

***The enacting of the public (from performativity to emancipation)  
in Alicia Herrero's 'Public Considerations'  
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**I.**

The *enactment*<sup>1</sup> is a type of legal act or stylized performance located between everyday and public life. These are acts that refer to knowledge, economy and politics, in whose physical, spoken and semantic gestures social and cultural performativity, underlies a performance that operates these highly codified bodies, almost despite itself. As much in the past as in the present, and almost without opposition, these events have acted as material - in many cases of conscience - for certain aesthetic and televisual discussions in Argentine artistic production. *Public Considerations, a Symposium in Three Acts*' by Alicia Herrero, being a narrative scripted and articulated performance in three acts, returns us to that forum and to that conversation.

If by a type of performativity, we understand the public enactment of an image, or the (re)presentation of a subject or subjects invested with authority to respond to rules, conventions and forms of justice and if, at the same time (as Giorgio Agamben suggests) this enactment 'objectifies' the forms of subjectivity within democracy, then it can also in some exceptions operate within a frame of illegality. If, facing terrorism, the *enactment* of the democratic state is articulated through the subjectivity 'of sovereign' then the frame of legality is inverted<sup>2</sup>. In another sense, in art, by making these experiential acts or events an everyday tale of public life and the political web, it would appear that for them to be interpreted they have to remain in the hands of the protagonists, or of those who are interested in enacting politics. As much in the sphere of knowledge of those gestures as in their appropriation, the *enactments* require a familiarity with word and body as mediated by the gaze of the other, such as the production of agreed, accepted and stereotyped discourse, above all that of politics. In any case, they refer to that situation of speech that can in turn be naturalized (as ideology) by the audience with which one communicates. This is a situation that is undoubtedly located in diametric opposition to that other which, positioned within an illegality, either cannot conceive of the aesthetization of the political, or on the contrary, having received a highly stylized experience can do no more than observe and point out the skills and abilities of the performer's spectacle, without being able to decode its meaning. Therefore both political performativity and artistic practice require virtuosos or experts to unleash their skills and abilities in the articulation of a *speech act*<sup>3</sup>, a script that makes their practice visible. In this way, *Public Considerations*, through taking the floor in the forum, not only sets the scene for the cameras but also employs them strategically as tools of mimesis and camouflage<sup>4</sup> to distribute or disseminate its ideas, which are divided between the diverse spheres of the production of meaning, knowledge of art and public life.

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<sup>1</sup> In doctrinal terms, there are multiple and diverse forms, but to a certain extent they share the idea that when something is represented, the person who represents them brings with them a structure or event of the experience that is put into action via word and body.

<sup>2</sup> The act of violation of the Pakistani sovereignty in the execution of Osama Bin Laden by the United States would be an example of this type of exceptional *enactment*, whose mechanism reveals old consensus and territorial-economic interests, the violation of which coincides with the skill of the sovereign state. See Giorgio Agamben's 'Che cos'è un dispositivo?' (Nottetempi, Venice, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> What interests us about the acts of speech is their performative condition in the illocutionary act, such as the acts of 'indirect' speech shared by participants in communication. That is to say 'while we say something, we not only speak it but we also say it in an indirect manner'. See John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1969).

<sup>4</sup> Mimetism and camouflage in art, and particularly in performance, refer to diverse mechanisms of exhibition and concealment in which the artistic practice that is implemented survives its challengers through demonstrating or disguising the art of merchandise in the consumer market of goods and services or between the political discourses that inscribe it.

