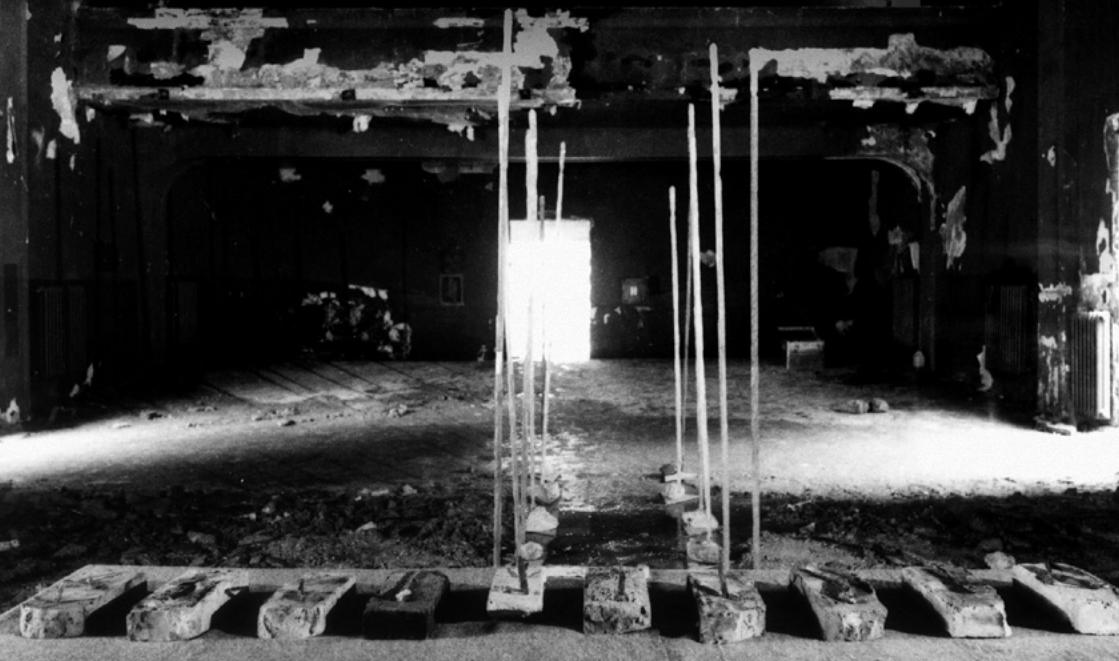


# Preparing to Exit: Art, Interventionism and the 1990s



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# PREPARING TO EXIT: ART, INTERVENTIONISM AND THE 1990s

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Ed. L'Internationale Online's Editorial Board

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# EDITORIAL FOREWORD: PREPARING TO EXIT: ART, INTERVENTIONISM AND THE 1990s

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**Nick Aikens and David Crowley**

This collection of essays, interviews and images results from L'Internationale's current focus on the 1990s and, in particular, our wish to identify actions and alliances from that era that form constellations with our own. Most optimistic claims made during that period were hubristic – not least the promise that technology and post-Cold-War politics would turn the world into a super-connected 'global village', and that the ensuing spread of civic society and liberal democracy would usher in 'the end of history'. Cultural institutions – including the museums and galleries that compose the L'Internationale confederation today – were charged with the task of extending civic society and delivering an image of a common and inclusive future. Indeed, confederation members Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid and Salt in Istanbul were created in the late 1990s and early 2000s to bolster civic life – a project that is ongoing. At the same time, many conflicts of the current era can be traced back to this period of considerable social and cultural turmoil. The after-effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 reverberate with Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, as we write these words.

However, another less well-known version of the 1990s also exists, from which alternative, often highly local expressions of cultural politics and political activism emerged, and which may yet inspire other futures. This version was shaped by interventions by artists and activists, who acted collectively and in partnership with their communities, in seemingly 'marginal' settings, and without the kind of support available in the centres of the 1990s turbo-capitalist boom. Much of their work seemed unfathomable and was dismissed as peripheral by commentators at the time, particularly when it travelled from its place of origin to elsewhere. Yet this output now seems vital and urgent, in harmony with the loud, contemporary calls for decolonisation and self-determination: the rights of peoples to their land, to shape their cultures, to determine the economic

and political systems in which their lives are lived – put plainly, the right to a future.

Our title, 'Preparing to Exit', is borrowed from Alessandra Pomarico's contribution, in which she elaborates the inspiring example of Zapatismo, and how it has informed the work and approach of the artistic collective Chto Delat. The moving force of insurgency in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1994, resonated, in the author's words, across the Atlantic,

between the Italian leftist, antifascist, anarchist legacy, and the tradition of *autonomía* (autonomy) – linking wor(l)ds of resistance, while offering another necessary perspective; a language full of poetic metaphors, inclusive of many relations beyond those of living human beings.

Via the prism of Chto Delat's films, puppet shows and drawings, Pomarico looks to Zapatismo as a paradigm of the possibility for 'preparing to exit' colonialist-capitalist state structures through the principles of *compañerismo* (comradeship) and *comunalidad* (communality). Across the six case studies of this issue, diverse motivations, forms and strategies appear that chime with the need to prepare an escape route from market, state and institutional structures. On the border between artistic practice and activism, and sometimes operating as para-institutional organisations, the case studies detailed here present provisional models for ways of beginning to lay the ground for imagining, and then enacting, different forms of exit. Pomarico's calling upon the idea of preparation also speaks to the improvised modes of practice that emerge throughout the case studies. An insistence on trying things out and an acceptance of failure as part of sincere preparatory work imbues these examples with a minor, rather than a declarative, register. Instead, preparation is held as a form of practice, of rehearsing, of getting ready.

Exiting or operating outside institutions permeates the recounts of these contributions; sometimes this is born out of choice, other times, out of necessity, such as when artists are working within the context of war. So, too, does ‘preparing to exit’ from the market-driven logic and attention economy of the art system, which each case study variously rejects or departs from. Asja Mandić, in her essay, draws on Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics in his 1980 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In short, tactics are the responsive and impromptu actions of those without power, while strategies infer command and control, and align with the operations of institutions and other organisational power structures. This relationship can, however, be inverted: the creation of an institution (or at least, the parodic appearance of one) can itself be a tactic, as a number of our contributors show.

The focus of Mandić’s ‘Emerging Innovative Artistic Practices as a Response to the State of the Siege’ is on the effects of the war in Bosnia in the first half of the 1990s on creative activities. She examines what she describes as ‘artist-led actions and curatorial practices, site-oriented or site-referenced interventions in the urban fabric that moved beyond the confines of the art world’. Turning to a number of street interventions and non-institutional practices in the context of the siege of Sarajevo (1992–96), Mandić’s contribution considers the ways in which artists mobilised public space as an expression and reality of resistance. Artists, such as Ante Jurić and Zoran Bogdanović, worked collaboratively, physically dragging the remnants of destroyed buildings like the iconic Central Post Office into the besieged street. ‘Disruptions to the panoptic mechanisms of power’, such actions were a means to ‘generate relations that opposed strategies of surveillance and control’. Across Mandić’s artistic examples, it is the use of found objects – often the debris of war, set in a public space itself under siege – that perhaps

most powerfully shows the necessity and possibilities of exiting the architecture and formats of the art system.

Artist Fernanda Laguna gives an account of Belleza y Felicidad (Beauty and Happiness), an independent artists’ space and educational project that she co-founded with writer, poet and translator Cecilia Pavón in Buenos Aires in March 1999. Belleza y Felicidad, as Laguna tells us, is rooted in feminist principles and situated as a space – both physically and propositionally – which strives for ‘everything we cannot (yet) imagine’. Working across pedagogy, literature and artistic practice, the project has unfolded as a series of ongoing experiments and self-conscious failures, which provide a counter-model to the market-driven trends of the Argentinian art world at the turn of the millennium. The sister space on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito, meanwhile shows how experimental forms of pedagogy and practice can reframe and de-hierarchise teacher-pupil relations. The collective learning processes experienced by the hundreds of school children and adults in the space(s) enact a compelling argument for escaping the limits of both formal education and enterprise.

Alessandra Pumarico’s aforementioned essay, ‘Echoes of Zapatismo outside Chiapas’, details the transformative impact of Chto Delat’s visit to the Caracoles (the autonomously governed territories of the Zapatista) in 2016, along with the Zapatistas’ historic visit to Europe in 2021, in order to illuminate how the movement both ‘warn[s] and nourish[es] the political thinking of those of us who have started to understand their project of sustained revolution.’ Pumarico asks what it means to *be in resonance* with the Zapatista project, and throughout this issue’s pieces, the will to be in dialogue, in relation, with those ‘suffering from various forms of oppression’ echoes, ever amplified by the role of art in these struggles.

In conversation with Nick Aikens, curator and writer Clémentine Deliss offers a fascinating reflection on her involvement with the Tenq artists' workshops and Laboratoire Agit'Art collective in Senegal in the 1990s. Describing Laboratoire Agit'Art as a 'parapolitical aesthetic infrastructure' or a kind of 'micro-government', Deliss highlights the invisible channels of the collective's work (working at night, refusing to archive their work) at a time of increasing emphasis on visibility in the art world. Deliss's comparisons with contemporary examples of what she terms 'artistic interventionism', through practices such as those of Ibrahim Mahama or Theaster Gates, as well as the recent case of documenta fifteen, cast light on contrasting relationships between the art market, institutions, and collective forms of interventionism. Underpinning Deliss's account is a thoughtful reflection on what is at stake when artists and collectives attempt to found their own independent institutions. We are left to contemplate a pressing provocation: What are the explicit and implicit relations between the art market and questions of reputational economy and visibility; and how much, against this backdrop, is the mainstream art system really prepared to support alternative models?

Founded in 1990 by Dragan Protić and Đorđe Balmazović, the Škart collective (meaning scrap or leftover) poses a second case of interventionist art practice emerging out of the reality of war. Working between Belgrade and Ljubljana amid the break-up of Yugoslavia, Škart's 'abstract and poetic' street interventions arose out of necessity and the impossibility of speaking within conventional, codified institutional settings. The piece – an excerpt from the author Seda Yıldız's interview with the two Škart founders, from her researched and edited archival book on the collective – details their direct and absurdist strategies, including flyposting a weekly radio programme *Škart News* across Belgrade, and the use of mail art as a mode of communication and dissemination beyond narrow

institutional frameworks of exhibition and mediation. The group's practice often alludes to these institutions – such as in the poster 'Škart is in the museum', displayed in their first exhibition in the small gallery of their village – so that while born out of urgent conditions, when transplanted to Graz, Austria, or to New York towards the end of the decade, it became a lens through which to view the alienating effects of the market.

The final contribution, tellingly, is the sole example of an interventionism that takes place within (though is not limited to) the context of a museum. Chronicling 'two decades of art and social activism', Leónidas Martín takes readers on a journey that begins among the anti-globalisation movements of 1999 and continues through to the financial crisis of 2008, the housing crisis in Spain and the mobilisation of mass social movements. With a first-hand account of the landmark project Las Agencias at MACBA in 2000, Martín closes the issue by detailing a limit case for how institutions might seek to work beyond their protocols. Working with various social actors and political campaigns in the wake of what is now known as 'The Battle of Seattle', Las Agencias was an attempt to circumvent the diapositives of an institution – the space of the museum and the format of the exhibition or public programme. Martín's lively account of the experience of Las Agencias, and the subsequent narrative of activism breaking past the walls of the museum, raises the demand of how institutions could genuinely engage with a far wider range of social agents.

Drawing attention to artistic interventionism in the 1990s, the texts gathered here are neither conclusive analyses of past events nor an attempt to define a single category of action. Their authors, rather, seek to report on poorly recorded activities and fugitive happenings. Many take the form of testimony. Their accompanying illustrations and photographs are sometimes 'poor images' too; snapshots and photocopies

indexing the improvised or reduced circumstances of their production. And of course, the minor histories of these pieces occurred before the wholesale occupation of the world by the internet. What emerges across the six contributions is evidence of kinds of critical practice that operate despite the shortcomings, or even in the complete absence, of institutional structures. Whether grounded in public space or the formation of tactical, collective organisational forms, these case studies document how interventionism is necessary in order to construct spaces and practices for imagining other worlds. As such, they are much more than archeologies of the recent past. Not only do many of the featured actors continue their practices today, but the matters that initially motivated them remain far from resolved.

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# EMERGING INNOVATIVE ARTISTIC PRACTICES AS A RESPONSE TO THE STATE OF SIEGE

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**Asja Mandić**

1. Most of the artworks discussed in this paper were presented at the exhibition 'Realize! Resist! React! Performance and Politics in the 1990s in the Post-Yugoslav Context' at the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (MG+MSUM), 24 June – 10 October 2021, curated by Bojana Piškur with guest curators Linda Gusia, Jasna Jakšić, Vida Knežević, Nita Luci, Asja Mandić, Biljana Tanurovska-Kjurkovski, Ivana Vaseva, Rok Vevar and Jasmina Založnik. See also A. Mandić, 'The Performative as Resistance to the Violence of War and Transition', in *Realize! Resist! React! Performance and Politics in the 1990s in the Post-Yugoslav Context* (ed. Bojana Piškur), Ljubljana: Moderna galerija, 2021, pp. 99–123.

2. During the four-year siege, the Chamber Theatre (Kamerni teatar) alone organised over a thousand theatre performances, and in the very first months of the siege the Sarajevo War Theatre (SARTR) was founded. See *Sarajevski memento: 1992–1995*, Sarajevo: Ministarstvo kulture i sporta Kantona Sarajevo, 1997.

The siege<sup>1</sup> of Sarajevo (1992–96), often referred to as the longest siege in modern history, manifested as carefully orchestrated violence against the built environment and those who inhabited it during the military-strategic control and paralysis of the city, transforming their everyday lives in ways that seemed unimaginable at the end of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in this defenceless and vulnerable city – enclosed, cut off, reduced to bare survival and constantly exposed to death – a persistent and defiant spirit of resistance was created that was particularly evident in the sphere of culture. There was a proliferation of theatre performances, concerts, film screenings and art exhibitions, and an increased participation in cultural life which was often perceived as a form of resistance in itself, as people consciously decided to risk their lives to attend events and so to continue with normal life or, we might say, to create that illusion, even under the conditions imposed.

Theatre played perhaps the most important role in this context, with plays performed on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup> But the visual art scene also flourished, as about a hundred solo exhibitions and dozens of group shows were held in various locations within the city, including versatile non-exhibition places and ruins. The exhibitions, especially

the openings, became sites for gathering and communication; locations for interaction, dialogue and exchange, or places where social space was produced; where artists, cultural workers and visitors became active participants in the processes of cultural resistance and opposition. For local artists, working mainly in traditional media, the new conditions imposed by the siege brought to the fore new strategies. The lack of materials and spaces in which to produce and exhibit their work necessitated adaptations and new approaches to their established ways of working.

In relocating and reconfiguring the display of their works, and in re-examining object-based practices in response to the new circumstances, they became more experimental, performative and installation-based, as well as more socially relevant. This essay examines these artist-led actions and curatorial practices, site-oriented or site-referenced interventions in the urban fabric that moved beyond the confines of the art world, as moments of rupture that broke down barriers between social and aesthetic orders and overcame the formerly entrenched approaches and structures of institutional art spaces. The discussion focuses on progressive, experimental events that took place in destroyed and damaged buildings or brought art into open public spaces, as 'situation-specific' initiatives here examined as tactics of opposition.<sup>3</sup> However, in order to understand their significance as determined by 'the impetus of place, locality, time, context and space',<sup>4</sup> as well as their sociopolitical potential to respond directly to the forms of control and oppression imposed, it is important first to reflect on the physical, sociopolitical and psychological aspects of the siege, and of bodily resistance to the murderous war-machine.

3. Claire Doherty uses 'situation specificity' to describe the ways in which contemporary artists respond to and produce place and locality. Claire Doherty, 'Introduction/Situation', *Situation: Documents of Contemporary Art* (ed. Claire Doherty), London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2009, p. 13.

4. Ibid.

## The Siege of Sarajevo

In the first months of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo was encircled by the military forces of the Bosnian Serbs, assisted by the heavily armed Yugoslav People's Army as well as Serbian and Montenegrin paramilitary troops. Immobilised, blockaded and subjected to the strategic disruption and destruction of its urban fabric, including of the infrastructure that allows modern life to exist, the city resembled a ruin; 'enduring between persistence and decay'.<sup>5</sup>

The state of siege reduced the citizens of the closed and isolated city to a struggle for bare survival, without water, heat, electricity, or food. They were surrounded at all times by the heavy artillery and snipers whose omnipresent gaze controlled their lives and deaths, operating to discipline and punish the body, much like Foucault's panoptic function of power.<sup>6</sup> This controlling gaze came not solely from the outside, from the Olympic mountains and hills surrounding the city, but also from the inside, from occupied Grbavica at its core.<sup>7</sup> Ever alert, the gaze of the sniper was inscribed in Sarajevo's urban body as the control mechanism of behaviour, space and movement. It was present in each of its segments and internalised in the bodies of its inhabitants. Punishment was mostly carried out on those bodies that dared to move within the areas of constant surveillance in the snipers' field of vision – intersections, squares, bridges – or to group, gather,

5. Infrastructure such as transportation, sewerage and communication systems, as well as energy, power and water supplies. On ruin as 'fragile equilibrium between persistence and decay', see Brian Dillon, 'Fragments from a History of Ruin', *Cabinet* 20, Winter 2005–6, available at <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/20/dillon.php> (last accessed on 10 May, 2022).
6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan), New York: Vintage, 1995, pp. 195–228.
7. Grbavica is a residential area located on the west bank of the Miljacka River, in the heart of Sarajevo. During the siege it was occupied and isolated from the rest of the town, and it functioned as a sniper's nest.
8. Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (trans. Robert Bononno), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
9. On the functional inversion of the disciplines, see M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 210–11.
10. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven Rendall), (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 37.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

interact and communicate, to get involved in the processes and situations that make up the essence of the urban.<sup>8</sup>

The discipline and punishment of the city and its inhabitants, however, differed from the panoptic perfection of power since it was not imposed to the point where the complete disruption of the behaviour of, and of communication between, the controlled subjects was realised. Rather, this particular form of panopticism exemplified Foucault's 'functional inversion of the disciplines' because the power structure that circumscribed the place, aiming to control relations among its targeted subjects, in fact produced oppositional practices.<sup>9</sup> Such practices could be described using Michel de Certeau's notion of tactics, for they subverted the

modes of subordination through 'isolated actions' that challenged the strategies of surveillance and control.<sup>10</sup> According to de Certeau, tactics are operations of weak but active agents that disrupt the strategic ordering and control of the everyday life.<sup>11</sup> Considering the nature of the siege of Sarajevo, everyday activities such as walking, searching for food, water or wood for cooking and heating, could be described as tactical in character because they also included the invention of new navigational routes through the oppressed urban space. For the spatially and temporally isolated city, marginalised and deprived of communication with the outside world, artistic practices whose unpredictable momentary actions and interventions in open public space, including manoeuvres 'within the enemy's field of vision',<sup>12</sup> were particularly significant tactical practices for opposing and resisting the mechanisms of repression,



Xeroxed photograph of Pregrad Čančar's documentation of performative action *May 15, 1992* (artists Zoran Bogdanović and Ante Jurić) with Jurić's textual intervention.  
Source: War Art Diary of Ante Jurić (1992-1994), archive of the Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Courtesy: Ante Jurić and Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

isolation and social conditions imposed, reviving the city's sense of urbanity and improving quality of life.

### Resisting Bodies: Artistic Interventions in Public Spaces and Ruins

13. Jurić's textual intervention into one of the Xeroxed photographs of the action reads: 'Creative process with presence of the eye of a spectator (killer/sniper), 15 May 1992.' Ante Jurić, *War Art Diary of Ante Jurić [1992-4]*, archive of the Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The first artists who replaced their studios with the street and engaged in one of the most radical performative actions were Ante Jurić and Zoran Bogdanović, who consciously exposed their bodies to the agents of surveillance and punishment and defied the strategic practices of the panoptical machinery. Their action of collecting and rescuing remnants of the Central Post Office (one of the most beautiful Viennese Secession buildings in Sarajevo), after it was set on fire in a military diversion on 2 May 1992, took place at the intersection of two streets that lay directly in the snipers' field of vision, one of which continues over the Čobanija Bridge to the other side. In this action, entitled *May 15, 1992*, they engaged in pulling and collecting burnt wooden beams, debris and fragments of destruction from the heaps of rubble while Predrag Čančar photographically documented their action. Thus, through the means of their bodies the artists confronted the panoptic spatial order, bringing to the fore that which had been repressed and destroyed. Čančar's fixing of moments of this lively process was not external to the work; the photographer was inside of the action, himself an active participant in the subversion of panoptic power, as his moving body and his camera also consciously performed for the 'eye of the spectator (killer/sniper)' that was monitoring the space of their movements.<sup>13</sup>

From today's perspective, it is not clear if Jurić and Bogdanović intended to display the photographic record of

aesthetic autonomy and formal qualities of the artwork, had been to collect authentic sculptural material and exhibit it in a gallery setting. However, their exhibition entitled 'Spirituality and Destruction' (1992), in which Čančar's installation composed of the photographs of their action was also included, actually took place in the interior of the damaged Church of St Vincent de Paul. Even though some of the exhibited works, created from the remnants of destruction at the Academy of Fine Arts, were directed by the Modernist conception of the artwork, that is, that of Art Informel, the physical conditions of the damaged church interior directed them, quite spontaneously, to find alternatives to Modernist art and its usual, institutional setting. Bogdanović's 'Art Informel-type relief drawings', made of embers, broken pieces of glass and sand glued onto paper, were now placed on the scarred church walls.<sup>15</sup> Juxtaposed with the scorched beams, shards of metal structures and various other kinds of rubble from the burnt-out Central Post Office, together with spatial interventions by Jurić that highlighted the physical conditions of the damaged Catholic church (wrapping the church altar in white sheets, sweeping the dust and fragments of broken stained-glass windows), the works established meaningful relationships with the site, by which they became formally directed and determined, framed by its environmental context. Transformed into a temporary exhibition space, the church became a point of departure revealing its physical, social and political context.

These artist-led, spontaneous, ad-hoc, time-based initiatives challenged not only the modes of display practiced in institutional gallery spaces in Bosnia and Herzegovina before the war, but also the prevailing art practices that, prior to the war, had been limited to traditional media. But while they did bring to the fore anti-establishment, anti-institutional approaches, this is not to suggest that they acted wholly in opposition to the mainstream since, in need of validation for their work, the artists invited Azra Begić, curator of the Art

14. Jurić's statement of this action consists of a Xeroxed copy of one of Čančar's photographs, annotated with the text 'Streets are our galleries', and 'Streets are our working spaces', Jurić, *War Art Diary of Ante Jurić*.
15. *Duhovnost i destrukcija* (Spirituality and Destruction), exhibition flyer consisting of a folded sheet of paper with texts by Azra Begić, Sadudin Musabegović, statements by Ante Jurić and Zoran Bogdanović, and biographical data on all three artists, 1992.

this provocative and radical action in exhibitions or catalogues, as something to be seen by audiences afterwards. Nor is it clear if the artists perceived it as live art/performance, or just as a process in which the sculptural material created by an act of destruction was collected for exhibition. The documentation was only ever exhibited in the context of the work of Čančar, in an installation commemorating the vandalistic destruction of the beautiful post office building. Unfortunately, these photographs can no longer be accessed; they subsequently disappeared from the archive of the Art Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Čančar

worked as a photographer. A fragmentary record of the action *May 15, 1992* can still be found in Jurić's *War Art Diary*, consisting of the artist's collection of sketches, personal documents, letters and newspaper clippings, along with Xeroxed copies of (Čančar's) photographs of the action complete with the artist's own conceptual, textual interventions.

For Jurić and Bogdanović, sculptors who before the war had worked within institutional confines, taught at the Academy of Fine Arts and exhibited their works in official gallery spaces, the use and performative transformation of street spaces into working spaces and galleries brought new approaches to the fore in their practice.<sup>14</sup> The effect of the temporality of their presence in these new spaces, where the aesthetic qualities and formal limits of their object-based works were inevitably challenged, was to move them towards the dematerialisation of their art.

The intention of these two artists, who prior to that point had worked in their area of competence, holding true to the



Predrag Čančar, Post Office 2 May 1992, 1992. *Spirituality and Destruction* exhibition, St Vincent Church, Sarajevo, 1992. Photo by Milomir Kovačević.



*Spirituality and Destruction*, exhibition opening, St. Vincent Church, Sarajevo, 1992. Photo by Milomir Kovačević.

16. Jurić, 'Sarajevski mani-fest' (Sarajevo Manifest), 2 May 1992, *War Art Diary of Ante Jurić*.

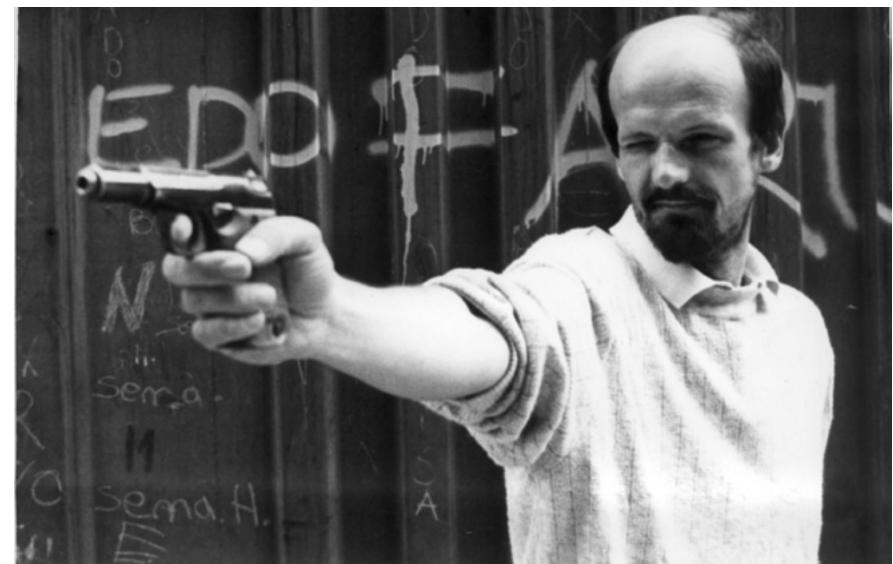
17. Jurić, 'Pucanje u material' (Shooting at Material), 17 November 1992, and 'Sarajevski pucanj 1992' (The Sarajevo Shot of 1992), 13 June 1993, *War Art Diary of Ante Jurić*.

18. This was Jurić's first enactment of *Sarajevo Shot*. The second performance resounded at the opening of the 'Witnesses of Existence exhibition' in 1993; the third one took place the same year, in front of foreign journalists at the Holiday Inn Hotel; the fourth was performed at the City Gallery Collegium Artisticum in 1994.

danger of a new Balkan World War'.<sup>17</sup> Though he re-enacted it several times, the first performance took place in November 1992 in the courtyard of Sarajevo's Academy of Performing Arts, where Jurić fired several bullets from a pistol at a tin surface supported by sandbags.<sup>18</sup> The second enactment of this performance was planned to take place at the actual site of the 1914 'Sarajevo assassination', but in the event it was too dangerous. While it is true that in his writings, sketches, drawings and elaborations of artistic ideas one can still find a preoccupation with the 'aesthetic process' – that of materials and their transformation, in which performance can be seen as a process of object creation or as 'a phase of real creation', after which 'an object with memory of an event remains' – this work

Gallery of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Sadudin Musabegović, dean of the Academy of Fine Arts, to write texts for their 'Spirituality and Destruction' exhibition. Furthermore, Begić delivered the exhibition's opening speech. Thus, the dislocation of their practice from pristine gallery spaces into spaces of destruction came rather from a need to respond to the destructive machinery of war, or, in the words of Jurić, to 'present the reality ... and document prevailing destruction'.<sup>16</sup>

A work that similarly responded to mechanisms of violence and repression, but that was foreign to Jurić's practice up to that point, was his performance *Sarajevo Shot*, conceived of in reference to the 1914 shooting in Sarajevo of Gavrilo Princip and directly evoking this historic event as a warning 'to the world, of the potential



Ante Jurić, *Sarajevo Shot*, 1992. Courtyard of the Academy of Performing Arts, Sarajevo, 1992. Courtesy: Archive of the Obala Art Centre.



Ante Jurić, *Muddy-Edged Form Leaning on White Canvas and the Wall in a Ruined Space of Sutjeska Cinema*, 1993. Sutjeska Cinema, Sarajevo, 1993. Courtesy: Archive of the Obala Art Centre.

clearly indicates Jurić's de-emphasis of sculptural concerns and his journey towards the dematerialisation and de-aesthetisation of art.<sup>19</sup>

Just few months after the exhibition at the Church of St Vincent de Paul and after the enactment of his first performance, Jurić created a work that was bound to the materiality of the site. His installation *Muddy-Edged Form*

*Leaning on White Canvas and the Wall in the Ruined Space of Sutjeska Cinema*, made for the 'Spirituality – Destruction – Rematerialization exhibition' (1993) in which Bogdanović also participated, was clearly a site-specific work, its identity composed of a unique combination of physical elements: the shape, length and texture of the damaged walls, along with shovelled debris and dirt.<sup>20</sup> 'Spirituality – Destruction – Rematerialisation' was just one of the exhibitions organised by the Obala Art Centre between December 1992 and March 1993 in the devastated Sutjeska Cinema, which had reached the final phase of its renovation and transformation into the Obala Open Stage space just before the war began. In fact these events, presenting the work of Nusret Pašić; Zoran Bogdanović and Ante Jurić; Mustafa Skopljak and Petar Waldegg; Sanjin Jukić; Edin Numankadić and Radoslav Tadić respectively, were closer to temporary interventions than they were to exhibitions in the classical sense. Each usually ended after the opening, when the artists would remove the works to protect them from rain, snow, and further decay in what remained of the building. The devastated space of the former cinema therefore functioned as intended, as an open stage, but one where artists intervened in the very substance of its ruin with their works and installations, interacting and communicating not only with exhibition-goers but also with passers-by because the desolate cinema, located on one of the most

<sup>19.</sup> Jurić, 'Pucanje u material' (Shooting at Material).

