

# Culture as display: Epistemic and organizational contingencies of ‘art/science’ collaboration

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## *Abstract*

This paper offers and reflects upon an organizational ethnography of a renowned cultural institution. The cultural institution in question, a foreign academy in Mexico City, brought together a select range of art and research fellows for a transdisciplinary residency program. Inviting a hybrid form of ‘art/science’ collaboration, the cultural institution soon faced a ‘permissive paradox’ (Heinich 2014); namely, how to support a transdisciplinary program that *prima facie* called into question the institution’s very existence. How would different constituencies of institution members, ranging from senior trustees to resident fellows, mobilize ‘culture as display’ (Sharrock and Anderson 2011)? And how would they do so to either dramatize or downplay said paradox, thereby configuring, and eventually deconstructing, the contended program and intended institution? The paper offers a reflexive ethnography in answer to these questions by probing the author’s experience, while taking its cue from Wes Sharrock’s longstanding plea for an unprejudiced sociology.

## INTRODUCTION

There has long been the notion that an activity once it is institutionalized is thwarted by the institution itself. It is almost as if one were to say that achievement of a purpose and establishment of an institution are mutually exclusive. (Hughes 1957: 6-7).

The paradox expressed in the epigraph is taken from a letter Everett Hughes wrote to Erving Goffman in 1957. Hughes wrote the letter to Goffman upon having read

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his ‘little monograph on the characteristics of total institutions’ (ibid.). Complimenting Goffman on what came to be regarded as a seminal essay (Goffman 1961), Hughes’ letter proved both supportive and nuanced. Indeed, after an initial compliment—‘it is great stuff’ (ibid.)—his letter would elaborate on nuances, conceptual and empirical. Conceptually, the letter touched upon the ‘several dimensions’ along which a ‘total institution’ may be analyzed: ‘totality itself; restraint, that is, the dimension of relative unwillingness of the inmates to be there; their lack of control over whether they are to be there or not; and third, the question of agency’ (ibid.: 2–3). Empirically, Hughes elaborated comparatively on contrasting ‘total institutions’, institutions ranging from mental hospitals (Goffman’s primary example) and concentration camps to company towns and boarding schools. This paper in turn draws upon a reflexive ethnography of a foreign academy, a ‘total institution’ of a kind which has yet to benefit from anything like Goffman’s analytic acumen or Hughes’ comparative outlook.<sup>2</sup>

As a reflexive ethnography, the paper draws upon my double experience as the academy’s former research director and in-house ethnographer, as I was hired both to direct its research program and probe its social organization ‘from within’. From the early 1930s onwards, the foreign academy has been located in Mexico City, where it has welcomed each year twenty or so shortlisted art and research fellows to pursue their creative and scientific work ‘abroad’ (i.e., outside their home country). Over the three-year period covered by this paper, the academy also invited its resident fellows to participate in a ‘transdisciplinary experiment’ across arts and sciences, a temporary experiment in ‘critical realism’ designed to question disciplinary boundaries in academia, whilst calling for ‘political engagement’ *through*, if not *as*, contemporary art (in a sense that, as we shall see, would fly in the face of the academy’s more conservative members). Hence, the selected setting invites us to (re-)examine how ‘culture as display’ (Sharrock and Anderson 2011: 26) would be fashioned, refashioned and made use of by academy members and resident fellows, in and as part of their transdisciplinary encounter. Importantly, the investigated setting makes possible an informed reflection on Hughes’ oxymoron, that of a ‘purposeful institution,’ a reflection informed by organizational ethnography and conceptual analysis, two crafts in sociology honed over six decades by Wes Sharrock himself (e.g., Anderson and Sharrock 1993, 2017; Sharrock and Button 2007a and b; Sharrock 1974).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The paper accordingly aims not at developing a generic concept of ‘total institution,’ but at describing how participants themselves would organize their joint activities, whilst displaying that social organization and its defining features in and as their ordinary course (Sharrock and Anderson 1986: 86). On the intellectual relationship between Hughes and Goffman, and their correspondence on the notion of ‘total institution’ in particular, see Vienne (2010). For a recent argument stating the continuing interest of this concept for organizational ethnography, see Fine (2017).

<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these two crafts and their unwavering refinement constitute Wes’ longstanding plea for an unprejudiced sociology. The present paper notably takes its cue from his critique of Goffman’s

*'What are they doing?'—Promoting and demoting 'art/science' experimentation*

'What are they doing?'—Wes' recurring question as an organizational ethnographer (e.g., Sharrock and Button 2011: 225) provides a fitting *leitmotiv* for the bulk of this paper, its empirical part, insofar as this question lands us in the midst of everyday practice, the everyday practice of a public-private partnership (PPP). At the Scandinavian Academy in Mexico City (SAM), 'art/science' experimentation was made possible through such an arrangement. The PPP in question was established between SAM, as a renowned foreign academy backed by a private foundation, and the State of Scandinavia, more specifically, its Department of Culture (for the 'arts' funding) and its Department of Education (for the 'science' funding). Over a three-year period, the institution would bring together twenty art and research fellows to participate in a yearlong residency program abroad, its 'transdisciplinary experiment in critical realism', entirely funded by the PPP. The ensuing ethnography elaborates on this experiment abroad and, eventually, on three particular way-stations along the path charting its rise and fall: its realization, evaluation, and dismantling. Methodologically, I will draw upon narrative accounts as 'packaging device[s] for elements of culture' (Schegloff 1992: xli), while examining some of the 'displays of culture' *in situ* that make these accounts possible, the 'problem [being] to discover in what way to regard what was said [,][shown, and done]' (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977: 206).<sup>4</sup>

