

popular

popular is an exhibition and an investigation. This time, literally, we exhibit – we show, following a vestige, a trace. An exhibition also interrogates something. What is the “popular”? It is not fame or celebrity. The popular is not the products of mass culture. It is not the art of the people, or the identity of a nation or its symbols. The popular is not a product of the proletariat, nor is it the craftwork of the working classes. The popular is not folklore. The popular is not clichés or tourist souvenirs. The popular is not visual candy, one-euro trinkets, the offerings of advertising. Yet the popular is there beneath all these things. It appears, disappears and reappears amid all these negatives.

What we mean with *popular* is a type of imagination, often words, images and things, that are produced by gestures, acts and ritual celebrations, a kind of material concretion which appears in ways of life outside political rule – outside the city, in the broadest sense of the word. In reality, this imagination is objectified and becomes political as it begins to circulate through the *polis* and to inhabit the core of the hegemonic imagination. What we call popular are these frictions, these sparks between what is outside and in, between the margins and the hegemony. A *fiesta*, a weave in a fabric, a story, a form of attire, a terrifying monster or an idealisation of the Virgin Mary.

Plato spoke of the *khôra*, a place away from the city and politics where myth and *logos* were still undifferentiated. The space of the *khôra* has given rise to the chorus; the choral, a polyphony of voices and bodies; and also to choreography. Language specialists have still not decided whether the *choro*, or space, existed in a particular

place, a sacred space or institution in the *polis* where collective dancing and singing took place; or whether the space of the *choro* would come into being anywhere as a result of a group of people dancing and singing together. The choice of either of these philological hypothesis is a substantial, decidedly political one in determining the origin of the popular. To use one or the other consideration of the *choro* or space is a political decision. But we also need not doubt that the popular may make its appearance in either of these two meanings of the *khôra* / *choro*; in both spaces at the same time; and may do so because it is not a historical happening but rather an anachronistic gesture. Precisely because of its ability to inhabit different times simultaneously, the popular always has many meanings, and very often none at all; like nonsense, an upside-down world.

That thing that runs below, as Agustín García Calvo called it: the thing that is not, but which always runs below people, or “the people”. The popular is imagination, surely: imagery, the imaginary – so easy to identify but hard to define. In fact, what runs below is also what refuses classification. We see it, we know what it is, but we don’t know where to put it. Our working hypothesis has situated the popular where no political representation exists, where there is no participation. People with no political sovereignty to call their own, who cannot reach the status of political subjects, will compensate by developing a potent capacity for representation, a hypertrophy of their symbolic functions. Those with no political representation of their own have an enormous capacity for symbolic representation. What is socially peripheral tends to be symbolically central, concluded Barbara Babcock in her study of the

world upside down (following Mikhail Bakhtin's famous definition of popular culture during the ancien régime).

From there on, with the new regime, the triumph of the French Revolution, is when the idea of the "people" appeared. With political sovereignty no longer resting on the idea of God as the divinity who legitimised royalty, the power of the republic and legitimacy of the nation-state then passed onto the people. Giorgio Agamben has accurately studied how, as the "People" appear, so do the "people", the politically un-represented. This is an essential split in the new order that we call modernity. When the popular first arises, it is not in the cities, the metropolises that control the nation's political power – literally, the power of the *polis* – but in the countryside, the landscape, the fields and jungles, where peasants and people with no political representation of their own would provide images, arts and ways of acting and making for the political community as it is shaped. The popular is always modern, but makes use of the old, of what is lost. As E. P. Thompson studied, everything that lost its function in the craft and guild-based culture of nineteenth century of Europe was then to reappear as the symbols of working-class culture: the hammer and sickle in the age of the steam engine.

