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Proyecto Venus: An Interview with Roberto Jacoby

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Proyecto Venus: **An Interview with Roberto Jacoby**

by

Eve Kalyva

Proyecto Venus is a world of desires
achievable through exchange and cooperation.

Roberto Jacoby, Comunidades Experimentales

Note:

The idea of art's dematerialisation is constant in Jacoby's work, which focuses on social structures, communication networks, collaborative creation and cultural experimentation. During the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983), Jacoby developed project Internus, a network that was never realised, seeking to re-connect artists, non-artists and workers, and to break the isolation and the cultural and political repression. Proyecto Venus functioned as a multidisciplinary laboratory of social praxis in search of new forms of living together based on collaboration, product and service exchange, and social activities. Structurally, it consisted of a website with pre-facebook elements (personalised profiles, chat rooms, support and exchange of visual material) and a rotational administration team responsible for maintenance, assistance and event coordination. It counted about 500 members, 900 subscribers to its monthly news bulletin and more than 20000 monthly visitors to its website. As part of the project, medical, legal and technical services were offered, and about 200 events were organised in the capital and nationwide (Sainz and Solaas 2007). These attracted an estimate of 10000 visitors, and included the still ongoing colloquia series "Multiplicidad," several editions of Estudio Abierto (figure) and the event series "Tecnologías de Amistad" (Borges Cultural Centre, Buenos Aires, December 2006). The project was supported by the START Foundation, the Secretary of Culture of the City of Buenos Aires and voluntary work.

Eve Kalyva: Let us talk about *Proyecto Venus* (2000-2006). My first question is, why "Venus"?

Roberto Jacoby: Isn't it obvious? Desire. Likewise, the participants called themselves "venusians" and appeared as if from another world; moreover, they exchanged a different currency.

E.K.: How was the project conceived?

R.J.: I have a long interest in collective projects, working with people and in groups. I have made other projects in the past, like *Bola de nieve* (2005) [*Snowball*] that still exists. It was a *light* project, aiming to create a database of artists. It began by inviting some artists and, in turn, each one had to recommend two other artists; afterwards, the process involved a co-election.

E.K.: So it wasn't only that each participant recommended other people, but it was also a collective decision.

R.J.: Yes, this was very important because the idea behind *Bola de nieve* was that it was not just a database, but rather that the project functioned as a reflection of real relations. That is, it reflected the true relationships that exist between people, networks, preferences and friendships, or not, because this is how real life is: artists may recommend other artists because they like them, because one is a friend of another etc [*laughter*]. This was part of the social networks that has to do with affinities.

E.K.: And it was developed quickly?

R.J.: Yes it was developed, but not quickly. It grew with great difficulty because it wasn't easy working with technology at that time: few people had email accounts, no-one had a digital camera. Thus we used the telephone a lot to call people in order to add their names; there was someone noting down the artists' data, the address of their lawyer etc. Then one had to make an appointment and bring copies of their work, or make copies, and laminate them. Afterwards, another stage was developed that was indeed a selection of the artists that seemed to me the most important.

E.K.: Was it only performance artists?

R.J.: No, there were writers, directors. But it was difficult to continue with the project because classes were formed. Class is a property of this relation. This is the problem that this type of networks have: the more you advance, the more prone you are to fail. Groups are formed, preferences; some use it for personal motives etc. The people that stay at the end are the same people that initiated the project; many people come and go. I wished there were a network that was more than 100 people, that has 1000 people, but it doesn't exist. And this is another problem – the fear that one has to work with or meet other people, fear of the connection between artists and other groups. What *Bola de nieve* does have – apart from a poetic name – is that it sought to find a way of exchange and development of networks.

Another project preceding *Venus* was *Chacra99* (1999). With this, I wanted to make an action in relation to the real. I rented a house in the countryside not very

far, for that time, from the city [Buenos Aires], about 20 minutes by car, in order to get together. The house was very nice: it had 12 rooms, a plot, horses, and a basement where stuff were left from its previous use. It was in a very nice neighbourhood, and next to it there was a convent with nuns. We managed to get funding and we got a computer, cameras to take pictures, a video-camera, clothes to dress up, wigs, we had everything – all the genius of the artist. We also managed to have internet connection.

E.K.: Seriously?

R.J.: Yes, but the analogue one, via the telephone. It was very slow! We named it *Chacra99*. “Chacra” is an indigenous word, it means “field” in Quechua (it is not the “chakra” of the Hindu). There, we started meeting up, inviting artists, writers, photographers, models, musicians, international DJs – a lot of people. We organised many parties with plenty to drink. The important was that there was a place to stay at night.

E.K.: And at that time of the Argentinean crisis, I can imagine, with all the social repression and the political corruption, it must had been very important.

R.J.: Yes, many people came. When they arrived it was like arriving to paradise, everything was new, everything was free.

E.K.: Could you talk a bit more about the relation of *Proyecto Venus* to the START Foundation and about another preceding project, *Internos*?