*An initial episode*

As a lead-in to our reflexive ethnography, let us consider the following episode, a conversational exchange that took place between two members of staff, the academy's (former) Research Director (RD) and its local receptionist (LR):

RD: El año pasado, ya sabes, que era nuestro primer año. Así que tratamos de hacer un buen programa, un programa de investigación, por lo tanto estaba muy ocupado en la Ciudad de México. Desafortunadamente durante ese tiempo no podía viajar a Estocolmo para realizar las conexiones necesarias. En cambio, otros güeyes, sobre todo los viejos políticos, estaban muy

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restricted notion of situation as an 'interaction order', on the one hand (see Sharrock 1999), and his invitation to the pursuit of (reflexive) ethnography in the light of a broader 'members' notion' of situation, on the other (ibid.).

<sup>4</sup> In the concluding remarks, I shall return to the anthropological angst of considering narrating itself as a mode of displaying culture. In the meantime, the 'marijuana smoking' analogy (i.e., my heavy reliance on Zimmerman and Wieder 1977) will be of methodological, rather than recreational, interest. Among other things, it will allow me to report upon my field experience in the third person singular.

contentos y se beneficiaron de eso sin vergüenza, debo decir, explicando que todo iba mal en el lugar y destruyendo la misma institución que hizo posible el programa. Buen programa, la recompensa: ¡Fuera!

LR: ¡muy feo!<sup>5</sup>

The exchange took place on the premises of SAM, a stunning château in downtown Mexico City (see Fig. 1), as its Research Director, dressed formally in suit and tie, made his way to his office and its receptionist checked the morning mail. While this was long ago water under the proverbial bridge, I found myself returning to this episode, rather than the château, in the context of preparing for the present paper (for a similar opening move, see Zimmerman and Wieder 1977). Two things still strike me as noteworthy. First, the *backstory* offered by the Research Director, picturing him as the expat victim of a ‘set-up’ by senior politicians at home. Second, the *way* in which he offered that backstory, as well as to whom, including the possibility of it being overheard by others (in addition to the receptionist) or noted down. Obviously, the reported backstory doesn’t come across as idle talk or a disinterested description, nor was it delivered as such. Instead, it can be heard—and indeed heard to be designed-to-be-heard—as an indirect complaint (about ‘unfair job loss,’ say), an indirect complaint that in the present instance triggered the receptionist’s brief response of commiseration (‘¡muy feo!’, *too bad!*).<sup>6</sup>

‘Yes, people do complain at work’—this is one of Wes’ wry lines (Sharrock, personal communication). So why turn this wry line of his into an ethnographic interest? As part of a ‘reflexive’ endeavor at that? Deliberately or not, the vignette above suggests that we probe the ‘social organization of institutional restructuring’ (echoing, again, Zimmerman and Wieder 1977:212) by asking questions such as the following. What were the circumstances at the château—the academy’s changing organizational culture—in terms of which incidental critique and indirect complaint(s) do or did make sense, at least to the participants involved? What

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<sup>5</sup> For present purposes, the following English translation can be offered:

RD: Last year, you know, was our first year. So we tried to do a good program, a research program. That is why I was very busy here in Mexico City. Unfortunately, during this time, I could not travel to Stockholm to make the necessary connections. In turn, other guys, above all the old politicians, were very pleased and did shamelessly benefit from it, I must say, explaining that everything went badly here and destroying the very institution that made possible the program in the first place. Nice program,—the reward: get out! [i.e., you’re fired!]

LR: Too bad!

<sup>6</sup> Indirect complaints have been studied as speech acts and found as triggering a set of common responses, including ‘commiseration,’ ‘no response or switching of the topic,’ ‘simple clarification requests,’ ‘contradiction,’ ‘joke/teasing,’ and ‘advice/lecture’ (see CARLA 2019 and, for a conversation analysis, Pino 2016).

were ‘those [organizational] features of [institutional restructuring] which would *warrant* its characterization by participants in particular ways’ (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977: 212)? For example, as part of a ‘set-up by a bunch of senior politicians at home,’ judged or misjudged as ‘¡muy feo!’ (literally *too ugly!*)?<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 1. Scandinavian Academy in Mexico City, *Château Karlsberg* (undated photograph)

Indeed, this potential research interest was triggered by my former engagements, local observations, and the following contradiction in particular. Formally, the investigated setting—the foreign academy—was supporting a transdisciplinary project in ‘art/science’ experimentation via the contractual framework of a PPP as mentioned. Materially, however, the leading members of the academy, including its senior trustees, were mostly concerned with the ‘non-contractual elements in contract’ (Durkheim 1964[1893]), rather than the PPP *per se*. These latter elements, for them, included matters such ‘*why* on earth should we, as an academy, engage in art/science experimentation?’, ‘*how*, if at all, should we do so?’, ‘*who* should actually do that?’, and ‘*who* is *we* anyway?’ (should ‘*we*’ include the

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<sup>7</sup> Direct or indirect, a complaint constitutes a ‘performative’ in John L. Austin’s terminology, an utterance that ‘does what it says’ (e.g., in uttering a complaint, one achieves the complaint). However, performative utterances of this kind work only under ‘ordinary circumstances’ (as Leudar et al. 2008 remind us). How such circumstances have been (or are being) assembled then constitutes an interesting question, and even more so perhaps the research question under what *changing* circumstances an utterance may (or should) still prove distinctively performative, given also the reflexive twist of this paper.

receptionist or gardener, for example?). Constitutive matters such as these had become part and parcel of a local struggle among academy members (also see Long 1958), struggle which, among other types of moves, both covert and overt, included a great deal of talk and many meetings, both formal and informal, pervasively monitored in and for their consequential character by participants. How did *they* get to this? Through what ‘displays of culture’ *in situ*? Before addressing these questions, a few words on the academy’s legacy are in order (if only to get a first ‘members’ notion’ of the situation under scrutiny).