But let us now change our point of view. *Carmen*, bullfighting, and flamenco, the epitomes of the Spanish. How can it be that the *gitanos* (Southern European Roma), excluded from all forms of political sovereignty, should be the carriers of the nation's symbolic weight? The same is the case in Hungary, or Russia before the Soviet Union. Or with the Black people of the United States, Cuba or Brazil, or the native peoples of Canada, Mexico and Chile. The very people excluded from political representation exhibit the country's symbolic production; in a literal sense, they represent it. Imagery, clichés, commonplace images – everything we know as "popular". We identify Paris with the accordion, the striped shirt, the beret, signs of the bandit, a lumpen-proletariat, delinquent culture, to be exact – a culture, or subculture as we used to say – of groups politically excluded from their sovereignty, from any form of politics within the city. Marx did in fact regret

having defined the lumpen-proletariat, but it has to be said that the subjects he named, from the Gypsy to the poet, the prostitute to the street vendor – are the symbolic deposit of Paris as the capital of the first modern age, "What the French call the 'Bohémien'", literally meaning the Roma, or the Roma lifestyle.

Another perspective. In her "Notes on Camp", Susan Sontag notes how gay culture has constructed its own aesthetics, a theatrical artifice, which is predominant the world of the spectacle, fashion or the social chronicle. Political repression in this case has produced a complete theatre of the world. The world upside down, the world of festivities, carnival; the upside-down world is literally a man dressed up as a woman or vice-versa. We might also think here of María Zambrano who, while favouring women's emancipation, also warned that while political emancipation was a necessity, women should still be muses, models, incarnations of ideas, all the forms of symbolic representation that women had achieved, doubtlessly because of their subaltern condition.

It is also true to say that there is no group, gender or class today that does not have or is not aspiring to attain political representation. Gayatri Spivak's question *Can the Subaltern Speak?* touches on a critical point. What happens to the symbolic world when all of those un-represented subjects who cannot participate politically aspire to political representation, begin to achieve it, and manage to find consideration in the nation's sovereign body? The popular is always something to be managed, relational, a floating category that appears with different intensities. In current democracies, the popular is managed from below, running through different classes and genders, being contested, in constant tension between political and symbolic representation, between participation and celebration. Where does the popular speak from today; where does it emerge from?

As Walter Benjamin correctly pointed out, one of capitalism's achievements has been to colonize the realm of the popular; not only its visible, conscious aspects, but also what runs below and is invisible – our unconscious. To turn life itself

into a commodity has meant appropriating the gratuitous nature of any visual trinket. Guy Debord made this a category when he spoke of the *Society of the Spectacle*. But just as nationalisms have appropriated – nationalised – the popular, capitalism, almost as if commodities themselves were taking revenge, has expropriated and multiplied the objectification of life, principally through popular wares. Everything has been turned into a souvenir. To understand this struggle in the space between nationalisation and expropriation, we must remember the task Benjamin attributed to communism in relation to popular culture, which was to return words, images and things to their own uses.

Thus what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari termed “minor” art and literature is a good explanation of popular strategy. To deterritorialise and still be the voice of the community. This twofold movement precisely describes the origin – always foreign, strange and marginal, always arising from the outside – of the popular. It also explains how, in spite of entering from outside, from below, the popular imagination takes hold and becomes a sign of identity for a community, a network of communications, the world. What is truly popular also deterritorialises; and does indeed become a sign of identity for this or that community wherever there are humans, animals and things. It speaks in that community and for that community, “the community of readers of a book” as Maurice Blanchot expressed it. In actual fact, that particular function of books was created by the popular, before writing, before institutions. Beyond words, images or things, the popular is the relation between ourselves and words, images and things.

Obviously, this exhibition / investigation is not an exhibition of folk or popular art. That would be an impossible undertaking even for ethnographical museums or the cultural Disneylands of today. Except for a number of exceptions – Manuel Ángeles Ortiz’s wooden sculptures, Gorrís’ toys, and the drawings by Ceija Stojka – in most of the items exhibited, the popular appears, disappears, and reappears; often barely there, running below. The popular

is a field of relations which affects artists and makes them see, a field that artists reveal. The exhibition delves into the IVAM collection, with its grand narratives – Productivism in the ‘thirties; the emergence of Pop art in the ‘sixties – but also looks at its gaps, the holes in the collection. Because often, it is through those gaps that the popular begins to show.

