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The Praxis 2023 Study Program

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Corina L. Apostol

A sea change in Santander: the Praxis 2023 Study Program

The inception of Praxis, an intensive independent-study program in the small city of Santander, Spain, recalibrates the relationship between contemporary art and academia within the region and beyond. Shepherded by fluent, an arts organization dedicated to fostering interdisciplinary exchanges across various institutional, nonprofit, and educational platforms, Praxis stands at the vanguard of interweaving social-practice art and pedagogy. As the backbone of Praxis, fluent's role is crucial, providing necessary infrastructure for a space where diverse voices can converge.

A storied art history profoundly influences educational approaches in Spain, where emphasis on classical art forms has often taken precedence. This focus, while rooted in Spain's rich artistic heritage, tends to disregard the dynamic and diverse character of contemporary art movements. An inclination towards traditionalism in art education has led to a static framework that struggles to adapt to the experimental spirit of artistic practices today, and creates a noticeable divide between the country's lively and fluid landscape of contemporary art and an education system that is still anchored in classical methodologies.

Within this context, Praxis positions itself as a response to these prevailing pedagogical norms. In a recent conversation I had with Alejandro Alonso Diaz, a founding member of fluent, the curator and researcher underscored contemporary art's unique potential to stimulate intellectual and societal discourse. fluent conceptualizes Praxis as more than an educational initiative, instead seeking to catalyze a sea change in art education altogether. This perspective is part of fluent's long-term commitment to fostering new institutional ecologies and interrogating the role of a small contemporary arts organization in an era marked by extraction, racism, financialization, and other sociopolitical challenges. How can such an entity, fluent asks, foster a collective shift towards a more equitable and just society? Praxis, therefore, is more than an acknowledgement of the urgent need to integrate contemporary art into academic realms; it's a call to action for a thoughtful and dynamic reimagining of art education altogether.

The quaint, picturesque façade of Santander—the capital city of Cantabria, in northern Spain—belies its role as a regional seat of financial power. Founded as a simple fishing village in antiquity, Santander became a crucial maritime port during the Roman era and the Middle Ages, and later transformed into a linchpin of Spain's banking sector. Since 1857, it has served as the cradle for the country's largest financial institution, Banco Santander, and the city's ascendancy prompted profound cultural and architectural metamorphoses. In the early twentieth century, Santander became the darling of Spanish royalty and aristocracy, leading to a bloom in opulent architecture and a burgeoning social elite. However, this gloss of wealth often obscures other realities that have been



Participants Can Lejárraga and Andrés Izquierdo working during one of the programme's open sessions.

marginalized by the march of progress and capital. Today, Santander's amalgamation of historical allure and financial might—symbolized by landmarks such as the Centro Botín,¹ a contemporary art center that emerged on the city's skyline in 2017—encapsulates the ongoing tensions between tradition and modernity, culture and commerce. Praxis consequently seeks to redefine the role of art within a domain that is especially swayed by commercial imperatives, including those of Banco Santander, known for its own significant art collection.

fluent and Praxis transcend a mere response to such neo-liberal dynamics, however. The latter counters the city's entrenched financial identity by promoting artistic experimentation in areas governed by economic dialogues. The program also leverages the city's rich maritime heritage, modeling itself as a reinvention of the cultural port concept, where divergent ideas and

narratives can collide and converge. "Mirroring the historical ports of Santander that opened gateways to new worlds," Diaz explained, "Praxis becomes a nexus for varied narratives, utilizing art as a medium for connection and communication." Ultimately, the establishment of Praxis in Santander does more than challenge the city's image; it has the potential to transform the locale into a burgeoning center of cultural and artistic innovation. Praxis stands as a testament to art's potential to redefine urban narratives and social dynamics, marking a bold shift in the city's story and its place within Spain's broader cultural landscape.

Before Praxis, there was "Proteínas," a pioneering initiative that fluent launched in 2021. Aiming to shake up old edifices of educational thought, Proteínas was inspired by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's groundbreaking and seminal treatise on critical

pedagogy, first published in 1968; the program also examined the Montessori method and its approaches to exploratory, self-directed education. Diaz describes *Proteínas* as an investigation into parallels between human learning behaviors and the automatic processes of other biological systems. “Our aim,” he remarked, “was to explore how learning could emulate the transformative and adaptive properties of proteins in living organisms.” This approach underscores a deep engagement with Freire’s advocacy of a dialogic education model that empowers learners to question and transform their world, alongside Montessori’s emphasis on self-directed, experiential learning in a prepared environment. By invoking the metaphor of proteins—which adapt and change in response to their environment—Diaz suggests a fluid, flexible approach to education that is deeply interconnected to learners’ varied contexts, backgrounds, and abilities. This philosophical orientation, when synthesized with the traditional interpretations of Montessori’s and Freire’s ideas, offers a paradigm that prioritizes adaptability and transformation in the learning process.

