The rich body of work of the Algerian artist Rachid Koraïchi speaks eloquently of the multiplicity of textured experiences that undergird his intellectual roots as a conceptualist apart. The wide range of his production provides a powerful testimony to an encounter that is at once pleasurable and complex. Experiencing the pleasurable in Koraïchi’s work, in all its vibrancy, subtlety, materiality, craftsmanship, and scale of execution, is both aesthetically and visually overwhelming. The work’s complexity derives primarily from its markedly nuanced expression and the multiplicity of references that underlie its conception and execution. Much of the existing literature on Koraïchi tends to underestimate these nuances and complexities, and one result of this has been a reductively oversimplified representation of his production.

Similarly, the more celebratory readings of his work have been largely informed by mainstream Western liberal approaches to contemporary art practices outside the West. The primacy given to the role of Koraïchi’s “Muslim Sufi” upbringing (for which, after 9/11, read “moderate Islam”) in shaping his artistic production risks the reduction of his artistic talents by superimposing narrowly-framed Western notions onto the contemporary art practices of North African and Middle Eastern artists. It is worth repeating here that such readings offer “a kind of prophylaxis to the veil, gender inequality, violence and fundamentalist Islam,” and that the picture that emerges “is selective not only in terms of content, but of genre, media, and the subjectivity of the artists.” Moreover, the emphasis on Koraïchi’s depth of knowledge of traditional crafts and on his collaboration with master craftsmen in the execution of his work has been de-coupled from the essence of his work, in which such energies are redirected within a cutting-edge artistic practice.

In resisting such readings one must emphasise that Koraïchi’s attention to aesthetics, his evocation of calligraphic formations and signs, and his use of classical and traditional crafts illuminate a conceptualist tendency informed by the latest discourses of postmodernist practices in art and by a serious engagement with progressive politics and larger humanist concerns. It is precisely that engagement which has been the driving force behind his production, a production that he continues to pursue with a brilliant sensitivity and subtlety that set him apart from his peers in the contemporary art arena.

Appreciating the extraordinary in Koraïchi’s work is compounded by the circumstances of the aftermath of 9/11, an event that has been a defining factor in re-awakening dormant Western anxieties about the Islamic world. Resistance and apprehension in emotionally saturated atmospheres about things “Islamic” preclude serious engagement with the work of artists like Koraïchi. Elsewhere I have noted that the picture that has emerged post-9/11 speaks mostly about Western anxieties concerning the region and Islam, rather than evincing any genuine desire to understand the region’s complex history, inter-
nal dynamics, and artistic development from socio-cultural and aesthetic perspectives. In this context, it is important to argue for a new reading of Koraïchi’s work outside of the limited realm of mainstream art criticism. Unraveling the judgmentally preconceived notions with which Koraïchi’s work has been approached is a necessary first step to deconstructing the representations and critiques of an extraordinary conceptualist and avant-garde artist whose work’s significance lies in its positioning within transnational contemporary art discourses.

Understanding Koraïchi’s creativity requires attention to details as well as to the perspectives that foreground his work. His commitment to his opulent artistic heritage as an Algerian has fostered his appreciation for the craftsmanship and rigor of the classical traditions. The fusion with these traditions in the conception and production of his work leaves no straightforward way of disentangling the interwoven strands of the personal narrative that is reflected in artistic tapestries that are both aesthetically and politically inseparable. A proper framing of Koraïchi’s work, therefore, would benefit greatly from being positioned within a broader understanding of postmodernist discourses in contemporary art practices. Although Koraïchi’s masterpiece *The Path of Roses (Tariq al-Ward)* is the focus of this essay, it is important to address this work in the larger context of his production as a whole.

To accomplish such a task, certain aspects of Koraïchi’s life and accomplishments will have to be brought to the fore. First of all, the fact that he is a cosmopolitan artist who speaks to a universal audience. His aesthetic is deeply rooted in rigorous artistic training and in his own multi-faceted life experiences, alongside keen awareness of the most recent currents in the global contemporary art scene. Like many Algerian compatriot artists and intellectuals of his generation, Koraïchi continues to endure the exertions of nomadic life, moving between Paris and Algiers in addition to dealing with the intricacies of living in Tunis and other parts of the world.

Koraïchi’s work continues to be analyzed within a narrow calligraphic/religious mode in which primacy has been given to the written word within Islam’s aesthetic tradition and its presumed aniconistic stand as a major influence on his artistic production. This mode of analysis must be taken into consideration but it should not be accepted at face value. As his family name Koraïchi (Quraishi) indicates, he was born into an enlightened religious Sufi family that traces its long genealogical line of descent to the Quraish, the Meccan based “tribe” to which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself belonged. Hence, it is argued, his fascination with Arabic calligraphic signs and symbols came naturally, as if it “ran in the family.” Certainly, Koraïchi’s early childhood experience, immersed in writing, talismans, illuminated pages, calligraphy reeds, traditional ink, parchment paper, clay, and wooden boards has influenced his artistic endeavor. The tradition of the Sufi sect to which his family belongs, their rituals and elaborate performances of prayers known as *zikr* (remembrance) accompanied by dance and fragrant incense, must have left indelible marks on his sensibilities and perverted his aesthetic taste.

In the large scheme of commentaries on Koraïchi’s work, his broader repertoire of signs and symbols has received repeated mention, but not sufficiently so as to account for its originality and creativity. This repertoire, which includes signs and symbols whose genesis goes back long before the rise of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, encompasses traditions that were largely extraneous to the Islamic world. Indeed, in the words of Rose Issa, Koraïchi’s works “evocate a scenography saturated by signs and writings.” The signs and symbols range from Arabic to Berber to the Tuareg Tifinagh characters, magic squares, and talismanic numbers. It even encompasses traces of the elegant strokes, scenes, and rhythmic signs of the ancient rock painting of Tassili n’Ajjer in Algeria. Koraïchi’s art should not be reduced to its calligraphic signs or symbols alone. As Okwui Enwezor argues, “His investment in signs and symbols means that he has also worked assiduously to decompose the script, to turn its cursive elegance into personal codes and concrete poetry.” Abstraction, deconstructed, and recreated into a new visual vocabulary, these signs and symbols have been referred to by Koraïchi himself as an “alphabet of memory” that transcends the boundaries of space and time, an alphabet in which the sacred and the profane converge so that “secular objects become liturgical instruments at one and the same time.”
What, then, is at stake when the particularity of the calligraphic mode is not accorded the depth of understanding it deserves? Calligraphism or the use of calligraphic abstractions must be understood within the larger modernist quest for a new visual language that emerged in the context of decolonisation in the Arab and Middle Eastern worlds. In this context, calligraphic compositions must be understood within the quest for a formalist language of abstraction that is rooted in Islamic discursive traditions. As Ifthikhar Dadi convincingly argues,

Earlier attitudes to classical Arabic calligraphy were not only decisively modified, but modern Western genres such as academic realism in portraiture, landscape, and still-life (which were still in vogue in the 1950s) were also reshaped by a renewed concern with the abstract and expressive possibilities of the Arabic script. The Arabic script was not simply utilised in a classical manner to beautifully render a religious verse or endow it with ornamental form; rather, the script was often imbued with figuration and abstraction to a degree that mitigated (sic) against a straightforward literal or narrative meaning.

