IMPOSSIBLE GLOSSARY

GOAI

Return

IPSBEMOIL

Haizea Barcenilla
Alberto Flores *Makea Tu Vida*
MawatreS
I confess that I don’t particularly like the word return. When chosen as a contributor to this publication, I was forced to reflect on how to approach the word and its various meanings. I found it interesting that it would be included in a section called the “Impossible Glossary,” and was somewhat relieved to know that the idea was grounded in its very impossibility, in the idea that there was no single word that defines the sum of participatory practices, nor a single meaning that could cover all aspects of them. I proposed this journey toward return as an opportunity to play with the term, to exhaust it, stretch it, and to see where it could taken.

Curiously, I find return more appealing as a romantic concept than as artistic jargon: the returning home of the prodigal daughter, going back to the place where she belongs and feels loved. Returning in this sense implies certain caring relationships—bound to a place and usually to a social group—that trigger stronger reactions than the administrative version of the term, used, for example, when we are returning a book to the library.

Perhaps what least convinces me about this last meaning, this administrative return, is that it involves an obligation of exchange. We are lent a book and, naturally, we must return it. We are done a favor and, naturally, we must return it. In this sense, return implies that something is exchanged in a manner previously agreed to, with the expectation that each part of the exchange receives something equivalent from the other. And it is this manner of applying the idea of return to art that bothers me most; not only does it affect how we approach participatory, contextual, or collaborative practices, but in recent years it has become pervasive with respect to any publicly funded artistic practice.

In the hypercapitalist view so characteristic of the current day, any center, agent, artist, or action that receives a cent of public funding should pay for what it received. We might argue that any cultural action gives back by contributing to the production of collective knowledge. But the idea of return generally does not refer to this type of contribution. The expectation of a devolution is framed in one of two polarized options: either it is something financially quantifiable (it must bring in a minimum number of visitors, who pay their entrance fee and then subsequently consume at neighboring...
Although not a direct inspiration for its creation, Nouveaux Commanditaires reminds me of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which proposes that it is the people who are to be learning that should define their own fields of interest, and who acts as an educator in this process must be capable of building with them a program of collaboration based upon these needs rather than implementing a default agenda. Similarly, in Nouveaux Commanditaires it is the group rather than the institution that determines the subject matter, and the mediator who constructs a program based upon the group’s criteria. An example of this process is the project *Andrekale*, for which I served as mediator, in the town of Hernani, in Guipúzcoa. Kalandria, the patron group, proposed a project that explored the name of one of the town’s streets; officially called Padre Kardaberaz, since at least the late nineteenth century that street has been popularly known as “Andrekale” (“The Street of Women” in Basque). Research into the origins of the name produced various theories but could not clarify exactly who the “women” were to which the name referred. The group had two objectives. On one hand, and independently of the Nouveaux Commanditaires project, they sought to change the official name of the street. Their requests had been rejected in the past, but on this occasion the local government conceded and the change was made. Parallel to this process, Kalandria sought to commission an artwork that

---


2. Hernani is a town in the Basque Country with a population of around 20,000. The patron group, Kalandria, is composed of Nekane Idarreta Mendiola, Maialen Apezetxea Lujanbio, Ixiar Pagoaga Soraluze, Ibon Arrizabalaga de Mingo, Maitane Elosegi Mateo, and Irantzu Jauregi Artola. *Andrekale* has been running from 2014 to 2016, and is produced by Tabakalera with the support of Artehazia and the Fondation de France.
Kandela, the eternal migrant, the women from everywhere and nowhere at once, combines all languages in wordless one; Pantxa, the lazy one, the idle woman who feels no need to produce, takes to the street with her friends to laugh, drink, smoke, and have fun.

The legacy of the three figures was portrayed by the women of Hernani in a three-channel video. In the channel representing Ekhiñe, women of different ages carry out actions that require great strength, as in a catharsis: breaking dishes or classical busts, burning clocks, sawing through chairs. For Kandela, twelve migrant women who have settled in Hernani hold a mysterious meeting in the main chamber of town hall during which they communicate only through dance. In commemoration of Pantxa, two hundred women occupied Andrekale street, setting up tables and chairs, playing cards, singing, and enjoying the public space and each others’ company. In addition to the installation, Señora Polaroiska is editing a single-channel video as a means to more easily disseminate the work. As a way of marking the street, a fountain will be rechristened as “the fountain of the legend” in order to give material form to the women’s legacy as well as being a functional urban element.

If we look at this project from the perspective of return, we see that it does not clearly correspond with the idea of a two-way street that dictates what society gives and what it receives in exchange. It is more a question of synergy, of concentric forces turning around a single place, of staying, taking root, and settling in. Kalandria contributes enthusiasm, hope, a subject for reflection, an approach to an issue of representation, of social responsibility; Señora Polaroiskas contributed their artistic vision, their ability to create new forms of representation, empathy, labor, and, ultimately, an artwork. However, the potential impact of this work also depends on Kalandria, and it is they who must activate it.