Proteínas staged a series of dialogues and workshops with the objective of cultivating a learning environment that was deeply intertwined with the fast-changing vogues of contemporary art and critical discourse. A standout session with Camila Marambio, titled “Scattered, light, otherwise I die,” addressed the circulation of solar energy through an integrative process of travel, writing, and dance. Marambio, known for her work on eco-cultural ethics via the curatorial platform *Ensayos*, brought a unique perspective on environmental engagement, blending artistic practice with somatic research. Similarly, curator and writer Sofia Lemos’s presentation “Journey to the One” provided insights into modes of critique through a critical-poetic meditation, drawing on diverse bodies of knowledge to challenge frameworks of representation and to contemplate the unchartability of utopias. In tandem with these intellectual exchanges, *Proteínas* hosted workshops that created practical applications of its educational philosophy. Artist Victor Ruíz Colomer’s workshop series, developed in collaboration with Joe Highton, tackled themes of mobility, sport, and love through interactive questionnaires and drawing experiments with local teenagers. These sessions all interrogated the fundamental potential and nature of learning in contemporary society, challenging traditional educational paradigms in Spain, and advocating for learning models that are as adaptable and multifaceted as the biological metaphor that *Proteínas* embraced.

The 2023 Study Program at Praxis also transcended the confines of traditional academic models, advocating for the erasure of rigid disciplinary divides in order to synthesize artistic creativity and intellectual rigor. Praxis’s methodology underscores the indispensable role of artists as thinkers and interlocutors in complex societal dialogues, distinguishing itself by the depth and breadth

with which it integrates these dimensions. Its program does not introduce a new concept but rather refines and intensifies the application of interdisciplinary thought in art education, in accordance with the contemporary art world’s appetite for artists who are both skilled in their craft and capable of engaging in a wide range of critical intellectual discourses.

Audre Lorde’s belief in art’s capacity to be a catalyst for social change is central to the program’s ethos. As she remarked in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”² The sentiment that art transcends mere personal expression, and instead serves as a vital conduit for social engagement and activism, has been instrumental in shaping Praxis. Its 2023 Study Program seamlessly blended artistic practice with inquiry into complex societal and ecological systems, with a curriculum that incorporated discussions of language, identity, structural dynamics, and bodily experience. Its four “learning modules”—“The Vital Dimension,” “The Dimension of Language and Identity,” “The Structural Dimension,” and “The Corporeal and Moving Dimension”—were interspersed throughout the program’s fourteen weeks and prompted participants to consider art’s role in instigating societal change. This approach resonates with current trajectories in the art world, where artists are increasingly valued as pivotal agents of social transformation and critique.³

Under the guidance of Yayo Herrero, an anthropologist, engineer, professor, and ecofeminist activist, the module “The Vital Dimension” focused on the nexus between art practice and socioecological issues, envisioning art’s potential to engage with and propose solutions for pressing challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and societal inequality. Herrero’s instruction underscored the urgency of integrating ecological and social justice into the fabric of artistic practice, positioning art as a key player in the broader dialogue on sustainability and equitable development.

In “The Dimension of Language and Identity,” the poet and educator CAConrad introduced a deeply personal, politicized approach to creative output. Renowned for their “(Soma)tic Poetry Exercises,” which ground poetic expression in one’s immediate surroundings, CAConrad’s study program at Praxis interrogated language’s role in constructing identity and meaning. Informed by their queer perspective and life experiences, CAConrad’s module served as a radical blueprint for understanding and utilizing poetry as a conduit for personal and societal transformation. This segment of the program treated writing as a prism through which the oft-overlooked textures of the “extreme present,” no matter how

seemingly mundane or unpoetic, can probe the deeper realities that envelope one's everyday. As an integral thread in the tapestry of daily life, poetic practice was posited as an avenue for grasping the complex social and ecological realities that define Santander and beyond.

Stefano Harney is an activist and scholar known for his incisive critique of capitalist institutions and colonial legacies. His module "The Structural Dimension" delved into the intricate histories and influences of colonial infrastructures. Harney's approach illuminated how the remnants of colonialism have shaped contemporary society, particularly within urban planning, educational systems, and environmental policies in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia, which were once part of the Spanish Empire. His curriculum encouraged a deep inquiry into the mechanisms through which colonial dynamics are perpetuated, urging participants to envision new ways to engage with the land and their surroundings. This was facilitated by a blend of discursive sessions and practical exercises, including collective forms of study, an analysis on logistics as new forms of coloniality, and explorations of how to engage with practices that oppose violence and brutality in their many forms. Harney's guidance steered the conversation towards a nuanced understanding of logic, logistics and logisticality in deciphering complex networks of power, violence, nationalism and racism. By discussing specific instances of colonial impact, participants learned to challenge entrenched systems of dominance, aiming to build a more livable world.

Finally, Andrea Rodrigo's module "The Corporeal and Moving Dimension" comprised a focused exploration on the body as a place of both concrete and physical sensation. Rodrigo is a curator and researcher who focuses on contemporary choreography and dance, and through a series of readings, exercises and encounters, her sessions unfolded a specific grammar of sensation. They situated performances as sites of study that negotiate between materiality and imagination, both sensing and making sense of provided materials. Working with textual and performative resources, Andrea led the group in an examination of embodiment, which explored different ways that somatic forms of knowledge bring forward bodily textures and intensities.