<sup>20.</sup> On the identity of site-specific work, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, London and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004, p. 11.

21. For more information on exhibitions in Sutjeska Cinema, see A. Mandić, 'Exhibitions in Damaged and Destroyed Architectural Objects in Besieged Sarajevo: Spaces of Gathering and Socialization', in Martino Stierli, Mechtild Widrich (ed.), *Participation in Art and Architecture: Spaces of Interaction and Occupation*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016, pp. 107–26; and A. Mandić, 'The Formation of a Culture of Critical Resistance in Sarajevo', *Third Text*, vol. 25, no. 6, 2011, pp. 725–35.

22. James Meyer, 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity', *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art* (ed. Erika Suderburg), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 26.

23. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, UK & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1999, pp. 822–34.

dangerous intersections, was used as a passage that sheltered people from the sniper's gaze.<sup>21</sup>

Situating exhibitions in such places thus created spaces of public interaction and participation in which spatial, bodily experience was extremely important to the overall experience of spectators (though not necessarily of equal, individual importance to each of the works shown). It was this interactive 'phenomenology of Presence, a spectatorship that unfolded in "real time and space"',<sup>22</sup> which gave these artistic/curatorial practices a 'theatrical quality', as defined by Michal Fried, through the emphasis of 'stage presence', or the condition in which objects/bodies were placed in situations.<sup>23</sup> The idea of an exhibition's own performativity may certainly be applied to 'Witnesses of Existence' (1993). A group show that reunited the eight artists in the same space, it was itself conceived as scenography 'for a series of performances assembled into a theatrical whole'.<sup>24</sup> There, highlighted by spotlights and sound, the artists successively and dramatically revealed their presence in the darkness, achieving stage effects for their works and their own bodies.<sup>25</sup>

In relation to the space, its audience and the duration of their experience, the exhibitions held at the ruined cinema corresponded to its condition and effects of ephemerality,

transience and flux. In places so subject to the contingent, artists' works themselves could only be seen as temporary spatial situations – works such as Kemal Hadžić's *Sarajevo Caryatids* (1995). In 1995, these photographs of beautiful young Sarajevan women, each leant against a burnt pillar of the National and University Library, were exhibited in the scorched ruins of the library itself, accompanied by a performance by ballerinas from the National Theatre. Before it was brutally destroyed with incendiary grenades in August 1992, the National and University Library had housed over 1.5 million volumes, including rare books and manuscripts.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the physical condition of what remained of the building – a hollowed-out structure in the continual process of disintegrating, deteriorating as it fell apart – affected both the work displayed and the conditions of its viewing. At the 'Sarajevo Caryatids' exhibition, the performative aspect of this ruin was literally enacted when leftover pieces of brick fell from the remaining dome structure, breaking the glass atop the photographs where they leaned up against the damaged pillars in the library's hexagonal central space.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the performativity of the exhibition (as in the case of 'Witnesses of Existence' and, in a different way, that of 'Sarajevo Caryatids'), one can also speak of the performative in the context of traditional media such as sculpture, which gained a new dimension during the siege of Sarajevo. In the month of August 1994, Alma Suljević prepared her monumental sculpture *Centauromacy*, made of steel, the remains

24. Tanja and Stjepan Roš, 'Exhibition design "Witnesses of Existence"', *Svjedoci postojanja* (Witnesses of Existence), (exh. cat., digital version), Sarajevo: Galerija Obala, 1993.

25. See Dubravko Brigić's film *Svjedoci postojanja* (Witnesses of Existence), TVBiH, June 1993.

26. András Riedlmayer, 'Erasing the Past: The Destruction of Libraries and Archives in Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 1, July 1995, p. 7.

27. Conversation with Kemal Hadžić on 28 October 2021.

28. Nermina Omerbegović, 'Sarajevska kenta- uromahija' (Sarajevo Centauromachy), *Oslobodenje*, 5 August 1994, p. 7; Angelina Šimić, 'Kentaumahija se nas- tavlja' (Centauromachy Continues), *Oslobodenje*, 14 August 1994, p. 7.

29. This sculptural composition was supposed to be dragged around the city's tram route, including through the part of the city known during the war as 'Sniper Alley'. However, for safety reasons, on the day when it was supposed to leave the tram depot, the artist postponed its journey until more peaceful times.

30. For the distinction between art in a public space and art as a public space, see Kwon, *One Place after Another*, pp. 56–65.

of a burnt tram and its tram platform, for a ten-day journey around the city.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, it was not possible for this work – symbolising the battle between civilisation and barbarism and commemorating the deaths of those who lost their lives on May 2 1992 in one of the biggest battles in the city, when this tram was set ablaze – to go on its journey as planned and so to challenge the imposed spatial conditions.<sup>29</sup> It nonetheless represents the manifestation of an idea of the theatricality of a monumental sculptural project and its (potential) performative reclamation of public space.

In wartime, it becomes almost impossible to make a clear distinction between art in a public place, and art as a public space, that is, between a sculpture that is public only in terms of its size, scale and free access, and one that refers to its location and thus intervenes in the very social fabric of the city, both physically and socially.<sup>30</sup>

Enes Sivac's *Equilibrists* (1994), a composition of wire sculptures of three human figures, one cycling, one flying and one jumping – was directed at wartime destruction both visually and metaphorically, including through the performative act in which it obtained its final appearance.<sup>31</sup> Wrapped in paper, the sculptures were erected above the Miljacka River in the immediate vicinity of the burnt-out Central Post Office, of which only the shell remained. On the opening night of the exhibition in which they were presented, Sivac set the paper-wrapped *Equilibrists* on fire.<sup>32</sup> In this performative inauguration one

can recognise an iso-anthropomorphism of nature and architecture: the river symbolising impermanence and transience, the ruins evoking deterioration and bodily decay.

The Miljacka River itself became a surveillance zone during the war, its banks and bridges an arena for snipers from the surrounding hills. Sarajevans ran when crossing the river, taking swift steps which may have been what was alluded to by 'Overtaking the Wind', the title of Sivac's exhibition. Also in 1994, Bojan Bahić and Sanda Hnjatuk, members of the Art Publishing group, protested the fact that, in the war, rivers had become 'imposed walls'.<sup>33</sup> In their action *This is not a Wall!*, citizens participated in the writing of banners on the Drvenija Bridge. These messages of peace were thrown into the river and launched downstream.<sup>34</sup>

These art practices, in which objects and bodies were placed in situations where the presence of the artists was a necessity for the materialisation of the work, involved not only contextual and spatiotemporal traits, but also the participation of the viewer. However, the spectatorship that unfolded in besieged Sarajevo's open public spaces involved the body's exposure to death, especially when taking into account that such gatherings were 'forbidden' – that is to say, targeted. Thus, the devastated buildings played a special role in the sense that they were analogous to open public spaces, making engagement in such spaces something radical – because it

31. This sculptural composition was presented at the exhibition 'Preticanje vjetra' (Overtaking the Wind), 24 August 1994, at the summer festival 'Beba univerzum' (festival authors: Haris Pašović and Suada Kapić). See Muhamed Karamehmedović, 'Kreacije pozitivne budućnosti' (Creation of Positive Future), *Oslobodenje*, 31 August 1994, p. 7.

32. Testimony of Enes Sivac, in Suada Kapić, *The Siege of Sarajevo 1992–1996*, Sarajevo: FAMA, 2000, pp. 802–7.

33. 'Ovo nije zid!' (This is not a Wall!), *Oslobodenje*, 27 April 1994, p. 6.

34. National television (BHTV) coverage of the action, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj5MhCOXQvQ> (last accessed on 5 June 2022).

35. Jean-Luc Nancy,  
'La Comparution/  
The Compearance:  
from the Existence  
of "Communism" to  
the Community of  
"Existence"' (trans.  
Tracy B. Strong), *Political  
Theory*, vol. 20, no. 3,  
August 1992, p. 371.

tion was grounded in multiple levels of discursive interaction between artist, site, and audience, and between members of the audience themselves. The exhibition openings initiated gatherings, communication and dialogue, producing zones of human relations. Visitors gathered around warm tea, exchanged information and engaged in discussions about ways of surviving in a besieged city. This communication between artists, cultural workers, exhibition visitors and casual passers-by who came to the openings unknowingly, produced alternative forms of socialising, social relations and community identifications. Through participation in these events, micro-communities were created, albeit they were never fixed and complete. Rather, they were always in the making, a process of creation, communication and the sharing of 'the common human condition', recalling Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of community as occurring where 'the common condition is at the same time the common reduction to a common denomination *and* the condition of being absolutely *in* common'.<sup>35</sup>

The experience of survival in the besieged city, reinforced by the physical condition of the ruined spaces that corresponded to the city's annihilation, brought together diverse people in a process in which, through their interaction and communication, social space was produced. In these specific sociopolitical circumstances and spatial situations, artists and audiences became engaged in social processes in which the

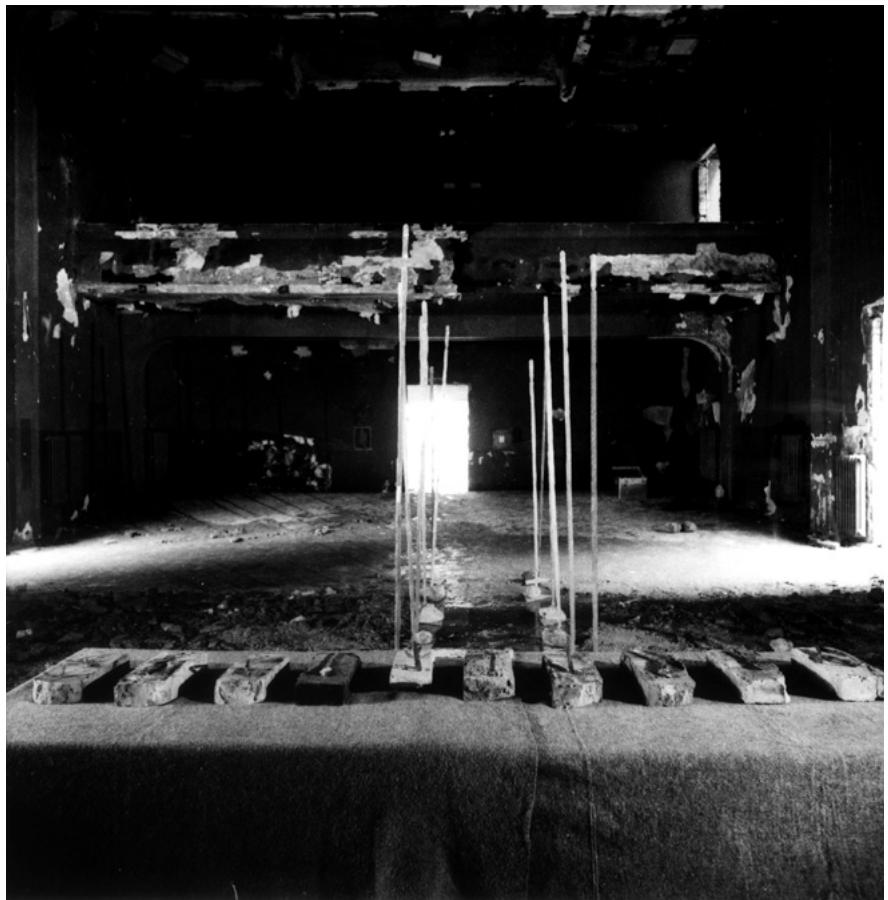
resisted the control mechanisms aimed at banning movement and gatherings. As such, the subversive quality of these disruptions to the panoptic mechanism of power was also in their ability to generate relations that opposed strategies of surveillance and control. Attendance at these site-related or site-oriented exhibitions surpassed other cultural events since communica-

artist was not only the author of the work, but also an equal member of the community, using elements of socially engaged practices to make interventions in the social fabric. Such events were able to empower, regenerate and produce a social body that showed resistance and attempted to change and humanise the reality of war. This emancipatory potential was a significant and distinctive quality of the artistic and curatorial transformation of ruins into temporary exhibition spaces.

### The Emancipatory Potential of Artistic Practices in Spaces of Destruction

The siege of Sarajevo initiated artistic actions and curatorial projects that resisted mechanisms of surveillance and control; through the performative appropriations and reclamation of public spaces as spaces for people, and the revitalisation of ruins as alternative art spaces. These practices also challenged the prevailing art forms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as pristine gallery spaces and their conventional exhibition formats. Art limited to traditional media and absent of social and political context was replaced by subversive momentary actions, performances and performative spatial interventions that introduced alternative modes of creating, exhibiting and viewing art. Overturning the traditional relationship between artist, artwork and spectator, these emerging time-based and context-bound experimental, non-institutional, artist-initiated and independent-curatorial artistic practices evolved in resistance to the state of siege, and in response to the needs of the current conditions and circumstances.

Because in war, everything becomes temporary, momentary, subject to transformation and decay; from the urban social fabric to the human body, tortured, massacred, mutilated to the point of being unrecognisable. The reality of life changed to such an extent that it was almost impossible to



Nusret Pašić, *Witnesses of Existence*, 1993. Sutjeska Cinema, Sarajevo, 1993.  
Courtesy: Archive of the Obala Art Centre.

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maintain the autonomy of art. Due to the lack of everything, including materials, space to work and neutral, clean white gallery walls, artists challenged both conventional artistic means and the notion of the eternal and timeless nature of a work of art. It was inevitable that, during those years, art would move away from the sphere of aesthetic autonomy. In place of the isolated status of the work of art embodied in the 'white cube' gallery concept came the placement of the object or body in non-gallery spaces of destruction that directly indicated the physical, psychological and socio-political state of siege. Thus, with the use of nontraditional artistic means and materials resulting from destruction (debris, remnants, waste), interventions in devastated buildings initiated events and situations in which not only the temporal and spatial status of the work of art was transformed, but in which ruins were transformed into spaces of communication and socialisation, spaces of participatory practice and the creation of micro-communities that resisted mechanisms of surveillance and control.

It was the siege that brought art into life, in the spaces of these practices, making it more accessible and more meaningful. Artistic interventions in the damaged and destroyed buildings inevitably became site-related and contextually determined works, situations in which shared experiences and community identifications spontaneously occurred not directed by some curatorial or artistic agenda. In fact, in the exhibitions and artists' actions discussed in this essay, there was no curatorial imperative – the artists were in direct control of the display format, and the organisations that assisted them with the technical and logistical aspects did not impose a curatorial agenda. The only exception to this was the curated exhibition 'Witnesses of Existence', whose later restaging in different places and outside of the besieged city proved, in any case, that it was its site- and context-specificity that provided the show with socio-political dimension.



Exhibition opening in Sutjeska Cinema, Sarajevo, 1993.  
Courtesy: Archive of the Obala Art Centre.

36. Dunja Blažević, interview with Dunja Blažević, *Kultura i oblici, Sarajevo* vol. 1, no. 2, 23 December 1997, p. 3.

## The End of Subversive and Progressive Art Practices

After the war ended, the majority of the artists discussed in this essay returned to their areas of expertise, as well as to the practice of mostly showing their works in pristine gallery spaces. The Obala Art Centre, which had organised all the exhibitions in the ruined space of the former Sutjeska Cinema, had also founded the Sarajevo Film Festival in 1993 and, as this gradually evolved into the best festival in the region, the art centre consequently redirected its activities towards it. Its Obala Art Gallery, which had been actively working towards developing the independent art scene, stepped aside when the Soros Centre of Contemporary Art (SCCA) was founded in 1996, with a policy of ‘supporting those phenomena in contemporary art that transcend/expand existing media boundaries and frameworks’.<sup>36</sup> Led by Dunja Blažević, the SCCA played a significant role in establishing a new art scene whose artists, mostly young and emerging ones, visibly departed from the dominant aesthetics of Modernism. The centre’s annual exhibitions, mostly organised in public spaces, represented a conscious curatorial intention to delve into the sphere of the socio-political. However, considering that the SCCA was part of the network of Centers of Contemporary Art established in former socialist countries by the Open Society Foundation and financed by wealthy American investor George Soros, one could say that this alternative art scene also served the foundation’s neoliberal social, political and economic agenda.

The infiltration of neoliberal capitalism into the sphere of culture marked a defeat of the radical potential of art; triggered during the siege, but dissolved in the processes of transition. The transition, viewed as ‘the ideological construct of dominance’<sup>37</sup> whereby neoliberalism infiltrates the

37. Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks, 'Welcome to the Desert of Transition: Post-Socialism, the European Union and a New Left in the Balkans', *Monthly Review*, vol. 63, no. 10 (2012), p. 40.

38. Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, vol. 59, Winter 1992, pp. 3–7.

39. Deleuze, 'Postscript', p. 6.

spheres of economics and politics, including cultural politics, has marked a new approach to power relations, characteristic of corporate neoliberal capitalism and the appearance of new information and communication technologies, which may be explained with Gilles Deleuze's concept of the society of control.<sup>38</sup> In the case of Sarajevo, if we were to attempt to connect Deleuze's understanding of social control with Foucault's theory of the panoptical disciplinary society, we would have to deal with the distinct specificities of the spatial establishment of control and power. Because, while in the war the body was subjected to the panoptic machinery of surveillance and punishment through spatial determination (siege), transitional capitalist domination over corporeality is exercised in abstract space, by means of new technologies, corporations and markets, where control is 'continuous and without limit, while discipline was of long duration, infinite and discontinuous'.<sup>39</sup>

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## BELLEZA Y FELICIDAD

Fernanda Laguna

1. This text comes out of a conversation with Corina Oprea on 1 June 2022.

Belleza y Felicidad<sup>1</sup> was a space for art, poetry and music, born in March 1999 in Buenos Aires. It was born from my friendship with Cecilia Pavón (Argentine writer, poet and translator), kind of like an extension of our bodies that loved each other so much. Our idea was not to create a space for art, but a 'gift shop': a fictional world. It was not a matter of showing an artist's work in the same way a gallery would, but of setting up a whole space where fiction and reality went hand in hand. (Also, we both worked with poetry, so poetry was very important.) Roberto Jacoby, an Argentine artist who was prominent in the sixties, talks about friendship as a technology. So, just as you have network technologies (and also many others), you can also think of friendship as a technology, which means that you can work from friendship. Using friendship as a technology, we put together a music show, for example: one person lent a speaker, another person had a light, another person had a microphone; and in that way, working from friendship, we managed to put together a sound system.

I have always worked in collectives of specific persons, which are rather open; not owned by any single person, but integrating many, like Belleza y Felicidad (Beauty and Happiness). When I talk about what 'I' do, I usually speak in the plural and not the singular. When I speak of Belleza y Felicidad, I speak in the plural to include every person who came to do something in that space (such as fashion, poetry or music) – everyone who participated in that space. They were not outsiders who came to do something inside the space; everyone and everything was inside, everything was made from the inside.

There was something that Cecilia Pavón and I were looking for: artistic genius. Now, many years later, this has been channeled into what we call '*arte\_lin*'. We were looking for artistic genius as a kind of creation that surpasses art: as that which is behind artistic expression, which surpasses what

one could imagine art to be. Throughout all of our events, we waited for that artistic genius to make an appearance. And two years ago, it did: I had an amazing, waking vision. I realized that 'known art', the actually existing art that an artist creates, is very little next to the 'something much bigger' that is behind it. It is like there is an artistic existence that surpasses the art itself and is ineffable. That inexpressible experience, that experience that cannot be described, we dubbed *arte\_lin*. *Arte\_lin* is everything we cannot (yet) imagine. It is a way of naming everything we do not yet know, everything that is not yet considered art, for example. As for that place that exists, that has a body, yet that encompasses everything that will never exist, the possibilities that will never come to be; we called that unknown '*lin*'.

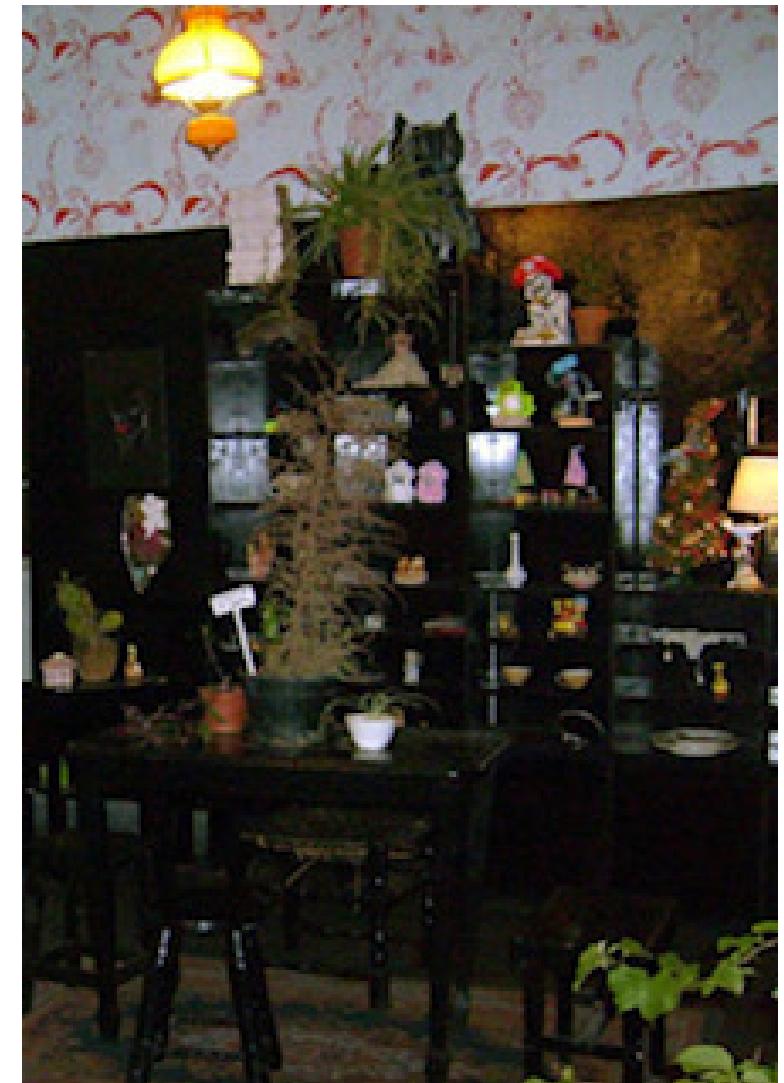
It was also a collective creation, the appearance of that word in our language. We do not have an artists' collective, but a collective curator. This curator consists of countless persons, and we do not know how many nor who they are. This curator has no gender. This curator is called '*comex\_lin*' as another way of thinking about a collective: not as a sum of personalities, but as a collective identity; not just an aggregate of individualities, but a collective entity in which individuals merge; a multiple curator, with a multiple identity. I do not know whether all of this sounds like delirium.

### Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito

Collectives work like a space for the creation and transformation of 'the collective' itself. All the collective work of Belleza y Felicidad, like that of other spaces I created with different artists, has been a space in which to experiment with various issues, such as identity. We do a lot of collective work on micro-politics, issues that have to do with relationships between people on a micro-, not a macro-political level. In fact, we've



Images of Belleza y Felicidad Gallery, Buenos Aires, 1999–2007, courtesy of Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón.



Images of Belleza y Felicidad Gallery, Buenos Aires, 1999–2007, courtesy of Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón.

been criticized for not being political, even though we run a queer publishing house and engage in intentional social interaction, such as the giving and receiving of *potlage* (potlatch) gifts, working outside the laws of the market as much as possible. It is hard to think of strategies outside the market, but I think friendship has a strong political meaning. Friendships are also forged in social work. For me, wherever bonds of love are forged politically, a valuable form of social work is happening that allows us to do different things. So, I speak of micro-politics and not politics, because that is the field in which we move.

In 2003, at a time when many galleries in Argentina were opening spaces in the Global North, we decided to open a space in what you could call the outskirts of Buenos Aires, and we created Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito. One of the questions we were always asked was: 'Why art, in a place where basic needs are not met?' The answer we gave was basically: 'Why not?' Why *not* offer quality art workshops and exhibitions to people who may not have their food needs covered, for example? Meeting people's basic needs would be politics, and art does not seem to *be* politics. Why we opened Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito was to meet people's need for a vocation, for accessing and being able to experience working with different aesthetics. We opened it as a feminist art school, feminist in the sense of feminist construction, a place to experiment with feminisms; as a space or platform for contemporary artwork on the connections within art; and as a school for research into what can be found beyond art, hand in hand with *arte\_lin*. There, we try to focus on experiences that are not necessarily dominated by the market. This is easier in the neighborhood of Villa Fiorito, where, being far away from the centers of art production and distribution, nobody pays us any attention.

Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito has been working as a school of experimentation for nineteen years now, and our learnings and our failures are ongoing. The community and the school

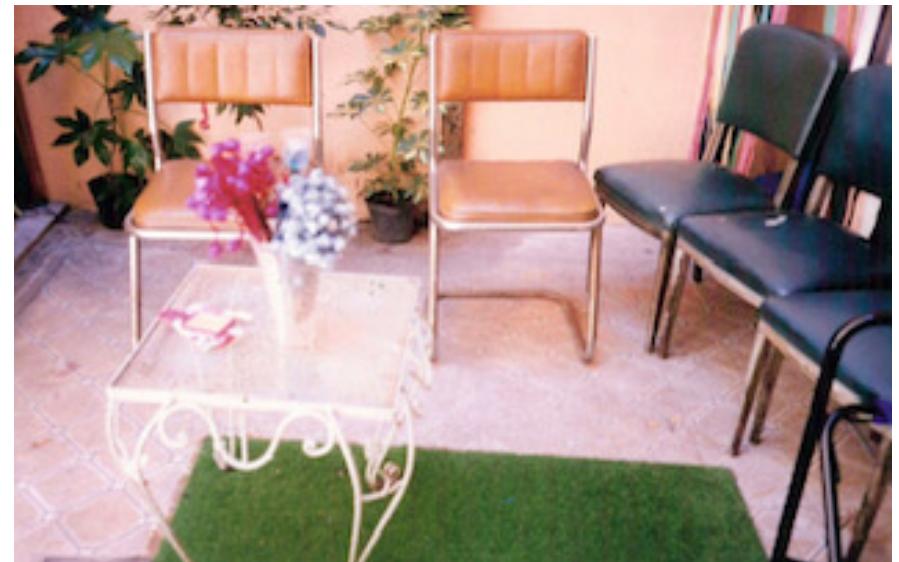
are in a place where there is no running water, and much of the time there is no electricity. There are many social problems, including food problems, and all of this brings many more problems with it. Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito is not a school that was built brick by brick like a wall, but one that is distributed in different places that together form a space that is always being de- and re-constructed, without a fixed shape of its own. It is given shape by the people in the school, and people *are* their problems, so it's a school based on solving people's problems, social problems, rather than having expectations. Yet, while we have very low expectations, we try to have many of them.

Failures are linked to expectations. A failure is an unfulfilled expectation. So, we try to have multiple expectations, and they are all very much linked to the present. The movement of the art school is like a spiral. As it spirals, so you go through similar problems many times, and growth is not linear. The spiral is the shape and the learning. We always try to learn, and that is where expectations are fulfilled. But it is not about achieving a specific goal. There might have been a time when we had a goal of getting artists who came from the outskirts of the city to join us, but that was wrong and responded to a preconceived idea that we brought with us from other schools.

Today, we think of it as a school for the present. Each person sees what they will do with it. Rather than having fewer and fewer failures, we have less and less concrete expectations. We call it an art school, but it is not an institution. The teachers are always changing, so pedagogical techniques change constantly too - there is no institutional heritage as such. We chose the name and form of a school to somehow define something of what we are, but what we are is a group of people doing things.



Images of Belleza y Felicidad Gallery, Buenos Aires, 1999–2007, courtesy of Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón.



Images of Belleza y Felicidad Gallery, Buenos Aires, 1999–2007, courtesy of Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón.

## Belleza y Felicidad, Eloisa Cartonera and Turrito

Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito and Eloisa Cartonera were born at the same time, in 2003. Eloisa Cartonera is a publishing house co-founded by Washington Cucurto and Javier Barilaro, whose literary output is books handmade out of cardboard collected by *cartoneros* (the local name for those who look for recyclable materials in rubbish) from Fiorito.<sup>2</sup> At first, they were closely linked.

I proposed to a group of artists that they could do just about anything. As a curator, I suggested once again that we collectivize the curating process, and started speaking in the plural. Together, we set out to create the most incredible show in the world, something unimaginable. Anything was possible. The first question that came up was where in Buenos Aires to have it – Turrito was the building. The building was missing a window pane. When we reinstalled it, it broke again, so we decided that that place would always be open. There was a group of about thirteen artists at Turrito, some of whom participated more, others less so, and then that group was joined by more people. It became a much larger collective space. It was up to whoever brought an idea to carry it out, so basically everyone who brought their ideas *did* something. We hosted weddings, fashion shows, bonfires. We had no electricity, so everything was done by candlelight. The space was quite limited; since it did not have a door and anyone could come in at any time, everything we had inside could be stolen. If there were paintings, you knew they could be stolen. So everything we did was performative, less tangible, without so many stealable objects. Sometimes circumstances influence aesthetic production. We had parties and *lin* parties, which were like parties but something more. We hosted many talks and workshops, about lysergic acid (LSD) experiences, philosophy, forms of community. That project lasted three years.