The idea of administrative return does not really apply in this case. Yet, if we go back to the more romantic idea of return discussed earlier, of finding oneself in a caring environment, within a sense of community, we can connect this to another concept that might help us to better understand the dynamics that came into play in Andrekale. It is the idea of the commons.

We will digress here to consider this idea of the commons, which first began to gather steam on the Internet and later gained momentum and visibility in the spheres of politics, activism, and social participation. The commons includes elements that belong to everyone and nobody at the same time, and that
The importance of this relationship was evident in the Andrekale project. The formation of an organization—a series of relationships of joint responsibility and of bonds between the participants—became in itself another of the project’s benefits. While the project would never have been completed without the labor of everyone involved (both the members of Kalandria and the more than two hundred women from Hernani who collaborated at different junctures), we should also highlight their importance on an emotional level, which we were able to integrate into the realm of care. As both the artists and myself as mediator also found ourselves within this network of care and collaboration, exchanges were not based solely on a contractual relationship of production of an object but also involved a number of emotional values held in common with the patrons. It is this factor, often overlooked because of the difficulty of quantifying it, that I consider essential in estimating the contribution of participatory projects. The dynamics of care and mutual respect that often develop in these contexts represent a significant form of symbolic value, a way of working and of shifting more market-based values that, I believe, is one of the most relevant elements of exchange within what we call return.

In addition to the common relationship that is created between participants, this kind of project can also activate the commons from another perspective: by making visible, empowering, and reinforcing common goods and common values. For this to occur it is vital for artists, curators, mediators, and other agents to have thorough knowledge of the context in which they are to work, or, failing this, must engage in ongoing research and lasting interaction with this context. With this in mind, it is important to point out that the Nouveaux Commanditaires platform functions through offices located in specific regions, each of which focuses on its own surrounding area. Contextualization goes hand in hand with any participatory project, and though this may seem self-evident, it is an aspect often not given the importance it deserves.

It is largely thanks to contextual knowledge and to the work with civil society agents that we as artistic agents can try to activate the mechanisms discussed above. Within the logic of consumption that is engulfing us, it is often possible to lose sight of the wealth of commons of which we form part, or its value as such. Social relations, care, languages, shared knowledge can become so naturalized as identity-forming elements that we may overlook their importance. An outside perspective can help one to value these components in a process of empowerment in which the artistic project can give participants confidence in themselves and their abilities. In the case of Andrekale, the project displayed history.
as a common and collective good that need not be left in the hands of outside specialists. A large number of women were involved in the writing and reformulation of their own history and that of their town. It provided a representative image in which the women felt reflected, and which encouraged them to demand a visible place in a shared, common history. In this sense, it was not the artists who created the women’s capacity for intervention; they merely provided an image and strengthened a capacity that already existed.

Consequently, the return that most interests me is the return to common goods by means of collaborative artistic practices. If we are capable of shifting the paradigm, taking us from the traditional sense of property (the we have) to its sense of identity and community (the we are), we would extract return from the administrative logic to which it is currently bound, turn it around on itself, in a spiral, constantly returning it to its origins, empowering care, affectation, knowledge, and social responsibility.
Interview with Alberto Flores (Makea Tu Vida) by hablarenarte

Alberto Flores (b. 1980, Talavera) is a founding member of the Makea Tu Vida collective, in turn part of the core group behind the development of el-recetario.net, a platform for sharing knowledge about construction methods. Makea Tu Vida designs and creates strategies, workshops, and platforms that investigate and promote reuse and open design. Since 2009, Makea Tu Vida has organized and promoted REHOGAR, a collective exhibition of open-source furniture design and constructive solutions for living that is based upon recycled materials and the effective use of resources. Though Makea Tu Vida’s work is highly collaborative in nature, its members’ primary motivation is not artistic. With a strong activist bent, they undertake their work from a utilitarian perspective.

—www.makeatuvida.net

Do you frame your work as an artistic practice? What is your motivation?

I’ll start with the second question in order to answer the first. As critical individuals opposed to the current situation of homogenization and standardization, and sensitized by the loss of values and of the degradation of the environment, we feel an inner need, both personal and professional, to act. By contributing as much as possible of our know-how and a bit of creativity, we hope to contribute to changing and bettering the environmental conditions by involving the community.

We build on the application of design methodologies that seek to address people’s everyday lives: how they look at their context, how they decode it, and how they approach work. We want people to be aware of their ability to transform and utilize resources from their immediate surroundings with their own means. We often use certain tools, criteria, or methods considered artistic practices in order to elucidate certain other things, but that doesn’t mean we think of ourselves as artists, or of having anything to do with the art market.