### *The academy’s legacy*

As a renowned foreign academy, SAM has been located in the heart of Lomas de Chapultepec since the mid-1930s. This chic area of Mexico City, better known as ‘Las Lomas’ (*The Hills*), was built in post-revolutionary Mexico under the still shaky government of Alvaro Obregón which, despite its communist rhetoric, facilitated private investment (e.g., Baitenmann 2011). It was in this context that the Scandinavian-Mexican couple Karlsberg-Mendoza of noble descent began to consider a returning to the capital. During the revolutionary years (1910–1920), the couple had made their fortune in Mexico by providing the opposing factions of the civil war with a quality product: vanilla bread. Vanilla bread? To cut a long story short, Princess Anna (born Karlsberg) during her younger years had travelled the country and, as part of her grand tour in Humboldt’s footsteps, not only discovered the vanilla orchid as part of Mexico’s natural heritage (Bruman 1948) but also her future husband Carlos Mendoza, a Yucatan-based vanilla farmer.<sup>8</sup>

Depending on the audience and occasion, our former Research Director would adjust the kind of ‘legacy telling’ broached in the previous paragraph. As an ordinary part of his representative duties, he indulged in it innumerable times, be it at welcome receptions for international conferences at Château Karlsberg or in small talk with diplomats from the neighboring Embassies. Château Karlsberg? The question of the château’s coming to be was a recurring one—for example, as guests contemplated the stunning view from its terrace with a glass of champagne in one hand, and an exquisite snack in the other (see Fig. 2). To preempt it, our Research Director cut the above story even shorter, simply emphasizing two aspects of the château’s ‘primal baptism’. First, the neoclassic château was built by the Karlsberg-Mendoza couple in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution (from ca. 1921–1922), thanks to a fortune made in the ‘nutrition industry’ during the war (no

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<sup>8</sup> In 1909, they founded *Bulla Bakeries* which, in the various factions at war, found a hopelessly divided, yet unsuspectedly growing client base. Its paradoxical growth during the civil war, in addition to illustrating Anna and Carlos’ marketing skills, tapped into Mexican-capitalism-in-the-formation since the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century (De La Peña 1975). The history of ‘bullar’ (Swedish for *buns*) is better documented for cinnamon buns (Wikipedia 2019) than for vanilla bread and, indeed, for Princess Anna’s hand in its invention. Recipes today abound (e.g., *Skandikitchen* 2019).

mention of ‘vanilla buns’ here). Second, and since the couple didn’t have any children, it soon was confronted with the question of heritage: ‘what shall we do with the château?’ (which, indeed, provided a stunning site and setting).<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 2. View from Château Karlsberg terrace (August 2016)

Eventually, the couple decided to donate the château, named after Anna’s maiden name, to the State of Scandinavia in the early 1930s, but to do so under two conditions, namely:

- First, that a ‘Scandinavian Academy’ would be founded on the château’s premises, welcoming each year young artists and research fellows from [her] home State, Scandinavia;
- second, that this Academy would facilitate the cultural and academic exchange between Scandinavia and Mexico, ancient and new (Karlsberg-Mendoza, *Founding Act*, México D.F., 15 October 1932).

These twinned missions found their circumstantial motive in the entangled biographies of Anna and Carlos. Her cultural experience of pre-revolutionary Mexico and Carlos’ unlikely encounter with the capital’s intelligentsia from the 1920s onwards (including the likes of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Arqueles Vela and later Leon Trotsky) nurtured their joint engagement as successful industrialists, a

<sup>9</sup> I’m grateful to Michael Mair for pointing out to me Kripke’s and Žižek’s reflections on ‘primal baptism(s)’ (Kripke, 1980: 94-98; Žižek, 1989: 89-95).

philanthropic engagement which was to become the ‘academy’s legacy’ (on the ‘Cosmopolitan Mexican Summer, 1920–1949,’ see Trillo 1997). Ever since, the château has offered residency to young artists and researchers, whilst also providing the stage for cultural events and scientific activities to take place, events and activities allowing celebrities, scholars, and specialists from the ‘two cultures,’ Scandinavian and Mexican, to mingle (whilst inviting many others in the process). So much for the *Grundstimmung*.<sup>10</sup>

### *The transdisciplinary experiment*

In sociological terms, Château Karlsberg was to provide the main venue of a ‘total institution’ (Goffman 1961). Indeed, not only were the activities of their residents, artists and researchers alike, to take place at Château Karlsberg behind the ‘high walls’ (Goffman 1961:15–16) that surround its premises (see Fig. 1), its residents were to live and work together there too (ibid., p. 17), were to be separate(d) from and supervised by the academy’s staff, and were to be occasionally invited to the communal events and ‘institutional ceremonies’ (ibid., p. 89, *passim*). These events and ceremonies were designed, if only for the time of a lively cocktail, to have all differences of position, stance and interest, if not opinion, dissolve in ‘party talk,’ party talk between staff and residents, between artistic proclivities and research agendas, imagined Mexican fervor and Swedish coolness, etc. (but see Stivers, forthcoming). These ‘common characteristics’ of total institutions, observed and analyzed by Goffman in the late 1950s, were still expressed, in and as the ordinary routine of the current SAM, the foreign academy of present interest. Before examining how these features resonated with its most recent ‘transdisciplinary experiment,’ let us delve into two further aspects highlighted by Goffman:

The total institution is a *social hybrid*, part residential community, part *formal organization*; therein lies its special sociological interest. There are other reasons for being interested in these establishments, too. In our society, they are the forcing houses for changing persons; each is a *natural experiment* on what can be done to the self (Goffman 1961:22; emphasis added).

