

*Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?*

Ricardo Basbaum



[Fig. 1]

The *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* [Fig. 1. Installation shot, *Nameless Science*, apexart] project was started in 1994 (see [www.nbp.pro.br](http://www.nbp.pro.br)) and is still going strong in 2009 – there is not an established deadline for it. As far as the project itself is capable of generating interest and there are participants who will join in, it will continue. I'd like to comment here, briefly, on some aspects of the development of my PhD research, which took the *Would you like...?* project as its main topic.<sup>1</sup>(1)

When the academic research started in 2004, it seemed that including *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* as its main line would mean a new impulse for the artistic project itself. I asked myself, “Maybe the academic world would offer some space for its further development, a different quality of space that would allow one to problematize it, make it fold over itself and generate a conversation that might add new layers to it?” Obviously I had to be conscious of the fact that “university” and “art world” are two distinct territories, and each one of them has its own legitimating mechanisms – that is, what is interesting to the art world might not seem so attractive to the academic world, and vice versa. Therefore, taking an art project to the university requires one to think in advance about the development of some strategy dedicated to soften – or even dismantle, if possible – some of the barriers and borderlines that these two self-confident territories have erected to protect themselves against (in general sense) the world. Recognizing the particular characteristics of each is not meant to establish any hierarchical relation; on the contrary, it makes easier to spot the passageways and contact lines that might make it possible for the two fields to communicate in more dynamically and productively.

Because it was developed basically as a project to encounter possibilities of movement of some lines of flight in the art circuit, the *Would you like...?* project has been conducted as a sort of autonomous system, composed of a set of protocols regulating it along the standards of a basic dialogical structure involving artist, object, and participant. The public or general audience only accesses the project later, at the documentation or archive level. In that sense, the presence of *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* at Documenta 12 was very significant, for the installation displayed there was in fact the very first opportunity to exhibit the project in its entirety, presenting an architectonic-sculptural structure that functions as the project's museum (or, on that particular occasion, a museum inside a museum), framing dialogically the protocols of relationship between artist, object, participant and audience. Thus, to produce the necessary displacement of such long-range activity towards the academic procedures requires a careful approach in order to realize which particular aspects could be further reworked, extended and linked to specific investigative topics.

One of the key elements of the *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* installation display, which has been present since the project started, is its *diagram*. [Fig. 2 Diagram] (see: <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/images/basbaum2.pdf>). There, in a combination of lines and words, the main dialogical guidelines of the project are portrayed, together with information on some of its generative statements (e.g. the *NBP – New Bases for Personality project*), other series of works developed in tandem and which share mutual influence, and also with some data information on number of experiences, names of the cities included in the network, etc. Yet also important to the diagram are the layers of comments included successively during the project's development, throughout the years – you can read, for instance, at the diagram's top right corner, the dates of the project's four phases until now (phase 4 is still ongoing). Thus a decisive moment for the development of the PhD research was when it appeared evident to me that the way to problematize the *Would you like...?* project was to extract the topics, themes and questions directly from the diagram – that is, literally localizing them in the diagram. With such a gesture, the research would not define its contours from a position of exclusion, but could be conducted from within the project's proper structure. Then, a set of eight different blocks – each including groups of concepts – was added to the diagram, to be extended later through discursive tools.

The PhD thesis, which can be considered a specific exercise of “hypertrophied” writing (in the sense that it extends a particular form of writing through several pages to fulfill certain academic requirements), was thus achieved with a body of text that advanced each of the eight conceptual blocks further. The concrete presence of these eight conceptual blocks *as* drawing, in the diagram, made it also possible to practice different modes of writing, letting the proper academic discourse shift closer to a sort of poetic or fictional use of words and phrases. The result was a body of texts completely interconnected with the diagram – a sort of hypertext where different parts relate among themselves, mixing drawing (diagram) and discourse – and that is now a concrete and particular part of *Would you like to participate in an artistic experience?* In some ways, such text has still to find a concrete way to access a more public audience, to make itself as available as the art piece; at the same time, it creates true access for the art project to the academic space, making it function there not just as a “passive conceptual monument” but as a provocative poem that resists interpretation and always asks for more (or less).