But careful, that doesn’t mean we don’t appreciate and, in many cases, admire the work of certain collectives or individuals who do form part of the art world and work within its codes, not from a binomial artist/viewer position but rather a more relational and facilitating one.

Are the projects specifically designed to generate the greatest possible impact, or do the formats chosen come from somewhere else? What is more important in a project, that it has a tangible impact or that it prioritizes the process?

The actions we develop with Makea Tu Vida are pretty varied and a constant learning experience. Clearly each action needs and has its own formalization, and one can use certain methods to achieve the stated objective, but each context is very distinct, the people are very different, and time frames are variable.
What is most important about the actions we implement is just that: implementing them with other people, getting them out of our own heads so that they can impact and get into the heads of others, and so on.

Your project el-recetario.net can be seen as part of a growing wave of proposals in which designers and architects work with tools of the commons and with a social purpose. Why do you think this tendency is so strong in Spain?

In the current environment of social transformation, there is a broad spectrum of citizens who cannot find anything commercially available that represents us or that provides solutions to our daily needs. Tired and bored of standardized spaces, facilities, and objects for which aesthetics and obsolescence take priority over functionalism and sustainability, it is becoming increasingly clear that, in certain settings, behavior is changing, and as citizens we have decided to take a more active role and to participate in the construction and reappropriation of our immediate environment. Being able to design and build our own objects strengthens us both individually and collectively as citizens, and creates intelligent communities that foster the sharing of ideas and encourage creativity and popular wisdom that, by putting it into practice, can be saved from falling into obscurity.

The el-recetario.net platform features open content that anyone can use, but also contribute to by modifying a design and make it more their own; for example, by using a recycled material in a different manner than originally intended, by altering the dimensions, or simply by using a different type of joint or finish. This highlights the fact that anyone, with practice and a bit of ingenuity, can become a designer and creator of almost every element in their domestic or urban environment.
You develop projects to activate the cultural fabric of a location, such as *El puente de Deusto* (The Deusto Bridge), along with workshops and activities in collaboration with other artists. What do you find artistically interesting about fostering actions that promote direct exchanges with a city’s context and its sociocultural network?

As an artist, I don’t believe that the creation of objects is the only goal, nor the only medium. I believe artistic practice is a product of the evolution of thought (among other things), of the exploration of the senses and experiences, and not only of the object as an end in itself. As such, I understand the creation of contexts as a practice with an equal status as that of the creation of a physical object.

I design workshops, publications, or roundtables as spaces for debate in which ideas and discourses are questioned in much the same way as occurs at exhibitions. My interest lies in dialogue, sharing, debate, discourse, and action. In *El puente de Deusto*, my role was (and is) to create the context so that work would be produced. I look to facilitate contents I think are missing, making places available to stage them that feel less hermetic and that are accessible to a less specialized audience.

**Do you believe that political art, or even art in general, must have a specific functionality?**

Indeed, I think that all art has a specific functionality, though some works may be of greater interest to me than others. For several years, we have been hearing a great deal about political art, at times perhaps too much; the fact that it is fashionable makes us suspicious.

If we were to speak of a triangle formed by art/artists, politics, and reality, I myself am partial to the work of artists, but above all, to the commitment...
of people. This reminds me of a work of graffiti that said, "Art doesn't help people, people help people."

I don’t doubt of art’s capacity to produce effects in real life, but this relation can take many forms. I believe that art is a context of struggle and resistance, but this struggle and resistance do not take place in the streets alone, but in people’s attitudes and ideas as well.

**Do you believe that these artistic manifestations can produce a return and have a profound importance in society?**

Metaphorically we could say that Marcel Duchamp changed the world; Gordon Matta-Clark contributed ideas and new paths on which to build with the concept of another architecture; and Jorge de Oteiza proposed “storming and burning” the university.

The time frames in which art develops are not immediate. It is difficult to measure the impact that a project might have over a brief period; but its development and assimilation by the general public involves reflection, and this is turn engenders attitudes... From that point on, things can start to change! I do not consider the role of art to be building awareness but rather of constructing subjects.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore that we are living in a country of boorish savages... The political disaster that has governed us has produced a society in which people know the names of more *Big Brother* contestants than they do Nobel prizewinners. And art is not exempt from this situation.

**What role does social impact assume in your work? Is there, or do you look for, a specific return?**

I cannot base my projects solely and exclusively on the impact. If that were the case, I would be in the wrong place and should go into advertising. With my work I seek to rethink, to be a catalyst and try to transform a specific context. However, I have been lucky to feel that some of my projects have had something of an impact, and that’s wonderful, but I’m not focused on that alone. I understand this type of social impact, in any discipline, as an aspiration, as something that doesn’t always happen. Art history is full of works that heralded problematic themes. I believe Chillida’s design for Amnesty International and Picasso’s Guernica have had major social impacts on the level of other types of projects, although I doubt that they were aware of what they were doing. Chillida’s logo was prohibited, while Guernica is obviously an impactful symbol on every level.