Many of the borrowed pieces here might perhaps point in the direction of something missing, something we’re lacking – and I refer to more than just the IVAM collection. A collection in many ways represents the conscious and unconscious realm of the community it is built from. Music, for instance, plays an important part in this exhibition, as in the superb musical scores by František Zelenka, or a reading of the collection and its treasures by El Niño de Elche, from the *Intonarumori* by Luigi Russolo to *Symphony No. 1* by Glenn Branca. And is trap pop, or a commodity? Let us not call it “urban art”, a suspect category if ever one existed. But a whole community is speaking through trap. The evidence is there in the *Nueve, Panamá* video by Brooke Alfaro. Yet there are still people who have no voice, voices still silent. A key piece in the exhibition is the borrowed film <...- *ohpera - muda* -...>, [*hasta la fecha del 23 de septiembre de 2023*], by Alejandra Riera, a film on the grand narratives of history and what is buried under its monuments, a film by those who speak from below, from the ruins. *popular* shows the murmurings and the silent, those who have no voice. Although that might be too loud a claim to make. We might say they appear, disappear and reappear. Perhaps these examples can give some indication of the workings of this research and how we’ve approached this exhibition.

Gallery 4

a. A ghost roaming the world

The ghost roaming the world was in actual fact not revolution, but the people. Sovereignty, until then legitimised from by the Almighty, was about to be replaced by a source emanating from below: the ambiguous idea of the “people”. Giorgio Agamben points out that with the birth of the “*People*” we also see the birth of the “*people*” – the wretched, the oppressed, the vanquished. While the former carries the political representation of the nation, the latter – the plebs, the riffraff who, being the people but not *People*, are the source of their symbolic imaginary; an idea which contradicts the democratic statistics of mass culture but also conceals its phantasmatic nature. We can imagine the *popular* as arising in the remainder between the “*People*” and the “*people*”. The popular is what is lost.

b. Gender in dispute

Like gender, the popular is essentially a conflicted realm. Since before the emancipation of the popular classes, in the famous male, heteropatriarchal world, the pre-eminent symbolic role of woman as a muse, model, numen or inspiration also carried with it the hidden, total dispossession of all her political rights. María Zambrano, in the times of suffragist feminism, warned of the dangers of becoming political subjects, of how emancipation should not carry with it the symbolic loss of the feminine, of woman as a myth, the goddess as *chora*. The feminisation of the popular is also a history of political emancipation. From imagery of the mother to that of the prostitute, each of our imaginations directly depend on our capacity to obtain political rights.

c. The sex of angels

In many ways the generic, in its two meanings – generality and origin, or lineage – defines the qualities of the popular. Byzantine discussions, apparently staged around such improbable issues as the Trinity or the sex of angels, not only provided the academy with rhetorical tools, but also emancipated popular thinking throughout the Empire. Its ingenious arguments led to the appearance of “ignorant masters” everywhere, as proclaimed by Joseph Jacotot and reiterated by Jacques Rancière. Gender dissidence relates not only to the sexes or reproduction, but also to the dissidence of bodies wanting to think and live autonomously. The carnival popular as an inversion of normative, obligatory sexuality was the first gender dissidence. From parody to politics, as Judith Butler indicates. In many aspects, the popular, which was initially “feminine”, cannot avoid being queer.

d. The decadence of illiteracy

As individuals, our political rights are won as we reach legal adulthood. Until then, we are considered subjects in the process of becoming mature, acquiring rights and obligations as we do so. The region of childhood, where we live meanwhile, is also the region of the imagination. Walter Benjamin equated it to play, where words, images and things can be given a different function to their habitual one. José Bergamín asserts that the popular is a kind of childhood of a people in history. In modern times, the child is akin to a political subject who has yet to become emancipated. Humans are the only species born as non-adults, and this fact also describes the region where imagination arises. The popular always resides in childhood. Like childhood, the popular recovers what has been lost and announces what is yet to come into being.

e. In praise of insanity

Relieving someone of responsibility. Alienating them. However many rights they possess, their testimony has no legal validity and they cannot exercise political responsibility. Imagine you are suddenly returned to the alienated state of childhood. Alienated? The art of the insane has always been a focus of the avant-garde: art brut, outsider art, psychiatric or anti-psychiatric art. What interests us here is the loss of political representation associated with certain pathologies, and the symbolic potency accumulated in their imagery. The insane do not exist, they are the *people* in the purest of states. The magical meaning of madness in ancient times re-emerges here; a sort of profound truth emerges from the unrepressed unconscious. The “art of the insane” recalls that lost psyche.

