

# Operating at a Necessary Distance from Institutions: A Case Study of the Barcelona-Based Collective Enmedio

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the conflicted relationship between creative activism and the art world, through an analysis of the Barcelona-based activist collective Enmedio. It traces the emergence of Enmedio back to their involvement in *Las Agencias*, a radical collaboration between activist groups and the Museu D'art Contemporani, Barcelona (MACBA) in 2001, the outcome of which led the members of Enmedio to conclude that they needed to 'work at a necessary distance from institutions'. Taking this position as a jumping off point, this article questions the efficacy of such an approach and asks on what terms, if any, a relationship between anti-institutional actors and the art establishment can be mutually beneficial?

**Keywords:** *Creative activism, Enmedio, exodus, autonomous Marxism*

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## INTRODUCTION: *LAS AGENCIAS* (THE AGENCIES)

In 2001 the Museu D'art Contemporani, Barcelona (MACBA) played host to *Las Agencias* (The Agencies), arguably one of most radical collaborative projects ever organised by a publically funded art museum. *Las Agencias* formed part of MACBA's then focus (under the directorship of Manuel Borja-Villel) on the themes of agency and direct action, and took the form of an experimental collaboration between the museum and activist collectives. Unusually for a project staged by a publically funded museum – particularly one which had previously played a significant role in the gentrification of Barcelona's Raval District – *Las Agencias* was conceived to provide tools and support structures for use in anti-capitalist

demonstrations during a World Bank Summit, which was scheduled to take place in Barcelona in June 2001.<sup>1</sup> The project was structured around five agencies that each focused on the production of different resources for use in the lead up to and during the counter-Summit demonstrations. They included *Dinero Gratis* (Free Money), a poster campaign that was disseminated across the city; *Està Tot Fatal* (Everything is Terrible), a magazine that functioned as a mouthpiece for the counter-Summit; and *Showbus*, a mobile platform/exhibition space for use in the demonstrations. A number of tools were also produced with the dual-purpose of attracting media attention and protecting demonstrators during potential clashes with the authorities; they included *Prêt à révolter*, a range of high-visibility padded and inflatable clothing, and *Art Mani*, shields overlaid with images depicting instances of global revolt against capitalism.

MACBA's head of public programmes, Jorge Ribalta (2009: 239), described the nature of the collaboration that took place between MACBA and the activist collectives during *Las Agencias* as 'asymmetrical'. He posited that the balance of power swung in favour of the activists, who, as a condition of their participation, insisted on maintaining autonomy from the museum in order to protect their political actions from being collapsed into art. MACBA complied with their request by assuming a back seat role as a facilitator, providing a base from which to operate, and as a sponsor, supplying equipment and materials. MACBA also gave the activist collectives access to an offsite workshop space when they refused to work in the museum itself.

Despite MACBA's arm's-length approach tensions over the use of space and resources arose and the activists were accused of overstepping the museum's 'hospitality' when they distributed copies of keys to the workshop space amongst themselves and allegedly used MACBA's computers 'for activities that could be defined as illegal' (Benavent 2013). In addition to complaints coming from inside the museum, Leónidas Martín, participant in the project, reports that 'MACBA [staff] had been getting lots of complaints from the local government and the Mayor of Barcelona who were all asking "what the fuck are you doing with our money?"' (Cited in Carroll 2014). Clearly the concern here was with the use of public money to support activist activities.

The relationship between the activists and the museum further deteriorated during the counter-Summit on 21 June, which culminated in a violent clash between members of *Las Agencias* and riot police who began firing rubber bullets at the demonstrators. At one point the police pursued the demonstrators into the bar at MACBA and in the ensuing skirmish, the glass in the main door of the museum was smashed and extensive damage was done to the bar (Carroll 2014).

As a result of the events that transpired, many of the activists were arrested and charged with public order offences and MACBA's Consortium (which included the Town Council, the Generalitat and the Foundation of the Museum) called for the resignation of MACBA's director (Borja-Villel) and its head of public programmes (Ribalta) for the roles they had played in facilitating the project. Although Borja-Villel and Ribalta retained their jobs (due to the existence of a prior agreement with the Consortium, which had sanctioned the project), they were compelled to reign in their experimental programme thereafter (Benavent 2013).