Now at Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito we host workshops and we run a community kitchen called Gourmet, which is kind of like a soup kitchen (which are common in Argentina because many people cannot afford food) but different. The Gourmet kitchen tries to be a community kitchen that on Saturdays works as an ultra-popular restaurant, with different foods from different parts of the world produced at cheap prices but by an actual chef. The chef is also a collective, a *chef\_lin*. We host art workshops, sewing workshops, poetry workshops, and so on. Our teachers are also our neighbors: we have five teachers right now. The idea is that you do not need to be hyper-specialized in something to become a teacher. Anyone can be a teacher, anyone who has something to share. We also have the art gallery, and the T-shirt workshop where we print T-shirts with feminist phrases. We hold markets, go to the theater, go for walks, have fun, make jokes. It's more than just workshops; it's a whole experience. Drinking mate, sharing, learning... The teachers learn just as much as the students. It is, as I have said, a spiral. In botanical terms, it is like a bulb, not like a root – something that is connected at its center.

The people who make up Belleza y Felicidad change all the time, and they get involved in different ways. Someone who taught workshops ten years ago continues to participate because the space is still there, so in a sense it is a fixed group now, but it also includes many other people. These days, Belleza y Felicidad must include approximately 150 people, plus all the people who study there, plus all the children and adults who pass through it.

Up until a month ago, I participated in Ni Una Menos (Not One Less), an Argentinean collective from which I learned a lot. We created Ni Una Menos Fiorito, a collective of women with whom we attend demonstrations. The feminist side is very important, especially in terms of an experimental

**2.** See [eloisacartonera.com](http://eloisacartonera.com) (last accessed on 25 October 2022).



Images of Belleza y Felicidad Gallery, Buenos Aires, 1999–2007, courtesy of Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón.

Images of Belleza y Felicidad Gallery, Buenos Aires, 1999–2007, courtesy of Fernanda Laguna and Cecilia Pavón.

form of politics, of micro-politics, of thinking about the world. Feminism is a way of thinking about the world as a construction, a way of imagining the world. That is how I see it; there are so many definitions of feminism that it is not what *I* say it is, I just came up with this definition and got hooked on it.

I am interested in exploring beyond 'known art', which I think is hyper-saturated. I am interested in spending whatever life I have left investigating *arte\_lin*, something I cannot even imagine and which I do not know. I, for example, believe that in order to be able to open oneself up to the unknown, it is important to hack the laws of the market. Art is highly influenced by the laws of the market, not only in terms of sales, but also in terms of systems of legitimization. That is why one of the ways out (and through, to *arte\_lin*) is to link art with gift economies. And this art school is open enough not only to allow us to perceive subtle forms of art, but to abandon the exchange.

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## ECHOES OF ZAPATISMO OUTSIDE CHIAPAS

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Alessandra Pomarico



Nikolay Oleynikov (Chto Delat), *Comrade Moose*, 2021, watercolor on paper. From the series *And the Embassy Sails On*, 2021. Courtesy the artist and The Gallery Apart, Rome

1. 'Autonomía' for the Zapatistas is a political process of self-governance in which they have engaged ever since their insurrection in 1994, when they declared war against the state, and their exit from capitalism and patriarchy. Refusing the *mal gobierno* (bad government) brought about by representative democracy, they oppose it with an assembly-run decision-making process in which the assemblies, or Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Councils of Good Government), delegate groups whose rotating members manage tasks of governance for the community. *Autonomía* is a never-ending project, an ongoing process of pursuing autonomous living, a trajectory that nevertheless has, in their experience, manifested through quite an effective system of self-governance. The term is shared by other leftist circles, anarchists, libertarians and Indigenous people that reclaim their right to their own forms of life, independently of State, Empire and Capital.

At crucial times – after periods of silence, retiring to protect their processes of building *autonomía* (autonomy) away from any external interference,<sup>1</sup> or going underground

I encountered Zapatismo, as it emerged internationally in the mid-1990s, in Milan, where I was a frequenter of the autonomous social centers, some of which were directly involved with solidarity campaigns in support of the insurgent people of Chiapas, whose famous '*Ya basta!*', declared on 1 January 1994, echoed across continents, reverberating with revolutionary hope among communities engaged in struggle, and militant groups, in the West as well. The vast mobilization of other communities, a part of Mexico's civil society, and the immediate international response were key elements of the interruption (at least momentarily) of the military repression of the Zapatistas, only two weeks after their *levantamiento* (insurrection). Since then, the Zapatistas' maintenance and cultivation of a channel of communication with comrades beyond Mexico has been a key part of their strategy. Widely sharing their vision, processes and struggles, they have aroused trans-territorial attention in moments of danger, generating a vast sense of admiration, and even devotion; challenging and informing our praxis, and inviting our solidarity to manifest unconditionally and on their own terms.

in the Selva Lacandona to face the ongoing low-intensity war and counter-insurgency perpetrated by the state, the paramilitary and the narco – the Zapatistas would reach out with an invitation, generating waves of responses among activists, artists, and intellectual circles. Caravans would be organized from Italy (as from many other places), and people would join the Zapatistas in Mexico. This was the case, for example, when a contingent of Tute Blanche (literally, 'white overalls') and many other Italian activists participated in the March of the Color of Earth from Chiapas to Mexico City.<sup>2</sup> At other times, comrades would collect funds and help to build infrastructure, offering skills or bringing medical aid required in the Caracoles, the Zapatistas' autonomously governed territories.<sup>3</sup> Upon their return home, assemblies would be held to share and report back from that far, fierce, almost legendary world where heroic Indigenous men, women, children and elders, *campesinos* (farmers) wearing masks to become more visible, kept on declaring their opposition to Empire, to the nation state, to the patriarchal, racist, colonial, capitalist system, reclaiming their land and the right to their own ways of life – *to dream their own dreams of a world that contains many worlds*. Murals representing Zapatistas and

2. See, for example, Chiapas Support Committee, 'The March of the Color of the Earth', 20 March 2021, available at <https://chiapas-support.org/2021/03/20/the-march-of-the-color-of-the-earth> (last accessed on 17 October 2022).
3. 'Caracoles' literally translates as 'snails', 'shells', 'conches', or 'spirals', all of which symbolize traits of Zapatismo such as slowness, the circles of their assemblies, the open-ended process of *autonomía*, and so on. Specifically, 'Caracoles' also indicates the autonomously governed municipalities, or regional seats, of the Zapatista government, formerly known as *Aguascalientes*. There are now twelve Caracoles, administrative centers that govern by applying the seven principles of *Mandar Obedeciendo* (ruling by obeying) through assemblies and their autonomous systems of education, economy, health and conflict resolution. See 'Palabitorio', in *When the Roots Start Moving: To Navigate Backward, Resonating with Zapatismo* (ed. Alessandra Pomarico and Nikolay Oleynikov), Archive Books and Free Home University, 2021, p. 235.



Chto Delat (realized by Nikolay Oleynikov), *Flag #1: To Negate Negation (Carlo Giuliani)*, 2021, mixed media. From the series *Navigation Signal Flag System. Set #3: Some Signals Registered from Chiapas*, 2021

their symbols of the *paliacate* (bandana), the balaclava and corn, tagged with their mottos, started to appear in the Italian urban landscape, as fair-trade commerce was organized to distribute Zapatista coffee. Many of our autonomous centers' infoshops became populated with publications of their literature, mostly of Subcomandante Marcos's letters, fables and communiqués. Once his books began to circulate, and his mysterious, 'holographic' figure and postures (riding a bay horse, smoking a pipe through his *pasamontaña* (balaclava)) became iconic, together with his fervent, sharp and unique literary style, the Zapatistas' words permeated our imaginary, resonating deeply between the Italian leftist, antifascist, anarchist legacy, and the traditions of *autonomía* – linking wor(l)ds of resistance, while offering another necessary perspective; a language full of poetic metaphors, inclusive of many relations beyond those of living human beings. This became progressively evident, and more so during the mobilization of what, within alter-modernity struggles, was called the No Global movement. In 2001, this mobilization tragically culminated at the infamous G8 summit in Genoa, where thousands of peaceful protesters were met with aggression and the young activist Carlo Giuliani was killed by the police. On that occasion, the opening message of the protesters clearly borrowed the language, narrative, form and structure of Zapatista discourse and invocations.<sup>4</sup> Now, twenty years after that moment, we have seen how the war of counter-insurgency against life has spread and intensified across the globe, including in the so-called Global North.

In their peculiar way of practicing and enhancing internationalism via a generous literature, the Zapatista both warn and nourish the political thinking of those of us who have started to understand their project of sustained revolution.

**4.** See Christian Peverieri, 'Travel to Salento Zapatista', in *When the Roots Start Moving*, pp. 141–42.

5. Manuel Callahan, in conversation with comrades and friends at one of the online Testing Assemblies organized during the 2020–21 Covid-19 lockdown.

The Zapatista conjunction became a lens through which we reflected upon the complexities of the neoliberal and neocolonial organization of the world, and its dramatic effects upon different territories and ecosystems – that which they also name and frame as the Fourth World War.

Zapatismo inflamed our practices, with a ripple-effect rarely achieved by other insurgent groups. With the experience of those who, over the years, would serve as international observers, or participate in the *semilleros* (seminars), *escuelitas* (little schools), CompArte or ConSciencia festivals; in the encounters with and between women in struggle; through publications and the constant work of translating, transmitting and building solidarity networks, the dialogue with Zapatismo grew, producing what we like to call a ‘resonance’: not an imitation of their example, which could not be repeated, but a refraction, a reverberation, a listening-with; a collective thinking-feeling through struggles, ‘a habit of assembly’.<sup>5</sup>

What it means to be in resonance with Zapatismo has now become clearer, both in retrospect and with the new perspective that their visit to Europe opened up, reigniting political energy and transnationally connecting self-organizations. Together with those working politically at the intersection of cultural and knowledge production, in the arts or in education, within and against formal institutions, and with those invested in building community and creating spaces of learning and political mobilization, we ask:

*What is the Zapatistas’ lesson? How can we learn with and through Zapatismo, in order to orient our inquiries, to be in service of a larger movement, to repair what has been broken, to remember that which*



Nikolay Oleynikov (Chto Delat), *Compas=Comrades*, 2021. From the series *And the Embassy Sails On*, 2021. Courtesy the artist and The Gallery Apart, Rome

*has been forgotten, to position ourselves, to attempt to reverse power, to decolonize our practices and the places we inhabit, maybe preparing to exit them?*

Within this frame, and as we live a moment of ecological catastrophe that calls us to produce trans-territorial forms of organizing and a paradigm shift on both a local and a planetary scale, it is worth observing how the wave of Zapatismo reached so many, with different worldviews and knowledge systems; amplifying the possibilities for a locally rooted and globally connected movement. *How did Zapatismo become this Northern (Southern?) star, shedding light on the darkest night, offering hope and guidance, even in contexts so different and so far away from Chiapas?*

Of course, there is an obvious sense of awe and inspiration that comes from their exemplary practice, their rigorous discipline, their insistence upon truly democratic and horizontal processes, their political cohesiveness, in building *another possible world*, away from patriarchal, colonial, racist, capitalist ways of life. I am not alone in arguing that the Zapatistas' usage of art, their poetics, their accessible yet evocative language, has something to do with their ability to successfully transmit their struggle, mobilize affect, and create a wide political awareness and support system. The Zapatista methodology is exemplary: inherently pedagogical and performative, it is concerned with the spread of ideology within the younger generations; the expansion of the skills of each member of the community, and of the spirit of *compañerismo* (companionship, comradeship, camaraderie), the emergence of a collective subjectivity, to reinforce community belonging – a sense of *comunalidad* (communality). Their way of being, thinking, knowing and relating is reflected through and built upon a corpus of textual, visual and performative narratives that reinforce, reinstate and celebrate the path of *autonomía*. The transformation that seems to happen upon meeting the

Zapatistas has to do with their unique capacity to inspire and move not only our intellects and our political awareness, but also our hearts and spirit; maybe our own capacities to re-member and connect.

Twenty-eight years after their uprising, almost forty years after the time spent clandestinely in the Selva Lacandona, the Zapatistas are still resisting and re-existing, and they have a lot to say and to teach us. In the middle of a pandemic, exactly 500 years after the conquest of Mexico by Spanish colonizers, unpredictably, a Zapatista delegation came to visit us in Europe – the first chapter of a journey set to continue on to all the other continents. *What did this visit signify? What was the message that they came to deliver, considering they had always invited us to build Zapatismo on our own, in our own territories and with our own tools?*

They came to 'embrace our struggles', to share their story and to prompt us to commit to defending life. With a sense of urgency, and clearly on a mission to acquire knowledge of, and establish a deeper connection with, those in struggle, their voyage is a call to action; a way to turn around and reach back into history, retrieving those knowledges that have resisted erasure and oblivion. After centuries of defiance and resistance, the Travesía por la Vida is another form of resurgence; an invitation to share a larger struggle, one that unites the people and the lands of the south-west of Mexico with those everywhere else on our planetary home.

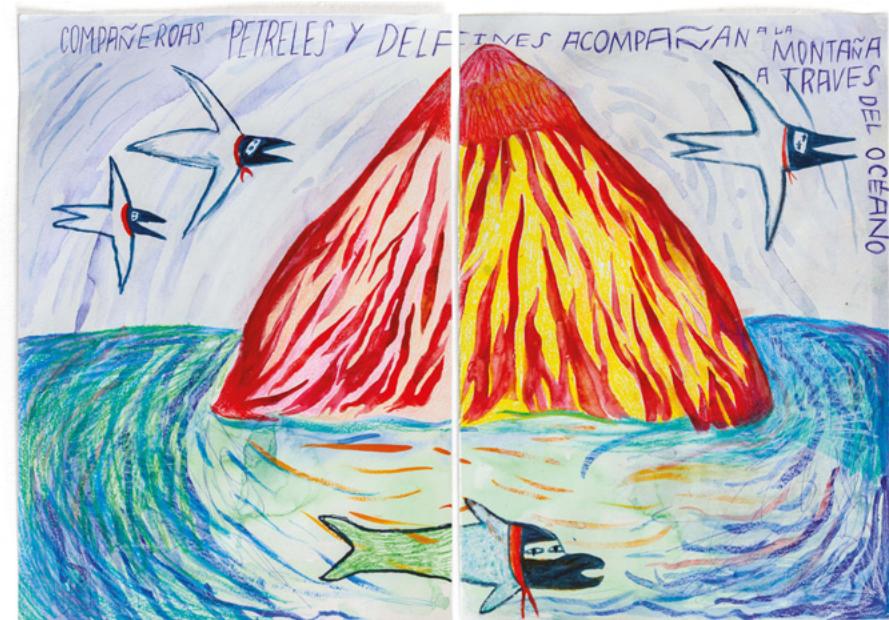
During the encounters held in Austria and Italy with activists, farmers, displaced people, and independent journalists (no invitation from governmental representatives or mainstream media was accepted), we were touched by the way in which the Zapatistas recollected their trajectory: a well-prepared and structured narrative, starting with the story of the oppression of their ancestors; a retelling of their Uprising; the various stages of building *autonomía*, its organization

6. Don Durito is a fabulous beetle, quoted by Subcomandante Galeano when he announced the tour. See Subcomandante Marcos, *Conversations with Don Durito*, New York, Autonomedia 2005, available at <https://school-forchiapas.org/library/conversations-don-durito> (last accessed 14 October 2022).

of reciprocity; a reminder of our interdependence, the necessity of solidarity and togetherness, the importance of sharing struggles and circulating knowledge about them with mutual respect. They spoke about this relationship as ‘learning with each other’ and ‘building comradeship’ and included copious examples of mistakes and failures, insisting on the necessity of learning from errors and the practice of practicing.

We are seeing seeds of Zapatismo spreading, permeating our soils and blossoming in the cracks of Empire, from center to periphery. The announcement of the *gira* (tour, journey) the arrival of ESQUADRON 431 on the shore of Spain, followed by the rest of the Zapatista delegation ‘invading’ Europe, to use the language of Don Durito,<sup>6</sup> produced a ‘miracle’ – one of coordination, as various organizations in disparate places committed to receive the Zapatistas, took decisions together and co-organized their visits, from August to December of 2021. Aligned, beyond their differences, in a spirit of care and service beyond regionalism, activists previously fragmented and dispersed across the old continent connected to work together; co-managing a crowd-funded budget, finding a common strategy, new protocols and agreements. We witnessed an awakening, as an effervescence of circles and assemblies miraculously formed to co-host the Zapatistas: local, regional

regarding governance, education, health and justice; and the practice of *compañerismo* – a chronicle collectively shared and diligently repeated upon each different encounter. Within this recollection, the Zapatistas repeatedly acknowledged the support of their *compas* (comrades) outside of Chiapas, as an important aspect of their resistance. While many of us welcomed them with reverence, they approached us with yet another humbling lesson: a statement



Chto Delat (realized by Nikolay Oleynikov), *Comrades Petrels and Dolphins*, 2021. From the series *And the Embassy Sails On*, 2021. Courtesy the artist and The Gallery Apart, Rome

7. Often, the *caracol* figures as a cornucopia in the Zapatista iconography.

assemblies in each country; national ones for each state; and a European one, in close connection with the Commandancia Zapatista – a beautiful, large, slow *caracol* (literally ‘snail’, ‘seashell’),<sup>7</sup> spiraling up in concentric circles, with an opening at its end. It was certainly not without challenges, nor without pain, contrasts and maybe even conflicts; yet a collective moment of fierce care and translocal mobilization did happen – a process the results of which may still have fully to materialize. We prepared for the visit and welcomed the ambassadors from Chiapas with such commitment, a joint effort requiring energy, time, work, finances and other resources. *How, then, can we continue to organize together in our many, here and now, prolonging this Zapatista moment?*

### Notes on Chto Delat's artistic resonance with Zapatismo

When we first learned about the visit of the Zapatistas, the Russian artistic collective Chto Delat and the Italian group at Free Home University had just completed the film *People of Flour, Salt and Water* (2019), the second in Chto Delat's Zapatista trilogy. With many open questions still in mind, we imagined a segue from the film into a book in which to interrogate notions of displacement and belonging. It was within this frame that Zapatismo emerged for us as a form of belonging: a home (or a homecoming) for our hopes and our imaginaries; a belonging that is also a *becoming*, a desire for the *not here yet*. When the *gira* was announced, we expanded the initial chapter on Zapatismo into a larger conversation with some of our comrades from different places, whose contributions are now collected in *When the Roots Start Moving: To Navigate Backward, Resonating with Zapatismo* (2021) – an editorial



Chto Delat (realized by Nikolay Oleynikov), Zombie-Communist Team vs. Bird-Girls from Selva, 2017, mural. Courtesy MUAC, Mexico

- 8.** *Cargos*, literally ‘weights’, ‘loads’ or ‘charges’, are responsibilities given by the assembly to a few (rotating) members of the community, who have to serve by volunteering for these tasks. In reciprocity, the community helps support the family of those charged with the duty, providing food or working on their *milpa* (literally ‘maize field’, cultivation plot; see also footnote 16). The system of *cargos* draws on traditional Indigenous forms of organizing leadership and authority that are strictly connected to a sense of service to the community, rather than power over it.

collaboration between Archive Books and Free Home University. Invested in politically grounded, collective artistic inquiries and forms of embodied pedagogy, both Chto Delat and Free Home University (with Nikolay Oleynikov belonging to both collectives, bridging people, sites and ideas) consider art a tool for investigating reality; for creating community; for sharing affect and politics. Our hearts beating for the Zapatistas, our visit to Chiapas together provided the common ground for our further collaboration and investigations. Zapatismo was the light we tended to, revealing possibilities for other ways of living, creating space for our own questions, and offering an example from which to drive inspiration

and strength – yet without romanticizing or objectifying their movement, their community, their stories or their struggle. And even then, even with all our flaws, we got implicated in this reverberation.

In 2016 and 2017 we shared the life-altering experience of witnessing the Zapatistas’ everyday resistance and re-existence. Our visit to the Caracoles also made evident how hard it is to suspend judgment and avoid the temptation to reduce what we see to what we already know (or think we do), through using the same language, categories and habits of mind we rely on to make sense of the world. The Zapatistas’ widespread, meticulous, capillary-level *undoing-and-doing-otherwise* troubled and changed our ways of seeing and thinking in manners hard to describe. We were astonished by their deep commitment to organizing just and equitable social infrastructure, where democracy, freedom and dignity are at the center; by how

responsibilities are distributed, via the system of *cargos*, as in shared duties, with power never concentrated in the hands of just a few authorities;<sup>8</sup> and by how everyone had a direct engagement in the life of the community. We had to question, scrutinize and rethink our own politics. We had to listen.

The occasion that brought us there was Chto Delat’s first solo show at Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City (2017). The collective initially proposed an investigation into political and artistic connections between the Russian and Mexican revolutions. Eventually, this included the Zapatista insurgency and its influence on activists in post-Soviet Russia. The museum’s curators were skeptical about the relevance of Zapatismo at that point, whether locally or internationally, arguing that the movement was dormant and so probably less politically significant than before. But Chto Delat insisted: they wanted to see with their own eyes. Eventually, they obtained support to accomplish their research.

Accompanied by Oleg Yasinsky, the very first translator of Subcomandante Marcos’s work into Russian, to help them with both cultural and linguistic translation, they managed to spend time in the Zapatista territories, meeting with researchers, artists, activists and people in the support-base communities. They participated in the assemblies and were even granted permission to interview Subcomandante Moises. Beatriz Aurora, an artist very close to the Zapatistas who contributed to the movement’s striking visual narrative in the early years, was key in introducing Chto Delat to the artists of the CompArte Festival, which led, one year later, to their participation in Chto Delat’s show at MUAC, emblematically titled ‘When We Thought We Had All the Answers, Life Changed the Questions’; for the very first time, Zapatista art was included in a museum run by the state and associated with the public university.



Chto Delat, *The New Dead End #17: Summer School of Slow Orientation in Zapatismo*, 2017, film still.

Back in Saint Petersburg after their first visit, Chto Delat proposed to the fellows of their School of Engaged Art a study session on Zapatismo. For months, the group read Marcos's books and studied what they call 'Zapatista Spanish', a sensitive, poetic idiom that embodies the Zapatistas' political vision. To fully grasp the Zapatista cosmopolitics using post-Soviet categories was a challenge: so much had to be rethought again and again, so as not to slip into the fault lines of representation; cultural or stylistic appropriation; the temptation to transpose the Zapatistas' powerful words and images, or to transform their struggle into an event.

The investigation continued in the form of a 'learning film', *The New Dead End #17: Summer School of Slow Orientation in Zapatismo* (2017), that produced, and was produced by, a collectively embodied process of both living and creating together. The film, as often in Chto Delat's work, develops on multiple levels: showing the process of creation, narrating the personal stories of the participants, while simultaneously building a fictional story. As spectators, we are carried in a space-time of living-thinking-feeling together, as the group questions the possibilities for Zapatismo in Putin's Russia; reflecting on what could be translated; readapted to their own struggle; and what type of Zapatismo could emerge in an urban, non-Indigenous context. They imagined (with great intuition, a dream that turned into a premonition) that the Zapatista were coming to establish their embassies in the West. Then, recuperating an old Russian tradition of didactic street art, using the device of a mobile puppet theater, they wandered around a village in the Russian taiga, giving life to critters from the pluriverse of Zapatista fables, or using other puppets to personify their ideas. A year later, Chto Delat returned to Chiapas to share the film in San Cristobal de la Casas, and also at CIDECI, the Centro Indígena de Capacitación Integral, during a multilingual assembly that lasted several hours, with the intention to collect feedback

9. See Chto Delat, 'Slow Orientation in Zapatism: When we Thought we Had all the Answers, Life Changed the Questions #2017', <https://chtodelat.org/b7-art-projects/installations/muac-project-when-we-thought-we-had-all-the-answers-life-changed-the-questions-2017/slow-orientation-zapatism> (last accessed on 23 September 2022).

before the final editing of the footage into a montage of separate episodes.

Some time after, those encounters produced a new, important moment: the acquisition of Zapatista art pieces by another museum, this time in Madrid – the very capital of the kingdom that conquered Latin America, including Mexico – the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (the Reina Sofía). There, in the summer of 2021,

the Zapatista delegation spent time with Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), the anti-war masterpiece *par excellence*, and the director and colleagues in various departments co-organized the Zapatista Forum together with other organizations, including ours. In the exhibition that opened in November of that year (on view until at least 2023) titled 'Vasos Comunicantes' ('Communicating Vessels'), presenting different sections of the Reina Sofía's collection together with the new acquisitions, the Dispositivo 92 assemblage asks: '*¿Puede la historia ser rebobinada?*' ('Can history be rewound?')

In this part of the exhibition, Chto Delat literally shares space again with the Zapatista artists, in *Slow Orientation in Zapatism* (2017 – ongoing), an installation that reinstates the magic of their first encounters in Mexico, and their relation of resonance, reception and comradely transmission.<sup>9</sup> Here, the Zapatista pieces, three sculpted and decorated canoes and paddles, are juxtaposed with Chto Delat's video interview with Subcomandante Moisés, mounted in the wooden puppet theater used by the artists in their film *Dead End #17*. In it, quite interestingly, the canoe rowed and steered by backward-facing, balaclava-wearing film participants is a recurring element of many scenes. Maybe this was a fortuitous coincidence, or a lucky transposition. More probably, it was great intuition on



Nikolay Oleynikov (Chto Delat), *Prof Corn, Queen of the Fields*, 2017. From the series *And the Embassy Sails On*, 2017. Courtesy the artist and The Gallery Apart, Rome



Chto Delat, *Learning Station #2, Free Home University / People of Flour, Salt, and Water*, 2021. Fragment of the installation *New kinetic melodies: on miracles, disasters and mutations for the future*, 2021. Photograph: Giorgio Benni. Courtesy the artists and The Gallery Apart, Rome

the part of Olga ‘Tsaply’ Ergorova, film director and editor of the group, as it was only after filming that we learned that, for the Aymara people, the canoe represents the cycle of time, and that to reach the future one has to navigate backward, facing toward the past.<sup>10</sup> We quote this teaching in the subtitle of our book: *When the Roots Start Moving: To Navigate Backward, Resonating with Zapatismo* (2021).

As the *Slow Orientation in Zapatism* continues, and as the museum retransmits ‘the Zapatista signal systems received, to which we respond’ – to use the words of Dmitry Vilensky,<sup>11</sup> another member of the group – threads of these old/new constellations appear. It feels somehow significant to trace back this interweaving of people, places, ideas, connections, struggles and actions set-in-motion; manifesting in different spaces and temporalities, through various constituencies. It is also important to note those instances in which museums, as historically and inherently colonial institutions, become pedagogical sites and spaces for encounters that offer occasions to deconstruct colonial narratives, through gestures of repair. In the museum as well as in the university, the intention to rewind (revisit? retell? reframe?) ‘history’, and to correct hegemonic forms of cultural invisibilization, extraction and epistemicide, is an absolutely urgent and necessary trajectory to pursue.

As for the Zapatistas, the acquisition of three of their *cayucos* (canoes) by the Reina Sofía – something that surprised their more dogmatic followers and was celebrated by those who believe that European museums can and should make space for other worldviews – provided a further opportunity to articulate their politics. The Zapatistas announced their will to donate the anticipated 25,000 euros offered by the museum, which they called an ‘incomprehensible’ compensation,

- 10.** With thanks to Natalia Arcos for sharing this proverb with us.
- 11.** Dmitry Vilensky in *Episodio 7, Dispositivo 92, Puedes la historia ser rebobinada*, 2021 (digital video interview), available at <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/collection/episodio-7> (last accessed on 3 October 2022).

12. Sam Jones, 'Mexican rebels donate museum money to refugees', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2022, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/11/mexican-rebels-donate-museum-money-for-ca-noes-to-refugee-rescues> (last accessed on 18 November 2022).

exit the tentacular mechanisms of capitalism, by re-routing the financial transaction.

When we speak of decolonizing the museum, when we criticize how art has become co-opted by the financialization of the art world, when we invoke a post-capitalist future with a rethinking of international solidarity... the Zapatistas seem to do it all.

Once one starts to *think-feel* with Zapatismo, it is forever. During the 2019 Free Home University summer session, Chto Delat realized their film, *People of Flour, Salt, and Water* (2019), the second in their Zapatista trilogy. Here too, Marcos's fables and the Zapatistas' thirteen demands were deployed to open a conversation about struggles with migrant subjects, war survivors, land defenders, organic farmers and young activists trying to make sense of the world. Here we are in the South of Italy, among hectares of dying olive trees attacked by the *Xylella fastidiosa* bacteria as their immune system is weakened by extensive monoculture, the use of chemicals and consequent loss of soil biodiversity. But we are also in a territory re-baptized 'Salento Zapatista' by the activist Christian Peverieri, invited to join our session to share his experience in the *caracoles* and the relation between Italian social movements and Zapatismo. It is here in Salento that Casa delle

to Open Arms, a Spanish NGO that rescues migrants in danger in the Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup> It's clear that such a sum could have benefited the infrastructure of their communities, yet the gesture (certainly a collective decision) is in line with their pursuit of navigating and undoing the system. They engage in a relationship with the state museum for the sake of building bridges, but then show themselves ready to

Agriculture was formed by some young activists who came back to the land of their grandfathers, generating a community of practices around natural farming and the communalization of lands and means of production, experimenting with forms of community-supported agriculture (and whose example is now followed by many in the region). Their struggle against agribusiness, the use of chemicals, the privatization of seeds and the new forms of slavery and exploitation, of both labor and land, has been affirmed through educational activities, participatory events, ongoing research and campaigns, as well as the gatherings, celebrations, art festivals and residencies program that Free Home University has contributed to since 2014. All of this was also what intrigued Chto Delat, contributing to their proposing a learning film process here, as they felt a resonance with the *campesinos* from Chiapas and their *milpa* (literally 'maize field', cultivation plot).<sup>13</sup>

As artists and film-makers Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson have observed:

Chto Delat describe [this] work as a learning-film. But who is the subject and what is the object of this learning?