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<sup>10</sup> In the early 1920s, the foreign academies in Athens and Rome (see Whitting 2018) provided the Karlsberg-Mendozas with a leading example, partly reflected in the neoclassical architecture of their château whose interior placed as much emphasis on cozy residential rooms as on its reception area, ballrooms and banquet halls (incidentally very much in tune with Habsburg family preferences). As a recent visitor, an eminent anthropologist from Europe, declared upon his entry to the *Platinum Parlor*: ‘I’ve never been in such a Kitsch place.’ Today, most of Mexico City’s foreign academies have either been turned into ‘culture institutes’ (such as the *British Council* or *Alliance Française*) or have been replaced by language or boarding schools (an early example of which is the *Colegio Alemán Alexander von Humboldt* founded in 1894).

What ‘formal organization’ and ‘natural experiment’ would SAM constitute? Its *formal organization* took the shape of a Private Foundation, created in 1932 to operate as its legal entity and supporting vehicle (also to make such a support possible whilst escaping Mexican taxation). Through this Foundation, the Departments of Education and Culture of SAM’s home State, would fund its activities in Mexico and Mexico City in particular. The philanthropic couple’s two initial conditions—provide residency, foster exchange—would become the two key missions of the Foundation, fittingly named ‘Foundation *for* SAM’ (emphasis added). Eventually, the State would engage term mandates to be negotiated *with* the Foundation, *for* the academy’s activities to be developed. A ‘double delegation,’ in other words, would define this PPP (also see Descombes 2004).<sup>11</sup> Legally, this double delegation found its expression in the Foundation’s charters, the roles and responsibilities that they defined, and the organizational rules that were designed to facilitate the academy’s support according to these roles and responsibilities. The Foundation, however, constituted *another ‘social hybrid’* too (Goffman 1961: 22). Indeed, it was not only defined by its *formal organization* (its charters and so forth), but also relied upon *cooptation* (its council members were nominated by cooptation, and included senior figures from the arts and sciences, as well as ‘old friends’ from politics).<sup>12</sup>

The academy in turn constituted, perhaps not a ‘forcing house for changing persons,’ but ‘a *natural experiment* on what can be done to [and with] the self’ (ibid.), to elaborate on Goffman’s phrase. In the 1930s, as Princess Anna and her husband Carlos continued to reside in the château, this ‘natural experiment’ took the form of a cultural expectation towards its resident artists and researchers to indulge in the Humboldtian *Bildungsideal*, forming the person (as Anna had been), not only disciplining the practice (as an ensemble of techniques, a craft). Turning to the contemporary day, the most recent ‘natural experiment’ in education, artistic and academic, conducted on SAM’s premises was a ‘transdisciplinary

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<sup>11</sup> As Michael Mair pointed out to me, PPPs are notoriously themselves ‘PP’ in character—that is, *Perfectly Plastic*—where their very plasticity makes them well suited for engaging in various forms of organizational contortion, some of which I shall be exploring in what follows. More broadly, see also Åberg (2019).

<sup>12</sup> Whilst the academy’s Directorate and staff were based in Mexico City, the Foundation’s Presidency and Council were based in Scandinavia (a few notable exceptions aside). As part of his initial appointment, our (future) Research Director was received by the Foundation Council at SAM in Mexico City. During his interview, he faced the Council *in corpore*, a Council that brought together elite members of the private and public sector alike, including (former) high-ranking state officials, emeritus professors, star curators, journal editors, and a banker. After his successful interview, our freshman was invited to join the party scheduled for the evening. Whilst enjoying his first glass of champagne on SAM’s stunning terrace, he approached one of the Council members also present: ‘¡Buenas tardes! Hope you enjoyed my presentation. Unfortunately, I didn’t quite get your name’. The latter’s unmistakable answer, delivered in a grave voice: ‘Hjalmar Forsbäck, President of the Scandinavian Science Foundation.’

experiment in critical realism' (2007–2013). Since the mid-1990s, the PPP that linked the Foundation (cum academy) and Scandinavia, its home State by pseudonym, had been defined in successive three-year term mandates. One of these term mandates provided a newly appointed Board of Directors with a template to propose a new educational experiment, a 'transdisciplinary experiment' that capitalized on recent developments in art education and artistic residencies, inviting artists to mingle with scientists and academics in a joint spirit of 'artistic research' (for recent reflections on such research, see Coles 2012; Farias and Wilkie 2016).<sup>13</sup>

*Agencia Mexico*, as they would call the experiment, was to be SAM's new residency program. The cover page of the program booklet (see Fig. 3) and the program's mission statement (Fig. 4) give an initial sense of its particular brand of 'critical realism' (not to be confused with its philosophical articulation from the late 1970s, as Leonidas Tsilipakos kindly pointed out to me).