R.J.: The Foundation *Sociedad, Tecnología, Arte* (START) [Society, Technology, Art] supported and sponsored *Proyecto Venus*. *Project Internus*, in the early 1980s, had in common with *Venus* the idea of network relationships. *Internus* emphasised the exchange between information and knowledge.

E.K.: This marked your interest in exchange, joint and communal activities, and in spaces of co-existence.

R.J.: Indeed, I was interested in networks of people. When *Chacra99* finished in April—it was already getting cold—I thought of realising this sort of experience but in the city, to create a similar situation but not one run by me, rather one that the people themselves would coordinate and organise. I thus began the legal processes, all the bureaucracy. At that time, towards the end of 1999, it was terrible. The people in charge were not at their posts, the offices were empty, there was no-one in the corridors of the ministries. I tried many times but it was very difficult during the crisis. After one year I managed to complete the paperwork.

The idea was to create a virtual society. It started with a round of talks that we called *Plácidos Domingos* as a pun on the singer Plácido Domingo [literary translating: Quiet Sunday]. It was something quiet and pleasant, with artists,

writers and intellectuals; the aim was to think about the structure of this society and other types of societies. Each talked from his or her own perspective, some about their inspirations and others about utopian societies. We did about thirteen meetings. I don't remember the exact date—it was April or March— we started working on *Proyecto Venus* with a programmer in order to design the platform. Nowadays there are many such platforms; at the time there were still no tools to make this kind of things, there was only one programme to access the internet, and another one to add data. There was nothing more, not even the idea of interaction – the people working in programming and digital design were like wizards. So we started working over the programme and linking people, contacting them via personal invitation, over the telephone or via email.

E.K.: This was in order to register?

R.J.: Yes, but it wasn't possible to register from anywhere at that time; it was necessary that the data was added to the main computer. Thus we called people and if they were interested they had to come personally in order to register. But we knew that things would not stay like that—there were more and more people that had an email account—and that the technology would change very quickly. Afterwards, each was able to add his or her own data, upload pictures, customise his or her web page.

E.K.: In order to enter the project, anyone could register?

R.J.: No. We selected the first members, and then one could become a member by invitation or recommendation. But it was open for everyone to see the people, the products and the events.

E.K.: A fundamental idea of the project was the exchange of services.

R.J.: Yes. In order to enter and become a member of the community, participants had to offer a good or a service. We started with few categories registering the type [of service] and the materials, but it grew very quickly. People started putting “other” so we had to revise the categories and increase them.

E.K.: Were the participants of different social groups?

R.J.: Yes. There were doctors, lawyers, musicians, taxi drivers. There were about 500 people.

E.K.: From the Buenos Aires province?

R.J.: In its majority from the city.

E.K.: Let us return to the project's currency. How did that work?

R.J.: The society had its own money, the venus. Upon entering, one was given [a

certain amount of] venus. This functioned as a means of exchange and collaboration.

E.K.: The project also offered intensive courses via the Venus Academy, launched in 2005, that were payable in mixed currency. Did the people also use venus to buy services? It wasn't only via exchange?

R.J.: Both. Some offered services for an indicative price, others for exchange. Members had their profiles where they indicated what they were offering; the connection was to offer something and nominate the value that one thought appropriate. This was the driving force behind the interaction. Moreover, there were spaces outside the network, bars, shops, that accepted this currency.

E.K.: So it wasn't a digital currency?

E.K.: No. Initially, I wanted to have it as such, and this precisely was one of the problems of the time. It wasn't possible to coordinate something like a digital currency; nowadays, there are many. Recently, they launched *Bitcoin*, an alternative bubble, which is very dangerous. In China, there was a digital currency that was banned precisely because this parallel currency had too much power.

E.K.: Were the prices in venus equivalent to the street value or between services and products?

R.J.: No, each set their own prices. Thus we saw the normalisation of the market.

E.K.: The exchange of services and goods actualises concrete moments of socialisation; it also engages with the value of cultural production in capitalist society. Most importantly, it allows to re-evaluate one's own production—and the responsibility that comes with it—as a shared social activity. Elsewhere, you have argued that the *how* is more important than the *what* (Jacoby 2005b). Central to *Proyecto Venus* was the importance placed on productive and collaborative activities.

R.J.: Precisely. At one point, I received the Guggenheim fellowship. From that moment, I had the funds to support activities, provide materials, have open calls and coordinate prizes for art projects. Moreover, we were able to secure a physical location where we presented the project proposals. People voted their selection; the projects were supported according to this election until the funds were exhausted.

E.K.: In this way, participation was particularly promoted. You mentioned the project's physical location – called "Tatlin" and located on Salta Street, down town Buenos Aires—that was a place to meet, organise events, produce, exhibit, exchange and lodge. As part of the project, about 200 events were organised. Was the Biennial of Tandil, Buenos Aires province (2003) part of this?

R.J.: That was someone's project, an artist that was part of *Proyecto Venus* and submitted to the open call; they also found a venue in Tandil that accepted venus. Many people came, since there isn't much to do in Tandil [*laughter*].