The intersection of such calligraphic modes with the Western abstraction to which such artists were exposed through their academic training has resulted in a broader, more complex movement in the Arab World and the Middle East, a movement known in some circles as Al hurufiya or the Letterist movement. Artists within this broad movement have shared in an active quest to rework calligraphic motifs and signs into an innovative new language with universal appeal.

In a similar vein, Koraïchi’s individual experimentation with a broad range of calligraphic signs and talismanic symbols has been groundbreaking in its critical engagement with Western modernist abstraction. Confident of his strong lines and strokes, Koraïchi employs calligraphy in an abstract symbolic manner, turning such visual alphabets, simultaneously, into aesthetic and ideological acts. He accomplishes these pursuits using a bewildering variety of media and techniques, including paper, silk, glass, ceramic, bronze engravings, steel, tapestry and scroll-like silk banners, thus moving far beyond the boundaries of the painted canvas alone. In this regard, his work is dominated by dramatic contrasts of black and white or blue and gold and monochromic engraved black steel. Beneath such dazzling strokes and complex abstractions, we find contemporary political writings and poetry superimposed and surrounded by talismanic and cabalistic designs, circles, and crosses. Koraïchi’s works range from elegant statements of beauty to humanistic references that combine to enable a universal visual language, which, as he once proclaimed, is a “comprehensive one, readable by an Inuit, a Mesopotamian or an African.”

In appreciating the multiplicity of references in Koraïchi’s work, one has to emphasise his identification with a generation of Arab modernist artists who are destined to break with the past, and who are determined to create a new discourse and rearrange the way that, from their earliest years, artistic production has been organised. His is a generation that aspires to work within a cosmopolitan context and has been open to all impulses within contemporary global art practices.

What sets Koraïchi apart from his compatriots is his deference towards traditional craftsmen and the collective memory that is embedded in their skills, whether they are blacksmiths, embroiderers, weavers, or potters. He takes pride in collaborating with them, as he has done in several series of large hanging silkscreens as well as in large-scale dyed and embroidered banners. In most cases, Koraïchi personally prepared the precise graphics with golden acrylic painting to rigidify the space for the patterns before leaving them for the skilled specialist to embroider. In other cases, he observed and fully participated in the dyeing processes from preparation to execution. The final products of such participatory processes become for him a re-routing of classical techniques and traditional skills within modernist and postmodernist contexts. Examples of this creative re-channelling of such energy are the hanging banners in The Path of Roses, in which Koraïchi collaborated with the Moroccan artist and fashion designer Padila Berrada. Of great consequence is the participatory process of the dyeing, which, likenwise reflect his appreciation of craftsmanship in the related arena of performance, including music, dance, and costume. His landmark work, Nights of Incense, which he executed in the old amphitheatre of Carthage in Tunis in 1993, included Tuareg singers and dancers together with Spanish and Corsican dancers, who performed against a backdrop of texts by Algerian writers, Inca rain sticks, silk tapestries, and obelisks of his own conception. The result was the creation of a carnivalesque atmosphere of contrasting colors, movements, and sounds.
In reading Koraïchi’s work, a systematic effort should be made not to downplay its political intent in favour of its visual and aesthetic appeal. For him, politics and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive, as they resist separability and compartmentalisation. This position stems from his commitment to progressive politics and humanistic concerns as well as from his active involvement in the struggle for justice, democracy, and human dignity in Algeria and elsewhere. He is part of a generation of Algerian intellectuals whose life and early youth were forever impacted by the Algerian revolution and by the tremendous energy it generated in Pan-African and Pan-Arab circles, as well as by the larger quest for decolonisation. Koraïchi’s artistic collaborations with a diverse group of progressive Arab and Western intellectuals have included work with such luminaries as Mohammed Dib, Soheib Bencheikh, René Char, and Michel Butor. Important books and artworks developed out of these collaborative projects as their most obvious products. Such encounters are indicative of the larger-than-life world of Koraïchi, where his passion for and immersion within the “written word” goes far beyond a supposed obsession with Sufi mysticism and the formalist concerns of the Letterists and other calligraphic modernists. In other words, for Koraïchi, the political context always translates into an aesthetic one inseparable from its formalist rendering or materiality.
To understand further this intersection of politics, aesthetics, and craftsmanship in Koraïchi’s work, a word on his collaboration with the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish is in order. This collaboration resulted in two series of works and a companion publication entitled A Nation in Exile. The first series features forty-two prints (of which twenty-one were etchings by Koraïchi) based on Darwish’s famous epic, Beirut’s Poem, which had been written during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut in 1982. The second is composed of an earlier series of forty-two prints (again, twenty-one by Koraïchi) based on selected poems by Darwish entitled A Nation in Exile. The partnership between the two Arab icons, Koraïchi and Darwish, continues to be of contemporary relevance today.

Koraïchi’s visually and textually rich series of works based on Darwish’s poems pay homage to the Lebanese and Palestinian peoples’ resistance and their fight for independence and nationhood. Artistically speaking, this collaboration brought in a classical dimension of Arabic calligraphy, exemplified in the work of the late Egyptian master calligrapher Kamel Ibrahim. The hand of this former director of the Alexandria School of Calligraphy rendered Beirut’s Poem in traditional Arabic Kufic style, forming an integral part of Koraïchi’s masterpiece. The process embedded in the final installation is what Abdelkebir Khatibi has referred to as possessing a lens capable of deciphering the visible according to “three registers.” Here, Khatibi argues, we find a poem “suspended in the act of calligraphy,” a calligraphy reflected by the painter, who is in turn portraying Darwish’s poems according to the art of engraving. An inter-poetic register circles between the poems, the calligraphy, and the prints, forming the essential trope of this visually vibrant, richly textured, and multi-layered ensemble.

At the level of large-scale installations, it is The Path of Roses which has brilliantly brought together all the complex registers in Koraïchi’s diverse body of work. The Path of Roses iconises the journey of the 13th-century philosopher and Sufi poet Jalal al-Din al-Rûmî from his homeland in today’s Tajikistan to Konya, Turkey, through exquisite ceramic ablution basins, brilliantly designed gold embroidered linens, and large metal sculptures. The three elements of the installation are laid out with geometric and mathematical precision, echoing Sufi mystical numerological systems (‘ilm Al-huruf), in which certain letters and numbers are associated with the divine. The silk embroidered banners hang along two of the installation walls, while the third wall is dedicated to one hundred and ninety-six metal sculptures arranged and lit in a specific manner in order to create shadows that echo their designs in a highly dramatic fashion. On a raised platform or dais, the ablution basins, filled with perfumed water and red rose petals, are laid out in corresponding geometric fashion, intersecting with a set of larger metal sculptures, similar in their rendering to the miniature versions on the wall. The result of such an arrangement is a breathtaking and magnificent environment in which invocations of the mystical and the divine combine to generate a dazzling multi-sensory effect.

The Path of Roses was conceived as part of a trilogy, as the sequel to Koraïchi’s earlier homage to the Andalusian Sufi philosopher Muhyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi and the great Persian poet Farid al-Din al-‘Attar, who had considerable influence on al-Rûmî. It was originally seen as the culmination of an imagined encounter between two Sufi masters — al-Rûmî and Ibn ‘Arabi — and of their journeys across several continents. (Though impossible to verify, legend has it that al-Rûmî met Ibn ‘Arabi in Konya.) The Path of Roses was also intended as an homage to and an embodiment of al-Rûmî’s idea of the inseparability of aesthetics and metaphysics, where art unites with the divine. In this context, Koraïchi’s evocation of the idea of safar (travel and transcendence) in Islamic Sufi thought is invoked by recalling these encounters, as well as the artist’s personal journey in pursuit of the ideas of these mystics and philosophers.