Perhaps the most ambitious aspect of the finished PhD research, though, is to consider the resulting writing as standing among the texts produced by most of the more than 100 participants of the *Would you like...?* project. All of them configure statements produced in direct relation to the proposed experience – such texts comment, extend, interpret the project, adding to it multiple voices, positions and points of view. It can be said that the entire archive (composed not only of texts, but also of photos, videos and audio files), produced by the participants, shapes an interconnected set of discursive and non-discursive documents, which stands as a truly polyphonic and polyrhythmic body of records. It is interesting to consider a collective production as such as a critical novel, depicting the adventures of different characters who are always in the foreground; each new participant contributes to the conversation, adding new voices to it, summing up dialogues, inflections, pauses, confrontations, conflicts, etc. One can imagine that a collective reader is required as well, as a network always offers space for many, and not for only one exclusive gaze – which is strictly refused. A diagram is conceived of as a surface which triggers thinking processes, narratives, histories, stories. In that sense, if you let yourself be captured by its lines and words, you will be taken elsewhere – and when you get back, you won't be the same; such is the promise articulated in transformational processes.

Considering the PhD thesis as just one of the chapters of a critical novel is an interesting mode of approaching it – it means it should not be read in isolation from the other multiple voices that compose the *Would you like...?* project. But also it points to the fact that it is not finished or concluded. Its dynamic is concretely in progress, acquiring some different features each day. Productive confrontations between academic and artistic worlds can bring both of them to light and in direct communication during certain particular and intensive moments – to achieve this is interesting and important.

## Response

### Gertrud Sandqvist

I am a professor in Art Theory at the Malmö Art Academy where I started, together with Sarat Maharaj, the first PhD program in visual art in Sweden. Up till now, we have had three PhD students. One of them is Matts Leiderstam, who is in the *Nameless Science* show at Apexart, and there are six more students to follow. From the beginning, our question was: Is there any kind of knowledge that could be produced from the field of visual art that would be transferable to other fields of knowledge? If this kind of transfer does not exist, we should not have PhDs in art. That sounds a bit absolute, but it was our point of departure.

It was very interesting to hear you talk about arrogance and escape. About the arrogance of the art world, the arrogance of the university world, and the question of whether we are able to escape the two.

Your second question is: What kind of method can be used in visual art, which would also be used in other fields of knowledge? For me, the most important method was the free experiment. Are you using the free experiment as an artist or as a researcher in other fields? Not only in science, but in all fields of knowledge we have experiments. So what kind of experiment are you actually using? What kind of parameters do you have? How are you able to decide whether it is a good research or a good art piece? What kind of method are you

using and why are you using that particular method? These questions are enormously important, and the answers are complex.

In the field of visual art, there are many experiments producing much new knowledge, not necessarily transferable to other fields of knowledge. This is really the crucial point. What kind of knowledge is it that would be transferable to other fields of knowledge? Of course, as you just said, you would have the impact of writing a standardized academic thesis. But I believe that the art world views the university world as much more conservative than it actually is. There are new ways of writing all over the university, not only in the art world. So why would you want to do this essay-experimental writing? What kind of knowledge do you expect to get from it?

One last comment on the question of criticality. As you know, normally in the art world, you will be reviewed, but you wouldn't necessarily be criticized. And you definitely need not change anything in your results due to criticism. However, in a PhD program, you are criticized all the time. And you have to change, every now and then, your results. That is not easy for an artist to do, but I believe that it is absolutely necessary. So, what is it that art research might do apart from creating and generating new knowledge? In my opinion, that would be to use critique in the old Kantian sense, i.e. imply investigation when you criticize or when you are criticized. That means one has to be open to critical evaluation.

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<sup>1</sup> Concluded in 2008 at the Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil, with Dr. Martin Grossmann as advisor. Original title, in Portuguese: *Você gostaria de participar de uma experiência artística? (+NBP)*.