Information pertaining to the events that transpired during *Las Agencias* is sparse. There is, for example, no mention of the antagonisms that arose in Ribalta's official account of the project in *Relational Objects: MACBA Collection 2002-2007*. With the exception of a letter written by John Zvereff, former CEO of MACBA to Bartomeu Mari (the director who succeeded Borja-Villel in 2008) and a selection of the posters produced during the project, MACBA's public archive contains no documentary material about the project, which is unusual considering the extensive material available on other past projects. Given the indelicate remarks contained in the aforementioned letter, it is likely that it was entered into the archive by mistake: it describes the project as '[...] a disastrous experience' and 'a nightmare' (Zvereff 2010).

The accounts given by the activists involved in the project are more forthcoming about the issues encountered during the collaboration. Fiambrera Obrera (the collective responsible for acting as a liaison between the museum and the other participants) report that although Borja-Villel and Ribalta re-approached them with a proposal to continue *Las Agencias* a few months after the events of the counter-Summit, the revised conditions proposed by the museum were not acceptable to the activists and the relationship came to a less than harmonious end with many of the participants vowing never to work with the museum again.<sup>2</sup>

The outcome of *Las Agencias* – both the failure of Borja-Villel and Ribalta to reconcile their radical programme with MACBA's necessarily compromised institutional reality and the activist's dissatisfaction with their treatment by the museum – resonates with the position Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2006: 342) take, when they posit that any attempt to reform a state institution from within is futile. Instead, they call for an exodus from all state institutions in order to establish autonomous institutions outside of the state. They acknowledge, however, that flight alone cannot bring about social change and counsel that the multitude – the term that they use to refer to the political subjects of post-Fordism that are capable of bringing about its demise – must look for other weapons while fleeing. By this they mean that in their flight the multitude must create 'the social relations and institutions of a new society' (2006: 348).

Exodus, then, is the catalyst for what Hardt and Negri (2006: 348) call ‘constituent power’, the interruptive force that ultimately leads to experiments with new forms of living and being together. Considered as such, the exodus which they propose should not be interpreted as a negative, defeatist form of withdrawal, but as a positive, collective turning away from state institutions in order to experiment with new forms of instituting. Such thinking serves to refute a common misconception, which contends that exodus necessarily involves the desertion of *all* institutions. It is a misconception that Chantal Mouffe (2013: 66) perpetuates when she asserts that the theorists of exodus perceive all institutions ‘as monolithic representatives of the forces to be destroyed’. What Mouffe fails to take into account is that Autonomous Marxists place a great deal of importance on the institutional form *despite* their call for the desertion of institutions of the state apparatus. For Paolo Virno (cited in Penzin 2010: 5), ‘Institutions constitute the way in which our species protects itself from uncertainty and with which it create [sic] rules to protect its own praxis’. Such a definition does not imply that an institution should be a top-down bureaucratic state structure; simply that it is a system of collectively agreed values. Both Virno and Hardt and Negri advocate a new form of institution that lies ‘beyond “the monopoly of the political decision” incarnated by the State’ (Virno cited in Penzin 2010: 5).<sup>3</sup>

When transposed onto the art field, the strategy of exodus can be said to describe how self-organised collectives – like those involved in *Las Agencias* – are severing their ties with the neoliberalised state art institutional landscape and self-instituting their own extra-statal institutional forms outside of its remit of control. These self-institutions are unconventional, non-hierarchical and constituent institutional forms. They come into being when collectives of artists and activists simply nominate their practices as institutions through simple, yet transformative, speech acts. As Simon Sheikh (2007b: 56) notes, what distinguishes the process of creating a self-institution from an institution of the society of control is that it emerges *out of* the subject instead on being projected *onto* the subject.

There is also another process at play here, one that seeks to instrumentalise the creative agency of art towards social goals. Both strategies can be found in what Yates McKee describes as ‘strike art’ in his 2016 book of the same name. For McKee (2016: 6, 22-3), strike art describes artists and collectives that elect to abandon the art system in order to re-invent art as a form of direct action primarily concerned with the prefiguration of alternative social realities. A further affinity can be drawn with what Andrew Boyd and Dave Oswald Mitchell (2012: 1) term ‘creative activism’, and what David Graeber (2002) refers to as the ‘new anarchism’ that emerged alongside the alterglobalisation movement.