In the first act of *Public Considerations* the auditorium of the Rojas Cultural Centre was converted into a space for the activation of knowledge and culture. The spaces became the scenario for a *talk show for public debate*. Fenced into this space of manoeuvre - which on occasion serves as the proscenium for L.I.P.A.C<sup>5</sup> - artists, invited investigators and the public argued and debated. The argument and debate was specifically about knowledge, public university and the means that these spheres have to participate and intervene in the city's spaces; also about the role of the educator, of art and of the intellectual. The first act ends. Some months later, in the second act of *Public Considerations*, Alicia Herrero and the performers proffered the discourses that are heard on economy and art from a bank (the National Bank) or in the *occupied* square in front of the auditorium, in a *locus* recognized symbolically by the subjects that frequent the amphitheatre. Repeating the gesture with the intention of generating further discourse, the public participates, having being guided through the space by performers. The future debate is rehearsed in the bank's auditorium. Judgements are pronounced, the dissent of the panelists is heard, and participants are 'activated' through questions linked to work and economy. In this second act the resonances of the 'public' in turn come to the diagrams that design the value of the economy, of money circulating in the plazas, labour markets and the forms of social instability caused by the neoliberal residues. The bank<sup>6</sup> presents itself as a financial institution, where money is issued, exhibited, made visible, and also where 'everything sold dissolves in the air', passing to another state, liquid to circulate in the market of goods and services. In this act, art and capital is transformed into letters, fixed terms, interest, possible investment, subversion, patrimony (mine, yours, ours), lent, financed, frozen or corralled. All these are configured on the basis of a performance codified in the solvency, belief and values that depend on the subject(s) and their skills being employed in the repartition of the terrain of the economy that regulates everyday life. This scenario is the *mise-en-scène* of *Public Considerations, a Symposium in Three Acts*, which Alicia Herrero chose to take the specialists who understand the forms and values of money and of art to 'talk publicly' with their audiences. The second act ends. In the third act, which takes place in the congress, site specificity transforms the performance into an act of legality: a kind of legality that attempts to interfere between the forms of emancipation of the genre of art and the legal bodies of the represented community. In the auditorium of the parliament, invited guests and the audience also participate in round tables, distributed in different areas (halls, the lobby etc), whilst on the stage a flag unfurled by Karina Granieri and Agustín Blanco the punctuated word E.M.A.N.C.I.P.A.T.I.O.N. is read. With this gesture both the space and temporality naturalized in the symposium and in the architecture that confers authority and centrality to the auditorium are automatically interrupted. Different focuses for debate and action are presented. We have activation once again. This time, the format of *Public Considerations* itself is extended to six hours. In this performativity transversal and horizontal structures of dialogue are presented and debated. It is a type of democratic act that creates a participative dynamic of rhythms and exchange of flows within the scenario of the National Congress.

The performative artistic practice of *Public Considerations* vectorizes the action towards emancipation, creating spaces of dialogue and appropriation of both political reality and the new spaces for participation in modern-day Argentina. Through this mechanism of simulations and concealments, the artist does not resign the old conceptual practice to politics, but rather breaks it out into different artistic forms and means of symbolic production that rework the old genres.

From a contemporary viewpoint that focuses on and updates 'the public' through diverse *enactments* and acts of speaking, the performance of *Public Considerations* works by camouflaging and mimicking the genre of these *speech acts*. The participants converse, chat, discuss, inform,

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<sup>5</sup> Laboratory for the Investigation of Contemporary Artistic Practice

<sup>6</sup> The Argentine artists Eduardo Molinari and Azul Blaseotto have tackled the difficult relationships between banking and cultural institutions from another perspective. See 'Prácticas artísticas de crítica institucional en Buenos Aires: Eduardo Molinari / Azul Blaseotto. *Casa Matriz* (2007)', *Revista Avances*, vol. 15, Córdoba- UNC, 2008-2009. ISSN 1667-927X.

communicate, debate, question, demonstrate, answer and at the same time respond<sup>7</sup> to situations of enunciation and production of meaning and ideas.