Fig. 3. Cover page of *Agencia Mexico* program booklet

*Agencia Mexico* is a transdisciplinary research program by the Scandinavian Academy in Mexico, offering study grants to young artists and researchers, fellowships, international mobility support and visiting scholarships, oriented to experiments in

<sup>13</sup> At the château, the educational interpretation of the 'person/praxis' nexus would vary over time. In the 1960s, the newly founded National Museum of Anthropology (1964) became a major resource for and beyond interdisciplinary dialogue, as it allowed not only its resident archeologists but also its arts fellows to (re-)discover Mexico's cultural heritage in one place. In 1982, the National Museum of Art gave a new inflection to this dialogue, tilting it towards visual art and Mexican modernism (e.g., Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco). For relevant work on 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mexican cultural politics, see Luck (2009); Stonor Saunders (2013).

new pedagogical practices in artistic and scientific production. *Agencia Mexico* is the metropolitan ‘artist’s studio’. A place of production, transformation and work to explore the role and potential of art and of different kinds of knowledge. A space between inside and outside, where research is not forced to achieve immediate results and experimentation is never tragic, but a prelude. With its laboratories and workshops, field research, events and common readings, *Agencia Mexico* combines and sustains the mutual interdependence of three forms of knowledge: science (epistème), practice (pràxis) and production (poíesis). This approach offers a radical alternative to those based on single disciplinary perspectives. *Agencia Mexico* accepts the challenge presented by knowledge itself, attempting an approach ‘by themes’. Every year a working theme will be selected with which to shape a transformative and generative approach to knowledge beyond specialization and traditional procedures. This method is an attempt to elude any standard of assessment for research, to glimpse off-scale landscapes, hybrid assemblages of experiences, expertise and formalizations of knowledges. A non-linear path that grasps the grammar of paradox and highlights at times decisive frictions, to explore an epistemology of multiple trajectories, to problematize the present instead of the repetition of easy answers.

Fig. 4. Mission statement of *Agencia Mexico* program

Cast in the allusive terms of an abstract rationale, this program statement displays both the transdisciplinary experiment and critically realist intervention that *Agencia Mexico* was designed to be: a ‘transdisciplinary experiment’ in the hope of generating a ‘radical alternative to disciplinary perspectives,’ a hybrid intervention in and across arts and sciences; ‘critically realist,’ in the sense of favoring a thematic approach for living up to this promise, where the ‘working theme’ would invite participants not only to engage with a common concern (a familiar move of applied social science, Watson 2000), but also to question their disciplinary habitus, artistic privilege, and academic outlook. The ‘radical alternative’ of the envisaged criticism, in turn, is encapsulated in the *Agencia Mexico* graphics, ironically reminiscent of a famous Pink Floyd album (see Fig. 3). At the château, for its residents, the call would be to tear down its ‘(neo-)classic walls,’ symbolically if not materially, and break out of the ‘foreign academy,’ suggested to have become anachronistic, if not moribund and vain in most respects (including its Humboldtian *Bildungsideal*, disciplinary organization, and modernist outlook). Indeed, the annual competition for the twenty residency places was cast in such terms (terms which, as highlighted above, were rapidly to become contentious among academy members *in situ*).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> ‘What comes [after and] instead of painting’ (*ce qui vient à la place de la peinture*), this is how French philosopher Jacques Rancière summarizes the central concern of (if not *as*) ‘contemporary art’—that is, not so much in artistic terms of technique as in curatorial ones of modes of display

## Rise and fall

Despite or precisely because *Agencia Mexico* had a (relatively) short-lived fate, it invites a longer discussion. Pending that discussion, this section documents three way-stations along the path of *Agencia Mexico*'s 'rise and fall'—its realization, evaluation, and abandonment (for a similar account in another context, cf. Blumer 1967). Itself a 'display of culture,' this documentation offers a truncated account of the 'social organization of institutional restructuring,' an account against the background of which our initial episode, and the complaint it reports, may appear as '*warranted*,' at least in the account's 'native terms' (i.e., those of our in-house ethnographer). In fact, the following account, even as it is used as a 'packaging device for elements of culture,' unpacks the 'rise and fall' narrative already encapsulated in the initial episode and its instant appraisal ('¡muy feo!'). At the same time, it offers an apt opportunity to reflect upon 'reflexive ethnography' and its discursive articulation (e.g., as a 'fragile story,' Sacks 1992: 504–511), an opportunity that I shall take in the concluding remarks below.

### Vignette 1, year 1—Program realisation

The theme of *Agencia Mexico* 2010 was announced to its prospective participants as that of 'crisis'—the twin crisis of capitalism and its typical modes of (artistic) critique. This theme was to be tackled by participants, including the arts and research fellows of SAM, during two months of 'transdisciplinary experimentation.' For this collaborative endeavor, they were offered 100,000 SEK (Swedish Crowns) and, therefore, expected to suspend their disciplinary routines and/or artistic habits (i.e., to 'leave them at home'). Yet upon arrival at Château Karlsberg they soon discovered a couple of things: first, the theme had been changed from 'crisis' (as announced in the call they had responded to) to 'borders,' in fact many different kinds of borders ('political,' 'disciplinary,' 'cultural,' etc.); second, the program had already been settled, including one 'artistic masterclass,' one 'scientific workshop,' and a 'field trip to the Mexico-United States border' (to 'rethink migration,' 'rethink borders,' 'rethink oneself,' etc.); and third, the program and its realization, intended

