

L'animal a l'esquena. MACAPD – MA in Contemporary Arts Practice & Dissemination

by Toni Cots and Ixiar Rozas

Spain 6/3/09

How does Macapd happen?

The MA derives from an initial project which took place between 2004 and 2006, with the support of the 'Erasmus Curriculum Development Project' Programme. Different entities, academic and cultural organizations, were invited to elaborate a curriculum for a European MA (Bologna plan). The initiative starts in Dartington College of Arts (Devon, UK), which invites the following institutions/entities: Piet Zwart Institute/Willem de Kooning Academy (Rotterdam, NL), Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, Faculty of Humanities (Lituania), MASKA de Ljubljana in association with the University of Nova Gorica (Slovenia) and L'animal a l'esquena in association with the University of Girona (Spain). Each of these entities is in one way or another specialized in a particular approach to the artistic practice: Dartington in performative writing, MaskA in theory and playwriting (theoretic approach to performing arts), Vilnius in commissioning and production, Piet Zwart Institute in the Post-graduate studies of Visual Arts and L'animal a l'esquena in the body-based practices.

The curriculum seeks to work upon three main axes: Contextualization, interdisciplinarity and dissemination. The objective of the MACAPD is to provide students with access to mobility and interdisciplinarity, and endow their own practice with access to dissemination. In other words, to provide the means for the student to turn their practice into an open and exhibited process, without giving him/her the feeling that it is a production oriented MA. We are talking about an MA with the purpose to research on a practical basis, but with academic criteria about how practice is situated in a critical and methodological research frame. It's about coming closer to the subject of practice as a research process.

To situate an MA of this character at L'animal a l'esquena as its context presents several difficulties.

In Spain, there are several performing art schools, which offer a university degree, but their programmes are determined by technical criteria on student learning, and absent of a critical or a research frame. That is, they do not follow any qualitative criteria based on discourse or analysis. However, there is no university where practice is considered as theoretic studies based on practice. What to do then, in order to reconcile both ways of understanding artistic development and how to situate this practice and this theory within a critical frame.



What led you to promote this from a creation centre like L´animal a l´esquena?

Basically, it was and is a way of changing the quality of the activities programme the centre has had for the past seven years. It has been a way of obliging us to describe our own dynamics. This only happens when what you do is legitimized by processes and practices framed within research and knowledge transference. Personally, I have no interest in having L´animal a l´esquena only as a location for activity programming and artist or project residency. That´s exactly why I consider the archive as very important. That all knowledge and follow-ups of practices at L´animal a l´esquena are then recorded, classified and distributed, generating discourse. What should come across is, that at L´animal a l´esquena, practice, experience, knowledge and people coming from practical research can work together through the creation of choreographies, projects, exhibit frames, etc And to make all these processes visible. But L´animal a l´esquena simply can´t do this alone. The MACAPD provides a frame, a context, which enables a different way of understanding a final dissemination when a project, a workshop or a residency has come to an end. I would also like to avoid L´animal a l´esquena´s activity to be identified by the names of the people or the professionals who come to the centre or that only these people are able to give a guarantee of what happens here. I wouldn´t like to sell quality brands or prototypes. I believe it is important to situate our activity in what we now call learning methodologies and practices.

Could you explain the difficulties you´ve had up to now?

The first difficulty was to achieve the validation of the MACAPD by the University of Catalonia (Spain). We wanted the curriculum of the MA designed by the network to be one of the post-graduate departments or institutes of the University. However, we managed to make the MA official in 2006. The Dursi of the Generalitat of Catalonia (Catalonian Government, Spain) and the Ministry of Education of Spain, validated a degree shared by Dartington and L´animal. But we turned it down due to enrolment issues: Tuition fees are very different in England and in Spain. The maximum fee a student would pay for an MA in Spain is 3 to 4 times less than in England per academic year. The premise all entities of the network agreed on was that each MA would be validated locally, but also shared on a mobility level and other aspects we will later on explain about. The next step was to manage the validation from the University of Girona, Spain. Currently, it is being imparted by the Innovation and Formation University of Girona Foundation (Spain) and has a duration of 2 years and about 60 ECTS per year.

The second critical point was the methodology and the contrasting of resources. A big part of the teaching was envisioned to be performed online from a website, coordinated by Dartington Collage



with the support of the University of Plymouth. However, this hasn't happened yet. By definition, the MACAPD is characterized by being semi-distance, with a more or less independent exhaustive follow-up of tutorships and studying periods, which vary depending on the year. Nevertheless, content tools and shared resources are still lacking.