This 'credible' practice of the symposium conversations suggests a modification with respect to the subjective canon of the melancholy political gaze, or the purely vanguardist affirmativity. It authorizes the 'public word' as a place of punctuation and checks, of critical, current and contemporary pauses and poses. They are institutionalized, to be copied in the event, on the podium, and as such to dilute in the present the frontiers between fiction and reality, demonstrating the artifice necessary for the creation of specialist discourses on knowledge and, therefore, on art. In this indirect performance, 'the public' is that which is spoken without words but is acted through gesture, that which is sustained as indefinite whilst it is acted and spoken, that which rhetoric does not explain but which it underlies. In other words, it is that around which the spectator's comprehension gathers, in the attempt to elaborate discourse, dissent or emancipation.

## II.

Yet how do we speak without words? How do we speak without fear of saying the truth? Could it be that both the public and memory talk through our figurations? Could it be that in Foucault's mechanisms, the possible lines of argument are to be found in the figures of subjectivity and the acts of speech? What is it that makes it possible to see and hear voices that talk frankly and without fear about 'the public'? It is now almost three decades since Foucault reinstated this attribute to the Greek term *Parrhesias*<sup>8</sup>, and its particularities of use in the crisis of the democratic institutions of Athens. Herrero's work *Links (2006)*<sup>9</sup>, in as much as it is one of the possible forms in the 'technologies of self', paraphrases the French philosopher, challenging the genealogies of this discourse in a context linked to the technologies and new media in the Argentine artistic field. This has perhaps been one of the few attempts in art that have considered the performativity of the acts of speech as a subject tied between economy, legality and politics that involve forms of speaking and talking in democracy, even beyond the media artefacts.

If it has been the (in)disciplined practices that in the past have exhibited the contradictions that exist in the rhetoric of liberty, perhaps they have done this less through the formal creation of constituent projectual devices and transvestite mechanisms, where the canon or rule of play makes conscious the act of speaking and its legality with respect to the body and the word. Or, as in these cases, it is staged, making the structure of 'how one speaks when one speaks' transparent once again.

In this way, the predecessor of the speculation<sup>10</sup> of conversational typologies explored by *Public Considerations* can be found in *Links*. Here, two naked women are shown taking the floor, reciting passages from Foucault's 1983 lectures in Berkeley University, California. It is not by chance that the lectures given by the French philosopher analyse the Greek term *parrhesias*. Here the term is understood not only as the inalienable right to free expression, it is revised through the uses and leanings of political philosophy towards the terrain of subjectivity and the personal, the relations with oneself and with others and fundamentally with the idea of 'taking care of oneself'. Foucault maintains that free talk, even in the sense of 'chattering', would to Plato be equivalent to acting freely, or freely saying anything that one has in mind, without making a judgement value or qualification. This, for the old Republic, was not a good example of constitutional democracy. From

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<sup>7</sup> In the work *Chat* and in the proposal *Alice Ville*, the artist demonstrates a predecessor to these forms of conversation within the museum. In these, Herrero locates her works in commercial, recreational or administrative *sites*: such as the shop, the bar and the offices of public museums. The former was realized in the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Holland in 2001 and the latter in Argentina, in Rosario Contemporary Art Museum (MACRO) in 2005 and the Contemporary Art Museum of the National University of Misiones (MAC-UNaM) in 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fear-less speech*, (ed.) Joseph Pearson, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> This video-performance by de Alicia Herrero was a project created specifically for the opening event of San Martín Cultural Centre's Culture and Media Space in Buenos Aires in 2006.

<sup>10</sup> María Fernanda Cartagena, 'Speculationis'. See [http:// www.aliciaherreo.com.ar](http://www.aliciaherreo.com.ar). Last entry 04/07/2011.