As Maryline Lostia has suggested, the encounter of a contemporary artist such as Koraïchi with the world of al-Rûmî is one of a culmination of many long journeys, rich in deviations and travel companions. One might say that Koraïchi is a good artist to go ‘on the road’ with, a companion who makes the way more beautiful, narrowing it through a game of mirrors until one place indicates another point of departure, which is in turn enriched by a new encounter: On his way to Rumi [al-Rûmî], Koraïchi is accompanied by two other Sufi thinkers: Ibn ‘Arabi and al-‘Attar.”

**Letters of Clay**


Letters of Clay Homage to Ibn ‘Arabi, Detail Olive Jar, 1995
The political message uniting the three installations should be further emphasised. The symbolic journey of the artist with the three travelling Sufi poets echoes their own journeys across centuries and the regions of Europe, Asia, and Northern Africa. For instance, Ibn ‘Arabi lived in Andalusia, in today’s Spain, where Islam and Muslims were part of Europe for more than eight centuries, and where a model of mutual enrichment and co-existence of Jews, Muslims, and Christians prevailed in a manner that is certainly lost in today’s xenophobic and Islamophobic Europe. The Path of Roses offers a subtle critique of contemporary European realities and the narrative of a pure Europe and solitary western civilisation invoked by the far right, neo-conservative politicians, and neo-Nazi groups.

The complex manner in which Koraichi’s aesthetic and artistic impulses operate in the public and political sphere is also brought to bear in his permanent public installation Garden of the Orient. This work was conceived as a commemorative garden and mausoleum on the grounds of the royal castle of Amboise, one of the jewels of the Loire Valley, in order to honor the legacy of Emir Abd-el-Kader, the heroic nationalist leader of the mid-19th century anti-colonial struggle against French occupation. Abd-el-Kader (‘Abd al-Qadir Ibn Muhayyidin al-Jaza’iri) was born in 1808 in Mascara, Algeria and died in 1883 in Damascus in what is today Syria. There he spent the last years of his life as a prolific scholar, following a period of exile and incarceration in France between 1848-1852, during which he lived at the Château d’Amboise. During that forced residence, more than twenty members of his family and retinue perished, the majority due to a short-lived epidemic, and were buried in an unmarked collective grave in the castle courtyard.

Born into a learned Sufi family to a scholar father who became an inducted sheikh in the Qadiri sect of Sufi Islam, Emir Abd-el-Kader was himself a learned man who travelled widely to the great centers of Islamic scholarship in Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus before returning to lead the resistance against French occupation. These places left an indelible impression on his intellectual development, both as a nationalist and as a thinker who was impacted by the reforms and renaissance he had witnessed in 19th-century Egypt.

Such details would prove to be important elements in the conception of Garden of the Orient and in the process leading up to the making and installation of the work. They are also indicative of the conceptualist framework of Koraichi’s artistic practice. This process is certainly reflective not only of Koraichi’s personal affinity with Emir Abd-el-Kader as a learned Sufi, but also of the seriousness and rigor with which he approaches his work from conception to execution. The unfolding process is itself performative in its re-enactment of Emir Abd-el-Kader’s life and in mirroring his journeys across three continents in a voluntary search for knowledge despite the exigencies of forced exile.
of seven cedar trees surround the tombstones on three sides, the total echoing the number of tombstones, and create a frame for the garden conceived in an Islamic style. The interior of the garden itself is crossed by a row of carefully selected small shrubs which cuts across the area of the tombstones. Both trees and shrubs were deliberately chosen from species that are particular to Islamic gardens and representative of the conception of Paradise in the Muslim cosmology. The final result is an exquisite and multi-layered landscape in which natural elements blend with manufactured ones to create perspectives of breathtaking scenery in a visually stunning environment. The sculptural elements become even more dynamic with seasonal changes. As the sunlight moves across the garden throughout the day, it casts ornamental shadows on the landscape, creating another superimposed layer of design. These complex elements are not accidental, but emphasise premeditated effects that add to the visual impact of the work as a whole.

Not to be underestimated is the symbolic dimension of this work and the renewed energy it has brought to the Château d’Amboise. Koraïchi’s intervention transformed this site into a meeting point between a 21st-century Algerian artist and his heroic 19th-century antecedent, set in the gardens of a Renaissance castle in the heart of Europe where another legendary master, Leonardo da Vinci, is also buried. The ironies are not lost here, but more important still were the meetings between artisans and craftsmen from Algeria, Amboise, and Damascus (where Emir Abd-el-Kader was originally interred before his remains were returned for reburial in postcolonial Algeria). The long process of making this work mimics Emir Abd-el-Kader’s life journey. Damascus, where he lived the last years of his life, is where the marbled tombstones were cut and chiseled by local stone carvers who mastered the centuries-old tradition in creative collaboration with the artist. The garden and its other sculptural features bear witness to the combined labor of the artisans brought together through Koraïchi’s installation.

In Garden of the Orient, Koraïchi has created a place of reconciliation where France can come to terms with the violence of its colonial past. It is a place for Algerians to mourn, to remember, and to find closure to a tragic and sad chapter in their history. It is also a place for Koraïchi, Algeria’s faithful son, to pay homage to ancestors who perished anonymously in an alien environment, an environment to which he has given renewed energy through this respectfully conceived and considerately inclusive multi-layered work of art.

Conceived as a site-specific installation in the famous gardens of the Renaissance castle of Château Royale d’Amboise in 2005, Garden of the Orient was a public commission initiated with the active support of the Amboise City Council. The twenty-one carved marble stones serving as tombstones are engraved with four verses from the Qur’an (Surat al-Fajr: Chapter 89: 27-30) that are popularly known for eulogising the soul of the departed believer. Each of the twenty-one tombs is topped with a shining sand-cast bronze finial bearing the name of one of the women and men from the family of Emir Abd- el-Kader who were buried, prematurely and in great haste, between 1848 and 1852. The twenty-one marble stones are geometrically aligned in three rows of seven, each facing east, that is, symbolically aligned towards Mecca, which serves to orient the direction of Muslim prayers around the world. Three rows
devotion, beauty, and intellect. Koraïchi’s compositions on silk banners, metal sculptures, or stone engravings are rooted in the calligraphic significations witnessed in earlier works, and their ordering by numbers and consistent symbolism suggest a transcendent link between human beings and the divine order.

To summarise, the creative process in Koraïchi’s work, beginning with its conception, whether as drawings or sketches, and leading to the final product as multi-media installation, reflects the intersection of intellect, aesthetics, and politics from which his artistic explorations derive. Envisaged within an exceptional and unique conceptual mode, the works discussed above highlight the cutting-edge side of Koraïchi’s practice and speak directly of issues of memory, diaspora, and exile as well as other facets of his own existential experience. Bringing The Path of Roses together with the works that preceded it, and to which it serves as a sequel, is a testimony to the versatility, tremendous energy, and dynamism of Rachid Koraïchi.