Gallery 5

aa. Proletarian chamber theatre

In political theory, representation and participation are surely seen as opposites. But representation and participation in artistic practice are continuous, they require one another and are forces which stimulate one another. The popular is thus an exact theatre, an ideal scene in the broadest sense of the word “theatre”, as theatre-less theatre, where all of the qualities of theatre appear without the rules of the staged spectacle. Performativity – and in the folk arts, music and dance are given first place – is the key, there is no representation without performers, even in crafted objects performativity is an important quality. And let us not forget, this is where we see the keys to a system of dominion for the subaltern masses who have no political representation and struggle to attain it. In *Pagan Spain*, the Afro-American writer Richard Wright observes that Francoism exercised

its dominion using dissuasive methods based on the control of public spectacles more than through police repression. Since the 'sixties, the people, who want to emancipate themselves, have another possibility for frustrated participation after the military coup that ended political representation. Representation and participation inaugurated since the early twentieth century by the generations who managed to achieve the Spanish Second Republic.

f. The conquest of America

The revelation of the popular since the late eighteenth century is a kind of underside of the European colonial project. The American Revolution (the thirteen independent colonies that comprised the United States of America), before the French and Haitian Revolutions, after the storming of the Bastille, not only inaugurated the people as new political subjects. These revolutions also became laboratories for the popular imagination which gradually conquered the entire world. Naturally, the popular imagination was deposited in the subaltern classes – Black people in the United States, Brazil and Cuba, Native Americans in Chile, Mexico and Peru – those who have no political rights, or no rights at all, such as the slaves, reduced to mere commodities. Frederic Jameson's comment on the Hispanic lack of differentiation between *modernity* and *modernism* relates to the original understanding of the popular, which has ended up reducing the two terms. Qualifying the popular as such has become even more complex as emigration to the US and Europe, or Spain itself, is providing cheap labour without full rights, and has also become the principal channel for the popular imagination.

g. Subaltern Orientalism

According to Américo Castro, in America, part of the Iberian heritage, which is simply the remnants of the Arab and Jewish cultures who inhabited us, is labelled "popular". Arab and Jew, Islamic and Judaic cultures concern us because we are also them. This is not only historical news; the centuries spent by these peoples on Iberian soil, the rapid conversion of the Hispano-Roman population to Islam and the proliferation of Sephard; the cultural continuity with Northern Africa and the Mediterranean is our kinship with these social and cultural forms. Naturally, when Christianity took over, the Arab and Jewish influence came to lie in the popular classes, the ones beneath. The famous *Marranos* were not only the builders of the great European culture – Montaigne, Spinoza –; they were also, in their resistance from below, with no political recognition of their rights, the great source of our popular culture. Edward Said, however, in his masterpiece *Orientalism*, begrudges the fact that the popular classes or lower castes use this exotic heritage to legitimise their alternative ways of life to the European colonising cultures. Yet this was how they managed to salvage themselves from power and the dominant classes of our own country.

h. The wretched of the Earth

Slavery is still capitalism's greatest shame, the most absolute refutation of political liberalism, its emblematic chains the contrary to freedom. The coincidence between the scientific discovery of the African origin of *homo sapiens* and the height of the industrialisation of the slave trade is a terrible affront. These are not only the stereotype of the primitive; the popular has a stride, a beat. In the Atlantic, an ocean, human beings became commodities denied of any rights, their subaltern condition fossilized. From there, Black Afro-Americans would mark the tempo and development of the "popular" everywhere in the world. Not the complex sounds of the celebration or ritual, but the binary tam-tam that sets the pulse of the world.