One has the impression that the learning process not only involves those who take part in the collective experience but questions the very concept of what constitutes research, a film, a production. While there are clear echoes of the Dziga Vertov Group and a kind of Brechtian pedagogy, at the same time, the film travels far beyond their

13. The *milpa* is the basic system of ancestral cultivation in Mexico. Corn is grown with herbs and fruits such as epazote, chili peppers, squash and beans, creating a micro ecosystem for mutual collaboration and protection from pests. In Zapatista territories, there is a collective *milpa* for the community and a smaller *milpa* for each family.

- 14.** Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson, 'The Fate of an Insect that Struggles Between Life and Death Somewhere in a Nook Sheltered from Humanity is as Important as the Fate and the Future of the Revolution', in *When the Roots Start Moving*, pp. 129–30.

mock-stentorian classroom mode. Though ludic in its approach, it becomes a transformative experience for those involved and for the camera, which is affectively always with the people in a process within which the viewer, too, can learn.<sup>14</sup>

Chto Delat's third Zapatista film, *About the footprints, what we hide in the pockets and other shadows of hope* (2020) is a recounting of a public performance and a learning process led in Greece by Chto Delat with the Solidarity School of Piraeus, a volunteer-based initiative that supports migrants and asylum seekers. The artists proposed a selection of texts by Subcomandante Marcos to the participants and their teachers, as tools to learn Greek with; of course, they all learned a lot about Zapatismo, too. During the session, the group was visited by Stavros Stavrides, an activist, urbanist, writer and professor at the School of Architecture in Athens, who shared about the solidarity actions organized and undertaken by Greek activists in Chiapas, including the building of a school. He underlined how the relation between movements opened up a new space for thinking and learning about autonomy and translocal anti-capitalist struggles, both in material ways and on the level of the political imaginary. A local master puppeteer, Stathis Markopoulos introduced the group to the tradition of shadow theater, and the voice of Durito, the famous beetle who appears in many of Marcos's fables, explaining the fundamental ideas of the Zapatistas, was integrated into the performance that resulted from this process, along with personal stories of the participants' coming from different countries to live in Greece. As curator iLiana Fokianaki writes:

For the current conditions of Greece, with a government that is introducing a police state, has increased extraction and fracking, and is abolishing the last remnants of a meager welfare state, all while being openly anti-LGBTQI+, anti-feminist, and anti-migrant – the words of the Zapatistas seem necessary. How will they be perceived by migrant communities that struggle to survive in an increasingly racist society? ... How can we think of life in a harmonious coalition with Land and Earth? ... What is the role of culture in a process of liberation – and how much agency can art have when assuming the role of the vehicle (or the toolbox) towards ideological emancipation?<sup>15</sup>

- 15.** iLiana Fokianaki, 'Reactivating Language', in *When the Roots Start Moving*, pp. 181–83.
- 16.** Chto Delat, 'Unlearning in Order to Learn (with a little unseen help from the Zapatistas)', *When We Thought We Had all the Answers, Life Changed the Questions*, Mexico, MUAC, UNAM/CAAC (2017), available at [https://chtodelat.org/page/9/?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=162&limit=5&limits\\_start=30&order=name&dir=DESC&Itemid=0](https://chtodelat.org/page/9/?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=162&limit=5&limits_start=30&order=name&dir=DESC&Itemid=0) (last accessed on 23 September 2022).

The relation of being-in-resonance with Zapatismo that Chto Delat collectively practice – a reflecting-with, a call-and-response, perhaps an echoing, or a reverberation of questions across completely different contexts and geographies – is clarified in their text 'Unlearning in Order to Learn (with a little unseen help from the Zapatistas)'.<sup>16</sup> Here too, they underline, they don't seek to imitate, replicate or appropriate the Zapatistas' art and lexicon, but rather to open conversations with it, using it as a lens to self-reflect and to instigate a dialogue with those fighting against or suffering from various forms of oppression. This is evident in all the films in the Zapatista trilogy (as in all of the copious productions in and through which they have engaged with Zapatismo), in which

17. Olga 'Tslapya' Egorova, 'Making Films Zapatistically', in *When the Roots Start Moving*, pp. 193–99.

struggles; a way for us to check in and exercise our own values and capacity for transformation; a way to reimagine what world we want to live in, and how we can organize to make it possible. Art, on the other hand, is a tool that brings people together; in which new scenarios can be imagined, articulated and tested, and new forms of collectivity can come to life, however temporarily.

Through the various processes and investigations that led to these productions, Chto Delat have come to identify what they call a 'Zapatista method', a series of principles and guidelines that they transpose into their art-making approach, which is always a process of building of community, a rather porous and rhizomatic one, and an exercise in political prefiguration. This is well explained by Chto Delat member Olga 'Tslapya' Egorova, whose witty text 'Making Films Zapatistically' shows how profoundly the group's artistic methodology has been influenced by Zapatismo.<sup>17</sup> Their work, openly shaped by Brecht, Godard and Russian art history, has become imbued with the notorious Zapatistas' anticlimactic and ironic tone; populated by animals and other critters, as well as by visual and lyrical elements that are not just quotations or references, but formal devices among the many visual, somatic, theatrical, political and didactic tools that the collective has developed throughout its eighteen-year existence. Within their practice, these are not only artistic tools but (with Ivan Illich) tools of conviviality, and instruments for building social infrastructure – *comunalidad y convivencia* (communality and co-living, or better a 'living with').

the medium becomes a *dispositif* that allows a process to happen, and at the same time, to be witnessed and aesthetically formalized. Zapatismo is, in their work, a proposition: almost an ice-breaker, to speak about different



Nikolay Oleynikov (Chto Delat), *Compas=Comrades* from the series *And the Embassy Sails On*, 2021. Courtesy the artist and The Gallery Apart, Rome

### *What does it mean to be Zapatista outside Chiapas?*

This was a recurring question that, for a long time, swirled in our head.

It was Subcomandante Moises who provided an answer: '*To fight! To never give up! Never surrender! Never sell out! Never corrupt! At whatever cost, to liberate this world – this is to be Zapatista!*'<sup>18</sup> This is how we keep moving on the foggy road, caminando preguntamos, asking as we walk, as the Zapatista star illuminates our path.

18. Subcomandante Moises in conversation with Chto Delat and Oleg Yasinsky, transcribed in 'The knowledge of the struggle, and the struggle of knowing', in *When the Roots Start Moving*, p. 72.



Chto Delat (realized by Nikolay Oleynikov with SHVEMY sewing cooperative), *Map of Slow Orientation in Zapatismo – Paris version*, 2017, mixed textiles (sewn), vinyl paint, 300 x 200cm. Photograph: Giorgio Benni

# FAIL BETTER — ARTISTIC INTERVEN- TIONISM IN DAKAR IN THE 1990s AND TODAY

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**Nick Aikens in conversation with Clémentine Deliss**

**Nick Aikens** Could you begin by talking about the context in which you became involved with Tenq artists' workshops and the Laboratoire Agit'Art collective in the early 1990s?

**Clémentine Deliss** Between 1992 and 1994 I was travelling around the African continent to meet artists. This was prompted by a seminar I set up at SOAS in London in 1991 on 'African Art Criticism', where I invited speakers like art critic Stuart Morgan, and Olu Oguibe, who had just finished his PhD on Nigerian artist Uzo Egonu, or British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare with art collector Robert Loder, to give parallel talks which would confront the assumption, published in art catalogues at the time, that there was no intellectual debate happening within and around the African continent. This led me to go and see Norman Rosenthal, then Exhibitions Secretary of the Royal Academy of Arts (RA). The RA was planning a comprehensive pan-continental exhibition called 'Africa: The Art of a Continent'.<sup>1</sup> But they were reluctant to include any practices from the twentieth century. A small committee was formed, which included – along with Rosenthal, Loder, and English artist Tom Phillips – the Nigerian novelist Simi Bedford; Ghanaian-born, London-based publisher and writer Margaret Busby; Guyanese-born, London-based film curator from the BFI June Givanni; Nigerian dancer and performer Peter Badejo; film-maker John Akomfrah; and curator Mark Sealy of Autograph (Association of Black Photographers). I was commissioned to travel to Africa in order to mediate between artists and curators there and potential venues in London and around the UK. The aim was to run a wider programme of events, 'africa95', at the same time as the RA exhibition. I visited twenty countries, mainly alone, going underground to find artists with whom I could exchange ideas. I was interested in particular in the urban situation. It was in this context that I first met Senegalese artist, activist

and curator El Hadji Sy and became involved in Laboratoire Agit'Art.

**NA** And could you describe the artistic milieu in Senegal at the time?

**CD** There was a lot going on. There was Binette Cissé's gallery in the 1960s building 'Les Allumettes' on Place de l'Indépendance, called simply 8F (eighth floor, door F). I met many artists, architects, critics, collectors, bankers, a lawyer working with Spike Lee, and you could sense a vibrant interconnected and intellectual art world. In the early nineties, development agencies were only just beginning to realise what they could achieve with the input of artists. Until then, the European Union and other foreign agencies and NGOs in West Africa focused on language-skills and infrastructural or technical needs, but they didn't think the arts were particularly useful to them.

Then in 1992, the EU delegation in Dakar and the French government funded the first edition of Dak'Art (Biennale de l'Art Africain Contemporain). El Hadji Sy actually boycotted the biennale's first edition, installing his large paintings on rice sacks in the streets of a working-class neighbourhood in response. Some artists were wary of the European officialdom surrounding the biennale and felt the need for greater autonomy, for an artistic interventionism that could speed up the process of change. If the Senegalese government wasn't acting fast enough, and the foreign agencies were worried about long-term sustainability and handing out funds to artists, then it was left to these same artists to try – in a militant but social way – to set up new structures. By 1992, a number of exhibitions of contemporary art from Africa had taken place in Europe and the US that were being debated and criticised

1. 'Africa: The Art of a Continent' was held at the Royal Academy of Arts from 4 October 1995 – 21 January 1996. 'africa95' was a festival of African music, art, dance and poetry that took place across Britain from August to December 1995.



El Hadji Sy in his studio at Tenq, 1994, St. Louis du Sénégal as part of 'africa95'.  
Photograph, Djibril Sy

by intellectuals and artists in Dakar. Jean Pigozzi was collecting through curator André Magnin, and Susan Vogel's 'Africa Explores' exhibition, across the Museum of African Art and the New Museum in New York (1991), with its categories of 'extinct art' and 'traditional art', had irked artists all over the African continent.

In 1977, El Hadji Sy, who had just completed his studies of fine art at the Institut des Arts du Sénégal, and his artist friends, dissatisfied by President Senghor's failure to set up the Cité des Arts, intended to be a multidisciplinary art centre, squatted a former French military building on the Corniche in Dakar. It was here that Tenq first emerged in 1980 as a gallery space within the larger studio complex, which the artists ironically called the Village des Arts. The space was open for a few years until the military turned up at dawn in September 1983, throwing the artists and their works onto the street. El Hadji Sy turned this disastrous moment into an exhibition on the roadside, but never forgot the violence of the state. Taking over defunct colonial or socialist architecture is what artist Ibrahim Mahama also did thirty years later when he purchased a former Soviet grain silo and cemetery in Tamale, Ghana. The difference is that then, El Hadji and his peers were squatting – they were not selling enough artworks that they might purchase buildings. I'm not even sure that ownership was a prerogative for them. Alongside Tenq, there was the Laboratoire Agit'Art, a much more fluid and complex collective of artists.

**NA** Is there documentation of this first moment of Tenq?

**CD** Perhaps. But I've not seen much of it. The question of documentation was always suspended among the players of Tenq and Laboratoire Agit'Art. None of them seemed interested in the discussions around the archive and conservation

that we are familiar with today. ‘Where is the archive of Laboratoire Agit’Art?’ is asked again and again. It still remains a mystery. The collective was non-bureaucratic and difficult to commodify. When Issa Samb aka Joe Ouakam died in 2017, someone removed the contents of his studio. So we shall have to wait and see when the materials emerge.

**NA** How would you describe the Laboratoire Agit’Art?

**CD** It was like a parapolitical aesthetic infrastructure, a micro-government. It was intriguing because you weren’t ever really able to know who was a member and who was not, or how extensive it was. I remember sitting and writing in the courtyard of Issa Samb’s studio space in the centre of Dakar, which acted as the crucible of the Laboratoire. Somebody would walk in who was an advisor to the president (at that time, Abdou Diouf), but this advisor also turned out to be a renowned poet, who ran a literary venue. A short while later, someone else would arrive – maybe the president’s physiotherapist, who was also an art collector. And then there were the central figures including film-maker Djibril Diop Mambéty; actor Pap Oumar Makéna Diop; his brother, dramaturge Abdoulaye Dani Diop; photographer Bouna Médoune Sèye; philosopher As M'bengue; Issa Samb and El Hadji Sy. It was an extraordinary constellation of people – mostly men, I should add.

When I was in Dakar in the nineties, the group was fractured by the death of a key member, playwright Yussufa John. Originally the Laboratoire Agit’Art was a sort of anti-theatre group that performed against the genre of national theatre promoted by poet-president Léopold Sédar Senghor. Yussufa John had emigrated from Senegal to Martinique, where he died quite suddenly in 1995. Between 1994 and 1998, the core activities of the Laboratoire were constituted by Issa Samb, El Hadji Sy and a tight group of interlocutors, including myself. I spent a lot of time in the capital and even had an

#### Manifeste de TENQ 96:

## TENQ 1996

Les Ateliers du Stade de l’Amitié  
Pôle d’Extension Dak’Art 96

Déclaration de Presse  
Dakar, le 8 mai 1996

#### 'DU POLE D'EXTENSION A LA...PONCTUATION: TENQ 96'

La notion de **glissement** peut, ici et maintenant, s’analyser sous un jour nouveau, puisque l’expérience nous conforte dans l’idée que le glissement peut être assurément au cœur de toute connection. De toute interconnection!

L’expérimentation artistique s’avère d’ailleurs de plus en plus comme moyen, comme outil privilégié de libérer les créativités et de réaliser les jonctions opératoires nouvelles entre différents intervenants, créateurs ou intellectuels ou techniciens de divers bords. Ou tout simplement, entre des individualités originales.

Dans les **ATELIERS** expérimentaux, c’est la création encore une fois qui est à l’honneur, pour une fête de l’Oeil et de l’Esprit, du corps et de la tête. D'où une nouvelle occasion de maturation, de nouvelles opportunités de découvrir, d’inventer: **DE PONCTUER!** Artistiquement parlant. Pour la simple explication que dans les **ATELIERS**, ce sont, en principe, des situations très ouvertes...

TENQ 96, une articulation, s’inscrit comme à son habitude dans la cristallisation et les interférences pluri-humaines. Sa composition multi-nationale, à la fois pluri-raciale et multi-linguiste fait de TENQ une sorte de constellation. D’ailleurs, qui a jamais dit que les langues ou les cultures sont des barrières objectives? Insurmontables? En l’occurrence, personne! Ou alors, aujourd’hui moins qu’hier. Et TENQ 96 se veut la défense, la preuve et/ou l’illustration du dialogue possible dans l’inter-professionnalisme et l’inter-culturalité. Le crédo ou la devise pourrait être: ‘A chacun son palier d’intervention en même temps que pour les autres paliers d’actance. En fait, c'est surtout affaire de sensibilité et d’ouverture, à l’autre...et à l’autre: du **CONCRETE ACTION**. Etant entendu que la théorie impulse aussi de la pratique théorique. Un peu à la façon d’un pendule (l’instrument), ou tout simplement d’une pendule (l’horloge). Un va et vient entre l’abstrait et le concret et l’inverse, un **METISSAGE** intéressant, quelque part. Toutes choses intéressantes, comme il faudra un jour bientôt analyser serré cette notion de **QUELQUE PART**.

‘Les goûts et les couleurs ne se discutent pas’, dit l’adage populaire, à connotation planétaire: tout le monde le connaît, le pense, et le **DIT** de diverses manières. Mais ce n'est pas la façon qui importe, c'est l'état d'esprit, la conception: **THE POINT OF VIEW**.

D'où TENQ 96 est un **WORKSHOP!** C'est à dire, par essence, un creuset de **PERFORMANCES**. C'est-à-dire aussi un **LIEU** de future(s) émergence(s) d'**OBJETS**, d'**EXPERIENCES**. Puisqu’après tout, le **WORKSHOP** n'est qu'un moment, et un moment important seulement de confrontation et de **REMISE EN QUESTION(S)**. Et puis, des réponses ou des questionnements, la vie humaine, quotidiennement, en fait, tout le **TEMPS** son problème, sa

problématique... Les subjectivités particulières, c'est-à-dire pratiquement tout le monde, rencontrent en permanence des **SITUATIONS INEDITES**. Et se demande: **C'EST COMMENT?**

Cette attitude est intéressante parce qu'elle rompt avec la tendance du **POURQUOI?** Mais l'essentiel du 'comment' consiste à s'en sortir. Ou très méthodiquement, la méthode et l'organisation sont les modèles de circonscription du discours. Au demeurant, le profil des intervenants de **TENQ 96** est ainsi précisé:

Mor Lissa Bâ (Sen)  
 Fodé Camara (Sen)  
 Clémentine Deliss (UK)  
 Guibril André Diop (Sen)  
 Assane Dionne (Sen)  
 Juginder Lamba (Kenya/UK)  
 Daniel Manyika (Zimbabwe/UK)  
 Ass M'Bengue (Sen)  
 Magaye Niang (Sen)  
 Chika Okeke (Nigeria)  
 Johannes Phokela (Afrique du Sud/UK)  
 Joe Ramangelissa Samb (Sen)  
 Kan-Si (Sen)  
 El Hadji Sy (Sen)  
 Yacouba Touré (Côte d'Ivoire)

Assistants techniciens:  
 Alioune Diouf  
 El Hadji Diop  
 Abdou Karim N'Doye  
 Malick N'Doye  
 Auguste Sylla

Last but not least, le **WORKSHOP** de **TENQ 96** a démarré. Les développements et compléments sont portés à l'opinion. La concrétisation en cours est connue du (ou des) public(s). Question de spécificité!

Il faut d'ailleurs préciser que **LES ATELIERS DU STADE DE L'AMITIE** sont un élargissement de la créativité bien comprise, au **SENEGAL**. Une manière de dire que c'est un autre **POLE D'EXTENSION** de **DAK'ART 96**.

Une autre façon de dire aussi que si la métaphore du début du texte, **AU COEUR DE...**, peut paraître **ANATOMISTE**, c'est tant mieux. Parce que le **CORPS** et l'**IMAGINATION**, c'est tout **UN**. Des réalités complexes.

Pour le moment, **TENQ 96** s'inscrit dans la dynamique d'une ambiance de création future. Juste pour répéter, que l'expérimentation **ARTISTE** a du chemin devant **ELLE**. Comme antécédent, c'est la communication, seule, qui pourrait être en **JEU**. La création comme la créativité sont choses sérieuses, quelque part. Le jeu peut et doit être sérieux. En valoir la chandelle ou la 'lampe tempête', comme souvent les créateurs travaillent. Le clair de lune et toutes les formes de lunaison suscitent des pensées. De la réflexion. De la **PENSEE**. Au fond, l'activité ludique, le jeu, peut être primordial.

**ENFIN**, il faut retenir que **L'ART EST PLURIEL**. D'une pluralité qui n'a pas dit son dernier mot... Et comme d'accord(s) propos et nuances, la Biennale de **DAK'ART 96** en est la coïncidence événementielle la plus appropriée.

Quoi de plus intéressant que de pouvoir dire à la face du monde:  
**HELLO PEOPLE! TAKE CARE AND HAVE A NICE TIME!**

apartment there. I would hang out with the group – we would go from one bar to the next, drinking and planning. A lot of the work we did was at night, and so was mostly invisible, which is counter to how you might think of interventionism.

At that moment in the mid-nineties, there was a sense of encroaching visibility in art and curatorial practice. Things had to be visible to the public and accessible to be legitimate. What I like with the Laboratoire Agit'Art is that we would work together on phenomena so fleeting they cannot be either captured in the moment or seen, such as the presence of the voice.<sup>2</sup> We would have these intense conversations about methodology; at times it felt initiatory. It was in 1995 that I was invited to become a member, following our intervention at the conference 'Mediums of Change', chaired by Stuart Hall at SOAS as part of 'africa95'. Later I tried to excommunicate myself from the Laboratoire, when I felt that Samb and Sy were giving away the keys to the house, so to speak, but I was told: Once a member, always a member!

**NA** Clémentine, you tend to talk about *a* Tenq – as a thing rather than as a group of people or a process. Could you perhaps give readers a definition of a 'Tenq'?

**CD** 'Tenq' means articulation in Wolof. I would say it is desmological – a branch of anatomy, from *desmos*, which refers to ligaments, nodes, connections. A Tenq event or workshop would bring different parties and voices together to *articulate* something in a set space of time. The first iteration I experienced was connected to Triangle Artists' Workshop. Robert Loder and English sculptor Anthony Caro had initiated the Triangle workshops in 1982, bringing artists from the UK to upstate New York. No critics were ever invited, no family members, academics or curators could be present – these

2. This research was published in Clémentine Deliss (ed.), *Metronome*, no. 7, 'The Bastard' (2001).

- 3.** The exhibition, developed and curated by Clémentine Deliss with Salah Hassan, David Koloane, Wanjiku Nyachae, Chika Okeke, and El Hadji Sy between 1992 and 1995, ran from 27 September to 26 November 1995.

'Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa',<sup>3</sup> Loder realised that here was a guy who had done quite a bit of activism in Dakar, and so he suggested they might initiate a Triangle-style workshop in Senegal. There had been Triangle workshops in South Africa and Botswana – I think that was one of the first times Chris Ofili used elephant turds to prop up his paintings. I was slightly critical of Loder's concept because it was so anti-intellectual.

El Hadji Sy agreed to run a workshop, and his 'Tenq 94' was the first event of the 'africa95' season. To find a location, Sy and I travelled to the northern coastal town of Saint-Louis du Sénégal where we met a headteacher who said something along the lines of: 'Look, the Lycée is shut for six weeks – take it over! The classrooms are empty.' Tenq 94 took place at the Lycée Cheikh Omar Foutiyou Tall (formerly Faidherbe), and we invited as many artists as we could from outside of Senegal. That was the key concern at the time: to gather artists together and break the isolation they felt between African countries. Remember that there was not yet any internet, no one had a mobile phone. Fax machines were the only way you could communicate between places, or with express post and landlines. Yinka Shonibare and Anna Best joined from London, Flinto Chandia from Zambia, Atta Kwami from Ghana, David Koloane from South Africa, and many more. It really was a remarkable set of artists.

Sy, along with our small group of artist collaborators, raised all the money for it. Some funding came from a

workshops were always artist-led and artist-run. It was about getting artists together for two weeks to jam. So while Loder provided the germ of the idea for the collaboration, he stayed very much in the background. He was the ultimate *éminence grise*. When he met El Hadji Sy, who would become a co-curator of the Whitechapel exhibition

Senegalese bank, another part came from the British Council, who flew over the artists from the UK. At that time this kind of patchwork of finance mirrored the patchwork of participation, in a positive way. You didn't have something funded by one corporation, one institution, or even one country.

- 4.** *Revue Noire* was a quarterly magazine dedicated to African art from 1991 to 2001, based in Paris.

**NA** That's also very different to the art-market-reliant infrastructure you see with Ibrahim Mahama or Theaster Gates, for example, which is wholly dependent on one person selling artworks in order to fund a collective project.

**CD** Absolutely. Even though all works that came out of a Tenq workshop were understood as unfinished, it was also important that at the end of the fortnight, there was a kind of public exhibition.

The second major Tenq I was involved with took place in 1996 in Dakar. I was given a contract by the European Union to go to Dakar to support the third edition of the art biennale. The EU was aware that if I took part, I would bring another crowd with me. Until then Dak'Art had been monopolised by small French galleries selling 'tribal art' and who were miles away from the rest of the contemporary art world. There was also prominent input from *Revue Noire* edited by Simon Njami, Jean Loup Pivin and Pascal Martin Saint Léon,<sup>4</sup> but they had their own publication, whereas I was an independent curator.

So it was that the then Minister of Culture of Senegal, philosopher and novelist Abdoulaye Élimane Kane, became involved in the realisation of this edition of Tenq. I shall never forget spending hours in his office in 'Le Building' (Dakar's large 1960s governmental administrative building), talking openly about infrastructure, about artist-led initiatives, about

what one could do. We were still desperately searching for a location to hold this Tenq in time for the opening of Dak'Art 1996. Kane offered: 'There's a Chinese village near the old airport with eleven empty barracks that no one has used for eight years, because after the Chinese migrant workers had finished building the city's sports stadium in the 1980s, they left. If you want, you can have that.' The Chinese had been commissioned to build stadiums by numerous West African states in that era in exchange for diplomatic support and to gain fishing rights.

El Hadji Sy, myself and the Tenq group agreed to have a look. We planned everything from my apartment, and then went back to see the minister. He literally gave us the key and we took cabs out to the Chinese village. All the signs were in Mandarin and the canteen had a banner saying 'Happy Chinese New Year!' There were storage rooms full of ginseng, a brick-making machine, and piles of maps and technical drawings by Chinese engineers, which stupidly we didn't hold on to. We asked a youth club to clear out the bushes and snakes. There was no electricity but there was running water. The Chinese had lived here with complete self-sufficiency, excellent systems of irrigation, and orchards of mango trees, but by then it was very rundown. We knocked through some of the partition walls of the barracks to make larger studios. And there were three weeks to go.

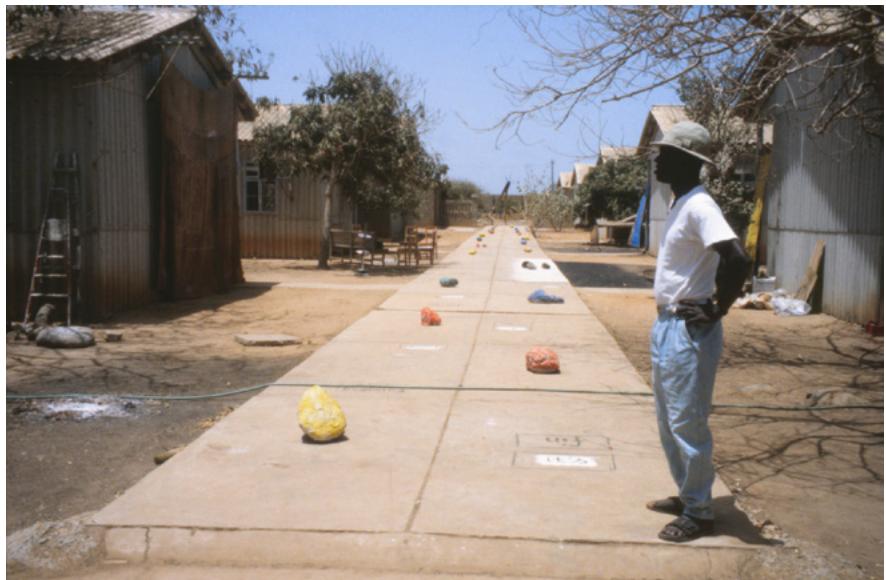
A gallery space was set up in the former canteen and a manifesto announcing the opening was pasted onto the shed walls. All our guest artists came to spend two weeks living and working together on site: Johannes Phokela from South Africa, Chika Okeke-Agulu from Nigeria, Yacouba Touré from Burkina Faso, and many more. Knowing I was in Dakar, North American artist Christopher Williams and his assistant Miles Coolidge came over and shot the beautiful photographs of Heidelberg machines in the same printers where I produced the first issue of *Metronome*.<sup>5</sup> Curators Catherine David and Peter Pakesch flew from Europe to Dakar, as did Swiss artist Renée Levi.

A year later, when I took part in David's curation of documenta X, '100 Days', El Hadji Sy came too. David was the one to coin the term 'aesthetic practices', which opened up the parameters of contemporary art. When Senegalese artist and collaborator Kan-Si said we had 'stepped down from the pedestal' and stopped being 'cloistered' to set foot in lived experience, this is exactly what was happening.<sup>6</sup> 'Tenq 96' had an inflammable character – between local cycles of artists' squats and government evictions, on the one hand, and the demands for accelerated production and visibility commanded by this new internationalism, on the other. And although the occupation of the site was not intended to last beyond the two-week session, El Sy and several of the core Tenq members have been based there ever since.

In the 1990s there was little space for communication between artists working with different interventionist strategies across the world. Danish artist group Superflex took their biogas project and placed it in a Tanzanian context, but their work was totally different to that of Senegalese collective Huit Facettes. This new group, which emerged around 1995 and included some of the artists associated with Tenq, worked with a form of readymade: the rural village. Some of the Tenq artists, in particular Fodé Camara, had been travelling to the region of Casamance in the south of Senegal. In the village of Hamdalaye they happened to meet a self-taught artist, Maat Mbaye, who was making extraordinary wall paintings. They began to visit the village regularly and set up workshops in the fallow period, when the villagers would have time after the harvest. The Tenq artists received money from a Belgian NGO to fund these workshops.

**5.** Metronome is an artists' and writers' organ, initially researched and produced by Clémentine Deliss in cities around the world between 1996 and 2007. It was relaunched in 2021 at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

**6.** See Kan-Si in discussion with Gardar Eide Einarsson in *Metronome*, no. 4–5–6, 'Backwards Translation', 1999, p. 119.



