

*The Texts Collection* is a program that accompanies and amplifies artistic practices by generating a collection of monographic texts for Hangar residents. Each artist has the possibility to commission a text about their work from an author of their choice—local or international; known or to be known—in editorial dialogue with Hangar. The intention is to produce publications on their practice in general—beyond this work or that particular work—designed for agile circulation and reedition, ensuring a long life, and contributing to expanding the networks and frameworks of artistic practices.

Through this editorial device, artists can count on a comprehensive and in-depth text that captures their ways of doing and thinking holistically, integrating different projects to build an overall view of their practices. The *Texts Collection* also provides artists the opportunity to establish a writing relationship as a starting point, rather than as the result of a project or exhibition.

# Distraction as a Tool

## On the Practices

### of Arnau Sala Saez

### Mattin

How can a complex, unfocused and many-sided practice be summed up in just a few words?

Arnau Sala Saez is a multifaceted artist who is relentlessly experimenting. Rather than answers, this text brings in a number of key points to understand what he does and his relationship with what surrounds him. While his practice includes a variety of disciplines, there's one thread running through his extensive career: his constant search. Since meeting him around 2006, I have always been amazed by his ability to relate to the most interesting scenes without necessarily adhering to trends or fashions that can be pernicious. In this short text, we will try to pull the thread of his practice by interspersing my personal experiences in relation to his work with conversations we have had over the last few months.

Even before I met him, Arnau was already an important person in my life. In 1999, he released a record by the Valencian band Zanussi as the first reference of his label Ozonokids. This single was a ticking time bomb that left its mark on me. I just didn't know one could make music like that. Arnau's beginnings go back to the hardcore/punk scene, DIY and animal liberation activism. Although his restlessness has led him to broaden his interests and explore other fields, music and sound have always been present. For instance, in the early 2000s, he was part of the city's noise scene when he was living in Philadelphia. Between 2005 and 2011, he organised the Cap Sembrat festival in Barcelona with the platform l'Ull Cec. Then, in 2011, he founded a platform that is a record label but also other things, Anòmia.

As an adult, he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a condition that has certainly influenced a number of aspects of his practice. Arnau reflects on his experience and how he coexists with this diagnosis. He looks at it as a sort of liberation, as it finally provid-

ed answers to decades of failures in education and work. However, it was a liberation that implied an awareness of normative systemic structures governed by productivist criteria and the hardships that these structures entail for neuro-divergent individuals. Arnau comments on this in more detail:

*Attention is understood in a very dualistic way. That's why people who are diagnosed with ADHD put themselves in a dichotomy by asking 'Am I functional or am I dysfunctional?' Then guilt appears, just like the idea of failure vs. success. I think it's obvious that society is making you dysfunctional, as society does not challenge what it is excluding and what it is condemning. I wonder for what and for whom one is functional.<sup>1</sup>*

With his work, Arnau raises questions of great significance: what is functional and what is dysfunctional in a society that constantly needs to generate surplus value? How can anyone accept being put at a disadvantage under the normative perspective of this system? Can the whole model be questioned at its roots? This is what Arnau is doing by rethinking the binary of normal vs. not normal and questioning who makes these distinctions. Arnau experiments with distraction as a tool and as a material to develop artworks, thus unveiling its potential. Distraction can be seen as a lack of motivation regarding what is established, but it can also be understood as amplified curiosity towards transcendence, even if unconsciously.

Predictive coding is a very interesting concept currently emerging in the neurosciences. According to this theory, the brain regularly generates and updates a 'mental model' of its environment: it uses prior information and expectations to generate predictions about the world and updates these predictions when it receives new information. Predictive coding assumes that perception is not simply a direct copy of reality, but an active, generative interpretation of sensory information connected with the individual's expectations and beliefs and the environment. Linked to predictive coding, a number of empirical studies have been carried out on ADHD, presenting it as hypersensitivity to what is new, to what is out of line with the established model: '[...] individuals with ADHD (unlike individuals with ASD – autism spectrum disorder) show higher or even exaggerated neural responses to new and unexpected stimuli (Gumenyuk et al., 2005) and lower responses to

1 Arnau Sala Saez, interview with Violeta Mayoral, in *Alteridad radical*, La Panera, 2023.

expected signals (Marzinzik et al., 2012).<sup>2</sup>

Taking these findings into account, it can be said that people with ADHD are incredibly sensitive to everything that is new. Not being very interested in the most expected signals or in what confirms the pattern they already have in their brain, they are individuals who can most clearly question established patterns. This could be seen as a positive feature in any given society – why is it not in this one? Perhaps because, in capitalism, what is new has to be administered in doses easily digestible by the system, not questioning the model itself. That's why Arnau comments: 'Whenever a huge stimulus comes along is when I am able to concentrate the most.'