Although McKee, Boyd, Mitchell and Graeber largely associate these terms with anarchist practices, while the political strategy of exodus has its roots in Marxism,<sup>4</sup> they all describe a self-conscious withdrawal from the machinations of the neoliberalised art system in order to repurpose art as an emancipatory tool, or a form of direct action (McKee 2016: 237). This flight is inspired by the conviction that, in the current social reality, art is no longer tenable, that, as Thomas Gokey, co-organiser of the Rolling Jubilee debt-abolition puts it, ‘there is more important work to do’ (cited in McKee 2016: 3).

A further distinction can be drawn here between the radical political strategy of exodus and its affinity with creative activism, and the post-Marxist strategy of ‘engagement-with’ as articulated by Mouffe (2008). The latter term has been widely used (Mouffe 2007, 2013; Möntmann 2006, 2008, 2009; Sheikh, 2004a, 2004b, 2007a) to describe critical artistic practices that operate inside the disciplinary field of art in order to reform its institutions from within. This latter approach could be said to account for the radical programme adopted by Borja-Villel and Ribalta at MACBA, which resulted in the programming of *Las Agencias*.

## THE AUTONOMOUS COLLECTIVE: ENMEDIO

Scepticism with the political efficacy of the strategy of ‘engagement-with’, coupled with Spain’s then emergent economic crisis, led a number of activists involved in *Las Agencias* to abandon their individual practices as artists, designers and film-makers and establish the collective Enmedio in 2009.

Their name translates in English to ‘in the midst of’, which is a reference to how they see their practice occupying ‘a no-man’s land’ between art, social activism and the media (Enmedio 2014). Enmedio comprise of a core group of members, but regularly expand to include anyone who wants to participate in an action.<sup>5</sup> They also frequently collaborate with activist collectives and social movements, most notably Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) and Taller de Acción Fotográfica! (TAF!).<sup>6</sup>

Enmedio’s projects and actions respond to what they perceive to be a lack of connection between art and political action. They explore how art – specifically image-making – can be put to work to realise social goals. Working with images their self-proclaimed goal is to ‘disrupt the dominant narrative’ circulated by neoliberalism through a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization’ (Eldiario 2013). Accordingly, Enmedio aim to both subvert the conformist subjectivities capital produces through advertising, and in their place, produce new, non-conformist subjectivities that hint at the possibility of alternative social

realities. They do so through a strategy of *détournement*, whereby existing media artifacts or symbols are hijacked, their meaning is then altered before they are returned to circulate in the public domain as social tools capable of disrupting the normal flow of capital.

Enmedio also align their methodologies with a politics of everyday life, a position that responds to the prevailing social and political climate in which they are operating. In particular, they cite the aftermath of the alterglobalisation movement as the impetus for their orientation away from the strategies of mass protest upheld by the movement towards a politics of everyday life, more recently experimented with by the Occupy movement.

For Enmedio the turning point towards a politics of everyday life came about as a result of the police brutality they had experienced when participating in the Genoa G8 counter-Summit in July 2001 (which marked the end of the cycle of protests staged by the alterglobalisation movement).<sup>7</sup> Where use of a strategy of spectacular mass protest at preceding demonstrations had introduced an element of surprise to which the authorities were at first unable to respond, by Genoa it became clear that the tide had turned against the demonstrators (*The Guardian* 2001). As a result of both the brutal state clampdown on mass protest, together with what they perceived to be its increasing futility, the members of Enmedio felt that the time had come to experiment with a new tactics of resistance. They decided to focus their efforts on a politics of everyday life that responded to the needs and desires of the immediate contexts they were operating and living in. As Martín (2015) states:

What we are essentially trying to do is have a better life. As soon as you do that you confront a wall of micro-politics all around you affecting your daily life all the time. And those are the places where we make interventions.

## OPERATING AT A NECESSARY DISTANCE

As proponents of the Autonomous Marxist strategy of exodus, Enmedio's relationship with art (and its institutions) is clear cut: they see art purely as an affective tool that can be instrumentalised in pursuit of their social and political goals. As they acknowledge: 'We're interested in the aesthetic, not for its own sake, but precisely because of the politics that lie within aesthetics: how things are told, what is shown, how it makes people feel' (Eldiario 2013).