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(Rancière 2004: 36). Over the last century, this concern has been met with widely contrasting and, at times, opposing answers. So was it to be at SAM. Setting aside Leonidas' *caveat*, its 'art/science' program eventually borrowed at least one key move from the philosophical program of critical realism, its very opening move. The late Roy Bhaskar described this move as the *rejection* of the 'epistemic fallacy,' the idea that 'statements about the world' ('ontology') can or should be reduced to 'statements about our knowledge of the world' ('epistemology') (see Bhaskar 2014). If conventional modes of disciplinary inquiry, artistic or scientific, have been or are to be abandoned, what should come next or instead? This was pretty much academy members' principal bone of contention *in situ*, quite unsurprisingly perhaps, given the arguably paradigmatic opposition of 'contemporary art' to 'classic' and 'modern' forms of art (e.g., Heinich 2014). For an alternative account, see Rebentisch (2013).

and/or unfolding, were in firm control of the academy's Directorate, and its curatorial staff in particular (whose ranks I [Björn Wallmark] was about to join as a Research Director). From irony, overt or covert critique, absenteeism and various other manifestations of disengagement, sometimes distress, this led to a range of 'secondary adjustments' by resident participants, artists and researchers alike. Ironic over- and understatements were part of it.

For example, one classical scholar not only complained about her 'loss of the agenda' due to the transdisciplinary program she had signed up to, given especially its unpredictable twists and turns, but she also delivered her own presentations as lengthy *pièces de résistance* defying that self-same program (by going overtime, sticking to disciplinary canons, demarcating science from non-science, etc.). 'Shit works' is another example. During the two-week artistic masterclass on 'metropolitan naturecultures' (sic), co-run by an internationally acclaimed artist and post-colonial cultural theorists, two of the participating resident artists, Fred and Rita, strolled around Las Lomas with a digital camera. Their catch: 200+ close-up shots of pigeon faeces in color. As they contributed their minimalist series to the masterclass' final exhibition, the double entendre of its ironic title—'shit works'—turned it into a candidate artwork cum immanent critique of curatorial framing. Indeed, as their series was exhibited, the framing remained intact.

#### *Vignette 2, year 2—Program evaluation*

The *Agencia Mexico* program had been supported by the Foundation Council under the condition that it would be evaluated on a yearly basis. To begin with, an 'auto-evaluation' by the academy's Directorate, which was largely in charge of the curatorial program, would be sufficient. Year two, then, was partly devoted to having the program edition of year one evaluated. Drawing upon feedback interviews with all resident fellows, artists and researchers, the Board of Directors would come up with a short report, for the Foundation Council so that its constituent members and other interested parties could arrive at an informed overview. Taking its cue from the range of 'secondary adjustments' by residential fellows, the report would paint a contrasting picture of the program's success, balancing complaints and praise (i.e., vested interests).

Yet the Directorate would soon discover the futility of its tentative auto-evaluation and balancing effort. Indeed, it would become the subject of a 'pincer movement' by traditionalist fellows, most of whom were prospective scholars of Aztec culture and Mayan civilization, and their traditionalist mentors in the Foundation Council, retired professors in those and other domains (the President of the 'Scandinavian Science Foundation,' as it seemed, stayed above the fray). Eventually, a Special Commission was created to sort out 'what went wrong' and 'what to do about it.' Meanwhile, the academy's Directorate would 'try to do better,' organizing the second edition of *Agencia Mexico* by taking into account the next round of

resident fellows from the outset, offering them different modes of participation, including traditionally disciplinary alongside hybrid ones, whilst avoiding overall program imposition, compensatory payoff, and arbitrary program change (or whatever could be construed or misconstrued as such, prospectively or retrospectively so).

*Vignette 3, year 3—Program abandonment*

As the Directorate was to discover, the internal program correction it endeavored to make—from the ‘bohème’ version of *Agencia Mexico* to a more ‘bourgeois’ variant—would soon to turn out to be futile, too. Indeed, the Foundation Council and its Presidency would not base their future action on the Directorate’s auto-evaluation, as cautious and balanced as it attempted to be, but rather on the Special Commission’s *ad hoc* report, amplifying the traditionalist view and its alarmist voice(s). Moreover, this report was not simply used to adjust the residency program in a piecemeal fashion, as might have been expected, but rather became itself part and parcel of an organizational effort at a more thoroughgoing institutional restructuring of the foreign academy as such—furnishing its pretext, in short (or *one* of its pretexts). Indeed, another Special Commission soon was to rewrite the academy’s charters and organizational lines of accountability, notably depriving the Research Directors, Artistic and Scientific, of their respective budgets.

At the same time, the Foundation Council was ruminating (as rumor has it) on how to best rid itself of the academy’s Director, a ‘university professor,’ if only to appoint a ‘cultural manager’ in his place. Eventually, it succeeded with both moves, whilst contemplating a third one: how to suspend the Academic Committee, itself composed of university professors, in charge of the yearly selection of research fellows (surely a regrettable excursus for the traditionalist faction). As I had a chat with the Vice-Director of the ‘Scandinavian Humanities Fund’ (SHF), another academic institution back home, he told me that the President of the Foundation Council, while he was still Minister of Education, had contemplated abolishing the SHF. Whilst he might not have succeeded in doing that, he arguably succeeded in having the ‘Scandinavian Academy in Mexico’ dissolved, in and through a corporate exorcism of its Socratic spirit, as already implied by my [our Research Director’s] initially reported complaint.

