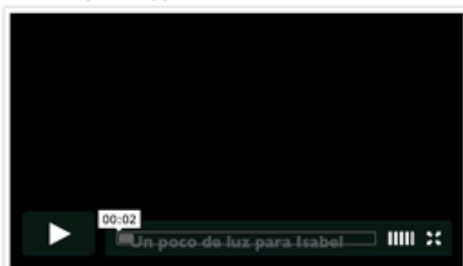
Carta de Alfredo (1)



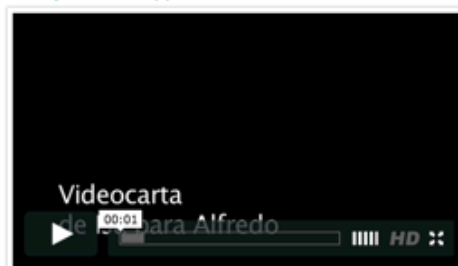
De Isa para Alfredo (2)



De Alfredo para Isa (3)

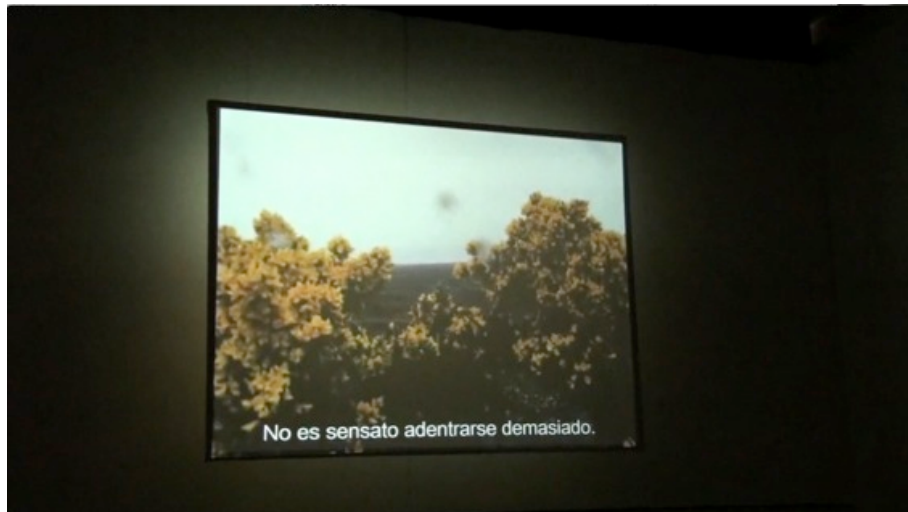


De Isa para Alfredo (4)



Correspondence Alfredo- Isa. 2013. Videos. 8':
<http://raraweb.org/carta-de-afredo-1.html>
<http://raraweb.org/de-isa-para-alfredo-2.html>
<http://raraweb.org/de-alfredo-para-isa-3.html>

In 2014, the workshops were extended and the activities came to stretch beyond the opening hours at the museum. We met to film and record, enjoy a cup of coffee, and chat about the weekly meetings, the difficulties we encountered with certain colleagues, or the ideas we had on our minds. We proposed texts to read together and guests we would like to welcome⁵; we started to feel that the diversity we embodied was covered by the skin of a shared drum. As we began to breathe and release waste products, we experimented with our own limits and desires. The resonances were multiple but we needed to narrate them collectively.



Fin de línea / End of the line. Spring 2014. Video. 12'10":
<http://raraweb.org/raravideo/correspondencias-4/fin-de-linea>

At this point we decided to call ourselves *Rara web* (Strange Web). The aim was to highlight the meeting space with "les otros", a virtual window from which we were showing ourselves a world that did not see us but that named and diagnosed us; a new frontier had just been crossed. We were no longer "me and the world" or "me and the outside"; through the identification of our limits and corporalities, we managed to become plural.