3 Ibid.
4 His artistic training includes diplomas from the Higher Institute of Fine Art in Algeria, the Superior National School of Arts, the National School of Decorative Arts, and the School of Urban Studies in Paris.
7 Issa, Signs, Traces and Calligraphy.
10 The term “carnivalesque” is used here in the Bakhtinian meaning of the word.
11 In assessing Arabist poetry of the second half of the 20th century, there is no doubt that the late Mahmoud Darwish stood as one of the most influential voices in shaping its development. Throughout his remarkable career as a political activist and literary figure, Darwish’s poetry continued to grow richer in metaphor, language, style, and complexity.
12 See Abdelkébir Khalîbi’s essay in A Nation in Exile, Darat al-Funun, Amman, 1997, p.3 (English text).
13 Ibid.
14 Conceived as a trilogy, this work was featured in the 49th Venice Biennale as part of the exhibition Authentic/Ex-Centric, organised by the Forum for African Arts. For more comprehensive analysis of this work see: Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe (eds.), Authentic Ex-Centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art, Prince Claus Fund Library, New York, 2001.
16 Ibid.
17 The four Qur’anic verses read as follows: Ya ayatuhu al nafr al mutma’inna; Arja’i ila rabiki radhayatun mardhia; fa adkhuli fi ‘ibadi; wa adkhuli janati (Oh reassured soul; Return to your Lord, well pleased [content and contented] and pleasing [to Him]; And enter among My righteous servants; And enter My Paradise).
19 See Abdelkébir Khalîbi’s essay in A Nation in Exile, Darat al-Funun, Amman, 1997, p.3 (English text).
There are many myths about the Angolan Civil War. Fought between 1975 and 2002, it engaged a series of conflicts that merged into what became one of the most complex and protracted wars ever fought in Africa. Alongside its local **raisons d’être**, the war also unfolded as a proxy Cold War fuelled by external interference, secret partnerships, and undisclosed political and economic agendas, primarily on the part of the US and South Africa, which then led to the involvement of Cuba and (somewhat reluctantly) the Soviet Union. All of this was made manifest in various deceptions, from the violation of international agreements to illegal operations, covert funding, and the provision of arms. It was a war of subterfuge, a fiction woven of half-truths and cover-ups. Even now, many of its stories remain untold.

I first read about Angola in *Another Day of Life*, Ryszard Kapuściński’s book about the events leading to the country’s independence and subsequent civil war. This was ten years after the book was written, at a time when South Africa was experiencing increasing mobilisation against the forces of the apartheid government, which was waging its own war in Angola against the Namibian liberation movement SWAPO. Until then, in my imagination Angola had been an abstract place. In the 1970s and early ‘80s it was simply “the border,” a secret location where brothers and boyfriends were sent as part of their military service. And although tales about Russians and Cubans and the Cold War began to emerge — tales that conjured up a distinctly different image from the one conveyed by the South African state — it remained for me a place of myth.

In 2007 I went to Luanda and began taking the photographs that would become the series *Terreno Ocupado*. It had been five years since the war had ended and the city was wild with postwar energy and enterprise, as millions of people displaced by the war sought a new future. During my time there, a second project began to suggest itself, one that would shift my attention away from the urban manifestations of the aftermath to the space of war itself. And so, in 2009, I embarked on a two-year journey through what Portuguese colonials referred to as *as terras do fim do mundo* — the lands of the end of the world. I travelled with ex-soldiers — South African and Angolan — who were returning to the places where they had fought for the first time since the end of the war.

These works explore how past trauma manifests itself, both forensically and symbolically, in the landscape of the present. We live in a present space, but one that — as Jill Bennett notes in *A Concept of Prepossession* — “bears the marks (indelible and ephemeral, visible and invisible) of its history. And as much as we occupy places, they have the capacity to pre-occupy us.”
Roadside stall on the way to Viana

The beach at Ilha
On the road to Cuito Cuanavale IV

Unmarked mass grave on the outskirts of Cuito Cuanavale
On the road to Cuito Cuanavale III
Unidentified memorial in the desert, south of Namibe I

SAM missile bunker, Cuban base, Namibe
It’s impossible not to be compelled by Doris Sommer’s entrenched and almost seditionist humanist optimism. Her faith in art in particular and in the aesthetic experience in general — in its intrinsic capacity for continuous renewal, for opening possibilities in the world — feels like a call-to-arms from the historical avant-garde.

As it happens, optimism might very well be the scarcest of goods across humanities departments in the United States these days. Pick up any book of cultural criticism or critical history, regardless of the field — literary, visual, musical — and you’ll find a sustained tone of pessimism: recipes for what not to do or what not to engage in, but hardly ever a proposal to do something, however small. Bogged down by the imperative of coming up with radical structural solutions to fix the world’s problems — problems that require involving disciplines (in particular, economics and realpolitik) that lie outside the traditional range of the humanities — and having being trained to be suspicious of any sort of social order and to avoid proposing new models or novel solutions, humanistic discourse these days feels not only stuffy and vain (the usual charge), but also grandiloquently empty.

Whether this negative outlook permeating the multidisciplinary landscape is the cause or the consequence of the unprecedented crisis into which the humanities have slipped over the last decade is a matter of debate. What’s clear, nevertheless, is that within academia the humanities have hit rock bottom. Indeed, not only are we seeing historic lows in our fields in terms of enrollment and applications to doctoral programs, even more crucially the humanities must struggle against a perception of obtrusiveness and gratuitous obscurity. All of these factors, in turn, have created a state of irrelevance that is now threatening to erase the humanities from higher education altogether. The downsizing of universities in the US has taken place almost invariably at the expense of humanities programs, which are perceived as irrelevant or of little importance to students. In the science-based education of the future, it seems that there is no longer much use for humanistic interpretation. But be advised: if the humanities go under, the arts will too. Insofar that it is humanistic interpretation which provides the ultimate validation of artistic practice (beyond its basic expressive qualities), there is no other field that would be able to establish the merits or demerits of particular works and their place in history. Those who propose the market, box-office popularity, bestseller lists, or number of downloads as validators are missing a point that was already recognized by Kant when he founded modern aesthetics with his 1791 Critique of the Power of Judgment: that art matters not only because it expresses that which is not defined, but also because it makes us interpret, and thus leads us to attempt to communicate with one another. Without the tools for fine-tuning that are the métier of the humanities, this whole process will be crippled, if not critically disrupted.
It is precisely the contested legacy of Kant that lies at the foundation of Doris Sommer’s latest book, *The Work of Art in the World* (Duke University Press 2014), a slender but powerful volume that amounts to a manifesto for reengineering the disciplines and mission of the humanities by taking the lessons of art seriously, by embracing art’s inherent risk, its trial-and-error methodology, its capacity not only to advance our world by proposing new concepts but also to refresh it continuously every time we feel its impact on our senses.

If it is Kant who has furnished the groundwork for Sommer’s analysis, it is the figure of Friedrich Schiller who is at its heart. Schiller’s insight that we can only mediate between our reasons and our passions by means of our faculty for play — our “play drive” (Spieltrieb) — is central to Sommer’s argument about the importance of artistic practice to our everyday lives. Insofar as an aesthetic education is what allows us to exercise our faculty for play, art is invaluable if we want to avoid being a victim of our passions or our reason alone. Indeed, Sommer’s book — as well as her intellectual project in general — makes it clear that letting our lives be dictated by reason alone is perhaps as dangerous as leaving it adrift on the ocean of our passions. For Sommer, there’s no other way to avoid the mistakes of a past in which we thought that reason was enough to lead us to a better society than by restoring art and aesthetic appreciation to the center of our educational models.