*‘Them and us’—Reflexive ethnography and members’ priorities, some concluding remarks*

‘Them and us’—Wes’ occasional question as a conceptual analyst / Wittgensteinian philosopher of social science (e.g., Sharrock 2014) offers ‘us,’ as the readers of this paper, a welcome invitation to reflect upon ‘them,’ foreign academy members and their conflicting priorities. If anything, the expanded account of the ‘rise and fall’ of *Agencia Mexico* and SAM, its home institution, has somewhat complicated

the picture, now legible as ‘ethnography made difficult,’ echoing another title cherished by the *Festschrift* recipient (Sharrock, personal communication; see Linderholm 1971). For lack of a panacea, my concluding remarks are organized around two rubrics, entitled ‘working hypothesis’ and ‘abductive reflexivity’ respectively. Each rubric outlines some terms and topics for future work, work taking further inspiration from Wes’ plea for an unprejudiced sociology, notably from his deliberate refusal to ‘argue with the members’ (to use a phrase from Mel Pollner; see Gubrium and Holstein 2012). In short, I shall briefly elaborate on my own surprise, once again, at the amazingly instructive character of a simple attempt at answering Wes’ first question, ‘what are they doing?’, in empirical specifics only (at present, by withholding judgment, as much and as best I can, in a normatively charged context).<sup>15</sup>

### *Working hypothesis*

As an organizational contingency, the notion and phenomenon of a ‘purposeful institution’ (to return to Hughes’ concern) is neither a performative contradiction *per se*, nor necessarily a sociological oxymoron *in situ*. On the contrary, this notion and phenomenon presently appear in relation to the case at hand as part and parcel of an organizational contingency indeed, and that in two respects at least. On the one hand, we observed participants’ multiple efforts at endowing the ‘institution,’ an ‘art/science’ residency program and the foreign academy as its host, with contrasting purposes, interpretations and understandings of ‘what they should be up to’ (as a foreign academy in Mexico City, the SAM specifically, welcoming each year both arts and research fellows, as shortlisted members of a future elite, etc.). On the other hand, this surplus investment of ‘purpose,’ for it to become an empirical contradiction, hinged upon participants’ own moves, curatorial and/or organizational, and especially their ‘identity politics’ and its temporal unfolding, as accentuated by those very moves, in the form of incommensurability claims on behalf of one’s own position, artistic or academic (‘radically hybrid’ or ‘disciplinarily conservative,’ for example). Accordingly, the ‘common characteristics’ of total institutions (Goffman 1961: 17), as they were to be observed at SAM as elsewhere, appear as achieved features of its everyday organization *in situ* (including its residents’ ‘secondary adjustments,’ *ibid.*, p. 56). Furthermore, their very appearance (i.e., ‘local display’) did become an acute concern for participants

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<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, I also hope to push (or have pushed) one of Wes’ more recent concerns (e.g., Anderson and Sharrock 2017), regarding ‘the limit imposed by the constraints of disciplinary inquiry’ (Zimmerman and Wieder 1977: 200). What is or should that limit be? I’m thankful to Philippe Sormani for having raised this latter question.

involved, at least in terms of what my retrospective account has had to suggest so far. Why?<sup>16</sup>

Granted, [...] ‘why’ questions are not the theorist’s questions but those of e.g. beginners, learners, and strangers’ (Hutchinson et al., 2008: 97). On the basis of our reflexive ethnography, readers (just as with me, the author) should now be in a position—a ‘beginner’s position,’ if you will—to both specify the raised question and formulate a first response to it, including the seeming difficulty of doing so. Why indeed would SAM’s Foundation Council (FC) decide to overhaul its venerable institution, the foreign academy, rather than simply change its residency program (e.g., from ‘bohème’ to ‘bourgeois’)? And why would it prove so difficult, despite my best efforts as reflexive ethnographer, to track the formation of this decision? Gesturing at a possible answer to these empirical questions, let me venture the following hypothesis, a threefold *working hypothesis*:

First, it seems that one FC faction had gained strategic clout, the alleged ‘bunch of senior politicians’ (or, less contemptuously put, ‘former high-ranking state officials’) by allowing the activities it could attribute to another faction, SAM’s curatorial team, to furnish it with its facile motive (*Agencia Mexico*, the ‘out of control’ residency program). As Milton Friedman notes, ‘only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change’ (Friedman 1962: ix), where an unreal crisis might produce unreal change. Second, that FC faction played it by the book, where ‘it’ stands for standard moves of Machiavellian politics *en miniature*. Those moves, in addition to ‘crisis display’ (à la Friedman), included ‘polemic accentuation’ and ‘victim playing’ (longstanding techniques of political deceit), all in the service of ‘logrolling’ (e.g., counter-intuitive coalitions against a common opponent). Third, the FC faction practiced the latter, logrolling, at the expense of the enrolled partner (e.g., traditionalist Maya scholars), a self-interested practice all the less avowable as its protagonist(s) pretended to service the ‘public interest’ and ‘common good’—in short, engaging in a familiar rhetorical (hatchet) job (e.g., Torres 2018).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Whilst this concern may be dubbed as that of ‘cultures in contention’ (Haraway 1989), its acuteness seems to echo Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophical discussion of ‘*Le différend*’ (the dispute between incommensurable positions). See Lyotard (1984).