i. *Camelamos naquerar*

Camelamos naquerar, or "We want to speak", in Caló, the Southern European version of Romani, the language of the Roma, in an important stage play written by José Heredia Maya with music and dance by Mario Maya, presented in 1976 by Mario Maya's Compañía de Teatro Gitano Andaluz, was a milestone in the demands of the Roma people throughout Europe. Can the subalterns speak? wondered Gayatri Spivak. That is precisely the point. When they do speak, when they attain their political voice, and manage to progress in being represented / achieve political participation, then they lose their subaltern status. But it is in this utterance, these first attempts to articulate, that the popular arises. The Roma, as one of the human groups that the early Marx called the lumpenproletariat, have been speaking for years without anyone wanting to listen to them. This is the fate of the poor, the lumpen, the lower classes. They speak alone. Nobody listens. *Camelamos naquerar* develops the potency of those who seek to speak. The popular, then, is above all a potency which knows how to remain as such. When it exhibits itself, when it participates in the public square, it still removes itself from politics however much it seeks to participate in them. On that threshold, right there, is where the popular emerges. In the worst of conditions, with everything against it, with nothing, from below, we see something move beneath the silt, the sand, the ground, we see a tremor in the earth, a shiver: that is the popular.

Gallery 4

a. A ghost roaming the world

- a.1 Peasants women
- a.2 Peasants
- a.3 Rubble
- a.4 Folk culture
- a.5 *Cartel*
- a.6 People
- a.7 Commandments
- a.8 Lumpen
- a.9 Multitude
- a.10 Kultura

b. Gender in dispute

- b.1 Revolution
- b.2 Technique
- b.3 Public
- b.4 Models
- b.5 Advertising
- b.6 Factory
- b.7 Actresses
- b.8 Stain
- b.9 Roles
- b.10 Adornment

c. The sex of angels

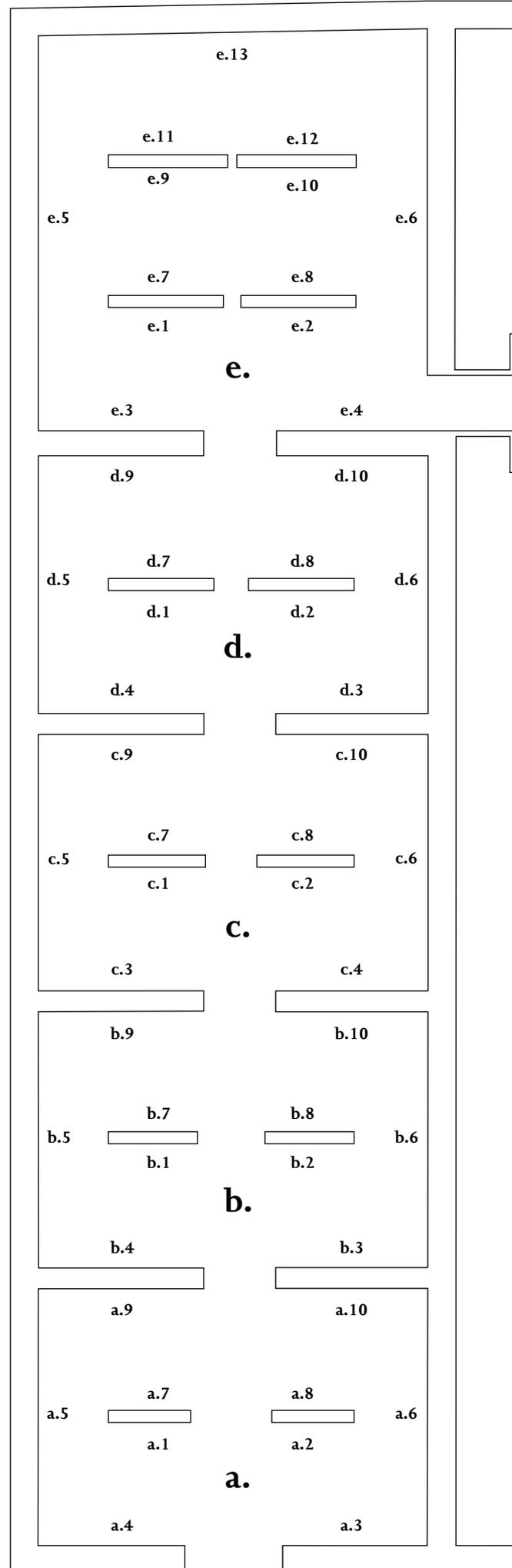
- c.1 Androgyny
- c.2 Transvestism
- c.3 Trans
- c.4 *Marrón*
- c.5 Biography
- c.6 Biology
- c.7 Gimnasium
- c.8 Queer
- c.9 *Maricas*
- c.10 Sex

