

RADIANTS.

metallic memory

women and sound in the struggle for freedom

introduction

This project aims to link an historic moment in the history of the town of Gràcia with a series of cultural events that took place a century later in the very same place. They both feature the same symbolic referent and share often untold values that bring together civil society, the role of women in the struggle for freedom and social equality, and the importance of sound as an identifying factor for a community.

historical timeframe

This project fits within the framework of Spain's transition to democracy, but in order to appreciate its symbolic elements, we need to go back a century and forge ties connecting the events of 4 April 1870 and 4 April 1979. This is what we aim to do below.

historical background

In the 19th century, the main system for conscription used by the Spanish army was calling up recruits called *quintas*, a classist system that created major social inequalities. In this system, each province in Spain had to supply the army with a number of young men in proportion to its population. These men were selected from the total number of young men of a certain age (originally the figure was a fifth, hence the name *quinta*, Spanish for 'fifth'). The law contained provisions whereby young men could avoid being called up by paying 1500-2000 pesetas or could choose to be substituted by a 'volunteer' for 500-1250 pesetas.

For the poorest classes, this system was manifestly unfair, and military service, an unavoidable evil. For the middle classes, though, this provision offered the chance to free their son from military service and put him to work. And for the rich, it was simply another tax they had to pay to oil the machinery of the state – if not this tax, there was always another similar one.

So for the rich this was simply another easily absorbed expense, for the poor it was a direct flesh-and-blood tax, and for the middle classes it meant getting heavily into debt for decades. Given the tremendous fear of military service, many families sold everything they possessed to avoid their son being called up. We shouldn't forget that at the time Spain was fighting wars on several fronts and the chances of a young man coming back alive were very slim. Faced with such a manifestly unfair and immoral system of conscription, those who couldn't afford to buy themselves out of the situation could only resort to deliberately injuring themselves, emigrating or deserting.

Following the 1868 revolution, which led to a six-year period of increased democracy, abolition of the Bourbon monarchy, the exile of Isabel II and the establishment of a democratic regime with remarkably wide-ranging freedoms for the time, the government promised that the system of recruiting *quintas* would be abolished. However, Parliament was reluctant to create a militia and loath to give up a major source of income for the state coffers, and eventually passed a fresh conscription decree. This decree and subsequent call-up of recruits provoked public outrage.

What had previously led to individual responses (either pay or flee) now exploded in a collection reaction.

shelling

As a result, two years after the 1868 revolution, between 4 and 9 April 1870, the town of Gràcia (which remained an independent town until 1897) was the site of what became known as the Recruits' Revolt. This protest soon gathered force and the town was besieged by the Spanish army for six days. Artillery fire rained down on the town, destroying many houses and killing 27 people. During the siege, the largest bell in Plaça de la Vila (also known at different times as Plaça Rius i Taulet and Plaça d'Orient) was rung night and day, rousing Gracians to stop their young men being conscripted. This bell was at the top of a tower built by architect Rovira i Trias – one of the few civilian bell towers in the country. The tower was one of the targets of the batteries under the command of General Gaminde (later known as General Boom Boom) which shelled the town from Passeig de Gràcia and it was hit on several occasions.

After assessing the course of events and realising it would be futile to keep up resistance, the men of the town sought refuge in the hills, but the bell, now cracked by the shelling, carried on ringing, since the women took turns to ensure it never fell silent.

When the army finally entered the town, they found it deserted: there was only a single woman in the tower, ringing the bell. Gràcia was indiscriminately plundered and the woman (whose identity remains unknown) was imprisoned in Alcalá de Henares for three years until the proclamation of the First Spanish Republic, when President Estanislau Figueres freed her.

the symbol

The following years saw a number of attempts to take down the bell to change or repair it, but neighbours were always against it. The bell tower also played a major role in the 1873 and 1874 revolts and became a symbol of freedom and democracy. This feeling gained strength after 1929, when public pressure had the bell restored to its place, after an attempt to melt it down for the clock tower at the Universal Exposition at Plaça Espanya.