There are incidences which had not been foreseen. And as a consequence, L'animal a l'esquena depends a great deal on its own resources and economic capacity. The way things are at the minute, the work-dynamic is now centered on dealing with the situation of contrasting contents on the internet and searching for more resources, and without having, for the time being, the capacity to make a forecast. Although the MACAPD wishes every entity in the network to be independent, this is not the same as depending exclusively on oneself and the context in which the programme is situated, instead of being part of a solid network and having shared resources on a European level. Despite having achieved to go from a pilot project to a post-graduate studies programme, L'animal a l'esquena has decided to stop for a period of time, until it is able to give an answer to questions which still exist, and are, in my opinion, becoming more and more critical. We have to start thinking about how to create groups of academic research, production lines... To answer to topics and questions that MACAPD has been developing during these past two years through the practice and research work of the students. If this is not possible it will be difficult to continue the Bologna plan for PHD and post-graduate studies. In England, they don't have these issues, because there are only official MA s, but imparted in art colleges. I also have to point out, that although it is not an official MA it meets the Bologna plan's criteria.

What has Macapd already achieved and what is still to be done?

To me, L'animal a l'esquena during the past few years, has managed to generate knowledge from practice beyond its own project. The problem is that this knowledge needs to be distributed as publications and dissemination projects. And, unfortunately, we don't have the means to distribute it, in order to avoid it remaining within a closed frame. Obviously, it is a matter of resources. L'animal a l'esquena has been able to access Culture resources, but not Education resources. This clearly limits our options. When financing comes from domestic government education departments (the Dursi of the Generalitat of Catalonia -Catalonian government- and the Ministry of Education of Spain), it goes straight to the university and its respective departments. In my opinion, to achieve direct access to these resources it is necessary to establish research parameters.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt, that one of our strengths is our adaptability and flexibility. We have accomplished a common ground for both theoretic studies and professional practice, which has generated the the interest of the people, who have worked directly or indirectly in the MACAPD



(lecturer staff, students and creators). Our weakest point, however, is how to give visibility to all of this. In order to place the MA on an international level, more economic resources are required and also connivance with the academic institutions. If we had made the Innovation and Formation University of Girona Foundation (Spain) be involved in the Erasmus agreements, I would be speaking in different terms. The Macapd counts on external highly qualified lecturer staff, according to the Bologna plan. We could have lecturer staff from the University of Girona, but the approach of the lecturers is too academic for the required practice analysis and research. It's difficult to find lecturer staff able to apply their knowledge to the objectives of the MA. They need to know how to transfer their knowledge as researchers to the own practice of the students, in this case, of body-based performative arts. In the context of L'animal a l'esquena, there are very few who meet this profile.

On the other hand, more specialized schools, such as conservatories and theatre or dance schools, where their approach to artistic practice is based on the learning of technique and the capacity for practice, practice in itself is isolated from the knowledge generated by the process of creation and dissemination.

The flexibility of L'animal a l'esquena is, therefore, its Achilles' heel Aquiles: It's true that it is an advantage to be able to select our lecturer staff. In the long run the MACAPD should be official at no cost. Then the internal staff would have to cover the core subjects, or have a strong network of collaborators, such as, museums, art centres, distribution programmes, etc.

How is the evaluation process carried out?

The MA has a system of integrated evaluations. During the first year, the student has global evaluation, based on three differentiated modules (see report) and during the second year, two modules. The student should realize different works and presentations for the modules. Depending on the case, they will be used either for the memo, the dissertation, the research proposal or the essay. The evaluation is, therefore, integrated. Other official MA departments or university institutes want students, for financing reasons, to attend courses, which are already being imparted at the university. In the MACAPD it doesn't happen that way: We start from the practice and the lecturers apply their knowledge from a research perspective. This allows the student to develop self-evaluation and contextualization criteria from his/her own practice. Seminars and intensive gatherings, which question the practice and define the research frames are the tools the student is given, for the analysis and critical approach to discourse.



How do you evaluate practice?

The student finds answers to the practices developed from the curricular programme. The student shares work and research spaces, where his/her practice is evaluated within a critical frame. It's never easy to evaluate the practice of a student, mostly, because the practice makes reference to different matters. When students enrol in an MA like this, they expect to be able to question and develop their own practice. The MA has to be able to guarantee, that the student will find a critical frame, for him/her to be self-critical of his/her own project. It's easy to say, but very complex in practice, due to the fact that it is indispensable to provide a frame, where everything will be discussed, shared, and questioned. I'm afraid that it's not very frequent in Spain, to propose a system of self-evaluation within a critical frame. I have seen it in other places and forum, where artistic practice happens within this critical frame. Not only the specialists are able to do it, but also the students.