On a cold, rainy day this past December, we sat with Sommer in her home in Boston, where she teaches literature at Harvard University, to talk about her book and about the need for a deep restructuring of the whole field of the humanities in order to realign it, once again, with the inexhaustible capacity of artworks to spur multiple and continuous re-interpretations.

José Falconi (JF): Tell me a little bit about your book. What were you aiming to accomplish in *The Work of Art in the World*?

Doris Sommer (DS): In my work I try to do two basic things. One is to reconnect the humanities today with a long tradition of civic engagement, a tradition that we humanists have lost touch with in the last few generations. Since at least as far back as Cicero, that engagement — with how to live better in society, how to use our interpretive faculties to engage better with each other — has been one of the motors of the humanities. The second thing, very much related when thinking about these classical roots, is for the humanities to take lessons, to use art not only as an object of investigation, but also as a source of inspiration. That is, to understand art as a series of models for speculation, for risk-taking, for making connections that weren’t obvious before the initial speculation.

JF: But haven’t the humanities always interpreted the arts in this way? From musicology to the history of architecture, from English literature to film theory, many disciplines within the humanities are actually based on interpreting the arts. So what exactly has changed?

DS: My experience has been that university teachers are highly risk-averse. If, for example, they don’t know another language or cultural tradition, they don’t invite someone to talk about it, they just avoid it. They won’t risk making connections between a piece of literature and a political movement. This general atmosphere of risk aversion permeates the humanities. This having to be right in the classroom, this having to know the answer before even formulating questions, I find stifling. It leads nowhere.

JF: What would you say to people who argue that the humanities are accomplishing something, that we aren’t measured in immediacies and don’t need to show immediate results? For example, our work on *Don Quixote* or on Matisse will only yield results in the very long term, so why the hurry?

DS: Because very few people have the faith or the patience to study the humanities today. Sure, the humanities can have a kind of subterranean effect on people’s consciousness; however, the fact that very few young people are taking courses and fewer still are concentrating in the humanities makes me feel an urgency about the need to refresh our access points, to multiply them, to make them relevant and timely.

JF: But that would be a methodological problem, not one of principles.

DS: I think it’s a principle when we decide to link the humanities with civic engagement, because these links become responsibilities to address issues. In these cases, we can’t just wait for the after-effects of an interpretation.

JF: You talked about Cicero earlier. Who else belongs to this genealogy of engaged humanists?

DS: Well, the models all link back to Friedrich Schiller, and from Schiller they lead to Humboldt, to Dewey, to Rancière. These models help us understand aesthetics — aesthetics rather than merely art — as a framework to refresh our experience of the world and to recombine the elements of the world. If it were only to refresh our experience, if it were only about the realm of the spectator, as Rancière developed it in *The Emancipated Spectator*, or as Kant first focused on in his *Critique of Judgment*, we would still be in the realm of art appreciation, possibly interpretation. But with Schiller, we add art-making to appreciation and interpretation.
JF: What is the critical difference between making and interpreting?

DS: The critical difference lies in the risks, in the consequences of trying to make art, trying to put the world together in new ways and not just interpret what already exists. For that reason, several chapters of the book are about makers who are also interpreters. Antanas Mockus, for example, began as a philosopher, but beyond his work on epistemology he also started reorganizing the elements of his city, having performance artists such as mimes take the place of actual police officers. That defamiliarization is more than just a new way of perceiving the world, it’s also an aesthetic intervention. It’s about making a difference that others will perceive first as strange or unusual, and then as worthy of their attention, interpretation, and participation.

JF: Schiller seems to be central here. It’s curious that someone who has relegated to the margins of philosophy for so long has now begun to take center stage in aesthetic theory. What else can you tell us about Schiller?

DS: He wasn’t considered an important philosopher for a long time, but until recently he was considered central to aesthetic education. I remember in my first years of graduate school, people read Schiller. If you talk to other people of my generation, he was certainly standard reading in art history and comparative literature. For that reason, it surprised me when I started working on this book that his work was out of print. Now he’s available online, but a dozen years ago, when I started to work on cultural agents, he wasn’t in the bookstores.

I think that he went out of style because we, as humanists, went into a period of self-important pessimism, into the sort of security that Adorno’s pessimism gave to intellectuals. Thanks to Adorno there was a pall over activism, over changing the world, over finding fissures in which we humanists could insert ourselves in useful ways.

JF: In his view no poetry or art was possible after Auschwitz.

DS: That’s right. And, if we follow that logic, all the poetry written before Auschwitz also loses its significance following the Holocaust. Auschwitz wins and we’re paralyzed because there’s nothing else to do. Adorno’s approach to aesthetic value, and the standard non-gramscian Marxist approach to aesthetic value in general, have been all-or-nothing. Adorno and the “high modernist” tradition placed humanists in a lose-lose situation: it’s been either you buy into the system by engaging it in some way or you opt out completely through revolution — a revolution that, by the way, has yet to arrive. So humanists used the exit strategy because otherwise their voices would only grease the system that they were opposing. There was no other way out. Under that sort of purism, humanists haven’t engaged in the kind of Schillerian give-and-take, trial-and-error, and over the last fifty or sixty years we’ve lost the connection with daily life. To me, that’s the most pernicious legacy for the humanities of Adornian aesthetics and politics. A possible response to this pessimism can be found within the ranks of the very Frankfurt School that Adorno helped to create: Jürgen Habermas’s reading of Schiller. I credit Habermas for reviving Schiller in a very significant way that shouldn’t go unattended. In fact, if you read the short excursus on Schiller, on his famed lectures on modernity, it will tell you outright that without Schiller there’s no communicative action, as there’s no ability to come into a meeting of people with different value systems, different expectations, different desires, and come to some basic universal understanding, a very precarious one but one that can address the particular issue that’s being discussed. Without Schiller’s input this idea would have been unthinkable.

JF: In many of his texts, Habermas goes on at length to show how his theory of communicative action doesn’t fall into the same pitfalls that Hegel detected in Kant’s ethical system. He shows how Kant failed to acknowledge that we aren’t just reasoning agents, that we’re also ruled by passions and desires from which we cannot detach ourselves. Do you think that it’s Schiller’s contribution that makes the difference?

DS: Most likely. I haven’t traced Hegel’s reading, but I can’t imagine that Hegel didn’t know Schiller, and that it isn’t Schiller who was behind his examination of passions and untamed desires. And of course later we have to credit Freud with providing us with a picture of human beings as dominated by their subconscious desires.

JF: Schiller considered himself and his project as continuing Kant’s enterprise. To what extent do you think that his revival is another way in which Kantian aesthetics is making a comeback? A comeback that is, obviously, making the Left very suspicious and anxious, because it’s been linked to Neoliberal politics.

DS: I would say, with Habermas, that modernity hasn’t failed, it just hasn’t realised itself yet. And that, again, the risk aversion of our disciplines is cured by Schiller.

JF: Your reading of Schiller reinserts dialectics into aesthetic interpretation.