E.K.: Was it necessary to organise fund-raising events?

R.J.: No.

E.K.: The project was based on what was conceptualised as 'technologies of friendship' [tecnologías de amistad], a system of relations of friendship that proliferated through networks of skills exchange and mutual support, group collectives and collaborative creation (Krochmalny 2007). I was wondering whether you find "dematerialisation"—a concept central to many post-sixties artistic practices that critically engaged the material and ideological value placed on the final art-object, and the re-connection of art with life pertinent to the project and relevant today?

R.J.: I believe that dematerialisation has widely increased in the last fifty years in all spheres of existence; in communication in particular.

E.K.: It has been said that *Proyecto Venus* recalls the principles of situationism towards developing new forms of social life, interconnections of bodies and actions, and relations between people (*Proyecto Venus* 2002). It has been described as an experimental, anomalous, and, to a certain extent, parodic form of state not crystallised and for this reason ideal; a state of emergency wherein unexpected talents and relations emerge; a society of DIY biopolitics based on actions and associative practices; and a sensible *phalanstère*, an utopic colony that takes place on the intersections of the world rather than outside of it, and whose rules are not rigid but voluntary (Jacoby 2005a: 29). Did the project also include collaborations with different communities, neighborhood and other social groups?

R.J.: There was connection with other groups, and groups that had their own spaces. For example, a physical space, particularly important, was *Belleza y Felicidad* [*Beauty and Happiness*]. Through this collaboration, the project opened up to more people, including younger people. There were also other collaborations with galleries. In addition, the project supported people in hardship, people who needed help at the time. Above everything, it supported and encouraged association and collaboration of groups and people, spaces to have exhibitions, shows, fairs and music events that were interconnected via the digital platform of *Proyecto Venus*.

E.K.: Was there a connection between the development of the idea, and the activities carried out, and the socio-political situation during the Argentine crisis?

R.J.: Yes, absolutely. All the social structures had collapsed and a void remained in their place. There were no physical spaces, the people felt repressed and this gave rise to the desire to reconstruct society.

E.K.: This is what is much needed today, to get out of the house, to join in, discuss, exchange. That is to say, to recuperate the communal and reconstruct the fragmented social fabric. As a social network, how did the project come to an end?

R.J.: It terminated; in reality there was decay. Other equivalent media appeared such as *Facebook*, chat rooms and other forms of connection.

E.K.: So it dissolved?

R.J.: No. What happened, as it happens in these cases, is that a group of people was formed, which was part of the project since the beginning, and it was getting annoyed with the people that came afterwards. They wanted to preserve their “*mythoplasia*” that they came first, that they were the “original” ones—this is like in real society. In part it was true, the latter were of a lesser artistic or human “quality,” or in relation to their behaviour. There were people who thought that by participating in *Proyecto Venus* they would obtain scholarships or that they would get stuff for free. Many people saw it that way; others took advantage in order to make money, to sell their products in real prices. This is what happens in real life, and one feels protected via the web.

Also, something else happened that is a syndrome of the web: violence. There was violence in the forums, people would say whatever came to their minds, insult one another, circulate opinions against social groups. It became very violent and this is typical of the internet.

E.K.: Wasn't it for this reason that it was important, since the beginning of the project, that members would register with their real data?

R.J.: Yes. Obviously this [violence] happens in anonymous networks, but it nevertheless emerged here as well. Moreover, personal things happened in relation to the private relationships of the participants. At a point, some started defaming someone, accusing him, advising others to be careful and, I decided, if it has come to this, if things got out of control in this way and the human being is transformed into this, it is better to terminate it.

E.K.: So it ended after six years. I think it is important to underline that *Proyecto Venus* was not conceived, nor developed, as a place to escape to—an “alternative” society external or foreign to the real one; rather, as a means to come together, to share and to coordinate social activities.

R.J.: Yes, this was the idea: to create spaces within spaces, and not outside of the real and the communal. In reality it was a very odd space. Within its context [early to mid-2000s], it was a very difficult time—like in Greece now—a time of real poverty. The *cartoneros** appeared, people were living in the streets, and one could feel the poverty. Deterioration happened very quickly; the situation worsened, and got worse and worse each time.

E.K.: In relation to the situation in Greece, would it be beneficial to coordinate similar projects in order to initiate social dialogue, to raise social awareness and bring people together?

R.J.: I am not inclined to give advice, based on the press reports. I know very well how they falsify situations according to their own interests and points of view. In any case, it is common sense, even natural, to recommend direct connection between people and groups and the search for common spaces in a time of expropriation of the masses.

Buenos Aires, April 2013

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Proyecto Venus at Estudio Abierto (2006). Correo Central, Buenos Aires. (c) Kiwi Sainz.

* Cartoneros: street workers that separate and collect carton, other paper products and recyclable materials from city waste. They are often organised in co-operations and, more recently, subject to city regulation. They process and sell material to recycle depots and companies.

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