another perspective, as for Demóstenes, it is equivalent to a *life-style* or personal mannerism, although the author also explains that talking is a personal quality of the sovereign (that which, with the investiture of the State, manages to subjugate and control the bodies of the city-states). In this context, Foucault understands the act of *parrhesias* as the situation in which any citizen who asks for the floor and is granted it, can -and is in his right to- express his 'countercultural speech' against the biopower. This is a term that was actualized in the cultural field, particularly in the context of Argentina during the insurrectional crisis of 2001, in the recent writings of Giorgio Agamben, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and certain collectives of Argentine political practice. Nevertheless these revisions perhaps avoid the primary relationship between the biopower and Foucault's sexual twist, coinciding the appearance of the concept of the first volume of 'The History of Sexuality'. Rather they perhaps take as understood the (non)discourse of the Subjects and their sexual histories, to articulate other meanings in a new political frame. Recent readings and ontologies, when added to the established constitution of legalities, constitute new bases for the history of the diversity of sexuality in Argentina. Here, subjectivities (such as those found in the base of the Foucauldian performativity) are strengthened and their differences in their typologies made visible. Although considering local activisms, the conception of multiplicity and experiences situated outside of the known borrowings and dependencies.

Returning to Herrero, in one way or another, the artist considers the naked life of the women that pronounce themselves in front of the public institution. Silences and pauses make up a new place of enunciation, like the social spaces that dwell in institutions and subvert the formal structures of power. The bodies that imitate the speech and the discourse of the other, put into play the consideration that constitutes them, without understanding it as a synonym for that which regulates them. They are –on the contrary– linguistic competencies or unrestricted talk, that which guarantees the channel of knowledge of the rules governing that gesture's performativity, or perhaps its synonym, that which constitutes the subjective markers in the *speech act*.

*Public Considerations*, through a flexible and paratactical mechanism conformed of various represented sectors, interposes an instance that goes from where some speak and others listen to the possibility of total alteration (where all speak and all listen). All of them are articulated from the construction of a community that organizes itself amongst equals. In this way, the voices are orchestrated with a theatricality that appears in the forum. The forms of democracy - the biopower and the countercultural expressions - are in a way emulated from an institutionalization that constitutes them and also from the dissents that emancipate them.

### III.

If it is possible for artists to dislocate the classic roles and discourses produced by the cultural field in its institutional form (whether, through parody, to destabilize the mimicry of the market or to explain the camouflage that permits the survival of autonomy) the performativity enacted and dramatized by Alicia Herrero in her capacity for self-alteration<sup>11</sup>, is that which makes *Public Considerations* an insubordinate *speech-act* in opposition to cultural structures and policies. It is not so much because she seeks to denounce injustice or represent the prohibited through a dramatic act, but rather that her act reveals the rhetoric naturalized in the gestures that through social rituals govern and structure the everyday. When we speak or use language to communicate, the words are articulated from the speaker, whose act/action organizes them and gives them meaning, whether this be that of an announcement, an argument, a dialogue or even a gesture. These form the acts of speaking, or *speech acts*, of which there are the highly regulated (greetings or other forms of courtesy) and the less regulated, such as misunderstandings, cultural significances that impose themselves, genres that are dissolved through arbitrary use, or subjective markers that hide or repeat themselves in language understood as a signifying system. What *Public Considerations* tries to do is to study these acts of formalised speaking, put them on trial, and return them to a state that deconstructs those levels of codification, without dissecting them. *Public Considerations*

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<sup>11</sup> Alicia Herrero, "The possibilities of art for self-alteration, in the symposium "*Challenges presented by the globalization of visual arts*", panel entitled: "Globalization and Culture, is there such a place as Latin America?", Tres de Febrero University, Buenos Aires, 26 to 29 August 2008. <http://www.untref.edu.ar/documentos/Simposio%20Artes%20Visuales.pdf>. Last entry 10/07/2011.

attempts to return the dialogue to the public sphere in order to discern and amplify the knowledge of discourse and the shifts in meaning organized by its gestures, or in any case to exhibit these, stripping bare the expressions and exposing a display of commas, signs, pauses and hyphens indicated by the *regisseur* to accentuate the markers of subjectivity and genre. If the discourses and topic of language are altered by those who enunciate them - whether this be through their act of speaking, style or genre - what interests Herrero is their performativity and how they act in the social context. If one uses the public, how then does the public act? If one names it, how does one name it? If one disputes it, how is the dissent empowered? If, as Herrero proposes, an insubordinate artistic practice signifies seizing the word, (with respect to the indoctrination and repression occurring in the systemization of violence and acts of speaking that language itself imposes), what artistic mechanisms make that evident? For Herrero, the rostrum and panels bet on the possibility of participants to self-alter and distance themselves from passive reception. She proposes a participation that distances itself from narcissistic and histrionic vanguardism, to reconstruct the senses that make the community an acting society.