El Hadji Sy in the former Chinese camp renamed Village des Arts. Floor painting by Kan-Si.  
Photograph, Clémentine Deliss, 1996

Later, Huit Facettes were invited to be in documenta11 (2002), where they showed videos documenting scenes of this rural environment, its landscape and animals. I remember going to see Kan-Si, a member of the group, and questioning this representation: ‘Why did you make this film about the village and rural life when actually this project is about you guys from the urban context extending your work to interlocutors in Casamance? Why didn’t you just shoot your debate in a flat in Dakar?’ I felt they were falling into the clichéd representation of the African rural context and development.

**NA** And the group’s answer?

**CD** Kan-Si didn’t seem concerned, but El Hadji Sy distanced himself from the documenta11 presentation. This time, he didn’t travel to Kassel, with the other members of Huit Facettes. He wasn’t much of a fan of Okwui Enwezor’s approach, and resisted being co-opted into a diasporic discourse on identity politics and race. Sy is of the generation that grew up with Léopold Sédar Senghor and had dealt with these questions early on. What he wanted was infrastructural activity that was not about identity but was a socio-aesthetic movement.

**NA** Let’s turn to Ibrahim Mahama. I know you’ve recently returned from a trip to Ghana. I sense some scepticism. Is it because of the contrast to your experience or involvement in the nineties scene? Or is it a wider scepticism related to the art market?

**CD** I travelled to Ghana most recently in March 2022, and mainly met artists from a younger generation. The first time I went to Ghana I visited the late, wonderful artist Atta Kwami, who won the Maria Lassnig Prize in 2021 and whose mural is currently on display at the Serpentine Galleries (2022–23). Kwami had an on-off relationship with the Department of

Painting at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, where he lived. He was too radical for the painting department at the time. Since 2008, a new generation has taken over the Department of Painting and shifted the discourse with the introduction of cultural theory, postcolonialism and critical thought. Mahama emerged out of this new movement.

The scale of Mahama's project in Tamale with its multiple hangars and airplanes is so large that I couldn't help but ask: Who is this for? Tamale is far from Ghana's capital, Accra, and there isn't a lot going on there in terms of art practice. If young artists set up studios, and galleries have the courage to open shop in Tamale that could change the landscape and the value of Mahama's remarkable intervention. His main focus has been on schools, education and exhibitions. Mahama is fascinated by ruins and the leftovers of the recent colonial and socialist past. He is an avid collector and buys large quantities of artefacts from sewing machines to architectural blueprints, textiles, chairs – everything you can imagine. He has basically gazumped any new museum that might be opening in West Africa by having already collected everything related to manufacturing, a sort of a semiotics of the industrial. When I was there in March 2022, his London gallery (White Cube) had not visited the site to witness his extraordinary enterprise. So, it can feel like a mad, lonesome, social project. Still, I think it is admirable. On the level of content. I just wonder about the scale, and whether an artist of thirty-four really needs to exhibit their work as a kind of permanent collection in a quasi-museum.

**NA** I find the ambition hugely impressive. But it's also important to acknowledge that the failures of governmental infrastructures are now more visible than they were in the 1990s and a new generation is addressing the lack of public institutional work. In terms of what you

#### Players and Groupings from 1992

##### Laboratoire Agit'Art (Visible members from 1992)

Core Team: El Sy, Issa Samb, Thierno Seydou Sall, Djibril Diop Mambéty (deceased), Mamadou Traoré Diop (deceased), Babacar Sédiakh Traoré, Magaye Niang, Pap Oumar Diop, dit Makéna, Ablaye Dani Diop, Mor Lyssa Ba, Yussufa John (deceased), Abdou Ba, Clémentine Deliss (from September 1995).

##### Tenq 1994 (26 artists)

Core Team: El Sy, Fodé Camara, Souleymane Keita, Mustapha Dimé (deceased), Kan-Si, Guibril André Diop, Djibril N'Diaye, Khady Lette, Amédy Kré Mbaye (deceased), Jacob Yacuba (deceased), Musaa Baydi (deceased), Pape Macoumba Seck.

##### Participants in Tenq 1994 (from outside of Senegal)

David Koloane (SA), Sam Nhlengethwa (SA), Dasunye Shikongo (Namibia), Ndidi Dike (Nig), Atta Kwami (Gh), Yacouba Touré (RCI, deceased), Flinto Chandia (Zam), Agnes Nianghongo (Zim), Mohamed Kacimi (Mor, deceased), Damy Théra (Mali), Yinka Shonibare (UK), Paul Clarkson (UK), Anna Best (UK), Clémentine Deliss (UK).

##### Tenq, Campement Chinois, Biennale de Dakar 1996

##### (later Village des Arts)

Core team: El Sy, Fodé Camara, Kan-Si, Guibril André Diop, Issa Samb, Mor Lyssa Ba, Clémentine Deliss

##### Huit Facettes (from 1996)

Abdoulaye Ndoye, El Sy, Fodé Camara, Cheikh Niass, Jean Marie Bruce, Muhsana Ali and Kan-si, as well as an administrative assistant (Mor Lissa Ba). In 1996 »Les ateliers d'Ham dallaye« (»The Workshops of Ham dallaye«, NGO finance Belgium (Vredeseilanden)). 1997 »Carrément pour la Paix« (»Directly for Peace«), »Téléfood Dakar« 1998, performance/exhibition »National Summit on Africa DC 2000«. In 1998, international workshop for fine arts Joal-Fadiouth, »Ici et maintenant« (»Here and Now«).

##### Factual Nonsense, Fama and Fortune, Metronome, Laboratoire Agit'Art, 1996, Vienna-London-Dakar

Joshua Compston (deceased), Clémentine Deliss, Issa Samb, El Sy, Djibril Sy plus guests: Christopher Williams, Miles Coolidge, Catherine David, Peter Pakesch, Paul Virilio, Penny Siopis, Mark Sealy, Joy Gregory, Edouard Glissant.



Amédy Kré Mbaye, Tenq, 1994, St Louis du Sénégal as part of 'africa95'.  
Photograph, Djibril Sy



Airplanes, Red Clay Studios of Ibrahim Mahama, 2022, Tamale, Ghana. Photograph, Clémentine Deliss

said about this patchwork of people and funding, what is your sense of the team in Tamale and Mahama's role within it?

**CD** There's a tight team of three, but Mahama has many other people whom he engages. The buildings are incredibly well-built with the finest craftsmanship and design. He had six defunct airplanes freighted to Tamale so that teachers could hold classes about drone technology inside them. One feels he is building, constructing something, and you want to support him as much as possible.

**NA** There is a sense of permanence with his work, which is the complete opposite to the idea around Tenq of momentary articulation that is fleeting and time-specific. The contrast between these approaches, separated by thirty years, is stark.

**CD** Laboratoire Agit'Art or Tenq would never have wanted to create a museum. El Hadji Sy briefly ran his Écomusée at the Village des Arts around 1998, repurposing several beautiful huts that had been constructed on the site of the Chinese village for an exhibition of Senegalese rural architecture. But that was more of an installation, without museological permanence. If the Laboratoire had imagined a museum, it would have been transgressive, fractured and mnemonic. I don't believe they were interested in owning and preserving artefacts. That's what attracted me to the Laboratoire in the first place, that the collective were concerned with non-material presence. As you say, this is quite the opposite of what you find with Mahama's work. The corpses of the past are contained in this matter that he is trying to preserve, which addresses contemporary questions of restitution, the repatriation of human remains and the formation of new private museums in Africa. Ultimately though, this is the vision of one person, not a collective.



Issa Samb and El Hadji Sy, Dakar, 1996. Photograph Clémentine Deliss

Theaster Gates says that artists have the capacity to invent the platform. His Rebuild Foundation also repurposes abandoned buildings to house and care for obsolete or discarded objects associated with Black culture in Chicago, from an archive of house music, to 60,000 glass-lantern slides of art and archaeological history, to a collection of printed matter from the Johnson Publishing Company (publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet*). Yet Gates doesn't speak of archives – he speaks of indexes. He is interested in methodology and process. In a way, he has got much further than Mahama – he is older, of course, but they share something in their approach.

**NA** Gates and Mahama adopt very different forms and strategies both from the two contexts in which they work and within the trajectory of artists' interventionism. Gates has a foundational relationship with music and sonic histories through the extraordinary work of his band, the Black Monks, which, in its essence, is ephemeral, less materially tangible. Mahama's jets as infrastructures for learning present an entirely different approach. Both, however, offer forms for growing communities and knowledge.

**CD** The main question I have about Mahama's project is around the transparency of its economic structure, something we have witnessed through the extensive modus operandi of ruangrupa at documenta fifteen. If Theaster Gates sells marble chunks extracted from the interior walls of a bank set for demolition for 5,000 US dollars apiece at Art Basel, in order to fund the building's renovation and transformation into Stony Island Arts Bank, the economics are clear. But with Mahama, you don't get a true sense of the relationship between him as a highly successful artist in the market, and the institutional, infrastructural work he is doing. And it is that division, that opacity, that I feel is unhelpful in the current context of

contemporary art, with these polarised positions. If he is really bridging the gap between institutional art and the market, then let's see the system.

**NA** In this respect, documenta fifteen is significant in its total detachment from the art market. The market is simply not present – neither critiqued nor positioned against – which is undoubtedly a first. Instead, they offer an alternative economy through the lumbung Gallery.

**CD** It is timely that we are having this discussion during the period of documenta fifteen. It is the first time for a long time that I thought I could feel something shifting between the market, on the one side, and the institutional art of recurring, biennial-style exhibitions, on the other. Sadly there has been a failure on the part of the art context in which we work to vocally support that effort. What is particularly distressing for me is that the finding committee that brought ruangrupa into the fold of documenta has remained practically inaudible during all the outcries and violent attacks on the ruangrupa collective and its artists. Instead, this summer we heard only from politicians and right-leaning journalists.<sup>7</sup> To have such a limited response from the people

7. The finding committee for documenta fifteen was Charles Esche, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Amar Kanwar, Ute Meta Bauer, Frances Morris, Gabi Ngcobo, Philippe Pirotte and Jochen Volz. Their single statement was published on the documenta website as 'Documenta Finding Committee on the Deinstallation of "People's Justice" by Taring Padi', 23 June 2022, available at: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/documenta-finding-committee-on-the-de-installation-of-peoples-justice-by-taring-padi/>. L'Internationale confederation published a statement in support of the artists, lumbung partners and artistic direction this edition of documenta, 27 June 2022, available at: [https://www.internationale-online.org/opinions/1093\\_statement\\_in\\_support\\_of\\_documenta\\_fifteen/](https://www.internationale-online.org/opinions/1093_statement_in_support_of_documenta_fifteen/). The artists, ruangrupa, and artistic direction of documenta fifteen published a subsequent letter on e-flux, 'Censorship Must Be Refused, Letter from lumbung Community', 27 July 2022, available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/481665/censorship-must-be-refused-letter-from-lumbung-community/>. (All last accessed on 8 November 2022).

who are running the established art institutions is deplorable. And so the danger is that such interventionism will go back underground.

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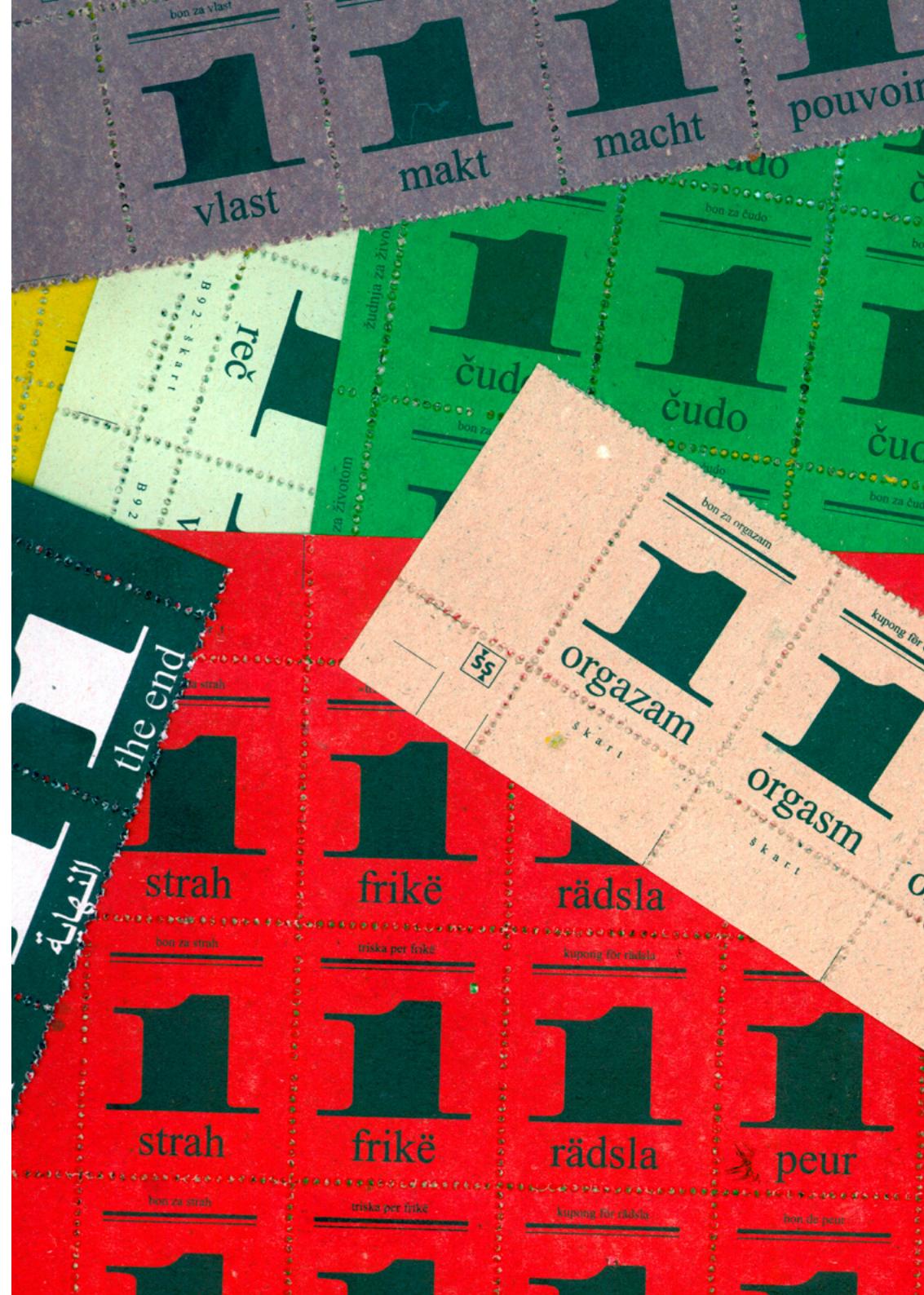
SHARING  
AND TAKING  
ACTION  
THROUGH ART.  
SKART  
COLLECTIVE  
(BELGRADE),  
FROM 1990 TO  
THE PRESENT

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Seda Yıldız

1. Naomi Hennig, 'Footnotes on Art and Finances: George Soros and What Remains', 2011, available at <http://www.naomihennig.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Footnotes-On-Art-and-Finance.pdf> (last accessed on 7 October 2022).
2. Branislava Andelković and Branislav Dimitrijević, 'The Final Decade: Art, Society, Trauma and Normality', in *On Normality. Art in Serbia 1989–2001* (exh. cat.), Belgrade: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005, p. 27.
3. Serbian acronym. SKC: Studentski Kulturni Centar.
4. Branislav Dimitrijević, 'Škart in the 1990s – The politics of small gestures in the time of war and privatisation', in Seda Yıldız (ed.), *Building Human Relations Through Art: Škart collective (Belgrade) from 1990 to present*, Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2022, p. 168.
5. Yıldız (ed.), *Building Human Relations Through Art: Škart collective (Belgrade) from 1990 to present*, pp. 15–44.

The following interview is an excerpt from the book *Building Human Relations Through Art: Škart collective (Belgrade) from 1990 to present*.<sup>5</sup> The first step of this archival book project,



in the absence of a fully developed archive, was to gather material from Škart's activities, spread between two cities: Belgrade and Ljubljana. Given the lack of supporting material, an oral-histories approach collects information and memories around their unofficial art practice. Between September 2020 and October 2021, I met the founding members of the group, Prota and Žole, to reflect on Škart's practice.

### Error as a trace of humanity

**In a city on the brink of war, Škart came to life in 1990, founded by two students at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade – Dragan Protić and Dorde Balmazović, also known as Prota and Žole. The duo decided to name themselves Škart, meaning ‘scrap’, or ‘leftover’ in Serbo-Croatian. Škart’s understanding of the word has positive connotations – such as a ‘refusal’ to remain silent in times of political unrest and rising nationalism, and an active ‘rejection’ of passivity in confrontation with a lack of well-functioning institutions, with the aim of potentially expanding our understanding of artistic possibilities.**

**The name sums up much of what the group has done over the last three decades: using creativity and minimal resources to reach out to the vulnerable and marginalised in society including the elderly, single mothers, refugees, the unemployed, and orphaned children. ‘How to make people participate in art projects?’ was the starting point for the duo, which remains the core of their practice today. This question has been revisited through numerous collaborations with individuals and groups who are not necessarily from an art circle. The 1990s shaped Škart’s mode of production and communication, as well as their strong aesthetic values of self-sufficiency. In ten years of wars**

**and isolation in Yugoslavia between 1991 and 2001, the transition to a neoliberal economy, followed by the fall of Yugoslavia and its socialism, the lack of financial resources, as well as the deprivation of cultural infrastructures, all resulted in building Škart’s modus operandi: self-organisation, self-production, and self-distribution. Upon these constraints Škart has built its core values: collaboration, care and solidarity.**

**Seda** How did you two meet and how was Škart formed?

**Žole** We met each other in Finland. Prota was a third-year student and I was in my second year. There was a union of architecture students meeting in Finland and fifty students from Belgrade joined, so this was the first time we met. After we returned to Belgrade, we became friends. Prota discovered a studio for etching on the rooftop of the academy, which nobody was using. He proposed that we go and learn classical etching. The atelier was full of dust; it took two to three days to clean it. Later the etching professor started teaching us the basics and gave us the keys to their atelier. It was like our nest. We started practising as typical apprentices, learning craftsmanship. The idea was to produce identical copies, 20–50 copies. But for us it was difficult to achieve ... They were not the same. We were making lots of printing mistakes, and one day Prota said, ‘but these mistakes are also beautiful!’ So we started to experiment and make poetry with these mistakes. Because mistakes are very human, nothing is perfect. These **mistake-graphics** are called Škart in Serbian, so we called ourselves Škart.

**S** How did you decide to leave your ‘nest’ and present your posters on the streets of Belgrade?

Ž It was very organic. Our ideology and politics towards art was shared by the circumstances of the times. When we were at the atelier, we realised that if you want to exhibit in an art gallery, you have to know someone, be part of the scene, or climb the stairs of its hierarchy. We were not willing to do that. We were also in the faculty of architecture (studying in the department of urbanism), which was not popular back then. But we had experience researching the city, so we decided to treat the city as our exhibition space. We knew the techniques of reproduction, so we produced our work in editions of twenty, thirty or fifty copies, as much as we could afford. We started with screen-printing posters and made **visual poetry** out of Prota's poems. After, we went into the streets distributing and gluing them in different spots.

**Prota** To take part in a predictable art context you also need to adapt your products, to be useful for these exhibitions. We didn't belong to that circle, and also we did not have something useful for them, something they could treat as artworks. We didn't care about this. For us the message was important, not the product. That's why we produced posters; it was a kind of noise in the media sphere, instead of taking part in the art circle. These messages were visual poetry, abstract, self-sufficient messages. Sometimes they had weird meanings or maybe no meaning at all. It was a surreal message in the streets that didn't try to tell or sell something like the others. It was a new, open space for itself, a space of imagination. For us, it was very important just to open this sphere of experimentation and treat **the city as a free ground** to spread our message.

S Yes, those posters were very abstract and poetic, yet they were carrying highly political statements in regards

to the chaotic atmosphere in Belgrade at that time. In a way they were subtle, activist interventions.

P The very first one was: 'Škart wishes you a nice day'. Complete nonsense ... Who is Škart? Because nobody knew who we were back then. Who cares about a nice day? It was slightly childish ... Later it went even more abstract like 'R for the letter R'. Or, 'Q a rare letter'. In another poster there was just a tiny dot and underneath we wrote: 'Important'. We didn't give them a title, nor number them, but insisted on doing this action every week, even though nobody mentioned it or documented it.

S One early poster of yours says, 'Škart is again in the museum'. What was this about?

Ž We did it for our very first exhibition at the gallery in the village, our hometowns: Novi Becej and Zrenjanin. The first action was in 1990. We were a group of four friends; one called himself a punk theoretician, who wrote a text introducing the show, and the other composer friend composed music for the show, based on one of Prota's poems. So there was sound, posters and poetry reading. We made a poster saying, 'Škart is in the gallery?' And the second poster was about the yearly exhibition of architecture students which took place at The Museum of Applied Arts Belgrade, and our work was also included. So we made a poster which said, 'Škart is in the museum'.

S For how long have you continued working with posters and distributing them around the city?

P It was for the whole year of 1991, or a bit longer maybe. We made a new poster and put it in the streets almost every week. **Continuity** gives you



Stills from video documentation distributing *Coupons* in Beli Potok village near Belgrade, August 1998.

Shot by Miloš Tomić. Courtesy Škart

the responsibility to develop a skill, or a responsibility to the city itself, as it was our strategy to spread our messages around the city. And parallel to these street actions and mail art we used radio to reach a wider audience. Radio was very present at the time. In 1991, together with Darka Radosavljević Vasiljević, we created a programme on Radio B92. It was called *Škart News*; once a week, weird news was on air.

**Z** First we were going out in the streets at 4–5 in the morning to distribute posters and after that Darka was playing our weekly message on her radio show, *Sketch Book*.

**P** It was also a kind of attack on your mind with something you don't know. One old lady, actually the Serbian actress Rahela Ferai, who survived the Holocaust, read: 'And now something important: *Škart News!*' followed by a jingle, with a very bombastic orchestra playing. And the news is for example: 'R for the letter R', then again the orchestra plays ... We were making nonsense out of the media, building up free territory for us. Parallel to poster productions the radio programme lasted for one and a half years. Also to reach a distant audience we used mail art; we sent posters anonymously to various people around the world; one-way, without an address.

**S** I'm also curious to hear more about the cultural scene in Belgrade back then. I wonder if there were any other arts organisations or cultural institutions with whom you had a common stance and considered collaborating with? And if not institutions, what about other like-minded artists or collectives in the region? For

example, during the same time, in the early nineties, LED ART collective was very active, especially in Novi Sad, making controversial street actions; a genius example of subversive art practices. I could find many commonalities with your practice too.

**P** In that time maybe we didn't need collaborators outside of our close circle. With mail art we wanted to communicate at a distance, but for street actions or sociopolitical engagements it needed to be a group structure, which is reachable. We wanted communication, not necessarily collaboration. But for example we collaborated with Women in Black, a network of women dedicated to peacebuilding activities, and this was different. It was not only a short term project; it became ongoing. Also, not many independent art or cultural institutions existed at that time. Rex and Remont came later in 1999. The Student Cultural Center (SKC) had a gallery in the basement and we used to put our posters in the window of the gallery.

#### Freebies: Same to everyone, or nothing for all

**D**uring the early nineties, Škart appeared in the streets of Belgrade with a motivation to 'build human relations through art'. This marked the entry of critical artistic practice in public spaces in Serbia, resisting the political and social environment. Leaving the studio and going to the streets was not only a conscious choice driven by an urge to communicate with fellow citizens, to overcome polarisation and social isolation, but also to question the place of art in society and its accessibility. Instead of exhibiting at museums or galleries Škart created a scene for themselves,

**'treating the city as their own exhibition space'. Not interested in the idea of producing 'objects' of art, but encounters in public space, Škart intended to remind their fellow residents about feelings of empathy and solidarity.** Numerous self-produced, self-distributed projects and street actions took place between 1990 and 1996, including distributing poems to passersby as a public declaration of personal sadness (*Sadness*, 1992–93), or survival coupons of 'revolution', 'tolerance', or 'orgasm' that are printed and handed out to random addresses by post (*Coupons*, 1997–2000). These freebies, which were mainly self-financed (together with contributions from friends, acquaintances and occasionally, foreign sources), became a gesture of resistance.

**S** For the *Sadness* project you created twenty-three poems, which were printed on cardboard as a direct commentary on the hostile social environment. *Sadness of Potential Vegetables*, *Sadness of Potential Landscapes*, *Sadness of Potential Travellers* ... And you started to collaborate with other people who often joined your street actions too, distributing *Sadness* cards. You wanted to encourage individuals to motivate and to reflect on social fragmentation, which was strongly present in Belgrade at that time. For *Sadness* you self-distributed both in Serbia and outside, right?

**P** Yes, through street actions and mail art again. We were sending *Sadness* poems to people important to us, both in the local and international scene. We had quite an open mailing list of individuals from different scenes.

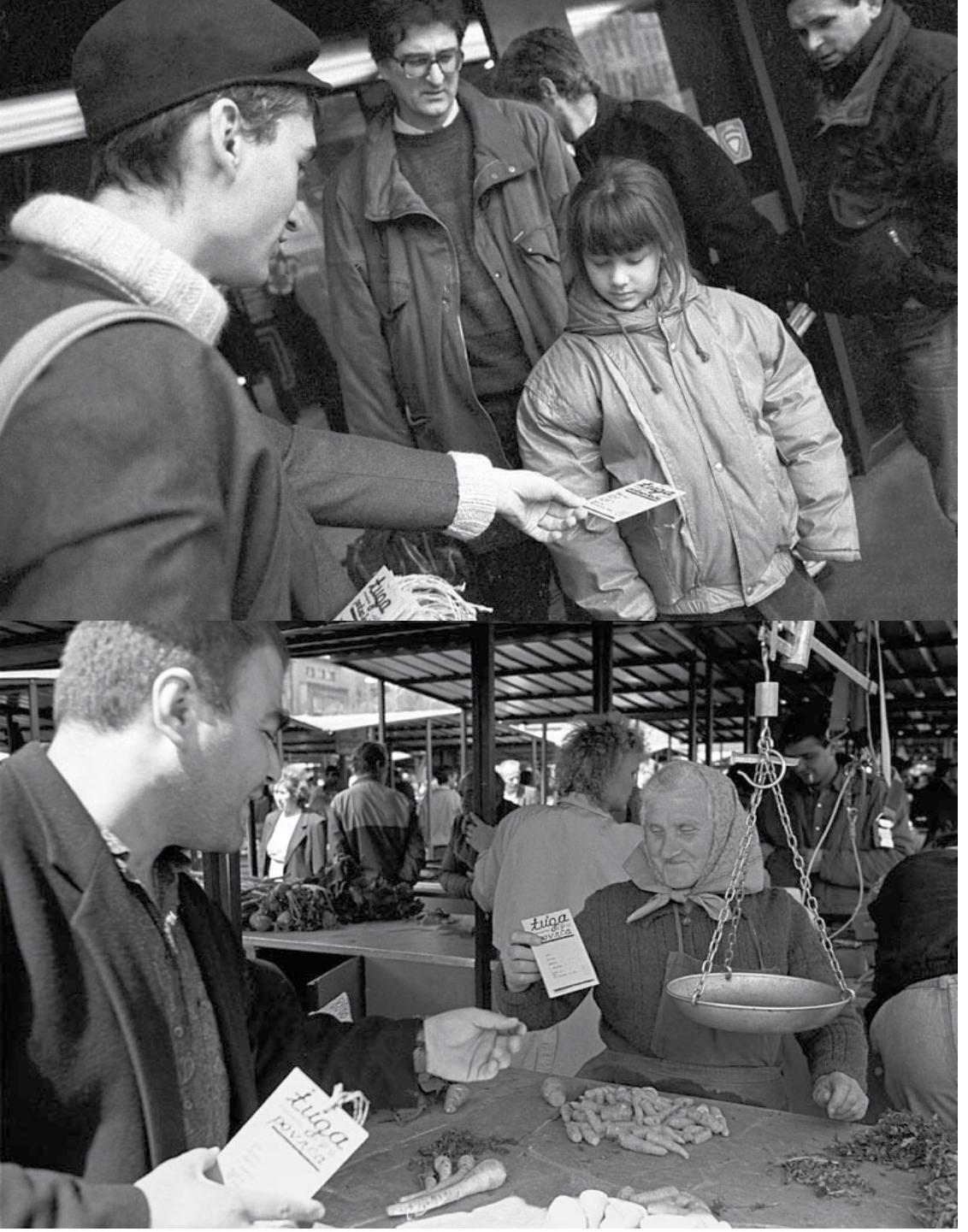
**Ž** This initiative came from Prota. He was making a list of people who were important to us, and we were sending posts, all of which were **anonymous**.