DS: Certainly. Right now, we make a mistake and we think that that’s the end of the road. Schiller continues to be Kantian, but he adds a twist, and Kantians shouldn’t disown him for it: he adds the twist of trial-and-error, which is what liberates us from the burden of error. Error becomes a moment and not an end.
Critics assume that Habermas thinks that you can talk your way out of a problem, and for that reason they dismiss wholesale communicative action as absurd. They don’t take seriously the importance of working through problems. What Habermas can be taken to task for is for not addressing feelings, a topic which is now hot even in political science. One has to address human feelings. Hegel talked about this, and certainly Schiller did. We’re animals of passion as well as reason, and feelings matter. If we had paid attention to them we wouldn’t have thought that any experience of radical change would be permanent — think of the Cuban or the Soviet revolutions. Instead we would have continued to “fine-tune” such sets of changes, working through continuous trial-and-error and continuing to experiment, never thinking that we had reached a permanent solution.

JF: You’re reminding me of the old, venerable discussion in philosophy of science among Kuhn, Lakatos, and Popper. In contrast to Kuhn’s notion of “paradigm shift,” Popper always insisted that the real structure of scientific revolutions wasn’t a fixed radical change in which paradigms shift completely but that it was, precisely, based on trial-and-error; it was a continuous permanent mini-revolution. Which is paradoxical, because Popper, the great liberal decried by Leftists, sounds Trotskyite when it comes to scientific development.

DS: Interesting. If we trade off the dialectical impulse for an all-or-nothing solution we risk paralysis. Let’s take for example the pressing issue of climate change and warming temperatures. We know that it’s an impending disaster that the world faces in the near future; it doesn’t matter what political side you’re on. And it’s clear that the big oil industry is a guilty party here. We have the option of trying to stage a revolution to go beyond fossil energy, but there are other people who are trying to broker quiet discussions with the very leaders of the fossil-fuel industry to see how to get beyond fossil fuels. It’s better to keep trying as many options as we can think of and imagining new solutions.

JF: Naysayers will respond that you aren’t attacking structural problems, that you’re just applying a patch and not really addressing the real causes of the problem. There are plenty of reasons to suspect that capitalism as a system is at the root of some of our more entrenched ailments; why not go against it?

DS: This is why I think that Gramsci is an interesting wedge between small thinking and large thinking. He mapped a way to reach large-scale change step-by-step, and the steps are cultural steps, they have to be changes in ideology, which today we might call feelings —

JF: Or affections — that’s the trendy term these days.

DS: Or affections, that’s right. So, we’re not being modest in our ambitions. We’re being ambitious. The question is how to get there. And I think that Gramsci laid out an important map for us. Not that he himself was a humanist; but he supported the humanities beyond technocratic education, because he needed “humans” and not robots for his revolution. His organic intellectuals are journalists, teachers, priests, people who change minds. For that reason, I’m skeptical of starting any systemic change from the top. That kind of revolution won’t work today. It won’t work today because it doesn’t have the popular support that it might have had in the 1930s or 1940s. Thus, Gramsci’s road is one that still holds out some promise; let’s continue to explore it.

JF: Central to that road, of course, is the methodology or strategy for “changing the feelings” of people, which I believe — very much in the Schillerian tradition — is an aesthetic education. Could you elaborate on that? What should this education look like?

DS: Any document you may reference today on the fundamental goals of education features “innovation.” This disposition or set of skills is basic to development, and has the support of leaders in education, no matter what their political tendencies. How does one teach children and youth to be innovative? It seems like a mystery to some people, or a phenomenal drain on resources, because some assume that teaching innovation depends on technology, on devices and systems that will favor rich communities and keep poor people outside the gates. But if we frame education for innovation as education in turning one thing into another, making art, and even recycling, the capacity of mind expands along with a set of technical skills that can adapt to new media. Conventional education that assumes that teachers frame questions and that students compete to answer, one answer per question, causes the capacity for innovation to atrophy. But facilitating a “flip classroom” in which students manipulate material, including difficult texts, scientific formulæ, philosophical principles, etc., fosters that innovative capacity, along with curiosity and a love of learning.

JF: I think it’s important to stress that we’re talking about aesthetics and not arts necessarily — art only provides a small parcel of the vast ways in which one can have an aesthetic experience. Nonetheless, a large part of your argument about education resides in moving from art into aesthetics. Could you expand on what is gained by this critical move?

DS: Art is about that which has never existed before. Art is always new. This was first recognised by Kant, even though he wasn’t terribly interested in the arts. Nonetheless, he gave art credit for communicating that which doesn’t yet have a name. This is the root of what Raymond Williams would later call a “structure of feeling” of a particular society; art can make public feelings that
aren't yet articulated. That particular feature of art interested Kant because he could see in it a main component of a healthy social life. If we think about it, artworks make feelings public and communicable, even when they're not completely articulated. Once they're in the public arena, they can either become commonly accepted or a subject for debate. So art is a way of generating new concepts. It's a way of learning about the world, which is another important aspect of art that we haven't acknowledged enough: art is a vehicle for learning, because it generates new concepts. Aesthetics, on the other hand, is a second-order response to art. The first response is one of delight and dismay, of confusion and pleasure, which makes you want to talk to somebody about it. That's why Hannah Arendt was so sure that aesthetics was Kant's way of doing his political philosophy: it's all about creating lateral relationships, necessary relationships, because you're confused; you're so buzzed that you want to talk to somebody.

What's important to note is that this philosophy that stresses the need for lateral rather than vertical relationships is a philosophy that is born at the same time as our modern notions of democracy. And this is central, because what it's telling us is that without aesthetics it's very difficult to think of democracy. The new version of democracy forged at the end of the eighteenth century is about creating lateral relationships among freethinking individuals. And there's no way to think freely, following Kant, except to develop the faculty of judgment. And the only safe way to develop judgment, he says, is through aesthetics. It's precisely the fact that the aesthetic experience isn't important in any economic, moral, or scientific way that makes it so central to the development of the faculty of judgment. That's the indelible link between aesthetics and democracy.

It's important to mention that Kant was very insistent on having an aesthetic experience through nature, through things that we already know but that continue to surprise us: a beautiful sunset, a rose, an incredible range of mountains. You can be transfixed in front of something that you've seen before, and for some reason you see it as if it hadn't existed before, and here I'm quoting one of Kant's many disciples: Viktor Shklovsky. It's an interesting distinction because it comes up in the debates about community-based art. Serious art critics like Clara Bishop will be really skeptical that community-based art is real art. Somebody like curator Nato Thompson from Creative Time will reply, "fine, but it makes real change."

JF: But if it isn't art then why keep insisting on those practices? This kind of debate touches on the problem of the instrumentalisation of art, which to a good Kantian implies the end of art.

DS: Well, it might still provide an aesthetic experience, and sometimes it might be art. I don't think that art ends if you make instrumental demands on it, because art still has the capacity, if it's real art, to delight and confuse you.

And it's only in a secondary or tertiary way that it will have some instrumentality. Schiller was very clear on that when he said that the political artist (i.e. the political leader) has to be very careful with his material. He put emphasis on the topic of his "material" because what the political leader is working with isn't marble, or words either, but human beings. And you can't manipulate them. The point is that anybody who tries to do political art is losing on all fronts: destroying the material, and destroying the aesthetic value, because it becomes burdened, it doesn't become enchanted.

