



ARTE VALENCIA ANONYMOUS

Álvaro de los Ángeles reports on cultural policy in the region of Valencia, in particular the recent Bienal de Valencia and the new Museum of the XIX Century. Many members of the local community are angry at the regional government's lack of transparency and accountability and are venting their fury through the Forum Cultural Valenciana hosted at www.e-valencia.org

Translated from Spanish by Etida Maiques

The web site e-valencia was officially launched on 30 November 2001. From the beginning, a key element of the site was the opinion and discussion forum (Forum Cultural Valenciana) that dealt with the cultural policies of the region of Valencia. Valencia is one of the 17 regions of Spain, each of which has its own president and government. After democracy was established in Spain in the late '70s and the current Constitution approved in 1978, the Central Government transferred to the regions increasing power and autonomy in areas such as health, employment, education, culture, and the economy. In Valencia these are arranged in 'Consellerias', each presided over by a 'Conseller'.

The region of Valencia, lies along the East Coast of Spain and has a population of more than four million distributed between its three, all eminently Mediterranean, provinces: Alicante, Castellón and Valencia. These fertile lands, prosperous in agriculture, manufacturing and service industries, also possess great tourist attractions in their coastline and beaches, making them some of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe.

For the last seven years, the conservative Popular Party has governed the region of Valencia. An absolute majority for the past three years has meant that political decisions have been made without any need to worry about the opinions of the opposition parties. During this period, major projects have been initiated. However, despite this increase in cultural activity much of it stays within the confines of a conservative programming policy, with much reliance on the tried-and-tested model of the blockbuster exhibition.

The star projects of the regional government – particularly the recreational-cultural complex La Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias (The City of Arts and Sciences) in Valencia, and the theme park Terra Mítica (Mythical Land) in Benidorm – are seriously depleting the region's financial resources. Another expensive project was the Bienal de Valencia. With an initial budget of nearly 6 million euros (although the final cost is still to be announced) it was intended to emulate the Venice Biennale, an obviously impossible task. The Bienal de Valencia enlisted the help of such cultural luminaries as Achille Bonito Oliva, Robert Wilson, Peter Greenaway, Viktor Misiano and Emir Kusturika, all operating under the direction of the cultural events manager, Luigi Settembrini, a veteran of many Venice Biennales.

From the beginning the Bienal de Valencia was intended to create masses of media attention and generate interest throughout the art world. Little consideration, however, was given to the quality of the product, or for improving, or even representing, the cultural interests of the region. Throughout its lifetime the Bienal's rationale remained in constant flux with



even its slogan changing regularly. Scheduling was very haphazard with many events being announced just as they were opening. All of this added to the confusion surrounding the event making it impossible to figure out exactly what was going on and where. Consequently the Bienal attracted press, but it was mostly of the negative variety.

Just over a month after the Bienal ended e-valencia was born. The inauguration of the website took place at the Galería Visor in Valencia, on 30 November 2001, in the context of the exhibition 'The Power of Security' by artist Daniel G. Andújar. Both exhibition and website were sponsored by Technologies To The People (TTTP), an organisation dedicated to safeguarding privacy and security on the internet and specialised in monitoring internet control systems. TTTP also acquires and promotes



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multimedia works of art, often through public exhibitions. For the exhibition at Galería Visor, the upper room was transformed with its walls covered with subversive printed information. A table was placed in the middle of the room and two computers were supplied with ADSL connections so that e-valencia could be accessed during gallery hours.

e-valencia was quickly seen by the local art scene as a useful tool that gathered together information about local cultural events including articles published in the local and national media. Here texts and images could be found, downloaded, printed out, copied and used. Another important feature of the website was that it allowed visitors to leave remarks or contribute texts on any of the news topics that e-valencia covered. Its novelty was, therefore, not the provision of already published content, but rather, its use as a stimulus for dialogue and debate.

In retrospect the website arrived at a crucial moment, between the closing ceremony of the controversial Bienal of Valencia and the next piece of bad news: the absorption of part of the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM) into a new Museum of the XIX Century. The first phase of the latter was already underway and it would see it taking over two exhibition rooms of IVAM's Centre del Carme. This news triggered an instant and negative response from the many people committed to contemporary art in Valencia. The Centre del Carme had been inaugurated together with the main building of the IVAM in February 1989. From its early days, it was recognised throughout Spain and Europe as an important centre for contemporary art. Noted directors included Vicente Todolí, Nuria Enguita, Bartomeu Marí and Corinne Diserens. Artists shown there included Richard Prince, Juan Muñoz, Dara Birnbaum, and Cildo Meireles. All left their mark upon the public consciousness and improved local knowledge of contemporary art forms. Much of its success was due to the attractive space itself, a former convent made up in part by a Renaissance cloister and the rooms of the School of Fine Arts. It was a place where gothic, renaissance and neo-classical architectural motifs could coexist with the work of an international array of contemporary artists.

The news that the site was going to be closed to make way for a Museum of the XIX Century created a massive reaction on e-valencia. A system for collecting signatures and comments was quickly developed in order to protest against its loss. The protest led to the formation of the Plataforma cívico-cultural ExAmics del IVAM (Former Friends of the IVAM – Civic and Cultural Platform), a body that included gallery owners, artists, art critics, exhibition curators and citizens committed to contemporary culture in the region. The creation of a new museum was not really the issue, it was the fact that there was little consultation with local people and that it meant the closure of a key space for contemporary art in Valencia.



The cultural top brass initiating these changes soon decided that e-valencia was an unwelcome interactive space. Kosme de Barañano, Director of IVAM, published an article in the regional edition of the newspaper *El País*, entitled 'IVAM: Balance and Objectives'. In this article, Barañano referred to the criticisms received via internet in this manner: 'to those who slander me and the other employees of the IVAM from the impunity and cowardice of anonymity, I'll say that they are wasting their time. I am one of those who believe, as did Ramón y Cajal, that silence is the best and most economical reaction to slander.' (*El País*, Sunday 3 March 2002).

The anonymity referred to by the Director of the IVAM related to the pseudonyms used by many contributors to the Forum Cultural Valenciana at e-valencia. This feature, however, is intrinsic to an open and plural medium such as the internet. Criticising it or seeking to repress it leads to denying the citizen's right to express opinions on the administration's activities. Losing anonymity would mean that those with alternative opinions could be quickly recognised and their opinions effectively suppressed. In short, this would leave those in authority with few obstacles in the wielding their power.

e-valencia has created a focus of attention, providing a daily barometer of public opinion and criticism, whatever the status and identity of the author. The use of anonymity and pseudonyms is therefore a key factor in its effectiveness. Interestingly all the criticisms and demands have been kept on a civil and reasonable level. Perhaps the greatest sign of its success is that it has stimulated other regions to emulate its critical attitude and independence. An e-barcelona is already in preparation and an e-sevilla is being considered. Together these sites could provide a comprehensive account of cultural policy in Spain even though they start from the critical examination of specific local issues. 🗑️

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