#### IV.

This manner of considering the performativity of acts of speech has some precedent in Argentine art, in particular in that of the late sixties and early seventies. Two artworks articulate points of reference and intersection for *Public Considerations*. The first is the artwork/installation realized by Lea Lublin in Yvonne Lambert Gallery, Paris (1974) after a journey to Chile, where she presented this proposal for the first time. The second, which in fact pre-dates the first, responded to a project presented in the Di Tella Institute, *Mesa Redonda- Esto es un juicio* (1967) by Margarita Paksa.

In the Chilean version, Lublin focused on the economy and the structures governing the art system. The social situation of art and culture was exposed through synoptic charts, diagrams, screens and round tables where cultural operators (sociologists, economists, intellectuals and artists) spoke. Examined in *Cultura: Dentro y Fuera del Museo* (1971), the institution was confronted with its role and political interest as a legitimising apparatus of the cultural machinery. In *Projet: Dedans/Dehors du Musee* and *Polylogue Exterieur* (1974), two continuations of the first experience, Lublin favoured interrogation and discourse in considering the place of enunciation. Here the 'prestigious' discourses of art were tackled on the basis of interviews with cultural agents, registered and recorded on audio for the gallery space. *Projet: Dedan-Dehor du Musee* and *Polylogue Exterieur* presented questions, from a feminist perspective (in this case libidinal and psychoanalytical) that disseminated themselves amongst figures in the Parisian intellectual field such as the group *Te/ Quel*. These were historic spaces and moments, in which the word Culture became synonymous with criticism and malaise. Lublin's artistic practice returned the art and signs (exposed as symptom) to the repressive frameworks that the system imposed with its own logic, reclaiming the word from social memory. Following an interview methodology, the artist invited personalities to respond to questions that she had formulated. At the same time she acted as interviewer. Simultaneously, she placed those personalities in front of the cameras, where - under the effect of feedback on the monitors - they viewed their 'live registers', allowing them to observe and adjust their gestures as they responded to the interview. On another hand, the action of *Prende la Parole* (taking the word) responds in turn to the residual gestures of assembly politics, the art of oration and the repertoire of acts of political speech: those shared by the university or union sphere, or in the form of free expression that artists or politicians employ to expose the contradictions of the performativity of culture and its seductive siren songs. To 'take the floor', as we understand it today, would mean to understand democracy as a space for disagreement<sup>12</sup>. Here, a determined type of speech situation is given 'in which one of the speakers understands and at the same time doesn't understand what the other is saying'. Here, subjectivity responds more with the will to free itself than with an idea of verifying the forms of division of knowledge and reason. It's not about rhetoric, but rather about enacting a difference and doing this in the face of those highly conventionalized gibes, repeated again and again in political rhetoric and which empty the words of meaning.

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière, *El desacuerdo. Política y Filosofía* (Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 1996)

In the case of the artist Margarita Paksa, the proposal was conceived of together with other artists and collaborators. In it, the scheme of enactment of the round table panel and between artist and public took place through questions and taped responses. In this project the artist focused attention on the emission of value judgements and specialized art jargon and 'the highlighting of the presence of communication codes', avoiding 'all possibilities of that which is termed spontaneity'.<sup>13</sup> Interest was concentrated on the proceedings and on a proxemics designed by the round table that distributed the arranged hierarchies within space and within the stereotyped codes that proposed the event of the round table to a public 'appropriate' for the situation. The level of performativity responded with humour, and at the same time with the presence of an unexpected public activity. It exposed the contradiction of the live presence of artists who respond in an automated form to the questions pre-programmed for the participants. Nevertheless it is the public that is the margin of manoeuvre. It is the public that is exposed. Paska asks to what point the voice of the public stretches, what its limit of tolerance is. She asks how to play its subjectivity against the passivity, tedium, or interest of a conversation of these characteristics.