**S** And who was on this list?

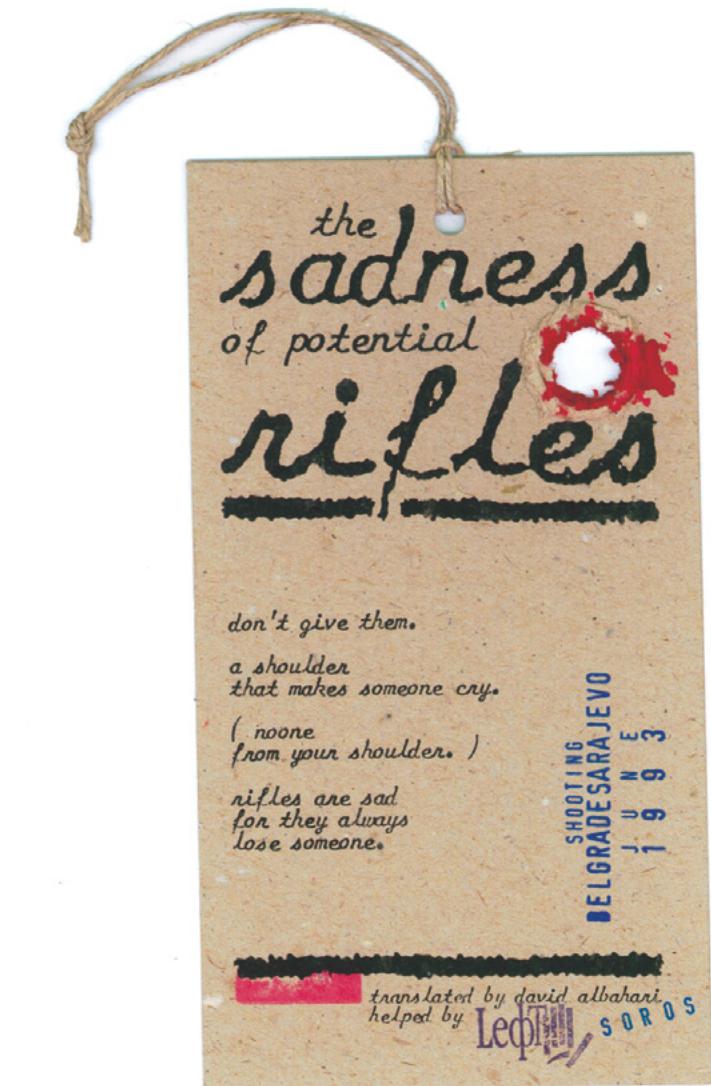
**P** Musicians, architects, literature magazines, film directors, writers ... We were not interested in the classic art scene, or the media; but it was important for us to appear, here or there, and still protect our invisibility. This was our strategy. People slowly started to hear about Škart, but they didn't know who we were exactly.

**Ž** Whenever we printed a *Sadness* poem we used to go out to distribute it on the street in editions of 100–200 depending on our budget. It was expensive at that time to afford screen printing. And again we used the radio for distribution, to reach a broader audience. Thursday morning we would distribute them on the street; maybe the same day, or the following, we had the poem of the week broadcast on the radio.

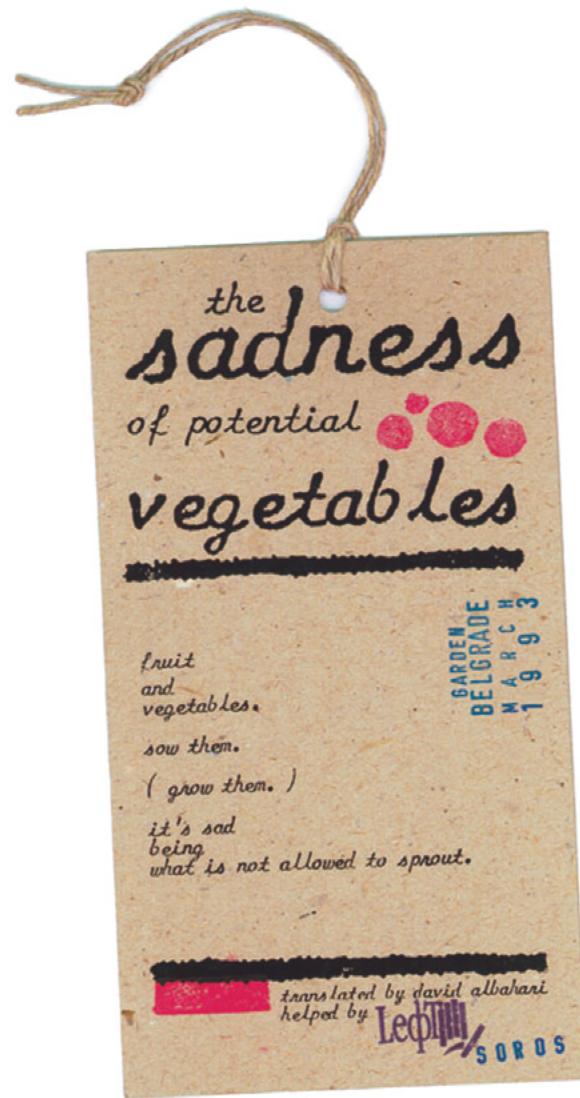
**P** Printed media is somehow frozen, it is on the paper; but the radio is very open so we wanted to use it to spread our message. Something important to add is that these poems were conceptualised; for example, *Sadness of Potential Travellers* was distributed around railway stations; *Sadness of Potential Consumers* in front of the department store which had completely empty shelves; *The Sadness of Vegetables* in front of the farmer's market. For *Sadness of Pregnancy*, a pregnant friend was coming with us to distribute. *Sadness of Potential Guns* was placed within humanitarian aid for Bosnia. We wanted to provoke people to think, why are the trains empty, why are the shops empty, and why had the country ended up under such austerity.



Distributing Sadness poems in Belgrade, 1992. Photograph: Vesna Pavlović.

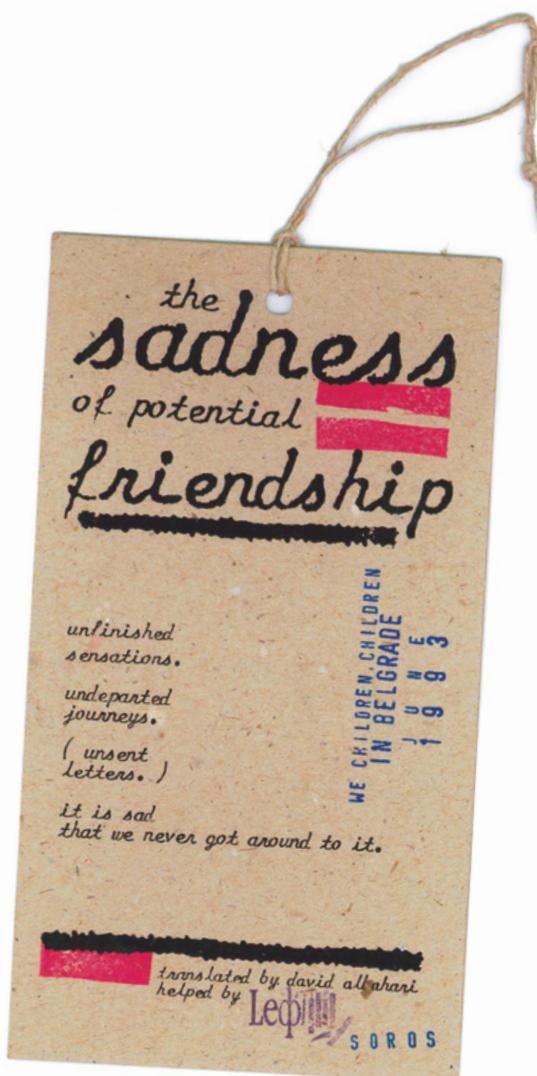


Courtesy Škart and Vesna Pavlović



Distributing Sadness poems in Belgrade, 1992. Photograph: Vesna Pavlović.

Courtesy Škart and Vesna Pavlović



**S** What were the reactions to these street actions? I have seen some drawings; I think, Žole, it is you who drew Prota giving away your printed works to the passersby as they hesitate to take them.

**Ž** Yes, reactions were exactly like those drawings. It was quite frustrating for me actually. Prota was the brave one, who approached everyone on the street. I was the shy one. So it was a challenge Prota took on, giving away something for free to someone, which they hadn't asked for. More than half of them were not interested. Most of the time, a few steps later they were throwing these poetry cards into the bin.

**S** But you did not give up and continued these street actions and distributions for more than a year, on a regular basis.

**Ž** Prota was pushing us to continue. It was a big lesson for me, to realise how people are reluctant or don't care about art.

**P** During the beginning phase of the *Sadness* project I was also disappointed, but after the second week people started to come and ask for free *Sadness* prints and started to collect them. This was a sudden brightness for us, that someone needs it, even if it is sadness ... which is also necessary because it is a comment on your weekly, political, emotional agenda.

**S** Meanwhile you continued working on street actions, self-production and **self-distribution**. One of your longest-lasting projects, *Coupons*, first took place in Belgrade, in 1995. You produced coupons, which referenced the survival coupons distributed during shortages of basic needs, like coupons for food and similar

necessities. But they further pointed out nonmaterial basic needs, human feelings and desires, such as coupons for miracles, relaxation, revolution, and orgasm. After Belgrade, *Coupons* travelled to different cities including New York, Stockholm, Graz and others. What I find interesting is how you adapted and adjusted this project, which was highly local and site-specific, into different contexts and localities. For example, in New York, together with students from Parsons School of Design, you made an action on the New York subway, distributing coupons to the passengers. How did you end up taking the project to New York, and what was your experience applying this work to another context?

P In 1996, we were invited to the *Olympic Art Festival* in Atlanta to display the *Sadness* project. After Atlanta, we went to New York, from one contact to another, and during three weeks of hundreds of meetings we ended up knowing many people in New York.

Ž We came with big pieces of luggage full of artworks and distributed them at every meeting.

P And it was always free distribution, we were giving small *Sadness* books away.

Ž Then we applied for ArtsLink funding in 1998. We got it and when we were in New York, we met Martha Wilson from Franklin Furnace who invited us to collaborate with students from Parsons School of Design. So everything always goes by recommendation, connection, recommendation.

S And for this New York subway action you printed multilingual *Coupons*. I saw the video documentation of

the action, in which Prota stands up and says: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm an artist and I would like to give my artwork to you, as a present.'

P Together with the students we decided to ride the subway once a week and distribute *Coupons*, because everyone was trying to sell something on the New York subway. It was crazy, full of advertisements. Instead, we decided to give something away. Each person was asked to give coupons to the person sitting next to them and to explain that this is an artwork and a gift from us.

Ž And people were telling us why they were not interested in them. One guy said, 'Okay you tell me these coupons are artworks, but if they are artworks they should be in the museum, not given away for free here.' Then I asked him if he goes to the museums, to which he replied, 'Of course not!'

P People think, it is not my world, I don't belong there.

Ž Exactly, but I find this answer very interesting. I asked this question for years, why don't people want to go to museums? Why do they feel art is so far away from them? Maybe it is not understandable, or is it too difficult to understand? There's something that keeps people from going to museums. However, some things are reachable for anyone; but it seems that art does not have such a capacity to convince people that it is useful.

P But this is the fight, this is your battle. For me it was always a continuation; poster actions were somehow meaningless, nonsense. But with the *Sadness* poems we created quite a raw, political



House, 1991, silkscreen print on paper, stamped, 34,9 × 49,7 cm



Important, 1991, silkscreen print on paper, stamped, 52,2 × 35,4 cm



Q - Rare Letter, 1991, silkscreen on canvas, stamped, 50 × 35,2 cm

6. Škart has no interest in the art market or creating tangible goods that can be sold as art objects. Likewise, their engagements do not always take the form of physical objects. Even though *Coupons* are, they 'become valuable' once used as an infrastructure for being together, which is beyond the artwork's object-matter.

agenda, a certain criticism. Even if people throw these poems away, or put them lazily in their pockets. So, even this delayed reaction was important to me. It was important to think that maybe they will look later in their home, maybe another person will see it as well, so the **echo of revelation** can continue.

S Yes, it was quite a refreshing gesture to distribute an artwork on the street for free. I find even the confusion it creates for people alone is meaningful.

This gentle force, approaching people to encounter an artwork directly, sitting next to them and giving them a piece.

Ž When we were in New York in 1998 we met one of the greatest designers: Tibor Kalman. After a public talk, we approached him and gave him our *Coupons* and we exchanged telephone numbers. A few days later we were invited to his studio; a huge studio with many employees. He was very interested in what we showed him and then said, 'Giving something for free in these times is such a refreshing idea indeed!' I remember his excitement very well, but I was not able to understand back then, since for us it would not be normal to do the opposite, to sell them on the streets for example!

S Well, today, distributing something for free on the streets has almost a negative connotation; a foreigner approaching and offering you something unwanted ... It creates an uncanny feeling. But I liked this twisted approach, how you play with people's expectations and mindsets. And after twenty years we can still say that it is

a radical idea in today's neoliberal reality in which nothing exists for free ... Maybe it is also interesting to add here that, later, *Coupons* were also displayed in museums, and became part of the *Museum of Yugoslavia's* collection too.<sup>6</sup> But still, when we met Prota in Belgrade, he was giving away these coupons to us as souvenirs. It was a generous gesture, which further made me think over the idea of artistic autonomy and ownership in your work.

P This comes from our belief in communism, that art and education should be accessible to anyone. As Škart we decided from the very beginning that all we produce will be distributed for free; because distribution is endless.

S Another note to add about the distribution of *Coupons* is that you were indeed invited by various arts and cultural institutions or festivals to present this project. How did you display them? Always through street actions? In Belgrade, for example, you were also travelling to small villages and getting in direct contact with people, distributing them on the streets. And once invited outside of the region, you developed a strategy to adapt multiple languages to every host country.

Ž *Coupons* were originally in Serbian and English. After, we introduced them in German when we were invited to Graz by Steirischer Herbst in 1998.

P In Graz we even built a fake machine to distribute coupons on the streets again; it was a wooden box and our friend hid inside. We were walking around the street and our invisible friend was distributing these coupons to passersby.

**Ž** Then we were invited to Sweden, so we introduced Swedish coupons. In New York we chose the five most common languages in the city: English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian and Arabic.

**P** It costs to publish, and thanks to these invitations we covered the costs of production, then we distributed them locally and internationally wherever we went. We also continued to send them around by post mail, worldwide, to some people, or the magazines that interested us.

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# FROM LAS AGENCIAS TO ENMEDIO: TWO DECADES OF ART AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

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**Leónidas Martín**

## The Big Bang

In November of 1999, only one month before the end of the twentieth century, Seattle happened. It was an event that took everyone by surprise. At the very end of *history*, a crowd of young people with drums and gas masks managed to entirely disrupt the annual summit of the World Trade Organization. If anyone had told me what would happen, the day before, I wouldn't have believed that such a thing *could* happen; not in a world that seemed to have stopped spinning. At that time, the world was like a chubby guy sitting on his couch, grinning contentedly, munching on cupcakes and singing to himself: 'Yo soy así, y así seguiré. Nunca cambiaré.'<sup>1</sup> And suddenly, the images of those kids sitting in the middle of the road and shouting 'Another world is possible!' came popping up on everyone's screens all at once. The effect was like a magic potion: it broke the spell that had kept us young-but-frozen.

When it happened, we had already been enduring neo-liberal globalisation policies for at least a couple of decades. Much of the social welfare system we knew was being dismantled. There was a deliberate massification of precarious work, and widespread indebtedness in the form of student loans and home mortgages. These were times in which everything took on the form of a company: governments, institutions and, little by little, even people became something akin to companies of their own, driven solely by the search for economic gain. It was in this world, a world seen solely as a set of profitable opportunities, that, amid the total capitalisation of life, the Seattle images burst through.

It was those boys and girls, standing arm in arm at the gates of the building where the World Trade Organization summit was to take place, and those Robocop cops, who pepper-sprayed them in the face, that brought politics and social activism back into the limelight. Suddenly, everyone wanted to be part of this new thing that had just emerged,

including, of course, contemporary art museums. If a medieval art museum becomes outdated and ceases to keep up with current events, that's fine; it is a medieval museum, after all. If the same thing happens to a contemporary art museum, it automatically ceases to be contemporary; and that is a big problem. Thus, just a few months after the Seattle events, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) contacted La Fiabrera Obrera (The Worker's Lunchbox) to coordinate a talk on art and new social movements, 'like those in Seattle'.

La Fiabrera Obrera was a group of four artists: Santi Barber, Curro Aix, Xelo Bosch and Jordi Claramonte, who, during the second half of the 1990s, had carried out a number of political performances and urban interventions, seeking by all means to give these aesthetic experiments some kind of social effectiveness. What MACBA proposed to them was more or less what all museums usually offer: to organise a two-or-three-day seminar in which a handful of international speakers would talk about the new political landscape that seemed to be opening up after the Seattle demonstrations, and its relationship with the arts.

Santi, Curro and Xelo would have liked to accept the proposal but were unable to, for personal reasons. But Jordi did accept, with a couple of conditions: first, that the guest speakers should remain in Barcelona a little longer and be given a space in which to develop and share any ideas emerging from the experience of the workshop with attendees; second, that the workshop be free and open to everyone wishing to attend. After some costly negotiations with the museum's staff, Jordi finally got his way.

And that is where I came in the picture, along with a few other persons: persons such as Marta Trigo (also known as

1. 'This is who I am, and who I'll continue to be. I'll never change.' Lyrics from the song, '¿A quién le importa?' (Who cares?) originally by Spanish pop group Alaska y Dinorama (1986), covered by Mexican singer Thalía in 2002 to become an international hit.

Titi), whose work and dedication would be essential to developing some of the projects we were about to embark on; or Pere Albiac, a very young photographer who had taken part in demonstrations against the IMF and the World Bank in Prague and whose life was completely shaken up by it; or Mar Centenera, a journalism student who sought to write about current issues and get involved in them in a way different than the detached and dispassionate one she had learned at college; or Josian Llorente (aka Josianito) and Maite Fernández (aka Cacharrito), a couple who had just arrived from San Sebastián and were eager to do lots of things. Cacharrito was an artist but she was also a great producer, and Josian, who studied architecture and design, soon became the group's techie. Ona Bros and José Colón also popped up around that time, determined from the start to do something connected to what they did best: photography. There was also Marcelo Expósito, an artist who was well acquainted with MACBA's management and who, from the very beginning, acted as a mediator between us and the museum.

### **Direct Action as a Fine Art**

Despite hardly knowing each other, we set about preparing the October workshops, which already by then had been christened '*De la Acción Directa como una de las Bellas Artes*' (Direct Action as a Fine Art). The space made available to us by MACBA was a building in Joaquín Costa street that was commonly used as a warehouse, quite close to the museum but far enough that we could maintain a certain autonomy. We called it El Cuartelillo (the Small Barracks), and it was at full capacity from the very day they gave us the keys and we moved in.

It was there, during the weeks prior to the workshops, that we first came into contact with many of the social collectives with whom we would later develop a good number

of projects. It was also there that we designed the first campaigns, the first posters, the first websites... and that, amid all that activity, we came up with the name of Las Agencias (The Agencies). If I remember correctly, the name first came to Javier Ruiz, a guy from Malaga who had been living in London for several years and was, at that time, very much involved with the Reclaim the Streets movement. Given the amount of graphic materials we had produced in such a short period of time, he thought it would be a good idea to build that into a permanent structure, 'something like a graphic design agency for social movements'. We found the idea as amusing as the name he proposed for it, Las Agencias: a good name is always one that lends itself to different interpretations, and Las Agencias did just that. I, for example, always associated it with the idea of taking as much as we could before the museum kicked us out on the street, something I was sure would happen sooner rather than later (as was indeed the case).

When the day finally came to open the workshops, we decided to change their location. Instead of holding them at MACBA as planned, we moved them to Espai Obert, a community centre that was very popular with Barcelona's social movements at the time. The change of location was mainly due to some social collectives' refusal to set foot in the museum. They claimed it had been the direct cause of the gentrification of the Raval neighbourhood since its (MACBA's) inauguration, and, to be honest, they were right.

It was a couple of days filled with introductions. We were visited by representatives from®™ark, Ne Pas Plier, Reclaim the Streets, Kein Mensch ist illegal and other international collectives that are, or were then, halfway between art and social activism. The workshops were a great success and received wide media coverage. The museum's management was delighted and immediately expressed interest in continuing the project. They asked us how we intended to continue with everything we had just set in motion. We answered that we would

do so by means of a ‘continuous intervention device’ called Las Agencias, and proposed we keep using El Cuartelillo until June, turning it into a ‘symbolic production centre’. We planned to go on working until then because, during the course of the workshops, we found out that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had decided to hold their next meeting in Barcelona in early June, and we intended to give them the welcome they deserved. The museum agreed and gave us twelve million pesetas (approximately 72,000 euros) to carry out our plan. We had never seen such an amount of money before, nor have we ever seen it since.

### **Las Agencias and contemporary art**

Today it is pretty much taken for granted that truly contemporary art must be imbued with its social context, and that artists are not so much individual producers of objects, but persons who collaborate with and create specific scenarios. But things were not like that when we started working as Las Agencias, far from it.

Held in 1997, documenta X spawned a renewed interest in the social and political orientation of art. In its announcements, it extolled political philosophy and sociology as the new interdisciplinary frameworks for contemporary art. However, none of the collective and activist *practices* that had begun to emerge in Europe (the ones we were interested in) were included in that exhibition. The works exhibited at documenta X were mostly installations, presented to people with the clear intention of finally bridging the eternal gap between art and life; but they only served to further emphasise the gap they sought to abolish.

It was at that time that a very particular term first became widely used: ‘project’. A project was then any work that understood art as an open process rather than as a finite object.



Las Agencias Logo (author: Las Agencias, 2000)

The term rapidly came to refer to almost any artistic practice which sought to endure over time and somehow engaged in a dialogue with social issues. Most site-specific and relational aesthetics projects (both very much in vogue at the time) are good examples of ‘projects’.

At first glance, a relational art installation might seem to offer the chance to live a real social experience within it, as if the long-cherished avant-garde dream of erasing the stubborn separation between art and life was here fulfilled. However, this was not the case. As soon as one approached these installations it became clear that putting them to any practical, potential use, beyond their status as art, was completely out of the question; and that made the spectator feel utterly rejected and let down.

Almost all the art on the official exhibition circuits at the time was marked in some way by this impossibility of its being used. We saw much of that art as like the sociologist who is never present in the world that they describe. It is true that it was no longer so focused on objects as before, but the only thing it did with the relationships and situations in which it now took an interest was to tear them away from everything that tied them to the actual world and trap them in a sphere of pure appearance.

We, in turn, set out to develop a series of formal and collective experiments aimed at opening up the forms of life that we wanted to experience. Among other things, we wanted to promote the surreptitious forms of dispersed, tactical and artisanal creativity of anonymous people. More than the autonomy of *art*, what really interested us was our own autonomy: the autonomy we had to interact with art however we pleased.

In addition to our constant endeavour to experience collective art, our work was always a relentless attempt to apply art to specific situations in our lives. Something like what Stone Age humans did, when they drew a moose with the same hands they had just used to hunt it.

## Las Agencias and social activism

On the other hand, social activism was not much better than art. When we started meeting with all those social organisations in Barcelona, we found a pretty bleak picture. Many of the so-called social movements of the time were still trying to fill the vacuum left by the defeat of the labour movement, of which they were, in a manner of speaking, downsized versions, and they insisted on organisational forms that seemed empty to us. The murmur of a monotonous voice moved heavily through every one of their endless assemblies; an ideological element still prevailed in their speeches. Their gaze was fixed on the past, as if they were afraid of waking up to the world in which we really lived.

*Las Agencias* was not driven by ideology; we believed all ideologies had long since collapsed. We had no great certainties or clear alternatives, nor, of course, did we have a good, militant discipline. We never set ourselves any maximalist goals, we never intended to do away with capitalism or consumerism. We were of the opinion that aiming for such an ambitious horizon would bring us nothing but frustration and would limit our ability to perceive what was really happening around us, in our daily lives, where it was indeed possible to change things.

We sensed that there were many forces awaiting deep within us; forces capable of manifesting themselves anywhere and in any situation, changing our lives completely. All we had to do was find them and represent them, bring them into our imagination as soon as possible. That is why we bet on art, because every activity performed by an artist, by a good artist, has always consisted in finding those forces that increase chaos, showing that every society is in a permanent state change.

## The Las Agencias method

The Christmas holidays were not yet over and we were already working at El Cuartelillo every day. In a very short time, El Cuartelillo became the organisational nerve centre of the demonstrations against the World Bank and the IMF. New ‘agents’ joined at that time, including Domi; a very active guy, committed to some social projects that were taking place in L’Hospitalet. His work was essential for the transformation of the bus that we acquired, and for many other things as well. We were also joined by Oriol, a very experienced web designer who gave a major boost to our online image. At that time I called Miguel Angel (aka Amonal) to join the team. Amonal was an old friend of mine from Zaragoza, from the times of La Insumisión (the Insubordinate Movement),<sup>2</sup> squatters’ social centres and punk rock. He already had a lot of experience working as a graphic designer. He had designed many of the graphic campaigns that came out of alternative community centres during the second half of the 1990s, and without him, we could hardly have developed and produced the extensive number of graphic materials we were able to in the short time Las Agencias was active.

Aviv and Oriana also joined Las Agencias at that time. Aviv was an Israeli who had studied art in Chicago. There, he had published an underground magazine focused on experimental design and created some floatation suits for migrants who risked their lives crossing the seas by boat. Oriana Eliçabe was an Argentine documentary photographer who had spent the last six years living in Chiapas to record the daily lives of the Zapatistas. As soon as she joined the group, she started working with José, Ona and Pere and our photographic work took a giant leap forward.

Oriana was not the only Argentine addition. Erika Zwiener also joined the group around that time. A graphic designer, she immediately began to collaborate with Oriol

and Amonal in the development of aesthetic proposals. Then came Nuria Vila, a young woman who had recently received her degree in journalism and who originally approached El Cuartelillo to write an article on Las Agencias, but was so touched by everything that was happening there that she soon put her camera and her notebook away and dove headlong into our work. One of our last additions was Ales Mones. Ales was born in the city of Gijón, in Asturias, and even though he never specialised in anything in particular he was good at everything, from taking quality photos to sewing a suit, cooking for a crowd or setting up a rave with hardly any resources.

In addition to all the people already mentioned, who were the main group of agents, there were many others who participated very actively in the creation of Las Agencias. Most of them came from Barcelona’s social collectives and movements, and headquartered themselves at El Cuartelillo as the date of the June summit approached. Among them were, for example, Arnau Remenat, Mayo Fuster, Tupa Rangel and also Enric Durán, who shortly thereafter would be wanted by the police for taking out a series of bank loans, investing the money in different social causes and never paying any of it back. I could also mention Ada Colau, a young woman who, after dabbling as an actress in a local series, switched from playwriting to social activism. A few years later, she would become the first female mayor of Barcelona.

At some point, Las Agencias was divided into five agencies: the Graphic Agency, the Media Agency, the Fashion and Accessories Agency, the Photography Agency and the Space Agency. All of them applied the same working method: collective creation workshops. These workshops were spaces that allowed participants to come into contact with each other, where each contributed what they knew best; combining their

- 2. An anti-militaristic civil disobedience movement of conscientious objectors at a time of compulsory military conscription.

work with others' until they were able to create something together, yet without ever losing their individuality. 'Merged individualities' could be a good description of what those collective creation workshops were. All of the work we did at that time was created using this method, from our public actions and interventions to the texts we wrote together. One could say that the general result of this pooling of diversity, constructing shared patterns, images and ideals, was the development of creative methods of action that also helped us deal with problems we faced in our daily lives.

### Show Bus

The first decision we made as Las Agencias was that none of us would get a céntimo of the twelve million pesetas that MACBA had given us. It was a risky decision, because none of us had a guaranteed income at the time, except for Jordi, who had received a doctoral scholarship. Even so, I believe it was the right decision. Setting personal finances aside and allocating all the money to the projects we were beginning to develop allowed us to work free of any influence that could have come with getting paid. I remember that the first thing we did with the money was to buy a bus. We found out that someone in a small town in the Basque Country needed urgently to get rid of a very old one, and was selling it very cheap. So, a couple of agents went out there and drove it back to MACBA in just one day (and without a bus-driving license).

The idea was to transform the bus into a 'spatial intervention device'. Our thesis was that, in recent decades, our cities had become increasingly alien territory. The social life of neighbourhoods had been drastically displaced, and the historic city centres had undergone a 'museumification' process aimed at extracting as much profit from them as possible. Across the board, economic forces had occupied cities, progressively



Show Bus (author: Las Agencias, 2001)

making urban life more difficult; hence the need to equip ourselves with a mobile device in order to face the hostile terrain without the need to establish a permanent headquarters.

Our goal with the Show Bus, as we called this project, was to develop a series of intervention tactics. These were mobile tactics, capable of eluding the mandates imposed on urban spaces, allowing us to use them in unpredictable ways. And precisely because they were in constant movement, they would not be easy to locate and so suppress.

The first thing we did when got our hands on the bus was to change its colour, We painted it orange with yellow polka dots so it would never go unnoticed. We also built a wooden stage with a powerful sound system over its entire roof. This minimal infrastructure allowed us to stage all kinds of events and performances, from concerts, parties and plays to lectures, public talks and debates. The side and rear windows were turned into screens on which we projected all kinds of images. With the Show Bus thus equipped, we managed to turn a lot of squares and streets throughout Spain into improvised open-air cinemas. The inside of the bus was also completely modified to meet all of the technical and logistical requirements of our public interventions. We replaced the rows of seats with work tables and even installed wi-fi, which was no easy feat at that time.

For about two years, a large number of collectives and social organisations used the Show Bus. It soon became an essential tool for the implementation of a number of different actions, increasing their visibility and effectiveness in a remarkable way. Direct action on wheels, that's what the Show Bus was.

## Prêt-à-Révolter

Our second investment of the MACBA money consisted in the purchase of a few hundred metres of brightly-coloured fabrics and a couple of large sewing machines. We wanted to make unisex suits that would serve two different purposes. On the one hand, the suits were intended to protect the wearers during demonstrations or any other event in which they could suffer bodily injuries. On the other hand, our costumes had to adhere to the precepts of what we then called 'direct representation': that is, our own autonomous ability to represent our way of life. We did not like the way social activism was represented in the media at all; journalists at the time had begun to introduce the term 'black bloc' to describe the anti-globalisation movement. This term reduced a series of rich, complex and diverse social experiences to an image of black-clad, hooded, mindless youths engaged in the arduous task of stone-pelting the cities they passed through. So we set out to synthesise all the richness and diversity that the media left out of the representation of the anti-globalisation movement through, and into, fashion design.