So, the key point here is to be indirect. Any sort of political traction from art needs to come indirectly. The French Revolution devolved into a bloodbath because it was so direct, because it was so impatient with anything that didn't fit the paradigm of reason. The revolutionaries thought they could just eliminate whatever didn't fit. They didn't appreciate the indirectness of putting the world together in new and surprising ways, and as a result terror ensued.

JF: It's interesting because the great theorist about indirection as the way that art operates in the world is Adorno. One learns from him that one can't
find a one-to-one relation between art and its society, because art is always indirectly addressing it.

DS: You're right. Even a pessimist like Adorno will find a way to base himself on Schiller.

JF: Let me then ask you squarely about the conundrum that seems to plague discussions about the efficacy of art and its role in community-building: if together with Kant you state that any good art has a capacity to confuse and to create wonder while putting forth new concepts, why not simply stick with the great masters, why focus on those with a particular social agenda? If all good art does what it should be doing, why isn't that enough? Why keep championing art that engages in politics as a theme?

DS: It may be enough if we all understand ourselves as artists. And that's another of Schiller's main points in contrast with Kant, who equates art-making with the special genius. As is well known, Schiller says that since all human beings are endowed with the “play drive,” we're all creative beings, which we need to be because it's the only way we survive the conflict between passion and reason. We all are creative, and we work through trial-and-error. Certainly, there are some geniuses who don't commit errors, or hardly ever. Like Goethe, who had poems peeling off of him. I remember Derek Walcott once saying that he thought he was done writing poetry but that it just grows off of him like moss; he can't stop. I think of Derek when I think of Schiller writing on Goethe in his essay “On Naive and Sentimental Poetry”; like Derek, Goethe's a genius, a child of nature; everything he does is beautiful, just like nature. But, precisely because of this, how is Goethe free? Where is his freedom? Where is his modernity?

JF: Insofar as they are geniuses they have no autonomy.

DS: Precisely. Goethe has no autonomy because he is an extension of nature. He's like Greek art. It's always beautiful, and it traps you in its own beauty. Nonetheless, it's the ability to commit an error that is the dimension of freedom. I think this insight is so profound because it's liberating. That's why I want to defend, even in the classroom, the ability to make mistakes, the ability to invite students to call attention to the teacher's mistakes. Without mistakes we don't have freedom.

JF: Wouldn't this transform your humanities program into an engineering or art school, insofar it would be based in this trial-and-error methodology?

DS: Yes. If the humanities looked a little more like an engineering school or an art school, it would be a much more exciting field. This doesn't mean we shouldn't be rigorous in our disciplines; we need to learn the tools that allow us to open reality. I don't think we have to sacrifice the specificity of our fields in order to allow ourselves the liberty, the freedom to make mistakes.

JF: Without this re-engineering, do you think the humanities will inevitably perish? Wouldn't that also imply the death of art, as there would no longer be any interpreters or anyone who could assess art's value and the place of particular pieces in history?

DS: I think that the danger isn't only the disappearance of art because we won't have a discourse to reflect on it, it's the disappearance of deep thinking. It's alarming what we might end up losing.

One of my guides here is Paulo Freire. It's straight-up pedagogy. In the introduction to his letters to teachers he says something to the effect that you should “insist that your students read and write a lot, and that they write, because if you read knowing that you have to write, you think about what you're reading, and then you think about what you're writing, and then if you have to read what you've written, you think about that again.” And the only way to spiral into any depth is through this process of reading and writing again. And if we lose that patience with the language around art, we will have lost a depth of interpretation of the world.

I'm not in agreement with intellectuals today like Néstor García Canclini and others who insist that there's no reason to worry that people aren't writing a lot, because everybody is texting and e-mailing. In fact, we're losing depth.

Even when our expressions are short haiku-like texts, if they're not reworked and reworked we're superficial; we're assuming that content is more important than form and reflection. We end up thinking that content is valuable in itself, instead of being the result of a process. We're losing process.

For that reason, in order never to think that we can do without process, we need to appreciate art as a support for the humanities, not just as an object for study. Art provides an emphasis on process, on making — on trying again, failing again, failing better, as Samuel Beckett put it. And if we don't have the patience to fail better, to keep trying to produce what we want to show the world, then we've made ourselves so superficial that we've lost a good part of our humanity.

Boston, December 2014.
RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

Project for Atlántica
ATITHI
A guest is always a stranger, an atithi.
She comes without warning, without appointment, without notice, or prior agreement about date, time, or arrival. She changes the rules the moment she appears, unannounced, un-called for, un-expected.
It follows that every stranger is also always untimely.
Our time for yours,
for now, for later, for the time of our choosing.

Can you hear
the scent of
the factory?
Can you taste
the future?
1948. It’s August.
The People’s Liberation Army has entered Shanghai.
China is about to change. No one knows what is going to happen.
There is a pressure on time.
People have to get into the bank.
The heart is the first clock that counts the body's time, and each heartbeat is a moment given over to knowing what it feels like to be alive. Sometimes when we are taken by surprise on the street, the heart skips a beat.

The heart skips a beat whenever we are transformed. Whenever the heart skips a beat, we are re-arranged inside. In the eloquent silences that syncopate the tumult and drumbeat of our sense of the world, the heart tarries. In that silence, the senses wander, and sentience watches itself. The heart skips a beat, the mind makes a move, the body replies.

The time it takes for a tree to grow, the time of the arrival of an unannounced guest, the time that spans the distance between epochs, the time of an instant, a moment, a wish, the spans of breath, revolution, eclipse, an occasion of crisis or synchrony, a notch on an untimely calendar.

A 24-hour clock measures the day, and the time of the universe.
Haider: So! Make your move.
Luxme: I have decided to stop letting myself be turned into stone.
Haider: That's easier said than done, you know.
Luxme: Some would say that it's easier done than said. And enough's been said already.
Haider: Someone needs to write, 'What is to be Undone'.
Luxme: I am in my time, you are in yours; we have almost a century between us on this table.
Luxme: We have looked too long to find the face of Capital. We thought we could turn a mirror to Medusa's head, but the mirror became our mask and we found Medusa's image infecting our vision. Like birds with mirrors, we have fought with our own reflection. We fought images with images, and we are like exhausted birds who have succumbed to the hardness of the surface that they were railing against.
Haider: So, how do we stop being imprisoned by the mirror? How do we stop analysis turning into fatalism and then fatally wounding us?
Luxme: You can allow yourself to be surprised by what the world might become.
Haider: As a lion tamer at the Berlin zoo, and later when I handled tigers for the 'Indian' films at Woltersdorf, I was surprised how animals translated baits into morsels and morsels into baits, like philosophers, forever interpreting the world.
Luxme: When you think Capital, you isolate one image, and you think you have overcome Capital by turning the image upside down, or inside out, and you think you have gone beyond that image. But what you forget is that Capital is not an object, not an image, not a state form but a social relation, exceeding the power of representation.
Haider: Dice games never end.
Luxme: And revolution never “wins”; it just is.
Haider: You still make your moves. Still look for openings.

Luxme: You keep looking for openings... you make, you flee, you turn, you be, you nest, you grow, you find ways to create the life you are no longer prepared to defer to an unknown future.
Haider: It's not desirable for the future to be captive to the present, just as it is unthinkable that the present be held hostage by the future, right?
Luxme: Neither the arrow, nor the boomerang of time! You decide your capacities, you decide when to change them, accelerate them.
Haider: You become its protagonist.
Three hours elapse between two emails, and the project is cancelled. One email addresses elements of a production that is already underway, and three hours later a message winds up the project. There’s no turning back, no room for negotiation. There’s no internal process hinting at a possible cancellation. In an instant, it all explodes. In truth, it had begun to explode from the very moment the project was set in motion.