This secular bell, which was never christened, still sounds cracked. It has a dull, broken sound that Gracians take as a (sound) symbol of mothers' indignation, the

defenceless of the poor, and the moral strength of a community in a town. The bell tower is a symbol of the town and the bell itself is too - a sound symbolising a community and a town.

This symbolic nature is still alive today, enriched by a further series of events described below.

the civil war: bombings

A few months after the events of April 1870, publisher and bookseller Innocenci López Pocs launched the weekly magazine *La Campana de Gràcia*, a satirical, republican, federalist and anticlerical publication which was published until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936. During that and the following year, the Gràcia bell was unable to call neighbours to the local fiesta or defy the besiegers, since this time the attacks came from the sky and the sea. Gracians used all the money they had saved up for decorations for the fiesta to build air-raid shelters to protect them from the first attacks in a new kind of warfare, a key chapter in what would become known as 'total war'. These systematic bombings of the civilian population, deliberately designed to demoralise the population and force the surrender of armed resistance, turned Barcelona into the first test ground for a perverse (although nowadays coldly familiar) strategy. Barcelonans became the first city residents to experience the traumatic and devastating experience of indiscriminate bombing for two years. Gràcia (which by now formed part of Barcelona) was one of the hardest-hit neighbourhoods and suffered attacks for the second time in sixty years, although these bombings were far more destructive than General Boom Boom's artillery shells. The bell tower was used to warn people to seek refuge in the air-raid shelters when the bombings started.

the transition

In the final years of Franco's dictatorship, the increased flow of information and the timid opening-up to the outside world, begun in the 1960s as a result of the international situation and the regime's own particular interests, enabled the (controlled) entry of new ideas and styles. In the 1970s this became a vital stimulus for a whole generation. In the art world, and specifically in the world of music, new folk, pop and rock started to play a part in street culture, and the radio (particularly Ràdio Joventut) was at the forefront of these new forms of expression which arrived very late in a cut-off country with fierce censorship, and led to the emergence of *nova cançó* and the progressive movement. These movements, currents and groups of young people, workers and students not only reflected a thirst for all things new; these kinds of music also clearly symbolised opposition to the regime and rejection of the dictatorship. The first generation to travel abroad for stylistic rather than political motives brought back enough cultural news to stimulate their political conscience.

The period of transition to democracy saw, in three short years, the rise and fall of the *laietà* musical movement – a brief but key consolidation of urban counterculture, in which other forms of cultural expression such as literature, comics, film and theatre were revived in a city that had never resigned itself to the grey colour of Francoist

subculture. This counterculture was also linked to other highly important values and demands: freedom of expression, freedom of sexual orientation, freedom of thought and a crystal clear message: young people wanted to take part in the process and wanted to do so from a perspective of maximum and not minimum demands. This incredibly brief yet fertile period created a strong network of associations and cultural activists, centred especially on libertarian cultural associations and other independent association projects, and saw historic events such as the Libertarian Days held in Park Güell. New action and communication tools were created to transmit these values and concerns.

the radio

On 4 April 1979, the day after the first municipal elections held in the new democratic era, the first independent broadcaster in the city, Ona Lliure, was also the first to be shut down by the government. However, it didn't take long for the new left-leaning town and city councils to exploit the legal loopholes to ensure the new urban culture would survive. The same year saw the launch of the free and independent broadcaster La Campana de Gràcia, transmitted from the bell tower in Gràcia, which enabled it to avoid being shut down, since the tower was municipal property and therefore out of bounds to the Spanish police. Another incarnation of Innocenci López's historic publication was born in 1979 when the Vila de Gràcia neighbourhood association passed on the challenge of informing neighbours to a group of young journalism students, who set up the no less mythical magazine *Carrer Gran*, which gave rise to a key generation of Gràcia activists, journalists, historian, politicians, etc. *Carrer Gran* was not the only independent publication; others, not necessarily neighbourhood-based, sprouted prolifically.