We called this project *Prêt-à-Révolter* because we wanted to change revolts in the same way prêt-à-porter changed fashion. In a way, prêt-à-porter meant the massification of fashion, its 'democratisation', so to speak. Our collection sought to achieve something similar with revolt and social activism: to democratise them into mass phenomena. Since fashion can create a feeling of group belonging, granting a certain 'autonomy' to define the aesthetic and creative dynamics that a group presents on the social stage, this was another of our design goals. We sought to imprint social meaning on the jackets, trousers and accessories we made for demonstrators, with the intention of turning them into a communication channel; a sort of symbolic transmitter capable of representing and disseminating the cultural conditions underlying social activism.



Prêt à Revolter (author: Las Agencias, 2001)

We designed and produced *Prêt-à-Révolter* over a number of workshops held in Barcelona, Madrid and Zaragoza. They were basically civil disobedience workshops in which, together with a number of collectives and social networks, we analysed the tactics deployed by both the police and activists during demonstrations. Then, we tried to respond to them in the form of fashion and equipment design. We worked hard to ensure that our designs could be appropriated by anyone who needed them, so that the users themselves could transform and adapt them to their own needs in a specific context. Also in the workshops, we focused on the creation and strengthening of what we called 'affinity groups'. It was always very important to us that, as the future wearers of *Prêt-à-Révolter*, the people who passed through our workshops should be involved in both the design and the making of these garments. Thus, once the workshops ended, they would be able not only to wear, but also to export the work to other places, thus eventually creating new *Prêt-à-Révolter* design groups.

*Prêt-à-Révolter* was a bid to renew the appearance of social activism, an exercise in 'self-representation' that sought to break down the walls of the old watertight compartments in which some forms of activism were trapped. In short, we could say that *Prêt-à-Révolter* was a response to the practical needs of the civilly disobedient, in the form of clothes. The work we did with different activist collectives and networks resulted in two full *Prêt-à-Révolter* collections: 'Basic' and 'Garbage Sports'.

The 'Basic' collection equipped protestors with accessories essential to adequately protecting the most sensitive areas of their bodies. These incorporated defensive design-components such as the fun airbags we installed in the sleeves of jackets, or the micro-cameras we added to certain garments, allowing users to live-broadcast any situation in which they found themselves.

The 'Garbage Sports' collection was designed for wear in high-risk situations, those that tended to be much more violent confrontations. The suits in this collection were entirely made

out of recycled materials, mainly plastic bottles and garbage bags; hence the name. We filled the plastic bottles with compressed air so that they could withstand very high-pressure impacts, such as when resisting a police charge in the front line.

Like any other fashion brand, *Prêt-à-Révolter* represented a symbolic force that sought to answer a series of structural social changes that, in our opinion, were taking place. Changes linked to the expansion of the economic crisis to more and more sectors of the population necessitated the broadening of the field, and the imaginary, of social protest. We had to start preparing people for revolt, and that is literally what we did with *Prêt-à-Révolter*.

### **Artmani**

The vulnerability of human bodies in mass demonstrations was something that really worried us at Las Agencias. *Prêt-à-Révolter* was not the only one of our projects to engage with this issue: *Artmani* did as well. *Artmani* was a brand of portable shields. Made of a very light and durable material, they were capable of performing a couple of very important functions (and perhaps more). On the one hand, the shields protected demonstrators from any acts of violence that might occur during demonstrations (police attacks, rubber bullets, etc.). On the other hand (as the brand name indicates), the *Artmani* shields comprised an art exhibit designed to be displayed at demonstrations. The ensemble of photographs pasted onto their surfaces was intended to attract the gaze of all those present. And, indeed, the visual created by the demonstrators' bodies behind those large shield-mounted photographs was utterly irresistible for the photo journalists. The shields made it into the newspapers countless times.

For us, the representation of an event did not mean its being turned into a mere image but, rather, its being bound,

or the binding of it to, a new meaning. The media irruption of those images, so different from the ones we were used to seeing, somehow inaugurated a new imaginary of social protest: a new way of interpreting and feeling it. Like *Prêt-à-Révolter*, *Artmani* was another practical way of sneaking new and unpredictable interpretations of social activists and their actions into the media; another way that we found to confront the world, using images as a shield.

### **Free Money**

During our time as Las Agencias, we also developed a good number of graphic campaigns in collaboration with collectives and social movements from all over Spain. These include the anti-war campaign 'Guerra Mítica' (Mythical War), as well as campaigns against property speculation and the privatisation of urban spaces, like the one we organised around the Reclaim the Streets movement in downtown Barcelona, in June 2001. However, the campaign that was, and that remained, most present in the streets was undoubtedly the 'Dinero Gratis' (Free Money) campaign that we developed together with the Oficina 2004 collective, a group of veterans of the autonomy fights of the 1970s together with a few young philosophy students.

Launched in early 2001, the creation process that we developed with Oficina 2004 was a perfect embodiment of that of our workshops. As soon as we started collaborating, all the boundaries that had separated us disappeared as the designers and artists of Las Agencias and the members of Oficina 2004 became as one, dealing with philosophical conceptual and aesthetic considerations in creative unison.

For them, money was the code with which reality was programmed: a reality in which life had been reduced to working, or looking for work. In this context, 'Dinero Gratis' was presented as a gesture capable of interrupting this repetitive

and excluding code. Together, we were able to translate some of Oficina 2004's philosophical, economic and anticapitalist critique into a collection of postcards and posters. We also produced a huge number of rolls of adhesive tape with the 'Dinero Gratis' logo printed on it. This tape eventually became an essential element of actions undertaken by collectives throughout the city. It was used on so many occasions that it ended up being one of the most influential visual elements of the cycle of protests that began with the World Bank counter-summit in Barcelona. (Our collaboration with Oficina 2004 is ongoing. For all of these years, we have never stopped producing graphic concepts and materials that have been tested in the countless actions we have carried out together.)

Over the winter and spring of 2001, Las Agencias did not stop working for a single second. Activity at El Cuartelillo gradually increased until it became the nerve centre of the demonstrations against the World Bank and the IMF that were to take place in June. We worked at a frenetic pace, spending much more time there than in our precariously rented homes. In fact, I don't remember spending a single full day at home: I would arrive late at night, lie in bed for a few hours and be back at El Cuartelillo by around 9 a.m. Sharing that intense rhythm with the other agents in Las Agencias brought us closer and closer together. We became friends, and it was that friendship that, among many other things, brought down the barriers that kept the five agencies apart. I remember one day we were holding five simultaneous meetings, something that was very common at the time. We all suddenly stopped, looked each other in the eye and said: 'Fuck this five-agency thing, one agency is more than enough: Las Agencias, that's all.' We laughed, put the tables together and, from that moment on, we all participated in and took responsibility for everything.

## La Bolsa o la vida

June was getting closer and closer, and the local media kept broadcasting the many clashes that occurred during the demonstrations against the World Bank. It was on TV, in the newspapers, everywhere. However, less than a month after the demonstrations started, the media still lacked a single shred of evidence to corroborate the story they had been pushing about the activists. They had not a single burning shipping container, nor even a sad broken shop window to photograph, nothing. That was when we came up with the idea of 'La Bolsa o la vida' (The Stock Exchange or Your Life).

Josian, who always knew everything, discovered that the Bolsa de Barcelona (Barcelona Stock Exchange) building was classified as a tourist attraction, which meant one could request a guided tour. That triggered our actions. We called and asked for one. A very kind young woman replied that would be no problem, she just needed an estimate of the number of people who would take the tour. We told her about ten thousand people, give or take. As soon as she hung up the phone, the nice young woman did exactly what we wanted her to: she called the police.

In the meantime, we were busy sending a series of photographs we had taken outside the stock exchange building a few days earlier to the local newspapers. They showed us as an ordinary group of tourists, but with bags (*bolsas*) on our heads; all very conceptual. The photos were accompanied by a note in which we stated that we were planning to make the most massive group visit to the Bolsa de Barcelona in history, and that all members of the press were invited.

They must have liked the photos very much, because they were published in almost all the newspapers the following day. I suppose they saw in them signs of the altercations that their editors were so insistent upon addressing. The first part of the plan already accomplished, we left the second in the



La Bolsa o La Vida (author: Las Agencias, 2001)

hands of the police. When he saw our photos in the press, the Minister of the Interior of the Government of Catalonia ordered the intensification of the monitoring and control measures that the police had already deployed around the building after our call. More fences, more vans, more police officers: a very complete operation to prevent a visit we did not plan to make.

The only ones affected by these measures were the shareholders and brokers who, accustomed as they were to going in and out of the stock exchange as if they were at home, were very upset at being searched and sniffed by sniffer dogs, over and over again. In fact, they were so annoyed that they unanimously decided to stop going to the stock exchange for a couple of days as a sign of protest. And that is how the stock exchange building was closed for two consecutive days, because of a simple phone call and a few absurd photographs. We threw a huge party to celebrate. Accompanied by the Show Bus, music blaring, hundreds of us spent a whole day dancing frenetically with bags on our heads. We even took a dip in the public fountain on Passeig de Gràcia, just in front of the stock exchange building. If we had to choose between life and the stock exchange, we'd choose life in a heartbeat. Lots of life.

### **The end of Las Agencias and the return to autonomy**

Las Agencias' collaborative projects (including, among others, the independent news agency Indymedia, which we helped to create, and the bar we opened at MACBA, overlooking the Patio Corominas square, where we fed a lot of people for free for several months) occupied the pages of the press every day during the months leading up to the World Bank and IMF summit in Barcelona. This, together with massive participation in the organisation of events and demonstrations against the summit, forced the World Bank and the IMF to cancel their meeting. It was the first time in history that something like that had

happened. We experienced it as a tangible triumph; we celebrated it in style, and we also decided to go ahead anyway with the programme of demonstrations that we had already published.

All our projects had a huge influence on those massive demonstrations. The Show Bus, the *Prêt-à-Révolter* costumes, the *Artmani* shields, everything was used by a lot of people those days. At the main demonstration, the police charged hundreds of thousands of people, causing chaos throughout the entire city. Along with a few hundred other people, some of us took refuge at MACBA, and there too the police fired at us with rubber bullets. One of those bullets ricocheted and hit the glass door of the museum. Since then, there have been two great broken glass panes in the history of art: Duchamp's and ours.

Things got so tense that a delegate of the Government of Catalonia asked for a personal interview with Manolo Borja, the director of MACBA. At that meeting, the delegate expressed her discomfort with our work and warned Manolo that she intended to stop our activities immediately. For a few days, it seemed that Manolo was going to lose his position and that the police was going to seal El Cuartelillo. Some members of Manolo's technical team were so nervous that they demanded the director expel us, but in the end nothing happened. The museum's organisational chart remained unchanged, and so did El Cuartelillo. After the demonstrations in June, Manolo Borja called a meeting and proposed that we continue our work for another season, but under very strict conditions. From now on, our working hours would be drastically reduced to fit the museum's timetable and every new project would have to be submitted to the director for approval. As soon as we left that meeting, it was clear to us that it was over.

Our experience with Las Agencias had shown us that, when political art is not accompanied by a high degree of autonomy, it is just another label; another way of adapting social practices to the institutional logics of the art world and, therefore, to market logics. If, together, we were to respond

to both our ways of life and the cultural forms that made them possible, we needed a degree of autonomy on which we were not willing to compromise at all. So, we did not accept the director's conditions. We packed up our belongings, left the institutional ship and put an end to Las Agencias.

Shortly after our departure, Manolo Borja wrote a rather extensive article in which he presented Las Agencias as an example of what separated MACBA from other international museums. Unlike 'museum brands' such as MoMA, museums as spectacle and entertainment like the Guggenheim, or any of all those other institutions that championed a vision of culture built on the basis of biennials and other big events, it was the work of Las Agencias, linked, as it was, to the dynamics and needs of social movements, that, in the director's words, made MACBA a living museum, one that was fully active in society. A few months after this piece was published, Manolo also left MACBA, moved to Madrid and took office as the director of the Reina Sofía museum.

Jordi also returned to Madrid. There, he started a new phase with David (aka Tina Paterson), an old friend of his who had visited El Cuartelillo a few times. Together, the two of them carried out the campaigns 'Mundos Soñados' (Dreamed Worlds) and 'Sabotaje Contra el Capital Pasádotelo Pipa (SCCPP)' (Sabotaging Capital While Having a Blast). We tried to continue working together for a while, them from Madrid and us from Barcelona, but it did not work out and we soon lost contact for good. A group of about fifteen of us remained in Barcelona, alongside the many others with whom we continued to collaborate on a regular basis. We found a new work space, a very large flat in the Gràcia neighbourhood that had been used by social movements for years. We used it to store our personal belongings and all the materials we had produced as Las Agencias, then immediately left for Genoa to take part in the international protests against the G8 summit, dressed in our *Prêt-à-Révolter* summer collection.

## Genoa, our turning point

The G8 counter-summit in Genoa was the high point of the anti-globalisation movement. It was held in July 2001, at a time when the IMF and the World Bank were experiencing serious difficulties to meet and hold their summits. Social demonstrations against neoliberal globalisation were on the rise, and so was police violence. Gothenburg saw the first bullet wound and Genoa saw the first death. Carlo Giuliani, a young man of 23, lost his life a few metres away from where we stood, shot by a police officer. That traumatic event and everything else we experienced during those days in Genoa was a major turning point in our work.

The argument behind the excessive police repression was based on a myth created by the media: the myth of the black bloc. The media created a very particular image of this political group, presenting it as a criminal organisation solely responsible for the violence experienced in the anti-globalisation demonstrations. In the hands of the media, the black bloc became the new enemy: the enemy of financial power; of those citizens who reject violence, and also the enemy of the anti-globalisation movement itself, as a line was drawn between violent and non-violent demonstrators. This simplistic media representation, based on the friend/foe schema, severely downplayed the rich diversity of the global movement.

## New Kids on the Black Block

For this reason, we decided we must urgently set out to effectively and systematically erode the term black bloc itself and, as soon as we returned to Barcelona, we got down to work. To achieve this, we resurfaced an idea that we had already begun to toy with during the last period of Las Agencias: New Kids on the Black Block. The name was a mix between black bloc

and New Kids on the Block, a band that was very commercially successful in the late 1980s and early 1990s. New Kids on the Block, or their record company, had developed a formula that would later be repeated and perfected with countless other bands, including the Back Street Boys and the Spice Girls: five young people, each with a diverse aesthetic and easily recognisable to the teenage public, performing the catchiest songs. Behind each of these groups was a perfect formula, developed by a record company for clearly commercial purposes.

But far from criticising either the band or the black bloc movement, with New Kids on the Black Block our intention was to highlight the logic of communication that imbedded *both* groups into a logic of consumption. By showing the very mechanisms that led to the development of anti-globalisation movement, we aimed to attack, and denounce, its criminalisation. We did this by appropriating the forms and language of a group of fans, producing stickers, posters, fanzines and pins. We also wrote songs, produced the odd video-clip and created a lot of fashion designs to be used in the activities that would be carried out by New Kids on the Black Block in many cities around the world.

New Kids on the Black Block soon became a tool for political transgression, devoted to unveiling, in our performances, the mechanisms employed by dominant discourses. By appropriating those discourses and shattering them from within, we opened up space for more diverse and complex representations. We performed in the streets, amid riots or on television sets. We gave countless press conferences on behalf of the anti-globalisation movement. But no one ever knew who was hiding behind that name. New Kids on the Black Block was always conceived as a ‘multiple identity’, a sort of collective and anonymous mask. New Kids on the Black Block gave to anyone who needed it, who stood up against the reductionist and criminalising narratives that ran so strongly in the media, a power to express and represent themselves.



New Kids on the Black Block Logo (author: Las Agencias, 2001)



New Kids on the Black Block at the burned Show Bus

We presented New Kids on the Black Block to the public in style. The European Union had just granted the six-month presidency to Spain and a campaign called 'Against the Europe of capital, globalisation and war' had been launched by many grassroots organisations across the country to protest each of the summits scheduled throughout the presidency. We intended for our Show Bus to be one of the main players in these protests. Our idea was to travel around the country offering it to many social movements as a communicative tool and an intervention device, but it was impossible: one day before the demonstrations began in Barcelona, we found the Show Bus completely destroyed.

Someone had broken into it at night and smashed the work tables, the screens and the driver's cabin. They had then climbed onto the roof and smashed the stage. Finally, they had doused it with gasoline and set it on fire. The news caught us completely off guard. We did not know what to say or what to do. None of the usual responses to this kind of incident would satisfy us at all. We could not see ourselves grieving our loss before the press, or demanding an eye for an eye. So, after giving the matter some thought, we decided to take advantage of this incident, turning the crisis into an opportunity to present New Kids on the Black Block to the public at large.

We put on our costumes, took some funny pictures in the burnt-out bus and sent them to the press, with a note saying: 'We are the New Kids on the Black Block, a group so radical that we burnt our own bus.' It worked like a charm. In just a few hours, everyone knew about New Kids on the Black Block. That is how, in a very short period of time, this new collective identity gained entry into the myth-making machine, and had hundreds of fans unconditionally join its cause.

During our time as New Kids on the Black Block, we tested a series of creative strategies that successfully combatted both media criminalisation and police repression on countless occasions, always with a lot of humour.

However, the violent repression of the anti-globalisation movement was on the rise, and we could not get Genoa out of our minds. So, all throughout the 'Another World Tour Is Possible' world tour, we kept thinking about a new intervention model. We wanted to go on fighting the power of multinational companies and the (increasingly intrusive) spirit of neoliberalism, but now we wanted to do it in everyday life, without relying on big events or mass demonstrations. We were convinced that there had to be something people did on a daily basis which, in some way, was already a threat to capitalist globalisation, however small. We searched everywhere until, finally, one day, we found something: stealing. This habit, ingrained in thousands of people, cost multinational companies millions of dollars in losses. Stealing was a kind of invisible guerrilla warfare, waged daily in shopping malls around the world. We created the Yomango (*Yo mango, I steal*) brand to make this war visible.

### **Yomango**

I remember the name came to me in bed. I had just turned off the light when suddenly 'Yomango' resounded in my head like thunder. I sat up, turned on the light on my bedside table and wrote it down in my notebook. Right next to it, I wrote a short comment: 'A brand that steals everything from other brands'. Then I turned off the light and went back to sleep. Over the next two days, I locked myself in at home and continued working on the idea. I took a lot of notes and drew some sketches. On Thursday night, we all met for dinner at Oriana's house and, once we had finished, I presented the idea to the group. The reception was spectacular! You could tell it was something that was on everyone's minds. By the next day we were already working to develop this brand and its lifestyle.

Yomango was, from the very beginning, an attempt to redirect marketing and all of its social-intervention techniques in pursuit of a human essence, self-defined, and so capable of self-definition, beyond the economic sphere. We started from the premise that the commercial impulse by which our lives were being driven was the sign of a very sad passion for them to be ruled by. We felt that all the happiness represented every day in advertising concealed an ocean of sadness and dissatisfaction. In a way, Yomango was our answer to that reality. Our goal in creating that brand was to go out and test our chances of intervening in any way in an imaginary that was dragging us all, with increasing energy, towards a very limited existence: that of consumers. Yomango was the vehicle in which we set out to explore the contours of true enjoyment.

We set ourselves a challenge: Yomango would never create anything, it would only steal. We sensed and so we decided that, in order to establish a subversive relationship with consumption and its representations, we had but to combine the elements that were already present in the consumption imaginary in a different way. What we found was that reconstructing the painful truths hidden behind consumer goods and their advertisements resulted in an endless number of scenarios that brought great enjoyment, both individually and collectively. No surprise, then, that one of the slogans we used the most in the early days of the brand was this one that we stole from MasterCard: '*Yomango, because happiness cannot be bought.*'

Among the first things we did once we had our logo and website ready were the Yomango dinners. These were weekly meetings where a bunch of people shared everything they had stolen during the week. The fact that we could not know the menu in advance made those dinners very spontaneous and improvised events. They soon became a point of reference in Barcelona. It was also around that time that we installed an open publication module on our website, something like a



Yomango Logo (author: Yomango, 2002)  
Public presentation of the Yomango brand (author: Yomango, 2002)

small Facebook wall but anonymous and free. Both the dinners and the online forum immediately created a community of people who, over several years, formed a structure for the exchange of knowledge, practices and experiences that was very enriching for the whole Yomango brand and lifestyle. From those two spaces were spawned, for example, many of the ideas that the fashion department would later realise. The first songs and many of the images that represented the brand's first seasons were created there.

The high level of engagement created by Yomango showed with absolute clarity that the brand made visible and appealed to something that was very widespread in society, but had been almost invisible until then. In order to provide outlets for all of that activity, we created a series of departments: the art and design department, the fashion and accessories department, the R&D department and, of course, the stealing department. Since we still had no money, some of us signed up to work nights in the stores of some of the biggest multinational clothing companies, such as Zara and H&M. It was there that we carried out all of the tests, with frequency inhibitors and other materials, that we then applied to Yomango fashion and performance. The social network and lifestyle that Yomango eventually became somehow began to take shape on those endless nights that we spent locked in those huge dark stores, unloading boxes of clothes from the company's trucks and hanging thousands of garments on their corresponding hangers.

On 5 July 2002, we presented our brand to the public. We had received an invitation to participate in an exhibition at the CCCB (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona), and we decided to take advantage of the opportunity to make the brand public. The event in question took place in a branch of Bershka on Portal de l'Angel street, Barcelona, in the middle of the sales season. The street was buzzing with people when Yomango performed its unique magic trick. A size 34 blue

dress with a retro belt and a butterfly printed on its bodice disappeared before everyone's eyes and turned into a real work of art that, a few hours later, appeared on display in the museum. All the local newspapers echoed with the event: 'Anti-system group claims theft is a new art style', 'Stealing from multinationals, the latest trend in art'. The force of that intervention was such that it shook even the mayor, who felt he had to visit the CCCB to make it very clear to the director, in our presence, that 'art is meant to conceal problems, not create them.'

That intervention was followed by many others. Over a very short period of time, Yomango spread everywhere like a rumour. Museums and social centres worldwide took an interest in this strange brand that fed off everything it stole from other brands that crossed its path. In Madrid, Jordi and David began to put the brand in the spotlight. They published a couple of Yomango booklets that had huge repercussions: *El libro rojo* (The Red Book) and *El libro morado* (The Purple Book). They also organised freestyle sessions 'sponsored' by the brand. In Barcelona, we increased the number of collaborators: Bani Brusadin and Flo became part of the group around that time. We went on tour, we visited many countries and we opened a new Yomango branch in each of them. In less than a year, we managed to get the stealing department to coordinate brand activities on more than one continent: in Mexico, Italy, Germany, Argentina, Chile... Before we knew it, Yomango had become another multinational; the only multinational brand that was outside the market. In record time, our brand became a symbol of resistance against neoliberal globalisation, and it did so by stealing the language and appearance of multinational companies (and, of course, some other things as well).

Like any other form of art, Yomango had the gestural capacity to establish unpredictable relations with reality and, therefore, to redefine it. Our performances in shopping malls, the fashion designs, the catalogues; all served the purpose of translating the symbolic meanings that operate in consumption,

SÁBADO, 21 DICIEMBRE 2002

## CULTURA

# Bailar y mangar

*El grupo Yomango practica la danza y el hurto en un supermercado*

INMA SAINZ DE BARANDA

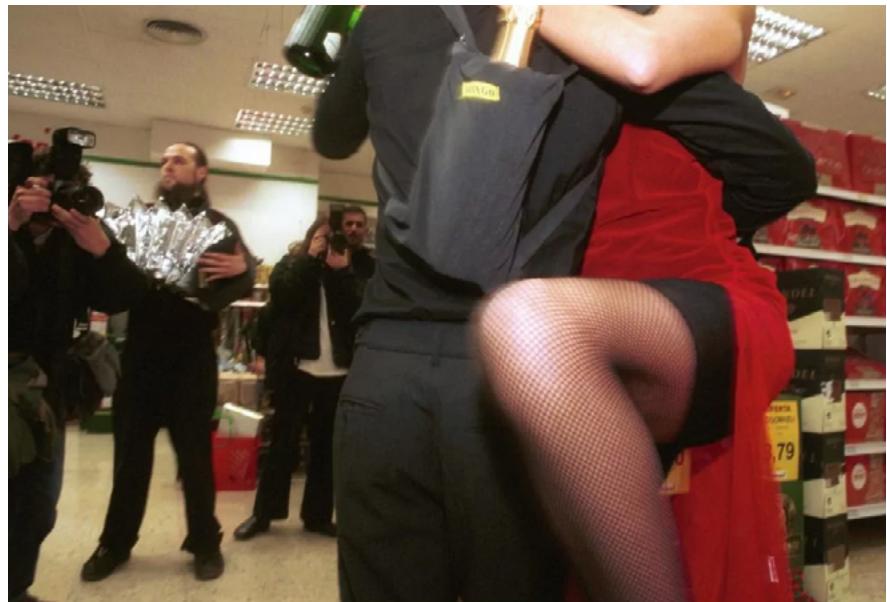
**Dos bailarines de tango del grupo Yomango, durante su acción de ayer**

**ANNA PORTABELLA**  
Barcelona

**C**on lemas como "Contra el capitalismo, tranquilidad y manguismo", el grupo con inquietudes artísticas y políticas Yomango, formado por jóvenes barceloneses de entre

20 y 30 años, entró ayer por la tarde en un supermercado de la Rambla para bailar tangos, como muestra de solidaridad con el pueblo de Argentina, y también para llevarse sin pagar unas botellas de cava, un discutible modo de protesta contra las multinacionales. "Hemos mangado las botellas para celebrar el aniversario de la revolución argentina y su "cacerolazo", explicó un miembro de Yomango. Durante quince minutos, pusieron música y bailaron tangos, mientras proyectaban en una pantalla en la calle su acción reivindicativa. Hoy, a las 11 de la mañana, brindarán en la plaza Universitat con el cava obtenido.●

Yomango-Tango (author: Yomango, 2003)



Yomango-Tango (author: Yomango, 2003)

bridging each person's individual history with the larger stories, or narratives, that make up consumerism. If the representations in advertisement deny people's spontaneity, creativity and capacity to transform their surroundings, our artistic interventions did the opposite. They sought to recover our power to act on the world; to change it. They were, so to speak, an attempt to establish a different relationship with the space and time of consumption as already deployed in almost all aspects of our lives.

Yomango developed an interventionist art, capable of crossing on numerous occasions the sharp threshold that leads to enjoyment; this being precisely the relationship that Yomango invited us to develop with our existence. With Yomango, we learned that we are actually governed by our environment (visual, architectural, urban...), which may seem at first glance to encompass everything, but is actually full of holes. These holes are not visible at first sight, because 'seeing' has meant settling for what we can see. Yomango taught us that the holes exist only to the extent that we bring them into existence, and that it is only in this way, by bringing that which cannot be seen with the naked eye into existence, that we can create a new relationship with everything that surrounds us. In fact, Yomango's actions were just that: vanishing points capable of interrupting the time and space of consumption. Our insistence on sketching out those points was what ultimately created a 'place' (the brand itself) that was half imaginary and half physical: a place where many persons were able to establish a different relationship with consumption. It was precisely there, in that unexpected place, that this entire international community settled and its lifestyle was affirmed. Sometimes you call out to life with the right words and life comes. We called out 'Yomango' and life came.

## A nameless force

Yomango kept us busy for a few years. Its massive activity and the influence it had on so many different people and places changed the way we worked and the way we understood social and political issues. All those actions carried out by anonymous people, all those authorless gestures capable of transforming endless adverse scenarios into enjoyment without the need to rely on the classic levers of political action were, for us, an omen of what was yet to come. From 2004 onwards, we began to witness a series of political expressions that no longer answered to what we used to understand as 'social movements'. They were presences that appeared in the public sphere and had no possible political representation whatsoever, collective expressions in which the existential and the political appeared indivisibly intertwined. They were, like Yomango, unexpected subjective spaces that had room for anyone; spaces capable of interrupting the social workings that create the map of what is possible. Since they had no name, we referred to them as the 'nameless forces', and we immediately became very interested in them.

The first time we saw one of these nameless forces was after the attacks at the Atocha train station on 11 March 2004. The spontaneous social response that flooded the streets of Spain in a few hours left us dumbfounded. When faced with the horror of the attack, people's lives seemed to cling together to face it. This unexpected connection created a most inclusive and multiple social space, a space that was characterised by its lack of representation: nobody ordered it; it was not endorsed by any organisation, the call was spread through SMSs and the internet alone. The meeting was not attended in blocs; no one knew who was standing next to them. It was a very diverse event. For once, things did not spawn from a previously constructed meaning, but developed on the go. Great creativity unfolded during the brief time it lasted: thousands of

new slogans were born on anonymous and personal banners, loaded with great intimate expressiveness. Its atypical social expression turned everything upside down and disappeared as quickly as it had developed.

### V de vivienda

The second nameless force appeared with V de vivienda (*V for vivienda*, that is, dwelling, living place). It was 2006, the year more houses were built in Spain than in France, Italy and Germany combined. This caused the largest economic bubble in the history of our country: the real-estate bubble. It was the time when banks offered forty-year mortgages to anyone who came to their offices. Forty years of your life paying for a place to live! The situation was totally unsustainable (very similar to the current one, by the way) and that unsustainability soon took the form of an anonymous email that jumped like a hare across the internet, from inbox to inbox. The email was brief, it said only this: 'For the end of real-estate speculation and the right to decent housing, next Sunday sit-in at all Spanish squares.' Once again, an anonymous voice expressing a pain and unease shared by many. The only difference between this and the demonstration against the Atocha attacks was that this new, nameless force did not disappear so quickly.