<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, French art sociologist Nathalie Heinich develops a double argument of related interest, argument according to which ‘contemporary art is based on the transgression of the boundaries of art as perceived by common sense; and that institutions, by accepting or even encouraging these transgressions, are at the root of a “permissive paradox” leading to a radicalisation of artistic proposals in an inflationary circle (a “*partie de main chaude*”) that constantly widens the limits set for art’ (Heinich 2014:55)—or, I should add, may abruptly narrow them. On the ‘unhappy alliance’ between critical gestures in contemporary art and the impact requirements of cultural management, see also Rebentisch (2013).

*Abductive reflexivity*

As Wittgenstein put it in one of his famous aphorisms, '[...] We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. [...].'

Of course, Wittgenstein's remark was part of his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (2003[1953]: 40, §109). Yet his remark, as previously noted (e.g., Lynch 1992), remains also of interest when it comes to sociological inquiry, ethnographically informed as in the present case, or ethnomethodologically pursued, as in so many of Wes's works (see, e.g., the references given in the introduction). In particular, my tentative answer to his 'what are they doing' question, as developed in the bulk of this paper, not only led me to venture a working hypothesis (in search of a 'members' explanation'), but also disclosed a myriad of interconnected themes of descriptive interest (which, in turn, may dissolve any 'explanatory need'). The title of this final subsection—'*abductive reflexivity*'—encapsulates this research experience. Among the themes calling for further description, I might list the following and index them in terms of related work:

- '*The Politics of Presentation*' (Becker 2011): in this essay, Becker elaborates on Goffman's (1961) answer to the question of 'what to call the things we study' (p. 25)—in particular Goffman's 'linguistic solution' (p. 26), an analytic vocabulary that was introduced (according to Becker) to avoid moral prejudice in the native terms of the studied institution. Accordingly, we might further investigate how 'echelon control,' 'role [dis]-possession,' 'identity kit,' 'looping,' 'secondary adjustments,' and so on would play out at SAM, the foreign academy studied in this paper. Depending upon the phenomena observed, these concepts may be respecified, reformulated or replaced, phenomena which may include additional paradoxes to that of the 'purposeful institution,' including the following one: '[...] the more profound the drama of difference between staff and [residents], the more incompatible the show becomes with the civilian repertoire of the players, and the more vulnerable to it' (Goffman 1961:104).<sup>18</sup>
- '*Questioning Kaufman*' (Fleischman 2017): in this essay, Fleischman discusses a classic organizational study of public policy implementation: Herbert Kaufman's *Forest Ranger* (1960). In particular, Fleischman discusses, and investigates, what he identifies as a critical omission from that classic study: 'How cross level political coalitions interact with organizational structure to determine outcome in forestry agencies' (ibid.). Truly, a foreign academy is not a forestry agency. Yet the pursuit of Fleischman's analytic perspective might bring us closer to

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<sup>18</sup> On (contemporary) participatory art as setting up 'artificial hells', see Bishop (2012).

answering the following kinds of question: how would the described coalitions be formed ‘at home’ (e.g., between former state officials and eminent Maya scholars)? What effect(s) would these coalitions have ‘abroad’ (e.g., to have an ‘art/science’ residency program changed)? How would these ‘effects’ be brought about (via what kind of ‘PPP’ interpretation), if not amplified (and what would my own role—well, my former role as research director—be in this or that scenario)? And, finally, to whom should this matter?

- ‘*Science in Democracy*’ (Brown 2009): in this book, Brown disentangles the nexus of ‘expertise, institutions, and representation’ (ibid.) in the light of a comparative discussion of political theories, old and new (including Machiavelli and Hobbes, as well as Dewey and Latour). In the process, he reminds readers of the ‘basic paradox of constitutional democracy: how to establish an institutional framework that does not destroy the creative freedoms it aims to protect’ (p. 183). As a foreign academy is not to be confused with a forestry agency, it is not to be taken for constitutional democracy either. However, as my discussion of Hughes’ paradox suggested, the question raised seems also to have been one of relevance to academy members. In turn, Brown’s observation may invite us, beyond describing deft moves of institutional demontage and ‘second best’ reassembly, to develop social organizations less prone to ‘institutional restructuring’ than to the liberal pursuits of ‘art,’ ‘science,’ and ‘conversation’ (where the scare quotes mark the irremediably tricky character of each task, not to mention their occasional articulation—see, e.g., Holert 2016).

Taken together, these three research directions, were they to be pursued, would require a return to the ‘treasure trove’ of field notes taken by me, during my formative appointment as SAM’s Research Director cum in-house ethnographer (see Fig. 5 in Appendix). Whether the monograph that this ‘return to the field’ promises will (or should) ever see the light of day, at this stage I cannot tell. What I can say is that the episode I started this paper out with, although it might have been a witty morning joke, a still warranted complaint, and definitely a useful lead-in to the presented reflexive ethnography, does not provide much analytic purchase on the case at hand. Indeed, the episode seems to offer an ironic expression of *ad hoc* ‘logrolling,’ thus performing and trading upon, rather than explicating a (if not *the*) ‘members’ method’ for constituting, and dismantling, the foreign academy that this paper has just started to analyze. The offered account remains a ‘fragile story’ (Sacks 1992), insofar as its narrator (Björn Wallmark) figures in it as a participant and might indeed still have a stake in how it is told (see Lynch and Bogen 1996). Yet this reflexive entanglement was not much of an obstacle for *initiating* the ethnographic investigation, all the less so as I tried to stick to Wes’ question—

‘what are they doing?’—without prejudging its empirical answer, moral lesson, or political implication(s).

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APPENDIX



Fig. 5. 'Treasure trove' of empirical materials (SAM, 2010-2013)