From another perspective, a more recent case where the public has been the subject under consideration was the exhibition 'Vida Pública' ('Public Life') realised a few years ago in the National Arts Fund (FNA) and curated by Karina Granieri. The catalogue reads:

*"Public Life* is the result of common materials: public sphere and the live presence of the other. It attempts to conceive of the public as shared territory. As Paolo Virno commented on Hannah Arendt's use of the expression 'public happiness': it is something related to the fact that our mind (yours, mine) is always a public, social mind and cannot be realised if not in relations to its own peers."<sup>14</sup>

In the exhibition the artists presented diverse situations and actions, situated between the aesthetic and the political and linked to how and where an artist lives and by what means they sustain themselves. They ask what their work is, its value and its function in an affective geography situated between memory, work and economy. In Granieri's production, she exhibited herself as artist and curator in front of a collection of proposals that permanently marked the vulnerability of their exhibition, in the frame of the practices of institutional criticism. Nevertheless her proposal was articulated as resonant instrument in an artistic community where difference were worked upon from the actions and gestures from the past and from other communities, in public and above all inside and outside the exhibition room.

To summarize, in this scene that we describe, these artists elect a practice of community that (as in *Public Considerations*) is considered in situ, in specific, determined and traceable contexts.<sup>15</sup> They are spaces and subjectivities in a historic moment, in dialogue with the stylization and crystallization of gestures that form the genre to which they refer. They test the judgement of reason as implied in Paksa's project. With a taste for performativity and the situation of speech, these three acts bring together not only the choice of innovative contexts for the artistic platforms of the body in action, but also the consideration of processes of mutability, alteration and continuity of the species in the forums and round tables. These artists celebrate the intention of making visible these recurrent topics in art, forming links between them and with discourse on the economy, education, cultural policy, public and private space. These practices act (enact) the public and speak without fear (*parrhesias*) in the debates of the cultural sectors and in the creation and design of participative communities. These proposals, on occasions camouflaged or part of mimicry, operate on the same

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<sup>13</sup> Margarita Paksa, *Proyectos sobre el discursos de mi*, Buenos Aires, Fundación Espigas, 1997, pp.43-46.

<sup>14</sup> Karina Granieri, *Vida Pública*, (prologue), exhibition catalogue, (FNA, Buenos Aires, 09-07/05-08, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> In *Magazine in Situ* Alicia Herrero has, since 2004, produced conversational situations in specific locations and in online platforms, for example turning a boat journey along the Beagle Canal into a platform that attempted to questions territorial limits, historical tales and artistic genres. <http://www.magazineinsitu.com/>. Last entry 10/07/2011.

wavelength of action that overlaps with the specialists and operators of public structures and policy that establish the legality of territory of the cultural industries.

Finally, one last political expression in this retrospective reading of typologies and territories. The cultural deconstruction proposed by post-feminism and post-colonialism in Latin America remains to be addressed in the reflections of the artistic field. However, these practices without doubt add to the genealogy. Unlike sociological or conceptual art, they are produced according to how we perceive the cultural from our different perspectives and how we recognize different means of masking the forms of expression within the differences of genre, gender, class and race. In the case of *Public Considerations*, it is not about a struggle to make a genre/gender or class explicit, but rather about working with the transversality of the same. It is about unmasking their insubordinations, subversions and pollinations and how these teach us the transpositions and semiotizations that work across genres/genders. It refers to the forms in which the structures and conventional languages governing the debarment of these hybridizations in the social and in art can be dismantled. It is about a reading that distinguishes between a vision that does not arrive at a conclusion but rather a process, or a written language that cannot be told but which we all speak.