As Garcés (2011) states, dealing honestly with reality would consist not so much of "adding the victims' vision to the image of the world, but altering our way of looking at it in a deep-rooted way". *Rara web* attained just this sort of transformed gaze from the very moment it was proclaimed in the plural. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, I would like to stress the idea that in *Rara* there are no more "victims". Instead, people who first approached the group via "belonging" to a diagnosis have since managed to escape such labels⁶. It is a space where a host of possibilities have been opened up through the desire to be someone else or, rather, to truly be ourselves.

The project then underwent a new transformation whereby *Rara web* became the group now known as *La rara troupe*. *La rara* stopped representing (seeing ourselves as) individualities and began to act as a collective body, making our films using everyone's ideas, implementing affective policies more than ever and putting emotions into play, with the knowledge of how to make them circulate creatively (Ahmed, 2015).

Mental suffering is what brings us together and causes intensities that transcend individual limits; it is in pain and discomfort that we anchor the sense of being together and it is from pain and frustration that we feel authorised to produce ways of naming and addressing ourselves.

On the other hand, this relationship of affections is organised in a circular manner. It appeals not only to identities that are organised collectively and not hierarchised by professionals or medical diagnoses, but also to the film-based pieces that we produce. This is interesting because it affords a relevant position to the audiovisual not only as a set of transmitting tools⁷, but also as objects that work affectively within the group, becoming links in the affective identification that we establish with them. Returning to Ahmed, it is perhaps enlightening how “in affective economies, feelings do not reside in subjects or in objects but are produced as the effects of circulation” (2015, p.31). This is exactly what happens in *La rara*, which produces or creates movement around relational effects (of an emotional type) based on a circular organisation between the subjects and the objects that we produce and with which we identify.



Hi, Mitch. Fall 2014. Video. 33'35": <http://raraweb.org/hi-mitch-2015.html>

We started 2015 with a creative residence as the guests of Azala⁸. This was a weeklong experience of coexistence that enabled us to test how far we could push our spaces of collaboration. This was a new scenario where private space and common space, creative work and each person's specific moods, had to find their place. It was at this time that we began to call ourselves *La rara troupe*, a name that we intend to keep and that arose from the idea of travel offered by the residence.

The project proposed an exploration of the idea of *troupe* as a collective of artists or creators who move together, as a “company” in the original etymological sense of the word, as a body of actors, dancers, technicians, etc., as well as the roles that each of us play in the collective, in order to

recognise ourselves in them or to question them. Moreover, we were moving away from our everyday reference “institutions” —from our work, from the hospital, group homes or the museum— so we decided to name the residence *des-plazados* (dis-placed). In short, the week spent working together was an opportunity to delve into the notion of the community and the contradictions and frictions that occur in our collaborative work.

We undertook many audiovisual exercises that week, starting with individual presentations and continuing with group exercises. My presentation exposed a concern that had occupied me for some time —my role as “the uncoordinated coordinator”— and this is how I expressed it:



La coordinadora descoordinada / The uncoordinated coordinator. 2015. Video. 2'18":
<https://vimeo.com/147473261/32fc6d232c>

Perhaps what Azala taught us as a group was more the differences between us than the similarities; some wanted to experiment with the camera while others were intent on enjoying the best days of their final years. The litres of coffee and kilo=s of sugar we consumed seemed to ratify the exercise of freedom that many colleagues said they needed.

The days of the residence passed with an intensity that our guest/reporter Martín Correa (Sola, 2015, p.297) described in the following terms:

(...) *La rara* is encountering the questions, detecting the collective and individual needs, and this is a giant step. In the face of a creative approach, the “what to do” is not only relative to a format or a tool (the “how”). The “what to do” is subject to a need or desire, to a search that is sometimes difficult to detect because we come from a life path marked by an excess of control, where one is almost always told what to do. I said then that I have

seen that they have created that context of rest, space of fracture, habitable limit, in relation to the former conditions of oppression: and the needs are becoming visible, those that were there before, but that are now becoming visible, communicating, expressing themselves. It is there, with these first seeds it is necessary to get down to work, compose, create. And that is what perhaps needs to be developed. Many creative processes are focused on the tool, *La rara troupe* already knows that the tool is both a means and an end for telling something that hurts, something that in many ways "is urgent", which is like a "scream" from within. *La rara troupe* has found or has begun to find that "cry" that "is urgent". Now it is time to continue analysing formats, tools, ways of telling and building a body for what is tellable.