The most important revolution, though, was the free radio stations. Ona Lliure was repeated shut down and many of its supporters joined La Campana de Gràcia, especially when it was being taken down and moved (Ona Lliure constantly changed location in the city to avoid detection). When Ona Lliure finally ceased transmissions for good, La Campana de Gràcia became the laboratory for a new way of doing radio and the school for many young people who used alternative radio as a particularly appropriate vehicle for communication and creation at a time when keeping a close critical eye on the democratic process was key. Thanks to its proximity and free, twofold nature as both a voice and a loudspeaker, and because music became a symbol of change, radio was best vehicle, as it also was for poetry and grassroots politics. In a few short months the phenomenon of free radios became unstoppable: Contrarràdio, Ràdio Pica (which also started broadcasting in 1979 from the bell tower), Ràdio Poble Sec, El Avispero, Ràdio Maduixa, La Seba, Ràdio Gavina, Radio Libertina, Ràdio Venus, Ràdio Can Serra, Ràdio Cornellà, Ràdio Boira Lliure, Ràdio Joventut del Pla, Ràdio Farigola... which all combined their clear commitment to social change and radical and highly creative attitude with their fierce opposition to the *Plan Técnico Transitorio del Servicio Público de Radiodifusión Sonora para Frecuencia Modulada*, passed on 8 June 1979, which placed the power to award broadcasting licences firmly in the hands of the Spanish central government and gave priority to stations with sufficient capital and financial backing, to the detriment of what were euphemistically called 'individual' projects, even though they came from social groups. This political decision, never overturned by any democratic government, meant that one of the greatest opportunities in this new historic period

was lost and left a very bitter taste in the mouth of groups behind the free radio stations which remains to this day.

The same symbol had reappeared once again and the bell tower built by Rovira i Trias in 1864 continued to stand as a beacon for people's longings for freedom. The free radio stations were logically the first means of giving a voice to political, artistic and cultural agents working in networks, which at that time meant working in secret and often clandestinely, with no resources and no access to promotion through conventional radio stations. Music, by its very nature, made best use of the radio and the free radio stations acted as a platform for the most experimental, innovative and daring sound projects, including radio art, a focal point of sound art since the 1920s.

Today's free radio stations continue to carry out the important job of promoting this music, alongside the current network of municipal district broadcasters.

Since 1996, these areas of sound creation have also been promoted by Gràcia Territori Sonor through its many live activities and its radio programme *Música i Geografia*, broadcast on 96.6 FM every Monday at 6 pm for the past twelve years.

women in sound creation

In 2006, Gràcia Territori Sonor set up the *Matriu* project within the LEM festival in order to achieve the goal of getting equal numbers of men and women taking part in the festival. This project won the backing of the Department for Women and Civil Rights at Barcelona City Council and the Catalan Institute for Women.

Appearances would suggest an absence of women in the context of sound experimentation. This, however, is not the case: there are many women in this field – many of them with many years of experience. What happens is that they lack visibility or the necessary support; others want to be there and cannot find reference models and support to let them plan their own career, or come across direct or indirect obstacles in their path.

Matriu helped raise the visibility of women's bold, original sound creation, sparked debate on the subject between creators and promoters, opened up new channels of information for creators, gathered data for studying the situation on the ground and gave some pointers for how to carry on working on this line in the future.

sound

In this overview we have travelled back in time, but not in space – we haven't moved from the bell tower in Gràcia. The cracked sound of its bell has beseeched Gracians not to hand over their sons to war and united women in their cry for equality and justice. It called them to seek refuge in the air-raid shelters during the bombings in the Civil War, and it launched society's longing for freedom onto the airwaves, along with the music created in freedom by the town's men and women. The story of the Gràcia bell tower is a story of a people's strength to change their own future.

Radiants aims to recognise all the players in this story, actors in a tale whose chapters fit together like pieces in the jigsaw of our memory.