Given his extensive work, I would like to focus on three of his projects that have been essential in the evolution of his practice. The first is based on music, the second is related to the pedagogical field, and the third is a visual arts project.

### Ex-Continent: *Participant*

This is an album co-released by New York record label Ormolycka (allegedly the label with the worst reputation in the world) and Anòmia, in 2018.

*Una realitat que es fa insuportable [a reality that becomes unbearable]<sup>3</sup>*

This album is a turning point. Beyond its research and discourse, this album embodies crisis and disappointment regarding the dynamics of specific electronic music contexts that existed when it was recorded. *Participant* represents, among other things, the decision to change. In order to understand its aesthetic complexity, just refer to the music genres and styles used on the Discogs website and database to describe this album: Electronic, Non-Music, Folk, World, & Country, Stage & Screen Abstract, Dub, Ambient, Field Recording, Catalan Music, Folk, Leftfield.

- 2 María Luz González-Gadea, Srivas Chennu, Tristan A. Bekinschtein, Alexia Rattazzi, Ana Beraudi, Paula Tripicchio, Beatriz Moyano, Yamila Soffita, Laura Steinberg, Federico Adolfi, Mariano Sigman, Julián Marino, Facundo Manes, Agustín Ibáñez, 'Predictive coding in autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder', *Journal of Neurophysiology*, November 2015, <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4643094/>>.
- 3 Arnau Sala Saez, album press release <<https://arnausala.bandcamp.com/album/participant>>.

To put this in perspective, between 2012 and 2016 Arnau released several works under the name Exoteric Continent. With this project, he was able to experiment and play with aesthetics associated with club music, which at that time was beginning to populate the small international experimental music and art scenes. The spread of club music, together with the rise of social networks such as Instagram, sparked the interest of the music press and festivals, opening up previously out-of-reach spaces like clubs to smaller projects. A new, broader interest from the public seemed to be a new reality.

However, this shift had a number of underlying consequences. It made it possible for artists who were originally self-managed, independent, and therefore lacking expectations to become professionals to a certain extent. This professionalisation came with strings attached. Using the name Exoteric Continent, Arnau reluctantly stepped into the semi-professionalised sector of electronic music and found himself face to face with contradictions and conditions that sectors like this contain: competitiveness, individualism, ego boost, hierarchies, inequalities, etc.

### Arnau elaborates on these contradictions:

‘Power structures, connections, individualism and gatekeeping thrive in such environments, although they’re totally unrelated to music and culture. They’re rather linked to the perpetuation of a model that is a carbon copy of the capitalist model of production and growth. This model prompts any content to be “contemporary” and relevant at all times, promoting an idea of newness that is linked to a “slavery” to trends as dictated by the market, first on microscales and then on macroscales. To be financially dependent on that, within a precarious context, generates competitiveness instead of community and mutual aid, thus inducing strongly hierarchical and unfair relationships.’<sup>4</sup>

The tyranny of cool, we might say, gets amplified in the era of social media and leads to mental health issues and toxic relationships. *Participant* was born out of a profound disappointment with this specific music context, and was recorded during 2017 and 2018, a very special period in the history of Catalonia. An independence referendum was held on 1 October 2017 and engaged a large proportion of the Catalan population but was brutally repressed by the Spanish state. The Catalan government played poker with this referendum, and although it won by a majority and even declared

4 Arnau Sala Saez in conversation with the author, 19 April 2023.

independence for a few seconds, it lost the battle against the Spanish state. Several members of the government went into exile or were imprisoned. In this album, the turmoil that was in the air can be sensed beneath the surface in a subtle way, though the roughness is there. When listening to it, there is a pleasant feeling at first, but its internal tensions slowly unfold – tensions between different forms of aesthetics, between seeking acceptance and experiencing a cluster of contradictions, between expressing oneself through certain aesthetic tastes and wanting to break away from them, towards something new, something different. In a way, this album feels like a call for help.