Building *un cuerpo para lo contable* (a body for the tellable) was the yearning contained in the two videos that we screened at the end of our residence:



Abrazos / Hugs. 2015. Video. 30': <https://vimeo.com/133125129>



Picnic. 2015. Video. 19': <https://vimeo.com/133046040>

The first video used the camera to create a choreography of bodies connected by the gesture of the hug, as a metaphor for the communion between us. *Picnic*, on the other hand, was an exercise where the camera was only a guest to a totally unexpected scene of conflict.

I would like to think of the first piece as a video-machine in the sense that the audiovisual tool organises and puts bodies to work in order to exercise the metaphor of collective work. The second acts as a video-symptom, where the discomfort produced is largely a consequence of not knowing how to shake off our mental states and individual obsessions. In any case, and based on listening to the assessment interviews we conducted, the week in Azala signified for *La rara troupe* an experience of life and freedom that was inextricably linked to the creative act.

Personally, I enjoyed listening to a phrase that I said back then in one recording: "I have learned how to accept myself in the group from my professional role"⁹. I think this refers to the experience of shifting position, learning to be someone else, knowing how to incorporate learning slowly, even though this forces you to question yourself and observe yourself in an often obsessive and frustrating manner. Doubting yourself as an exercise to account for yourself; these are two ways of shifting in one's work that cause pain and fatigue but that I understand as necessary conditions in creative projects where the body is present.

At that moment *La rara troupe* took on a name identifying it as a group focused on artistic creation; however, it has never renounced its political identity as a think-tank on mental health investigating two central issues:

- The generation of contemporary ways of life that make us ill and produce multiple discomforts, and that ultimately also make us incapable of organising ourselves collectively;
- The use of vulnerable or precarious lives as part of a normalising and capacitating discourse that seeks to open up spaces where voices that are said to be ill can be integrated.

We are conducting this inquiry (or investigation) with our films.



Son curiosos estos días / This is an odd time. 2016. Video. 35'58'':
<http://raraweb.org/son-curisoso-estos-dias-2016.html>

This is an odd time enabled us to connect with our daily existence in April 2016. Recording moments discovered at random or explicitly sought, we used our cameras to share time-spaces loaded with a sense of everyday life. The film expressed the dignity of our vulnerable lives and was intended to show the importance denied by small things, endowing them with interest, which is also a metaphor for our small and precarious but significant and valuable lives.

A new change occurred at this time, one that was not so much endogenous or self-referential but exogenous or reflexive. This was the ability of the project to imagine a larger space within the museum for research and implementation of creative projects with communities. Since 2016, *La rara troupe* has been integrated into the Laav_ Laboratory of Experimental Audiovisual Anthropology¹⁰, which was launched by MUSAC's Educational Department and became the test-tube project for learning from the group's constant experimentation.

In 2017 we were invited by Alfredo Aracil to form part of the exhibition *Notes for a Destructive Psychiatry*. Here, we proposed an audiovisual exchange with another group from Madrid that was coordinated by the mediation team of La Sala de Arte Joven (Madrid), the venue for the exhibition. The result of this exchange was two videos, born out of the desire to explore the construction of a collective body, dealing with ideas situated at the crossroads of performance, ritual, celebration and play.



CocinaPlaza/PlazaCocinada / SquareCooking/SquareCooked. 2017. Video. 9'50":
<http://raraweb.org/apuntes.html>

The first video represents an experience around reading excerpts from the book *Ser o no ser (un cuerpo)* (To be or not to be (a body)) by Santiago Alba Rico. We were able —not without great effort— to agree on gathering to cook paella in a half-abandoned square in one of those half-finished neighbourhoods that can be found in any provincial capital in Spain. The video could be divided into two sections; in the first (until minute 4'45"), we collected images taken on the day we explored the square, and in the second we filmed the process of us cooking the paella. In both cases we used the sound from experimentation exercises that we recorded in the space.

