

(POST-PANDEMIC) COUNTER-IMAGINARIES

If it is easier to imagine the end of the world than capitalism (Jameson), then we have a problem, and Counter-imaginaries wants to become a way of dealing with that problem.

We twist two concepts to make them less apocalyptic and more transformative, i.e. Gentrification and Pandemic. We propose the relation between the dynamics of gentrification (real estate speculation or real estate violence) and the dynamics of Covid-19, or rather its political regime, the pandemic, as virtually the same thing. Generally speaking, we understand the development, expansion and mutation of each virus as historical events. On the other hand, a pandemic is a form of governance frequently used in modern western history. From the handling of the black death, dysentery, and leprosy in the Middle Ages, to influenza, which were lethal weapons against populations colonised by the English, French and Spanish empires in what we know today as America, pandemics have always been a useful weapon of bio-power. Pandemics have been weapons of war and conquest from Spanish colonisation to contemporary biological bombs. In a nutshell, they belong to the modern political categories of control and social changes. Thus, in a highly contemporary manner, they join to the crises inherent to capitalist models like self-fulfilled prophecies at a decisive moment of structural readjustments in those territories where “they appear”.

In 2020, the steps in force around the world banned access and transit to public spaces. “Confinements” had a particular impact on the more dense areas of global urbanity. The impact on people living in urban centres has been greatly silenced under a general story centred on the time spent on the sofa watching films, series via streaming, doing yoga or talking to family and friends via social networks. During our research and from shared experiences of allied collectives, it is obvious that the urban reality during the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be reduced to a simplistic hegemonic narrative. “Stay home” was a possibility many could not afford, and without denying the difficult consequences of doing so, it has also been a privilege.

In “The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City” (Neil Smith) explains how gentrification of undervalued outlying districts systemically goes through the over-criminalisation of its population. The urban panoptic due to desertification of the public spaces, where offending bodies give themselves away by their mere presence in a space occupied by control (police and neighbours), suffer such criminalisation. Placing ourselves in a wider perspective, governance of the public space, at least in Europe and urban centres, locally shapes and organises colonial necropolitical categories (Mbembe), reproducing the colonial matrix of power (Quijano). In this sense, as one might expect, the pandemic has enabled a radicalisation of the already well-known impacts of the modern categories that govern bodies. In the book “From the Pandemic to Utopia: The Future Begins Now” (De Sousa), the Portuguese sociologist makes use of his analysis regarding Covid-19 development to delve into said systematic categories that determined the way in which the victims were “chosen”. As a privileged ally of capitalism, the city and its spatiality played a role, i.e. the most precarious collectives were disproportionately affected according to colonial intersectionality of race, gender and class (Crenshaw / Lugones).

(Post-pandemic) Counter-imaginaries does not separate theory and practice. Therefore, the following lines propose a methodological transition towards a located thought (Hallway) branching into a feeling-thinking-doing (Escobar).

To make evident and bring to the collective memory the realities lived, (post-pandemic) Counter-imaginaries made an effort to create a network of allies who could share (in debates, radio podcasts,

texts or visual work production) the silenced narratives (Puig Punyet) of the current pandemic, such as attending emergencies (anti-racist care Network), places of work, neighbours battling against evictions, and academic debates (Agamben-Bifo), to name but a few. We recover past and future pandemics, historical or science fiction (Butler - Machado), and see how they make existence of the current pandemic possible, which we also understand as a discourse (Jimenez). We call to share any story that does not coincide with History, to see what is repeated, changed, and what we can lose along the way if we are not paying attention. We pay attention to stories whispered about patients zero, lying on blankets with smallpox (De Sousa) and environmental toxicity in sacrifice areas (Guzmán).

We dismantle hegemonic imaginaries and look outside the epistemological prison (Grosfoguel), attend to the existing counter-imaginaries and those which do not exist yet. We take care every image that does not coincide with the official statement (Steyerl - Cusicanqui), every sound and word interrupting the doctrine of shock and production of catastrophes (Klein). We collectivise resources to create counter-hegemonic images (in the widest sense, sounds and words too). We take photos, steal others, draw, download songs, compose music, underline books, write poems, and copy others, collectively.

What is research for us? We avoid the production modes we cannot control, i.e. impact indices and indexing, metadata and quantitative analysis. Instead, we offer two quality criteria, namely, that the research should be a “feeling-thinking-doing” (Escobar), and that it should be truly collective. Our efforts are aimed at opening temporary situations enabling this collective feeling thinking action to take place and be shared with temporary partners. For the effects of this text, we will call them collective knowledge Spaces.