Moreover, they believe that the political agency of their actions is premised on maintaining their position as an autonomous collective. This autonomy comes at a

price, however. It entails cutting themselves off from the infrastructure of display, dissemination and ratification previously afforded to them when they operated as artists, designers, and filmmakers.

It also entails the refusal of any financial subsidies that the state makes available to the arts. On this point Enmedio are very clear: they do not accept state grants. They predominately sustain their activities by speaking at conferences and delivering workshops and lectures. They also raise income by organising parties and through crowd funding campaigns (Martín 2015).

In order to safeguard the autonomy of their projects and interventions (and to avoid their assimilation by the art world), Enmedio have (for the most part) been careful to avoid the circuit of production and display utilised by the art world. As such, their projects typically emerge out of workshop situations where participants come together around a particular issue and produce a collective response, and while this in itself does not necessarily differentiate them from the mechanisms of the art world with its recent turn towards collaborative and socially-engaged practices, the manner in which they choose to circulate their projects does. All of their projects and interventions are disseminated either in the public realm or through social networking sites and via the media (or both), and not through art institutional channels (Martín 2015).

Enmedio also protect their interventions from being recuperated by the neoliberal state by adopting a strategy that has much in common with Hakim Bey's (2008) concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ).<sup>8</sup> For Bey, the TAZ is a form of guerrilla warfare that temporarily emancipates an area from the control of the state, before dissolving and re-appearing elsewhere. In order to underscore the importance of its non-permanent nature, Bey describes the TAZ as a form of 'uprising' as opposed to a 'revolution'. The former, he reasons, is fleeting, while the latter is so protracted that it allows for its recuperation by the state, a fate, which the TAZ is designed to resist at all costs. He argues that it is precisely because the uprising is a failed revolution that it succeeds in breaking the vicious circle of revolutionary history, which historically has resulted in either the coming to power of an authoritarian dictatorship, or in a return to the status quo (capitalism) (2008).

The transitory nature or temporary dimension of the TAZ is central to the manner in which Enmedio operate. In particular, the intentionally antagonistic locations they chose for their interventions – including state unemployment offices and banks – mean that they must get in and out relatively quickly, or risk being arrested. *Fiesta en el INEM* (Party in the Unemployment Office) (2009) (Fig. 1), as its title suggests, was staged in a state welfare office at the height of the economic crisis in Spain. In April 2009 a flash mob organised by the collective descended

on a Barcelona unemployment office carrying confetti and streamers. As the sound of the Beastie Boy's *(You Gotta) Fight For Your Right (To Party!)* disturbed the monotony of the waiting area, the assembled group burst into dance. Within minutes many of the stunned onlookers began to join in with the spontaneous festivities and momentarily forgot their reasons for being miserable as they limbo danced under a banner that read 'Crisis'. As the song drew to an end the flash mob exited the premises in a conga line and dispersed into the city.



Enmedio revisited this tactic in June 2012 for an intervention entitled *Fiesta Cierra-Bankia* (Party shut down Bankia). This time they responded to the deeply unpopular government decision to bail out Bankia – Spain's leading mortgage lending bank, which was largely responsible for *La Crisis* – at the same time as announcing cuts to public health and education budgets. Enmedio devised the



intervention in order to encourage customers to close their Bankia accounts, pointing to how a small act – closing a private bank account – can be a powerful political tool if enough people have the courage to do it. They designed a poster campaign, which they distributed in the public domain, with slogans that read: ‘Take your savings out of that damn bank’. And ‘It’s better for it to go down than all of us’. The poster campaign was then followed up by the intervention, which took place in a Barcelona branch of Bankia. This time a flash mob gathered outside and waited patiently until a customer entered the bank to close their account. A member of the group acting as a look out inside the branch relayed the news to the rest of the group, who promptly raced into the branch dancing and singing. The action lasted exactly four minutes, timed to coincide with a remix of the 2 Unlimited dance classic *No Limit* that blasted from the speakers of the huge ghetto blaster a member of the group held on his shoulder. At first the bemused customer stared open mouthed at the unexpected celebration she had unwittingly incited, but after a while she accepted the bunch of flowers thrust at her by the revellers and began to dance in time with the music. As the song came to an end she allowed them to hoist her horizontal body up into the air and carry her out of the branch, leaving a trail of confetti and party poppers in their wake.