The Madrid group responded with a highly dynamic video in which play was highlighted as a collective experience, so we decided to conclude the "co-relation" by filming a party to provide continuity while enabling us to include a variety of different actions.



El cuerpo del delito / The Evidence. 2017. Video. 8'10": <http://raraweb.org/apuntes.html>

As a cinematographic reference, we used *Tongues untied* (Riggs, 1990). This inspired the concluding choreography, subtitled with the text of a colleague, Ángela María, which gave the video its name. The rest was an odd recording of the proposals made by each of us, from a karaoke session to a free painting workshop that also involved reading or dressing up.

Apart from these videos, the participation of *La rara troupe* has signified recognition from sanctioned cultural spaces. *La rara* definitively abandoned its links with the training workshop format to become a full-fledged creative space. This shift came not come from *La rara* itself, but rather from the space of artistic legitimization par excellence: the exhibition.

Between fall 2017 and spring 2018 we went through hard times. Several people quit the group permanently, and those who remained strived to balance some members' demand for activism with others' radically artistic aims. In June and July 2018, our latest film, *La Humana Perfecta* (The Perfect Human), coexisted with texts by Félix Guattari and the film *Le moindre geste* by Fernand Deligny in the context of a reading group and thought programme¹¹ at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid. Beyond the symbolism of an anonymous group defined as "strange" sharing a table with recognised and authorised names from the world of culture, *La rara troupe* was invited in order to present itself as a space with enough accumulated wisdom to produce and share knowledge in its own right. We arrived at this state using our own self-crafted tools —or in other words epistemologies— located in our discomforts.



La humana perfecta / The perfect human. 2018, Video. 9':
<https://raraweb.org/la-humana-perfecta-2018.html>

With this brief tour of the work of *La rara troupe* I have wished to highlight two things: firstly, the museum's current role as a privileged place for social research using artistic research methodologies; and secondly, the need to enable spaces for community organisation with subalternised or minoritised identities. To do so, we have consciously taken words and images into our own hands to construct our stories and thereby create our own genealogical narratives.

La rara troupe, this School for the Deranged, makes demands and brings into play its life, its emotional states and its discomforts, fostering awareness of a shared alienation. This awareness unites us on a journey through a world whose medical diagnoses, pills, and neoliberal recipes for social adjustment fail to make make people fuller or happier.

It took me six years with *La rara* to give up on my desire to burn down the museum. Now what I really want is to fill it with the deranged; this is what can restore meaning to my work here.

June 2018

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Notes

¹ Chus Domínguez, audiovisual artist; www.chusdominguez.com

² The public mental health system has shifted radically from the Franco-period's asylum or mental hospital to the current semi-private welfare state that was introduced in the 80s.

³ This does not mean that we think that the museum as an institution is neutral, rather the opposite. As Preciado (2017) says, "the museum is a machine that produces subjectivity and reproduction of regulatory codes".

⁴ See video "El cuerpo del delito/The Evidence" in this paper. Minute 4'45.

⁵ Another symptom of our forming a research group was the desire that arose in the group about (self-) training. This led us to begin to expand our audiovisual meetings by adding texts and guest voices. We started in February 2014 with the Grupo Esquizo Barcelona and since then workshops, talks and meetings, as well as several readings suggested by us, proved key to the growth of *La rara troupe*. For an exhaustive tour of guests and texts, see www.raraweb.org/blog

⁶ I only provide observations that are directly drawn from the *La rara troupe* workspace and relationship, as I am unable to extend them to other contexts.

⁷ The audiovisuals we produce are not intended to be tools of self-expression or an anti-stigma pamphlet but are creations of our own imaginations and, as such, of our subjectivities in the making.

⁸ Artistic production space located in Lasiera, Álava; www.azala.es

⁹ https://archive.org/details/2.EntrevistaIdaAzala/3.entrevistas_vuelta_Azala.mp3, min. 38

¹⁰ www.laav.es

¹¹ <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/actividades/fuerza-posible-hacia-poietica-vivir-juntas>