The album was presented in the context of the MRB\_AMM IV meeting at Centro Huarte in Navarra, in September 2018. This meeting brought together people working in experimental music, sound art and activism, raising questions such as: what is the function of music in society today? How can we confront the rise of individualism and competitiveness? During the meeting, there was a key moment that for me represented the crisis that was taking place in experimental music at that time in the Basque Country. While people were talking about their personal experiences regarding the scene, sitting in a circle, a person coming from an activist background exclaimed: ‘This is more like an AA meeting than an assembly!’ I think that person was right. This was an existential crisis and we needed collective tools to manage it, which we didn’t have yet. Arnau had been working on these issues for some time and was trying to generate those tools.

These issues were developed further during the gathering *Context, percepció – En busca d’hiper-mediacions i comunitat*<sup>5</sup>, that Arnau organised a few months later in May 2018, at Hangar in Barcelona. In this gathering we tried to deal with issues such as the dominance of algorithmic agendas, problems derived from so-called ‘connectivity’, overexposure to information, addiction to self-expression, pervasive competitiveness and individualism, the threat of climate change, and the rise of the Anthropocene.

A big part of the answer inevitably lies in a collectivisation of frustrations and an understanding of the psychosomatic effects caused by technology. For instance, listening exercises help us understand in a practical way how our body and mind function when our model and expectations are dealt with differently. This is something that Arnau elaborated in his work *Déficit de atenció y distracción profunda*<sup>6</sup> [Attention deficit and deep

5 <<https://arnausalasaez.com/2019/05/09/context-percepcio-en-busca-dhiper-mediacions-i-comunitat/>>

6 Learn more and listen: <<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/content/arnau-sala-saez>>

distraction], developed for specific events organised by Pan-Pan Kolektiva in the midst of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

One of the strategies used by Arnau to develop his sound works is the use of certain characteristics of attention as defined by psychology – amplitude, intensity, oscillation and control. Thus, in a formal way, he tries to generate sound experiments that constantly lead you to question what attention is. The referents become abstract to the point of not being recognisable anymore. This leads us to the relationship between the avant-garde, attention and models. Allegedly, the avant-garde and modernism seek a rupture with established models in order to generate new ones, as in a *tabula rasa*. However, post-structuralism points out that the idea that one can start from scratch is a spurious concept. There are always pre-established grounds—perhaps imperceptible ones—that condition what should be considered new anyway. In his listening exercises, Arnau puts the listener’s attention at the centre. This makes a difference when trying to generate new forms since he is working on reception, attention and how it is conditioned in different ways. It makes a lot of sense that from this point in time, Arnau started organising workshops and working in pedagogical contexts, dealing with attention and distraction in a straightforward manner with people.

### Hiper-Mediacions Workshop / workgroup, 2022-2023<sup>8</sup>

*You have to be very careful: not being aware of diversity in the classroom can ultimately lead many students to depression and lack of self-esteem. I try to teach something that I feel is very powerful—not all cultures understand and deal with attention in the same way. The same goes for the notions of failure and success.*<sup>9</sup>

Hiper-Mediacions are a series of workshops that Arnau carried out during 2022 and 2023 at the Can Felipa Civic Centre in Barcelona, with participants mostly between the ages of 20 and 40. In these workshops, Arnau

7 <<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/activities/post-traumatic-listening>>  
More about Pan Pan Kolektiva [in Spanish]: <<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/content/escucha-postraumatica-pan-pan>>

8 <<https://arnausalasaez.com/2022/09/28/hiper-mediacions-2022/>> <<https://hipermediacions.wordpress.com/>>

9 Arnau Sala Saez, interview with Violeta Mayoral, in *Alteridad radical*, La Panera, 2023.

collectivises the experience of his own personal crisis in order to understand the structural conditions behind it, conditions that currently affect all of us. When sharing these personal experiences of mental blocks, many other issues arise – climate crisis, sterile activism, infinite capitalism, technocentrism, toxic contemporaneity, precarity, competitiveness, overexposure to information, new forms of communication, international political climate, wars, escalation of populism, proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories, individualism, mass surveillance...

Pedagogy is increasingly becoming more relevant in Arnau’s activities, especially the work on distraction. In recent projects, *En residència* and *Alteritat radical*, he has worked with teenagers, developing a series of experimental techniques that challenge what we understand by neurodivergence from the standpoint of alterity, thus questioning our perception of distraction and attention. ‘The distraction notebook’ is one of the techniques that Arnau shares with participants during his workshops. One can paint or write whatever they want in a notebook when they get bored or distracted. Distraction becomes creative material. What is usually perceived as a lack of education or a waste of time becomes material for thinking collectively about the learning process and its relationship with models that society imposes on us.