The first sit-in was a resounding success. Thousands of people answered the call by taking to the squares of the main Spanish cities. All of us who attended experienced the joy that comes with being moved by the power of being together. The operation was repeated the following Sunday and a few more Sundays thereafter. This series of anonymous calls began to form a kind of spontaneous movement. For the first time, an anonymous and massive force aspired to survive over time, and that brought with it the problem of visibility.

In a way, the movement for decent housing *appeared by hiding*. It chose as its name 'V de vivienda', a joke, a wordplay on the title of the comic and film *V for Vendetta*. This choice was guided by the explicit desire not to be named, represented or even identified. 'V de vivienda' actually meant nothing, and it was precisely because of this, because it was nothing, that everyone could fit inside it. It was from this inclusive and non-identifying capacity that it drew its force, its nameless force. But once the movement tried to survive over time, things got hard, and V de vivienda was immediately forced to adopt a concrete visual identity, easily recognisable by the media, if it wanted to maintain the quota of visibility it had unexpectedly gained with its irruption into the public eye.

We had some experience with the problems that come with visibility. Both Las Agencias and Yomango had taught us a few things about it, so we decided to take matters into our own hands. If we had to define ourselves and adopt an image in order to retain our presence in the media, we would find one that would wear down the strength we derived from not having a name as little as possible. We set to work. It wasn't easy: finding a common imaginary among those gatherings of people who were so different from each other was not easy at all.

After several attempts, we soon realised that trying to find common ground was impossible. People did not come to those rallies moved by a common ideology. They were not just leftists or rightists, and, even if they were, those demonstrations were not characterised by that, any more than they were by gender, age or race. On the *outside*, those rallies were radically heterogeneous. So, we decided to change the plan and started looking for something common to everyone on the *inside*. We asked hundreds of different people what they felt when they were confronted with the housing crisis in one way or another. We wanted to see if there was something inside all those very different people that somehow worked as a commonplace, a common ground we could use as the basis for an

imaginary that represented us at the most basic level. And yes, there was. Deep inside ourselves we all felt that we were never going to own a home in our fucking lives.

We took that feeling and turned it into a slogan: ‘You’ll never own a home in your fucking life.’ We printed it on posters, stickers and T-shirts, and that phrase automatically became V de vivienda’s rallying cry. For a while it was truly impossible to walk down the street without bumping into it. Thousands of people identified with it, and it was not an easy slogan. It certainly broke with the common sense that usually accompanies other slogans used by social movements. It offered no hope ('Yes we can'); it offered no future ('For a future without poverty'); it offered no alternatives ('Another world is possible'); and yet it gave one the feeling that no one but oneself was hiding behind it. ‘I read it and I hear myself’, a person once said to me when I gave him the sticker in the street. ‘That’s exactly what I think: I’m not ever going to own a house in my fucking life.’

In addition to a lot of visibility, that phrase managed to give V de vivienda a big boost. With it, we were able to organise much more massive rallies and demonstrations. For more than a year, thousands of people were shouting our slogan at the top of their lungs in squares and streets all over Spain. But we had the impression that our cries were getting us nowhere. That is why we decided to break the world record for people shouting ‘I’ll never own a home in my fucking life.’

One day we called the people at Guinness World Records and asked to have our feat officially entered into their famous book. We explained our idea in detail, telling them that it would be carried out at the same time in several cities throughout Spain and that everything would be live-streamed. They assessed our proposal for a couple of weeks and finally rejected it ‘for being too weird’. They called us weird! Anyway, we didn’t give it a second thought and went ahead with our plan. We made a few videos and distributed them on the net as a call to arms. We also designed the Putómetro (Fuckmeter), an app

that measured the level of anger someone felt in connection with a specific situation. On 6 October 2007, thousands of people gathered in the main squares of several Spanish cities and their shouts reached the maximum level of the Putómetro, setting the first world record for people shouting ‘I’ll never own a home in my fucking life’ at the same time. But not even this could prevent the economic crisis from reaching every corner of the world shortly thereafter.

That was when we created Enmedio (Amid). In addition to Oriana and I, who had been working together since Las Agencias, and Mario Ortega, who had been involved in the latter days of Yomango, Anja Steidinger, Jesús Cuadra, Daniel Bobadilla, Xavier Artigas, Núria Campabadal, David Proto and Toni Valdés joined this new adventure, as well as many other collaborators such as David Morgado, Elena Fraj, Samuel Esteban, Penélope Thomaidi, Patricia López, Nico Hache and Kevin Buckland.

The name Enmedio was an attempt to escape the names, or terms, that limit and reduce the experience of what we do. It refers to the fact that we value our work from a place established by ourselves, according to our needs and desires, and not by those imposed upon us by cultural institutions or professional artists. Enmedio means acting in the terrain we inhabit, trying to open paths where none existed before. Paths everywhere, amid everything.

### **Party at the INEM office**

At first, the crisis was just a state of mind; a sort of social sadness and existential insecurity that paralyzed everything. It was as if, suddenly, the dreams represented daily by advertising had become completely unattainable, and people, frustrated and resentful, had begun to feel fear; a fear that seeped through the pores and filled the bones with dirty smoke.

We never fully believed in the financial crisis. We always saw it more as a tool of governance. Rather than a crisis, we were facing a triumph of *crisis capitalism*, a mode of government that ensured the permanence and the reproduction of profit by spreading fear everywhere. Fear was the essential symbolic strategy to achieve ‘quietism’ and to subjugate a population broken into a thousand pieces. This is what really worried us, that fear would prevail over joy. That was the main political problem for us, and we decided to confront it.

On 30 April 2009 we had a big party at an employment office. The first thing you need to do to organise a party is choose the right place. The INEM (Instituto Nacional de Empleo) office seemed ideal. Is there any other place where sadness and social fear are more present than an employment office? Unemployment is fear, isolation and stigmatisation; unemployment is the literal embodiment of sadness and social depression, just what we wanted to fight with our party.

So we went there one morning with our sound system, and the result was amazing. In less than five minutes of dancing and partying, all the long faces of the people in the unemployment line turned to laughter. The video we shot there became much more famous than we ever expected. Today it has more than one million views, and has been the inspiration for many other parties that have since been held from time to time in employment offices all over the country.

In order to scare us, capitalism insists on the belief that we have something to lose. If our party at the INEM office showed something, it is that the only thing we should really be worried about losing is the enjoyment and the joy of being alive.

## We Are Not Numbers

One of the earliest manifestations of the crisis (*crisis capitalism*) was the evictions. Over the first three years of the crisis there were more than 350,000 evictions in Spain; some 532 a day, or approximately one every eight minutes. That’s how the media talked about them, as numbers. But the evicted are not numbers; they are people, with faces and eyes.

The ‘We Are Not Numbers’ project originated at ‘¡TAF!’ (Taller de Acción Fotográfica, Photographic Action Workshop), a workshop Oriana had been teaching at the Enmedio centre on an almost permanent basis for a few years. At ‘TAF!’ we investigated the infinite possibilities to intervene in social conflicts that photography offers. ‘We Are Not Numbers’ was created in collaboration with the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages, PAH) and its goal was always to confront the housing problem: literally.

It achieved this in three different ways. Firstly, ‘We Are Not Numbers’ was a meeting place for people who were about to be evicted from their homes. The loss of a home is something that utterly destabilises a life. An eviction always affects the whole of family life, work, health; it is the dynamite that blows up the mental stability of anyone who suffers it. Those attending our workshop were all in a very vulnerable place. In those circumstances, the need for support becomes absolutely essential. Our workshop was first and foremost about responding to this need.

Secondly, ‘We Are Not Numbers’ was a photography workshop. The participants, all of them threatened with imminent eviction, learned some basic portrait photography techniques, as well as some cheap printing methods. When the portraits were ready and printed large, the third and last part of the project began: the public intervention part.

Our interventions with ‘We Are Not Numbers’ sought to establish a visual connection between all those people who



No somos números/We are Not Numbers (author: Enmedio, 2011)

were about to lose their homes and those directly responsible for their eviction. The person in the picture was the one who stuck their image to the facade of the bank that wanted to evict them from their home, and they did so accompanied by many other people who were in the same situation.

This act not only helped in identifying those responsible for an unfair system, but also gave those affected a great deal of power. This ritual, repeated countless times, not only gave strength, dignity and self-esteem to those affected, but also helped many people to understand the problem of evictions at a glance and, therefore, to support the struggle of those affected. Moreover, the continuous media coverage of these interventions forced banks to cancel some of the most imminent evictions.

'We Are Not Numbers' was one of those collective rituals that humans have been practicing since the beginning of time. It was an act of magic that used (self-) representation to confront the powerful forces battering us; an act of collective presence that, through the use of images, stood against the heralds of death, surviving the most adverse circumstances. Cave-dwelling humans did something similar when they used blood and ashes to depict themselves dancing around the fire, spears in hand, as a way to face the dangers that lurked in the deepest darkness of the night.

### **Yes we can, but they don't want to**

With the PAH, we also launched the slogan and graphic campaign 'Sí se puede pero no quieren' (Yes we can, but they don't want to). The PAH had just placed a bill before the Congress of Deputies (Congreso de los Diputados) that included three specific measures to guarantee the right to housing in Spain: social rent, retroactive payment in kind and the immediate halting of all evictions.

Contrary to what one might think, the greatest inconvenience of placing a bill before the Congress is not having to collect the 500,000 signatures required (the PAH collected three times as many); it is getting the deputies to greenlight and approve the bill. The PAH thought that the only way to achieve something like this was to ensure the deputies really understood the dramatic consequences that a negative vote could have. That is why it repeatedly invited all deputies to its meetings, so it could explain to them in person the situation of those affected by the crisis. But unfortunately not a single deputy accepted those invitations. The PAH was running out of ideas when someone suddenly remembered the Argentine *escraches*.

In Argentina, the term '*escrache*' is used to describe a peaceful demonstration in which a group of people congregate before someone's home or workplace with the intention of publicly denouncing them, either as the perpetrator of a criminal act or to expose their responsibility in a political event. Adapting this same practice to feed live information on the situations of emergency in which thousands of people found themselves to the Spanish deputies seemed like a good idea. You know, if the mountain will not come to me...

However, it was a big leap from a 'Stop Evictions' bill to *escraches* for the PAH, and not without dangers for them. They had to determine how to properly convey the meaning and intentions of this proposal, or they ran the risk of being misinterpreted. That was precisely where we came into the picture.

Carrying out an *escrache* campaign is not easy; you face a series of very difficult challenges. First of all, we had to make it clear that, rather than pointing the finger at anyone in particular, the PAH's *escraches* were intended to showcase and transmit the great social support that there was for their proposals. This forced us to invent a visual device capable of creating a friendly environment while, at the same time, showing all the hope contained in the Bill, at a glance. Second, we were working with a social movement (the PAH) that had itself, over

the years, created a whole visual universe (the colour green, the 'Yes we can' slogan, etc.) that was already deeply rooted in the collective imagination, and from which we could not detach ourselves. Finally, the campaign had to work throughout Spain, and this forced us to design something light and easy to reproduce on a large scale.

Finally, the result was two circular cardboard buttons, one green and one red, each one metre in diameter. The green one read 'Yes we can' and the red one read 'But they don't want to'. Rather than trying to invent something new, we chose the opposite approach: to reinforce what already existed. This is a common practice in our line of work. We believe creativity can be found there, in the infinite combinations offered by the things that already exist, rather than in a pretended originality born in who knows what parallel universe. We decided to make the buttons out of cardboard because it was the cheapest material we could find, and that also responded to our creative demand: that the things we make must be capable of being easily appropriated by anyone. This is why we worked with circles, because even a fool can make an 'O' shape, and because the deputies press round on-screen buttons when they vote in the assembly: green circles for, red circles against.

On the other hand, since we are of the opinion that if something is not broken we should not fix it, we kept the 'Yes we can' slogan intact. We only added 'But they don't want to'. It seemed to us that this perfectly represented the conflict faced by the PAH, after more than two years of fighting against evictions and having placed a bill before the Congress: there are solutions to the housing problem, but a small group of politicians has the power to block them.

The campaign was completed with green stickers reading 'Yes we can' and including a summary of the basic proposals included in the bill. These stickers were designed so that businesses and establishments could show their support for the PAH by sticking them on their windows, if they wanted to.

To facilitate the distribution of all these materials, we devised the *Escrache* kit, a file accessible from the PAH website that included everything necessary for everyone to be able to build the two green and red buttons at home by following some simple instructions. In short: two recurring phrases, two simple shapes, two basic colours; nothing that could not be done by everyone. Yes we can!

### World champions of unemployment

With the crisis came the privatisation of the public sector. Everything public was at risk of becoming private: universities, hospitals and even historical monuments. In June 2013, Barcelona's city council, then presided over by the now-defunct Convergència i Unió (Convergence and Union) party, rented the city's monumental statue of Columbus to two multinational companies for use as a billboard, and for a good sum. They dressed the sculpture in a huge FC Barcelona T-shirt and used it to advertise sneakers and low-cost tourist destinations. This campaign went around the world. In just a few days, it was on the main TV channels and the covers of some of the most popular magazines. Its success put Spain back in the international spotlight, highlighting once again what the country is best known for: its sporting victories.

Spain is a world champion of almost everything: football, basketball, motorcycle racing; everybody knows that. What is perhaps not so well known, because it is never mentioned in the media, is that Spain is also a world champion of unemployment. At the time when we carried out our action there were more than six million unemployed persons in our country, almost half of the young people of working age. And that was something that deserved to be advertised.

When a company uses a monument such as Barcelona's Columbus statue for commercial purposes, it triggers at least



Campeones del paro / Champions of unemployment (author: Enmedio, 2013)

two immediate reactions. On the one hand, it adds a new meaning to the monument, giving it a new sense, a new interpretation; on the other hand, it puts a spotlight on it. And since no sign is ever fully closed, every sign is constantly open to new meanings, as long as one is able to intervene in it. From that moment on, any intervention focused on that same monument would have a similar (but different) effect.

The first thing we did was call the press and summon them to the foot of the Columbus monument at 12 a.m., the time when there are the most tourists in the area. Since the press had already spilled rivers of ink on the privatisation of this monument, everything related to it aroused great interest. So all the journalists we called showed up on time, eager to capture whatever was going to happen there with their cameras. And what happened was that, suddenly, a gigantic yellow balloon appeared on the scene, bearing the phrase 'Spain, world champions of unemployment' in both Spanish and English.

The journalists rushed to photograph the sphere as it rose through the air to the tip of Columbus's finger, creating an image so irresistible that none of them could fight the desire to capture it. That is how we managed to sneak an advertisement of Spain's alarming social situation into the press without spending a céntimo on publicity. And if the original campaign, that of Columbus the football player advertising sportswear and low-cost flights, had achieved great media coverage, our intervention's did not follow far behind. Once again, Roland Barthes's maxim was proven true: 'It is always more subversive to alter a sign than to try to destroy it.'

### Reflectors Against Evil

During the time of the crisis we did everything we could, even becoming superheroes at times. Rather than being a group as such, Reflectors Against Evil was a creative technique that

anyone could use whenever they needed to, whenever they could take no more and said 'Enough! This the end of the line.' We Reflectors Against Evil were ordinary people. We did not have what one could call superpowers; we had never mutated because of some strange scientific accident, we could not fly, we did not have superhuman strength. The only thing we had that made us a little bit extraordinary was some shiny suits and a couple of curious tools that we designed ourselves (with the help of the German group Tools for Action). Those tools were the *Reflective Beam* and the *Infallible Inflatable*, or *Reflector Cube*,<sup>3</sup> two very simple things that everyone could make at home with little effort.

The *Reflective Beam* is a silver, lightning-shaped object used to reflect sunlight and prevent the police from filming people at demonstrations. The *Infallible Inflatable* is a very light but gigantic silver cube that can withstand extremely intense blows. It is designed to serve three purposes: First, to point out Evil wherever found, by adopting a thousand different shapes. Second, to entertain people when demonstrations become boring (which is quite often). Third, to stop the police from charging against demonstrators, which is the main reason why we created it.

We tried it for the first time in Barcelona during the general strike of 2011. Plaça de Catalunya was full of people enjoying the strike when the riot police arrived, hitting demonstrators left and right. That scene of terror caught us playing with our *Infallible Inflatable* and we could think of nothing to do but to throw it at the police. It was a real *deus ex machina*. The unexpected presence of that strange object was like that timely eclipse that appears in the movies when no one expects it, allowing the hero to escape. It completely immobilised the agents, who stood there not knowing what to do.

**3.** We refer to these tools in both Spanish and English. In Spanish, the cube is called the *Infallible Inflable*. We call it that because it is almost impossible to pronounce.



Reflectantes contra el Mal / Reflectors Against Evil (author: Enmedio, 2012)

First they tried to destroy it with their batons, but when that did not work they ended up throwing it back at us. We then threw it back to them, creating a sort of ping-pong match that turned that scene of terror into a real laughable scene. It was in this fortuitous way that we discovered the anti-repressive potential of the Inflatable Cube. That same day, back in our studio, we started mass-producing the Inflatable Cube and shortly thereafter we were testing them at demonstrations all over Europe, with consistently excellent results.

### Cierra Bankia

In early 2012, Bankia, one of the largest banks in Spain, filed for bankruptcy. It then asked the Spanish government for twenty-three billion euros to be able to continue doing business, and their request was accepted without a second thought. That same week, the government cut twenty billion euros from the annual health and education budgets. The same politicians who had managed Bankia for years and brought it to bankruptcy were now the ones who decided, without asking anyone, to invest a huge amount of public money to bail it out. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. From that moment, many people began to understand that what the media called an economic crisis was, really, a monumental swindle. More than a mere economic fact, the crisis became a political technique that, far from weakening neoliberal policies, as many then believed, led to their reinforcement.

This reinforcement came in the form of destructive austerity plans and bank bailouts. 'Crisis' now meant shutting up and obeying every command they gave us, and we were not willing to do either. That is why we organised the surprise 'Cierra Bankia' (Close Bankia) party, to get rid of the anger we were carrying around after hearing the news of the Bankia bailout. It was an action that we carried out in two distinct

phases. First, we wrote and published a statement encouraging all Bankia customers to close their personal accounts. ‘It is better for Bankia to go under than for all of us to go down with it’, we told them. Then, once the statement gained momentum in social networks and some official media, we went to the vicinity of a Bankia office and stayed hidden until a young woman entered and closed her account.

When she did, dozens of persons appeared by surprise, celebrating her decision in style. Music, champagne, confetti; nobody had ever had such a party inside a bank before. The girl, who was more than astonished, ended up flying out the door while the rest of us (except the bank’s director, of course) sang ‘*;Bankia, cierra Bankia!*’ (‘Bankia, close Bankia!’) in unison, a tune we wrote for the occasion which later became the official chant of the demonstrations against the budget cuts. The whole party at the bank was developed according to a predefined script, although not entirely so, as improvisation always plays a key role in this kind of intervention. During the workshops we organised in the days leading to this action, I remember, everyone defined and rehearsed the performance they would give on the day.

The repercussions of this action in the media were truly surprising; in a few hours, the video of the party got over one million likes. With a little creativity and a lot of fun we had been able to create an image capable of standing up to both the fear transmitted by the media (‘Don’t act, it could be worse’), and the mirage of security and trust on which any relationship with a bank is based (‘Trust us, we guarantee your future’). Somehow, the ‘Cierra Bankia’ (Close Bankia) party succeeded in transforming popular anger into a spark of fun without taking away one iota from the criticism of the budget cuts and the privatisation of public money. The fact that social protest can be fun, even in the worst of circumstances, inspired a lot of people to close their bank accounts with Bankia and to organise other ‘Close Bankia’ parties everywhere.

## The Fence-World

From the day we held that party, the logic of neoliberal globalisation, exacerbated competition, job instability and the disturbing stagnation of high unemployment rates have only continued to increase fear. Fear is, today, the dark star of a comprehensive crisis that surrounds us on all sides, dragging down and dominating everything in the face of the extreme uncertainty of the future. Fear, more contagious than the plague, has slowly transformed the world into a fortified place full of exclusionary attitudes. It is a world increasingly defined on the basis of parameters of control and security, as the certainty of old ideas, political beliefs and the possibility of a better future, one of diverse and plural coexistence, weakens more and more. A world in which the social fabric is increasingly broken and security, surveillance and control are proclaimed as the only things with meaning. We at Enmedio are currently devoting our energies to imagining creative ways to confront these dark meanings of what we call the Fence-World: the world as a great fence made out of many fences.

What art, what activism can still stand up to the Fence-World? All the artistic experiments, public interventions and social processes that we developed in recent years are, in a way, attempts at answering this question. This is no easy task. How to be an activist when the truths that mobilised social action in the past have fallen, and reason no longer governs the organisation of life? How and where must we act to stop this free-for-all war, this classless class struggle that reduces us to a solitary and frightened crowd, ready to accept the most violent terms as a matter of course? With whom can we create alliances, groups or movements, when our lives are shattered, our identities ruined, a broken mirror that we try to put back together again and again? How can we still bet on social movements in a world without society, where solidarity and mutual support are nothing but a memory archived in

the museum of ideas? How can one still be an activist in an inhuman world?

Attempting to answer these questions has led us to explore the vast propagation of neoliberal devices. Over the years, we have classified them into two main groups: 1) intensification devices, and 2) division devices. The first ones are all those devices that the powerful deploy to intensify and capture social energy. They take the form of desires, insatiable drives that always want more and more. The ultimate consequence of being constantly exposed to these kinds of devices is exhaustion, fatigue and anger. The second ones are those separatist impulses that now exist in all kinds of social relations, from the closest and most intimate to the most global ones. The equilibrium that holds between all the separate elements of global society is maintained through the use of control, surveillance and organised violence.

This set of two categories of devices encompasses everything, or almost everything, in and about the Fence-World. From the psychic to the physical; from the mental to the material; from its ideas to its infrastructure; together, they co-create the Fence-World as a space that attracts and repels at the same time. And it is this that we have set out to confront over the coming years. We are currently preparing a publication and a series of workshops where we will explore some possible ways of subverting it, of loosening our unhealthy ties to it. You will hear about these actions, for sure.

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## BIOGRAPHIES & COLOPHON

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## Clémentine Deliss

Dr. Clémentine Deliss is Global Humanities Professor of History of Art at the **[University of Cambridge](#)**, Guest Professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, and Associate Curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, where she directs the **[Metabolic Museum-University](#)** and is currently preparing the exhibition, “Skin in the Game” (opening September 2023). Her practice crosses the borders of contemporary art, critical anthropology, curatorial experimentation, and publishing. Her book “The Metabolic Museum” was published by Hatje Cantz in co-production with KW in 2020, in Russian translation by Garage Publishing in 2021, and forthcoming in Spanish with Caniche.

## Seda Yıldız

Seda Yıldız (b. 1989, Istanbul) is an independent curator and art writer with a background in artistic practice, design and literature, based in Hamburg. Her work centers an open, experimental and process-oriented perspective, and spans curation, editing, printed matter. Her research is focused on artist collectives and self-archiving practices particularly in the former Yugoslavia. Since 2019 she has been collaborating with Škart collective (Belgrade). She is the editor and co-author of the book “Building Human Relations Through Art” (Onomatopee, 2022). Yıldız is a member of AICA Turkey and she was the art critic in residence at the Igor Zabel Association for Culture and Theory (2021). [yildizseda.com](http://yildizseda.com)

## Škart

Škart collective was founded in 1990 in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Between 1990 and 2000 their work focused on self-publishing (poetry books and printed matter) that were distributed in self-organised street actions (*Survival*

*Coupons, Sadness*). From 2000 to 2010, the group founded other collectives; Choir Horkeškart and Proba, children’s choirs Children from the Moon and AprilZMAJun, and a female embroidery group together with the single mothers association of Belgrade. Škart ran the monthly festival of experimental poetry Poetrying (*Pesničenje*) at the cinema Rex in Belgrade between 2008 and 2013. In 2010 Škart represented Serbia at the Venice Biennale of Architecture (*Seesaw Play-Grow*). Since 2012, the collective has been working occasionally with the pensioners and the children in the foster care center in Bela Crkva, Serbia. In collaboration with Group 484, they conducted several workshops with migrants in asylum centres in Bogovadja and Banja Koviljača between 2013 and 2017. Škart is involved in poetry and graphic design, often cooperates with others, helps activist groups, and earns wages mainly working as graphic designers and illustrators. [www.skart.rs](http://www.skart.rs)

## Leonidas Martín

Professor of Artistic Policies at the University of Barcelona and other international universities. As an Art, Culture and Contemporary Thinking specialist, he frequently participates in international conferences and meetings. His production as a multimedia artist always develops in a hybrid field where social processes and artistic practices are blended. He is a founding member of the artistic collectives Las Agencias and Enmedio. A large number of the projects he has carried out in the last two decades have been exhibited in museums and artistic institutions in several countries. He regularly publishes articles dedicated to researching the functions developed by artistic practices in different social processes. Doctor of Fine Arts, he studied at the Universities of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain), Gent (Belgium) and Trondheim (Norway). He also studied film script and

creative writing in Barcelona and New York.

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### Fernanda Laguna

Fernanda Laguna is one of the most influential Argentine artists of her generation, with a multifaceted practice that encompasses visual art, poetry, novels, the creation of alternative cultural spaces—among them Belleza y Felicidad (Beauty and Happiness)—and an effective artistic social practice for more than fifteen years in the neighborhood of Fiorito, a center of feminist activism in a place where gender violence is endemic. Laguna has participated in the Mercosul Biennial, Brazil; the Cuenca Biennial, Ecuador; *Casa Tomada*, Site Santa Fe, New Mexico; and *A Universal History of Infamy*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among other international group exhibitions. Her works are in the collections of the Guggenheim Museum, New York; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires; Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo (CA2M), Madrid; and Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City.

### Alessandra Pumarico

Alessandra Pumarico (PhD) is an independent curator, writer and educator working at the intersection of arts, pedagogy, and community building. Founder of art-activist [Free Home University](#), residency program Sound Res, and the trans-local [Ecoversities Alliance](#), Alessandra's research currently focuses on ecology of knowledge, care and relational epistemologies. Recent projects include [firefly frequencies](#) radio, the Mediterranean Ecofeminist, Decolonial Union for Self-Education M.E.D.U.S.E, the School of the We (<rotor>, Graz), Grounding~Seeding

(Tranzit, Bratislava), The New Alphabet School #Commoning (HKW, Berlin) and #Healing (Dakar). Editor at [artseverywhere](#), she curated the volume Pedagogies Otherwise (Ecoversities Publications, 2018), co-edited What's there to learn (Publication Studio Guelph, 2018) and [When the Roots Start Moving: Resonating with Zapatismo](#) (Archive Books 2021).

### Asja Mandić

Asja Mandić is an Associate Professor of modern and contemporary art and museum studies at the University of Sarajevo. She is the author of *Challenges of Museum Education* (published in Bosnian, 2014), six exhibition catalogues and co-editor of *Treasures of Socialism* (with Michael Fehr, 2011). Her writing has appeared in a number of books and journals, including Third Text, Memory Studies and Journal of Museum Education. Mandić also worked as a curator of the Ars Aevi Museum Centre of Contemporary Art, Sarajevo. Over the years, she curated more than twenty exhibitions, including the first pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the Venice Biennale. She was the recipient of a Fulbright fellowship for the academic year 2005/2006.

### Corina Oprea

Corina Oprea is the managing editor of L'Internationale Online since January 2019, as well as Lecturer at HDK-Valand Academy of Arts and Design, Gothenburg. She was artistic director of Konsthall C, where she curated a programme on decolonisation in the north. She holds a PhD from Loughborough University, UK, with the thesis 'The End of the Curator: On Curatorial Acts as Collective Production of Knowledge'. She is also a member of the curatorial team of Timisoara European Capital of Culture, 2023.

**Nick Aikens**

Nick Aikens (b.1981, London) is a curator at the Van Abbemuseum. He was part of the curatorial team for the Museum of Arte Útil (2013) and recently curated Positions (2014), a series of presentations by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Céline Condorelli, Bouchra Khalili, Charles van Otterdijk and Koki Tanaka. He is co-curating Forward!, a solo presentation of the Ahmet Ögüt, opening in March 2015. Nick has edited and contributed to publications including Toward a Lexicon of Usership (ed. Stephen Wright, Van Abbemuseum, 2013), Too Much World: The Films of Hito Steyerl (Sternberg Press, 2014) and The Company She Keeps. Céline Condorelli (Book Works, 2014). His articles and reviews have been published by Afterall, Frieze and Flash Art. He is part of the editorial board of L'internationale Online and has been a faculty member at the Dutch Art Institute since 2012.

**David Crowley**

Based at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, David Crowley is a historian with an interest in Eastern Europe under communist rule. He has curated various exhibitions including *Cold War Modern* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2008–9 (co-curated with Jane Pavitt); *Sounding the Body Electric. Experimental Art and Music in Eastern Europe* at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2012 and Calvert 22, London, 2013 and *Notes from the Underground. Music and Alternative Art in Eastern Europe, 1968–1994* at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, 2017 and Akademie Der Künste in Berlin in 2018 (both co-curated with Daniel Muzyczuk). His exhibition *Henryk Stażewski: Late Style* will be presented by the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, in 2023.

**Farah Aksoy**

Farah Aksoy is a curator based in Istanbul, Turkey. Since 2017, she has been working as a Programmer at SALT, a non-profit institution producing research-based exhibitions, publications, web and digitization projects. Her research and writing interests include modernism and comparative avant-gardes, postcolonial and globalization studies, and cultural politics within WANA. She completed her master's degree at the Art History, Theory and Criticism program of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (2016).

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