Collective knowledge spaces: radio

The Counter*imaginaries radio podcast, with 3 episodes already recorded and another in process, is a radio which records live as a conversation sprinkled with music and sounds. We share experiences first hand likewise reflections which open us like in a global political gadget. In a gentrified city we encounter those criminalised along the borders, sold by states to the large pharmaceutical industry, drugged with legal psychoactives, torn from their community, battered by counter-imaginaries and burnt for defending what is fair; and we share recipes of how to stop these lethal processes.

Collective knowledge spaces: play/game

If you have ever played and learnt something, you can join us. That was the starting point to propose a game as a collective knowledge space. Our hypothesis is that when playing collective knowledge can occur with less exclusion than in the classroom space. By proposing play/game spaces-times and then sharing how we have been in the game and how we have felt on finishing, we have learnt a lot, e.g. that a competitive debate can become a wheel of respectful listening “because we have already played as companions”. We have also learnt that reliving traumatic events in the form of play can reduce its power over use. Moreover, by proposing this as a kind of game can elude the cynical distressing self-censorship imposed on us by the hegemonic narrative (regarding the end of the world and end of capitalism).

Gentrifi-què

Gentri-fi-què is a game created by the collective Memòria, Lluita i Resistència to educate people about the dynamics and consequences of the pandemic, besides activating the neighbourhood organisation and desires to fight. The game proposes representing a resident in a city with unequal districts, likewise an unequal resident, whose characteristics grant her a value in the system (racial, capitalist, cis-heterosexualist, ableist, etc.). From thereon, the players can simply attempt to access health, culture, employment, food, etc., which is not easy on a frantic cheating board. Gentrification can only be stopped by stopping the system, and in this game the system continually causes minor changes affecting each player differently, hindering collective action and a real transformation of living conditions. On finishing, there is a debate where we immediately go on from how we have played the match to life experiences and reflections on how to disobey. We add another layer to the game, i.e. The Pandemic, which reveals the stick hidden from the Capital and State and militarises and pharmacologises the liberal capitalist regime. Let us recall that gentrification did not stop during the pandemic, and inequality did not decrease. Throughout 2022 we proposed three matches of Gentrifi-què in Santa Mònica and another one in La Capella, in collaboration with Espai Avinyó. Once we know where we are and that we do not want to live like that, where are we going to go?

Watch Out! by Etcétera / occupy public space

After playing the city and its gentrification dynamics (capital against life) on a board thanks to Gentrifi-què, we need to go down to the street. Furthermore, we found ourselves in an art centre of the Barcelona Raval district, where everything is happening before our very eyes. More than analysing, we now feel the need to challenge, so we invited the Argentinian collective Etcétera to stir up the gentrified ex-public privatised urban space around Santa Mònica in a festive manner. We were disguised as pandemics with hazmat suits looking like minions with posters of *teng- (an imaginary counter-apocalyptic political game currently being developed) game drawings. They took us for a walk with gigantic tablets and shouts of "positive!" "negative!", and "beware, beware, beware, beware". The walk stopped in some of the Barcelona flagship hygiene management HQs, obsessed not only with containing the virus but also any subversive elements. On a surrealist-situational night we challenged the Lyceum Theatre, Old Hospital, Centre for Tropical Diseases and passers-by who, as soon as they joined us, took photos or insulted us. Was it collective knowledge or catharsis, trigger or seed? We still do not know which satisfies us, because it cannot be appropriated.



David Mirás' painting based on various periods of Pandemic Counter-imaginaries' research, particularly the Etcétera collective's action "Watch out!", November, 2022.



Gentrifi-què Game in Santa Mònica, June, 2022.



Etcétera collective's action "Watch out!", in La Rambla, Barcelona, November, 2022.

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Post-Pandemic Counter-Imaginations is one of the resident research groups at the Santa Monica arts centre in 2022 and 2023, made up of Jesús Arpal Moya (La Caníbal co-operative), Nancy Garín and Antoine Silvestre. Throughout 2022 they listened, studied, disseminated, questioned and hypothesised alternative imaginaries in the official statements produced in the field of the Covid-19 crisis representation (cultural, social and political) and the extended pandemic (post-pandemic).

They are interested in the multiple displacements, gaps and adjustments caused by the pandemic, as lights of new political imaginaries boosting possible futures. What are the differences extant between the pandemic as a persistent narrative and Covid-19 as a historical event? What space is there to self-manage history, health and knowledge in the pandemic narrative? Post-Covid, pre-Covid, anti-Covid, sub-Covid, super-Covid, sim-Covid? Which imaginaries opened in the pandemic context remain or have disappeared from the collective memory? In this erasure, can we track any changes in dialectics between the local regime and global hegemony? Due to the fact that it is a non-academic artistic research, it alternates different tactics to feel-think-share-act. They meet Mondays from 5 p.m. at the Santa Mònica Mòniques' space.