My work is based primarily upon research and return. I find things that interest me or I feel I should work with, I study them and transform them into something (a project, a topic of debate, a publication, a place for proposing art), and I generate a return in the form of questions. I do not believe there is one correct, indisputable response to a complex problem, but through the language of art I believe one can find other pathways of negotiation with what surrounds us, and with ourselves.
Colectivo Atlas, Constituyéndonos (Constituting Ourselves), Deusto Bridge, Bilbao, 2015

MawatreS, Sant Romà de Sau I, digital video, 2013
Haizea Barcenilla is a professor at the Art History Department, Universidad del País Vasco. As an art critic and curator she is concerned with producing works and writing for artists. Her research is vertebrated around the idea of the commons and analyses using gender as a perspective. She works from the hypothesis that art exists within different interlinked social systems and is entangled in ideologies and ways of looking, which she attempts to study from as many viewpoints as possible.

Ana García Alarcón is a researcher, curator and a Doctor in Art History and Theory with the Universidad Complutense, Madrid. She has recently published the book ARTE versus PUBLICIDAD. (Re)visiones críticas desde el arte actual (Universidad de Zaragoza, Zaragoza, 2016). She regularly writes texts and articles, and curates projects on an individual as well as a collective basis. Together with Isabel Durante and Miguel Ángel Hernández Ana makes up the curatorial group 1erEscalaón, and she is also a member of the curatorial team of Espacio Trapézio, an offspace in Madrid.
Impossible Glossary is an editorial project by hablarenarte that will grow steadily until the close of the CAPP project, planned for the end of 2018. This digital edition of June 2016 is comprised of seven independent chapters:

**Agents**
“Constellations, Glossaries, and Functions”
Es Baluard, Museo d’Art Modern i Contemporani de Palma
“Vanishing Points”
Javier Montero
Interviews with Núria Güell and María Ruido

**Autonomy**
“Autonomy and Modes of Relation”
Jordi Claramonte
Interviews with Rogelio López Cuenc and Alexander Ríos

**Authorship**
“Going Beyond Artistic Authorship”
Diego del Pozo Barriuso
Interviews with Christian Fernández Mirón and Left Hand Rotation

**Collaboration**
“Collaboration is Inevitable”
Maria Mur Dean
Interviews with Maider López and DEMOCRACIA

**Context**
“Walking in Ice, Artistic Practices in Context”
Francisca Blanco Olmedo
Interviews with El Banquete and DosJotas

**Work**
“Down to work! Ways of Doing and Activating within the Social Network”
Selina Blasco y Lila Insúa
Interviews with Juanli Carrión and David Crespo

**Return**
“The Return Is the Common”
Haizea Barcenilla
Interviews with Alberto Flores (Makea Tu Vida) and MawatreS

The Impossible Glossary will be expanded over the coming years, the contents of which will be published digitally at www.cappnetwork.eu and www.hablarenarte.com/capp. A selection of all the texts will be published in a paper edition in November 2018.

We hope for the widest possible dissemination of this publication. When quoting fragments or full texts, the following formula should be used: Full name of the author, “Title,” in: name of the chapter, Impossible Glossary, ed. hablarenarte, (Madrid: hablarenarte, 2016), p. xx., see: www.hablarenarte.com/capp

Editorial design and coordination: hablarenarte

- Graphic design: Jaime Narváez
- Translations (Spanish to English): Toni Crabb, Jonathan Fox, Wade Matthews, Douglas Pratts
- Spanish copyediting and proofreading: Miriam Querol

© of this edition, hablarenarte, 2016
© all texts, the authors
© all translations, the translators
© images, the authors

We are committed to respecting the intellectual property rights of others. While all reasonable efforts have been made to state copyright holders of material used in this work, any oversight will be corrected in future editions, provided the Publishers have been duly informed.

**Acknowledgments:**
- Our Spanish partners of the CAPP project
  - AcVic (Vic)
  - Centro Huarte (Pamplona)
  - Medialab Prado (Madrid)
  - Tabakalera (San Sebastian)
- Create (Dublin, Ireland) lead of CAPP and the international co-organizers
  - Agora (Berlin, Germany)
  - M-Cult (Helsinki, Finland)
  - Tate Liverpool (England)
  - Heart of Glass (Liverpool, England)
  - LADA (London, England)
  - Kunsthalle Osnabrück (Germany)
  - Ludwig Museum (Budapest, Hungary)

Impossible Glossary is published within the framework of CAPP (Collaborative Arts Partnership Program, 2014–2018). 

hablarenarte is part of the CAPP network, as the Spanish co-organizer.