Swear words, porn websites, logos of sports clothing brands such as Nike or Adidas, sexy girls, etc., are examples of things that teenagers share in these notebooks. These notes could be understood as the subconscious of late capitalism, a jungle in which we have less and less place and where image and identity as a brand are on the rise.

Another performative technique that Arnau uses during his lessons is ‘The chunk of clay’ – students get a piece of clay so they can do whatever they want with it when they are in the classroom. Besides ‘The distraction notebook’ and ‘The chunk of clay’, Arnau suggests that students create a ‘Distraction Protocol’ to find strategies that help address different sensitivities within the classroom. For instance, the creation of mantras to be used by students when their classmates are being too loud, when they want to check their mobile phones, or when they are bored listening to the teacher. When difficult situations arise, students can also use hand gestures inspired by mudras, as found in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, gestures used as symbols by street gangs, or sign languages.

These workshops have included presentations by scientists, such as professor Rosa Maria Gil Iranzo of the Polytechnic University of Lleida, visits to a Buddhist temple, or listening to noise concerts. Thus, students can realise that people can also be interested in things the majority of society

rejects. What I find fascinating in Arnau's pedagogy is not only how he manages to collectivise that which causes crisis and leads us to mental blocks, but also that he is able to generate tools that go beyond the established models of pedagogy. Arnau manages to establish practical ways of learning that decentralise the relationship between background and figure, concentration and distraction, teacher and student.

## Patrons de Distracció Installation series

*Art helps me in many ways. It helps me to understand what drives me, to understand my place in the world. In the context of the climate crisis, art helps me to ask myself where priority stands.<sup>10</sup>*

For some years now, Arnau has been working with music and sound, experimenting with different formats to find possibilities beyond conventional spaces. For instance, in a sound installation, the artist does not need to be present – for Arnau, this is an opportunity to get rid of himself.

The installations he has been working on are located in a blurred space between sound and vision, often using materials linked to *arte povera*, such as strings, tubes, or even ceramics. Beyond these material elements, once again, the focus is on attention itself and the possibilities it offers as a plastic material.

Multiples of 11 and scales of blue are recurrent themes that Arnau has implemented over time. I wonder if the use of these themes is a strategy to anchor certain decisions, thus freeing space that allows him to concentrate on other things. Though these works are informed by some practices of established artists and composers of so-called 'sound art', they lead us to question our attention and certainties. For instance, Arnau asks whether Pauline Oliveros' deep listening concept is still relevant today when our society lives under intense hyper-stimulation. He suggests exploring distraction as an alternative type of concentration, or involuntary hyper-concentration, in what he calls 'shallow listening'.

The latest version of *Patrons de Distracció* is a system made of synthetic sounds, high-frequency loudspeakers and highly resonant ceramic pieces. These elements work as two layers of the same system – it has been

<sup>10</sup> Arnau Sala, private conversation, March 2023

generated with the Supercollider software and, by means of a generative arrangement, it manipulates the sounds and assigns them to six tweeters at random. Once the sounds, as waves, are in the air, the ceramic pieces work as resonant bodies that are activated with more or less intensity, depending on the sound timely assigned by the algorithm. Arnau's goal is to look at how this system, which in a more or less poetic way 'interrupts itself', can generate listening situations and dynamics that can somehow bring us closer to this process of non-attentive or involuntary listening. These sounds somehow disrupt the listener's neural system, which has to recalibrate its expectations model.

In *Patrons de Distracció*, formal elements are combined with a form of interrupted listening, where algorithms and sounds generate specific behaviors, simulating a lapse of attention. *Patrons de Distracció* is a composition method based on research on attention at a cognitive level via sensory immersion. Arnau's installations keep the tension between attention and non-attention, playing with the listener's consciousness and unconsciousness.

These three examples of the multiple aspects of Arnau's work reveal a trajectory that arises from a vital need to overcome a personal crisis, working in very difficult historical conditions. After the COVID-19 pandemic, we are currently facing a mental health pandemic – it is in this context that Arnau creates types of work and pedagogy that amplify our sensory stimuli, considering neurodiversity and different types of attention.

Whereas society tries to grab our attention in any way it can, via media, social networks or the market, Arnau puts forward practices in which our attention and distraction play a leading role. By not imposing normative expectations upon audience reception, Arnau envisages distraction as a tool to better understand the material conditions of everyday life that are increasingly undermining our ability of attention and concentration.

## Anti-Copyright

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