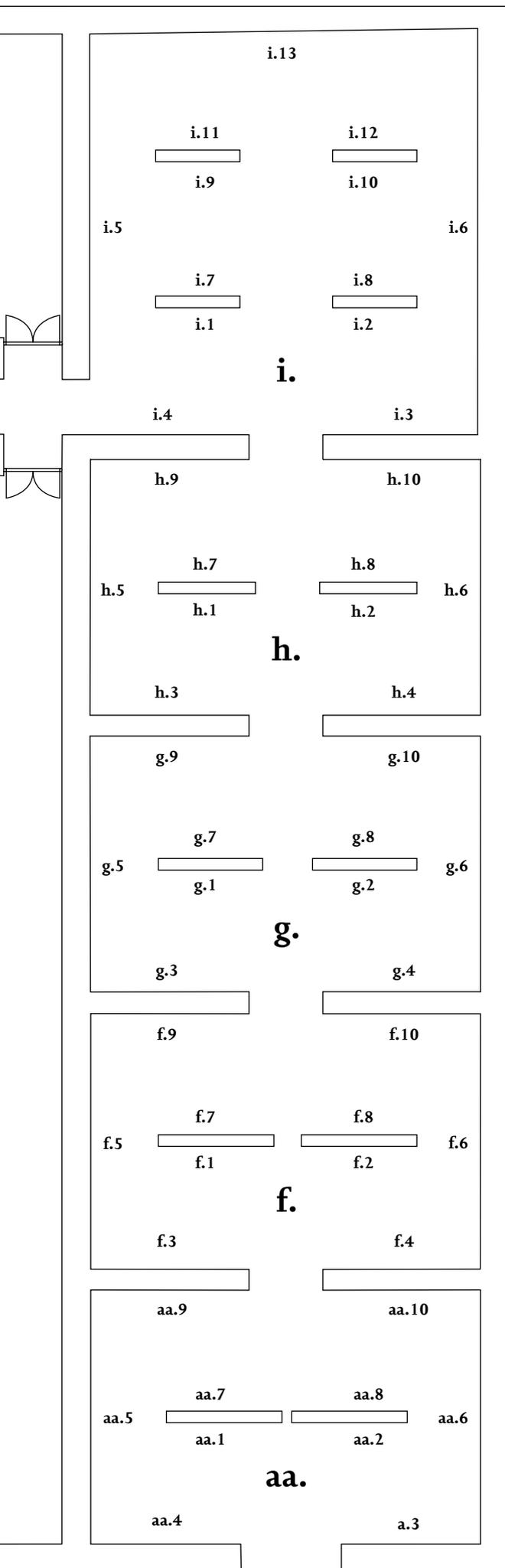
d. The decadence of illiteracy

- d.1 Carnival
- d.2 Laughter
- d.3 Pediatrics
- d.4 Education
- d.5 Institution
- d.6 Anarchy
- d.7 Civilisation
- d.8 Barbarism
- d.9 Culture
- d.10 Nature

e. In praise of insanity

- e.1 Hallucination
- e.2 Delirium
- e.3 Desire
- e.4 Plasticity
- e.5 Schizoid
- e.6 Paranoid
- e.7 Violence
- e.8 Destruction
- e.9 Language
- e.10 Tongue
- e.11 Voice
- e.12 Echo
- e.13 Mute