In tandem with interdisciplinary study and a belief in art's power to enact social change, diversity and inclusivity are also central to Praxis's ethos. Its dedication to fostering a heterogenous educational environment is reflected in the student body's makeup, which was deliberately assembled to mirror the wide-ranging geographic, gender-identity, and disciplinary backgrounds of its applicants. The 2023 Study Program comprised twenty students, thirteen of whom are from outside Spain. Gender diversity is represented by eight women, seven nonbinary individuals, and five men, and the students' fields of expertise span performance, choreography, dance, writing

and translation, visual arts, architecture, activism, and curation. Praxis also addresses accessibility and language barriers by offering grants and facilitating bilingual classes in Spanish and English, complete with simultaneous translation services. This ensures that linguistic proficiency does not become a barrier to participation, thus democratizing access to the program.

At Praxis, the educational philosophy transcends traditional methodologies, embracing interactive and experiential learning tactics. The program prompts active engagement from participants, fostering a transition from passive knowledge consumption to contextualizing it within the political dimensions of life. "Our pedagogical approach is fundamentally transformative, seeking not only to change the participants' interaction with the world and art," Diaz explained, "but also to profoundly reshape their self-perception and understanding." This transformation lies at the heart of Praxis, which is designed to provoke a paradigm shift by endowing participants with altogether new conceptions of their surroundings.

Diaz perceives the complex structures in which Praxis exists —be they logistical, financial, or conceptual—as spaces for observation, study and potential transformation. He views these conditions as essential catalysts for the program's constant re-adjustment. "Each obstacle [that] the programme encounters propels the community of participants and faculty members to listen, discuss, and, dig into the conditions affecting such difficulty, ensuring that Praxis remains both agile and healing to the evolving landscapes of art and education." This approach signifies an ambition to react to current trends and challenges while also anticipating and influencing the future trajectories of art and education.

Praxis has already begun to impact Spain's artistic and intellectual discourse, resonating with and expanding upon the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's insights on the role of art within society. Bourdieu's extensive work on cultural production asserts that artistic practices and preferences are deeply intertwined with societal structures and power dynamics. Praxis deliberately expands upon Bourdieu's insights by challenging the established norms within Spain's art scene. Diaz envisions Praxis as an ongoing, dynamic force in this context. "Our goal is for Praxis to act as an agent of change, not just within Spain, but internationally, influencing and sculpting the dialogue surrounding art and education." This objective underscores Praxis's ambition to spearhead artistic and educational experimentation, and to make enduring and substantive contributions on local, national, and international stages.

In essence, Praxis marks a significant turn in the dialogue between art and education. It's a journey of conviviality, deep listening, study, and exchange as methodologies that redraw the contours of art's interactions with—and

transformations of—society. As Diaz summarized, “Praxis is an open, ongoing narrative, an opportunity for metamorphoses to continually redefine the intersection of art, education, and societal impact.”

This article was adjusted on April 22, 2024 to correct quotes from Alejandro Alonso Diaz and to revise the descriptions of Stefano Harney's and Andrea Rodrigo's modules.

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Dr. Corina L. Apostol is an assistant professor of social practice in contemporary art and culture at the University of Amsterdam. She served as a curator and a member of the steering committee for “Beyond Matter” (2020–23), an international, practice-based research project taking cultural heritage and culture in development to the verge of virtual reality. In 2022, she curated the Estonian Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale, presenting the project “Orchidelirium: An Appetite for Abundance” in the Dutch “Rietveld” Pavilion. She served as a curator at the Tallinn Art Hall, Estonia (2019–23) and was appointed as a guest lecturer at the Art Academy of Latvia (2021–23). In 2019, she curated the Shelter Festival “Cosmopolitics, Comradeship, and the Commons” at the Space for Free Arts in Helsinki. Dr. Apostol held the Mellon Fellowship at Creative Time (2017–19), where she co-edited the publication *Making Another World Possible: 10 Creative Time Summits, 10 Global Issues, 100 Art Projects* (Routledge, 2019) and co-curated the Creative Time Summit “On Archipelagoes and Other Imaginaries” in Miami. Dr. Apostol obtained her Ph.D. from Rutgers University, where she was the Dodge Curatorial Fellow at the Zimmerli Art Museum (2010–16). In 2022, she won the apexart 2022–23 exhibition competition in New York with the project “Flora Fantastic.” She is currently coediting the volume *Flora Fantastic: From Orchidelirium to Eco-Critical Art*, which is set to be released in 2024 by Routledge.

1

An extension of Banco Santander's philanthropic endeavors, the Centro Botín stands as a testament to the bank's influence in shaping public spaces and cultural narratives. See "Spain's new Centro Botín Shuns the 'Bilbao Effect,'" *Art Newspaper*, June 2017.

2

Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984).

3

On art's potential to instigate societal change and the role of art in community identity and activism, see Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New Press, 1997).