To ensure the maximum dissemination of interventions like those described above, Enmedio often produce short films, which they then post on social media sites. A two-minute long video of *Fiesta en el Inem* received 100,000 hits within twenty-four hours of being posted. The footage was subsequently picked up by Spanish television news stations and aired across the country. Largely as a result of the coverage it received, *Fiesta en el Inem* was re-enacted by other unconnected groups across Spain.

Although Enmedio’s interventions succeed in momentarily replacing the depressed atmosphere that hung over Spanish society with a mood of euphoria, their goal is not simply to cheer people up, but more crucially to incite them to political action. The atmosphere of hope and enthusiasm that they foment is intended to inspire the Spanish people to imagine an alternative society beyond the neoliberal state and to participate in its realisation.

## CONCLUSION: A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIP?

Where proponents of the strategy of exodus (like Enmedio) take the steps recounted above to distance their autonomous practices from the art establishment, they cannot control the level of interest their activities generate within it, nor how it might seek to represent and potentially aestheticise and institutionalise

their actions. As Martín (2015) acknowledges, ‘When Enmedio are invited to speak around the world, the invitations mainly come from art institutions. We are already part of that network’.

A case in point here is the group exhibition *Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Museum in New York (11 December 2015 – 7 August 2016). Alongside the work of major contemporary artists with politicised art practices, *Agitprop!* represented documentation of the actions of scores of anti-institutional activist groups and social movements including among others: Futurefarmers, Los Angeles Poverty Department, The Yes Men with Steve Lambert, Amnesty International, Interference Archive, Occupy Museums, Pussy Riot, The Illuminator and Movement to Protect the People (MTOPP).

Despite their prior commitment to ‘work at a necessary distance from institutions’ Enmedio were also represented in *Agitprop!* through the inclusion of a short film of their intervention *Fiesta Cierra Bankia*. While at face value it might appear as though Enmedio are abandoning their ideological position and allowing their practice to be collapsed into art, it is necessary to contextualise their inclusion in *Agitprop!* by making a number of clarifications.

Firstly, *Fiesta Cierra Bankia* was included in phase three of a three-phase curatorial process. This hierarchical process involved the museum’s curatorial team selecting the primary group of exhibitors: predominately well-established contemporary artists making political art. This primary group was then invited to nominate a secondary set of practices and projects for phase two of the exhibition, and then this second group nominated the exhibitors for phase three. As this system of nomination unfolded there was a notable move away from practices ratified and institutionalised by the art establishment, to those rooted in social movements and activism. Enmedio were nominated for phase three by the activist collective Not and Alternative, who in turn had been nominated by The Yes Men for phase two. As part of phase three, *Fiesta Cierra Bankia* was displayed alongside documentation of numerous other examples of ‘non-art’.

Secondly, unlike the political artists Martha Rosler, Jenny Holzer or Luis Camnitzer (all of whom exhibited in phase one of the exhibition) who consciously disseminate their work within the art system, Enmedio’s intervention was not conceived for display in a gallery context. It was initiated through a social media campaign and distributed on the web and through the media, and while visitors to phase three of *Agitprop!* at the Brooklyn Museum could view it on a flat screen monitor mounted on the wall, they could have equally watched it from any electronic device connected to the Internet.

Thirdly, it can be argued that *Fiesta Cierra Bankia* is neither a rarefied and

unique art object, nor a limited edition document of a performance, but an iteration of what Hardt and Negri (2012) call ‘the common’, namely that which is circulated in the public domain for the free use and benefit of all, and which offers a radical alternative to both private and public property. Like their other interventions, *Fiesta Cierra Bankia* was specifically designed to be distributed, copied and altered by others and as such aligns with Hardt and Negri’s understanding of constituent power, insofar as it reconfigures its form in response to the shifting requirements of its users. As Enmedio explain: ‘We conceive and design them like seeds, which can scatter and germinate elsewhere’ (Eldiario 2013).