How to be able to verbalize and formulate the practice from their own process. A critical frame with referential academic methodology, where practice and its process are material for an essay, not just a report of the practice. This kind of MA enables questioning through the learning process and a critical approach towards artistic practices and their processes of dissemination and production.

Another matter, is how to situate the student's practice within the different practices imparted at L'animal and at the places the student will visit during his/her mobility period and residency (second year). It's true that L'animal provides students with tools through a number of diverse activities. But it's really during the time, when the students move to a different context, that he/she is able to gather new tools for the development of the research process. This enables him/her to situate the practice in relation to other contexts and practices, which already implies an interdisciplinary approach. One of the foundations of the MACAPD.

The calendar and the MA modular system are the frame, in which the student's research project conforms to the practice determined by a number of steps, that feed and analyze the process. This is what the MA evaluates, the **interrelation** between contexts. The way the student situates his/her practice in other contexts justifies his/her final project.

How would you synthesize the Macapd? What are the keywords?

There are three main axes, which are the core topics: Interdisciplinarity, context, and dissemination. What is dissemination?. It's not only an implicit aspect of the process of creation and/or artistic production, but also a critical frame from which work is disseminated. I believe, that this approach



to process and practice is something to be revised. We, therefore, require a research group to develop a critical frame and to generate discourse. We want dissemination to be part of all the curricular modules imparted in the MA. This is a key point which does not only imply publishing contents. To disseminate: The way the artistic process generates knowledge and the way to transfer that knowledge (distribution, contextualization, added values from that knowledge, etc.)

What we understand as knowledge from the practice. How knowledge is generated or not from that practice and by which criteria. It's about finding the strategies, that articulate the discourse of the practice as a process, which generates language and its distribution.

These three axes are not isolated nodes. We want ideas to flow and interact in all three of them. Can we theorize about what dissemination is? Open interconnections or interactions between practice and theory.

We could say that the Macapd opens an experimental, evolving, based on experience frame, which has an impact on different levels: production, lecturer staff, students.

This is indeed an important aspect. How are the MA s, which are starting, enabling students and/or professionals to work from their practice? Giving students the chance to develop their work, independently, and to situate their own practice. Where does this happen? When the students research and develop their artistic processes from practice, they need spaces to work in and a critical context to endow them with the criteria and self-evaluation tools. It's true that the precarious situation for resources and the Bologna plan not being well defined in Spain, are reasons for L'animal a l'esquena to have a break. There is a great need for a revision and for resituating the collaboration with the university on different levels: recognition and valuation of the MA, mobility for students, financing criteria, etc.

Would, then, dissemination, somehow, not be included in the contents?

This is something we have to adjust. It has been implicit in the way works are presented, but not in the way they should be developed. There is a lot of work behind each project. Now is the time to ask ourselves where everything is leading to and how to give access to a different kind of audience.

It's important to create a research group able to make reference to the concept of dissemination. A group able to focus it, for it to develop on an academic level. To disseminate is not only to present a work. They are terminologies that have to be backed up by a discourse.



In the Macapd, the essay is related to the own practice. In other MA s a topic is developed in the practice and another in the theory. The theoretic part should support the practice.

The aim of L'animal a l'esquena and the MACAPD does not consist of just doing an MA on choreography and dance. I believe, there is a lot of confusion on this matter. It's about seeking for specialization in an already known practice and study. The MACAPD is oriented toward the people, who make of artistic practice an evolving basis of knowledge and discourse from analysis and reflection within a critical and research frame.

It's indispensable to be ready to self-question oneself

In general, education in the arts is focused on students having a good technique and a market oriented professional capacity, and, of course, an academic degree is a guarantee. Others search for tools to develop their process within their own production/creation project. Unfortunately, very few times, the practice generates a discourse, which contextualizes the own practice, defining the relation to a social, economic and political context. The MACAPD does not produce a show, nor does it inform the market of how to create new strategies to trade a product. The MACAPD expects to develop research methodologies, which will generate discourse and knowledge. The practice of the student will be purpose of study and analysis.

I would like to express my satisfaction with all that has happened during the pilot project (2007-2009). However, I am concerned about the kind of students, who are applying for the MA, right now. They should be informed about what the MACAPD is about in the context of universities. It's a fundamental aspect, but the Innovation and Formation University of Girona Foundation (Spain) doesn't seem to consider it as important.