Gallery 5

aa. Proletarian chamber theatre

- aa.1 Popular
- aa.2 Populism
- aa.3 Hegemony
- aa.4 Subaltern
- aa.5 Terror
- aa.6 Rhetoric
- aa.7 Spectacle
- aa.8 Market
- aa.9 Comfort
- aa.10 Deterrence

f. The conquest of America

- f.1 Language
- f.2 Population
- f.3 Old
- f.4 New
- f.5 *Orbe*
- f.6 Land
- f.7 Dialectics
- f.8 Encyclopaedia
- f.9 Anarchitects
- f.10 Little doctors

g. Subaltern Orientalism.

- g.1 Maurophilia
- g.2 Orientalism
- g.3 Goods
- g.4 Commodities
- g.5 Stereotype
- g.6 Documenta
- g.7 Crusade
- g.8 The sleepers
- g.9 Morisco
- g.10 Arabesque

h. The wretched of the Earth

- h.1 Afro-American
- h.2 "Nigga"
- h.3 Black
- h.4 *Noire*
- h.5 Servitude
- h.6 Slavery
- h.7 *Mulato*
- h.8 Colour
- h.9 Blackface
- h.10 Klan

i. *Camelamos naquerar*

- i.1 *Lumpérica*
- i.2 *Gitanos*
- i.3 Gypsy
- i.4 *Quincalleros*
- i.5 Poor
- i.6 Rrom
- i.7 Degenerate
- i.8 Jondo
- i.9 Bohemia
- i.10 Flamenco
- i.11 Beggars
- i.12 Roma
- i.13 Travellers

The songs (and one)

This magnificent collection of scores by Jaroslav Ježek, illustrated by the architect František Zelenka, was an opening for us to present, in some way, songs as one of the privileged spaces for the relation and emergence of the popular. Both were Jewish artists linked to the Czech avant garde; Zelenka was murdered at Auschwitz in 1945, while Ježek had died two years earlier of illness in exile in New York. The particularity of this repertoire, linked to the explosion of vernacular forms of music as a result of colonial movements in the 1920s, is exception in this respect. The popular emerges just at the point where displaced political representations fold that have based their success or symbolic potency on their necessarily subaltern position. This is the era of the slate record, and the birth of the global industrial culture later to be known as pop, or popular music.

The songs (and two)

The simplistic division between visual and musical culture has a strongly theological background to it. Reducing sound to abstract, spiritual or ritual categories without recognising it as symbolic representation, imagination and material figuration is above all the result of the totalitarian Enlightenment ordering of the world. What actually exists are continuities and relationships. Between *poiesis* (way of making), *esthesis* (way of seeing) and *phonesis* (way of speaking), there is always circulation. More than a specific cultural product, the popular is a result of circulation which runs through different means that can also multiply. The relationships between the writings, sounds and images selected here are based on that principle. There are avant-garde pieces, academic music, products of the cultural industry, studio experiments and street experiences, and the possibility of the popular runs through all of them.

The songs (and three)

This collection of songs by Niño de Elche with the collaboration of Xisco Rojo travels the – often blurred – limits between sound, music and the popular in song. Agustín García Calvo said that the popular qualities of a song could be measured in how likely you are to hum it in the shower. Whether through electronic dance music, spoken word, Latin diasporan music or flamenco, Niño de Elche has tried to connect some of the pieces in the IVAM collection, some of its images, with possible ways of being sung. Or hummed in the shower: be it a phrase by Juan Hidalgo or the *petenera* repeated by the Mexican people portrayed by Paul Strand, a fandango dedicated to Helios Gómez or the musical imprint of VALIE EXPORT's tattoo on Rosalía. An image is also a song.



The 45 musical compositions that constitute the *popular* soundtrack are available through QR codes distributed throughout galleries 4 and 5.

Some images present in the exhibition may offend the public's sensitivity.