Fourthly, although it is on exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum, *Fiesta Cierra Bankia*, resists the designation ‘artwork’. Instead it functions as a ‘tool’ or performative apparatus intended to set its viewers in motion and prompt them to political action. Moreover, it is necessary to clarify here that by ‘apparatus’, this author is not referring to the ‘relational’ understanding of this term where pseudo-artworks facilitate communitarian and convivial situations in gallery spaces that simply reinforce existing knowledge structures. Enmedio’s apparatus is intended to produce politically active and empowered citizens capable of interrupting the producer/consumer paradigm upon which the knowledge economy stands.

Finally, and as Izabel Galliera (2016) concludes in her review of *Agitprop!* in FIELD Journal, ‘As a documentation exhibition, *Agitprop!* both aestheticizes politics and politicizes aesthetics, at once forestalling and enabling the resurrection of its exhibited causes’. Understood in this light, the museum is simply further disseminating a project that is already a common good, that has already been (and continues to be) disseminated within the field of activism. In this instance it has very little power to redefine its status, to turn it into an art object and to recuperate its political agency.

To conclude, while Enmedio technically contravened the principles of exodus by engaging with the art world, they did so largely on their own terms. Such an exception showed that, although their relationship with the art establishment necessarily remains conflicted, at certain moments it can also be beneficial. A similar case can be made for their involvement in *Las Agencias*. Unlike Borja-Ville and Ribalta, who almost lost their jobs for the role they played in the collaboration, the activists succeeded in temporarily co-opting a state institution as a sponsor and platform for their anti-capitalist critique.

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## NOTES

1. Even though the Barcelona World Bank Summit was cancelled due to fears of civil unrest following the mass demonstrations in Prague and Gothenburg, the counter-Summit still went ahead.
2. The Fiambreras give the following account of what transpired on their website: '[...] at the end of the summer – even though the project officially was to continue until October – they [MACBA] started to make things difficult for us. We couldn't work at night time for instance. Only one or two people could have access or the key to the Joaquin Costa street building where there was a private security guard at the door, clearly with the intention of making us leave, which we did and we took all our materials with us' (Fiambrera 2014).
3. The logic of extra-statal institutions can also be found in Félix Guattari's thinking on the revolutionary machine, and can be traced back to the writings of the individualist anarchist Max Stirner; both of whom propose alternatives to institutions that close themselves off in the state structure. Guattari advocates the creation of revolutionary machines that resist structuralisation; that can be described as 'non-molar'. Stirner, for this part, described the insurrectionary moment as a process of self-institutionalisation that refuses the structuralisation processes of the state (Raunig 2009: 175-80).
4. In *The Politics of Postanarchism* (2011) Saul Newman argues that anarchist values have provided the backbone for a variety of contemporary left-wing political currents, whether or not their theorists care to acknowledge this fact. In particular, he locates a number of anarchist ideas in the Autonomous Marxist politics of Hardt and Negri, not least their rejection of authoritarianism and the figure of the central revolutionary party and their leaning towards alternative forms of organisation including direct democracy and networked communication. He also points to a general recognition in Autonomous Marxism of the increasingly authoritarian role of the state and the belief that a radical politics must necessarily operate beyond the state (2011: 106).
5. At the time of writing Enmedio's core members include: Xavier Artigas, Núria Campabadal, Oriana Eliçabe, Leónidas Martín and Mario Ortega.
6. Prior to forming Enmedio, many of its members were previously involved in other

activist collectives and social movements, including The Agencies, YOMANGO, V for Vivienda, Zapatismo, squatters' movements, the anti-globalisation movement, and Los Indignados.

7. During the counter-Summit, Carlo Giuliani, a twenty-three-year-old activist from Genoa, was shot by a police officer before his lifeless body was run over by a police Land Rover (*The Guardian* 2001).
8. While I draw on Hakim Bey's (a.k.a. Peter Lamborn Wilson's) concept of the TAZ, I do not condone the manner in which he employs the concept of zones of autonomy to legitimise paedophilia (Helms 2006).

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1 Enmedio, Fiesta, *Fiesta en el Inem*, 2009, Action, Barcelona (Colectivo Enmedio 2015)