But let’s rewind a bit. The project Núria Güell had created for the Göteborg Biennial drew a great deal of media attention in Sweden. It consisted in having an immigrant — someone who dwelt on the margins of the law and was in the process of seeking asylum — play hide-and-seek with the visiting public. On one side, someone who in fact had to hide in real life; on the other, visitors who would be invited to have some fun playing a game. The project provoked many reactions and a lot of discussion. The (quite real) person whose role it would be to hide was willing to talk openly about the meaning of staging this situation within art, and also about his life. Since it came with a contract, the job of playing hide-and-seek would help him earn a residence permit and thus provide an avenue towards a positive response to his application for asylum.

But in the artwork, the visitors were at once the controllers he had to evade and the people he had to confront with inequality. We don’t all enjoy equal rights. I have to hide, and my family does too. You are playing, and doing so in an artistic context; my life is at stake and here I am, playing with you and appealing directly to you.

There would be a tinge of antagonism, as well as a blatant demonstration of the existence of a power structure. Some individuals have more rights than others, depending on their place of birth, and when viewed from a position of comfort, injustice sometimes arouses a sense of unease — all the more so in a society like Sweden, in which humanitarian and political aid are built into its modern definition of national identity, as a purported element of its DNA.

Edi Muka, the director of the city’s Röda Sten art centre, was commissioned to organise the Göteborg Biennial at the time that Núria Güell was creating her project. Later, Muka became part of the “dream team” that Magdalena Malm put together at Statens konstråd, the Swedish government agency that is entrusted with promoting public art. Over a period of more than seventy years, the agency has been responsible for bringing art to society in the form of sculptures and collections in public spaces. That the whole country is dotted with small sculptures, and that art has a real presence in every neighbourhood, is largely due to Statens konstråd. Magdalena Malm had assumed the post of director of the agency on the heels of her excellent results at MAP (Mobile Art Projects), where she produced works in the public space under a concept of time and performativity distinct from the classical ideal according to which “art in the public space” is a synonym for a “sculpture in the round.” Apart from signing up the soon-to-be former director of Röda Sten, she also brought on

Anothe

Cancelled

Project by

Núria Güell

Martí Manen

Do you want to play “hide and seek” with a political refugee?

Too Much Melanin. GIBCA. Sweden, 2013. Credit Levi Orta
board Lisa Rosendahl, a curator who was coming off a stint directing IASPIS in Stockholm after previously serving at the helm of BAC in Visby.

Statens konstråd’s first major project under Malm was coordinating the Creative Time Summit in Stockholm in conjunction with the New York-based arts organisation Creative Time. Mobilising several institutions, the Summit had a core programme of presentations and keynote speeches, and managed to sell out in record time. For the Summit, Statens konstråd wanted to produce a work by Núria Güell. Everyone involved — Magdalena Malm as well as the curators — agreed on that point.

Güell outlined two possible projects: one that would address the global economy and another, more specific, that would tackle what is the most sensitive issue in Sweden at the moment, namely the problem posed by destitute Romanian immigrants begging on the streets. Their presence has come as a total shock, because the existence of poor people among the Swedes is unthinkable. Although Núria Güell would have preferred to work conceptually with the economy, the agency opted for the project involving Romanian gypsies. From the first meeting they were aware that the project would attract media attention and create tension and debate. But, hey, that’s a good thing, isn’t it? The curators admired Güell’s work and her conceptual grounding as an artist. They also endorsed the desire to have contemporary art serve as a forum for possible social and political discussion. That is the mandate the agency has set itself. At the time the meeting was held, an alliance of right-wing parties was in power. SD (Sweden Democrats), a far-right party with roots in the national-socialist movements of the 1930s, was skyrocketing both in the polls and in media focus.

The project that Güell envisioned, entitled Support Swedish Culture, essentially involved hiring four EU migrants, ethnic Roma people from Romania who had been “begging” in the streets, to “raise funds” on behalf of Swedish culture. Playing with power and with language, it promised to drop several foreseeable bombs. “Begging” amounts to being at the mercy of the goodwill of others, while “fundraising” plays an active part in today’s economic system and does so from an entrepreneurial position that reflects an assimilation of neoliberal premises and their implementation in global policies. “Begging” means being on the ground, inactive, waiting for other people, decent hard-working folk, to make a gesture, while those involved in “fundraising” speak on an equal basis with those they are engaging with, asking them to share in a given goal. The money requested was intended to fund Swedish culture. But what exactly is “Swedish culture”? Who is entitled to make use of that concept? Can Romanian gypsies beg for money on behalf of Swedish culture? Who would they be trying to fool? There are no such ambiguities when the extreme right talks about Swedish culture; they talk about “we, the people and culture of Sweden.” But, gypsies raising money for Swedish culture! Race, class, identity, economic system, legal framework, and power structure — everything would be turned on its head.

The production work, led by Edi Muka, was faultless. Various partners were sought: some conversant with the legal system and others who had contacts with EU migrants. Four individuals who were well-qualified for the job were approached; apart from paying them a good salary, it was decided that they should be given classes in Swedish so that they would be better able to handle one-to-one conversations. Everything got underway.

Inevitably, there were setbacks. When one of Stockholm’s major cultural institutions was sounded out to see whether it would join the project as a recipient of the funds that would be collected, it declined to participate, reportedly on ethical grounds. To begin with, they weren’t sure that people living in such precarious conditions were not in fact being exploited; secondly, they suggested that, if the purpose were to help, then it would be better to invest the money directly in Romania, the country of origin of the hired participants, so as to improve living conditions there. This latter reason put one of Sweden’s cultural institutions on the same wavelength as the rising far right.

So the situation involved four individuals with a job contract, an NGO that was highly active in supporting migrant people, a state agency dedicated to art, and an artist working on a project that was intended to wage battle against a number of elements. To begin with, it would act disruptively within a society paralysed by the arrival of hordes of destitute people. The system was unable
to react, no state structure was capable of grasping the situation, and it was left up to individuals or non-governmental organisations to take up the slack. The project also focused on day-to-day life on the street and the process of invisibilisation in which poverty continues to exist even though one no longer sees it. It would rail against the imposition of an ideologically-laden vocabulary that organises — and normalises — a system based on class and ethnicity. It would question the construction of a national cultural identity and ask to whom that identity belongs and who is entitled to act on its behalf.

Just at that moment, national elections were called. Until then, Magdalena Malm, though working at Statens konstråd under a right-wing government, had maintained a critical outlook on social issues. The outcome of the elections forced a change in government — and then something happened. The new minority government was made up of the Social Democrats and the Green Party. Ideologically speaking they were closer — at least theoretically — to Núria Güell’s proposal, but the agency’s role started to get complicated. It was working on a project of critique precisely at a time when the government was purportedly closer to its position. It was no longer so easy to release that critical broadside from within the institution, given that creating tension and debate was perhaps not what the new government “needed” right at that moment.

The elections posed another serious problem: the extreme right, with a platform based exclusively on the expulsion of immigrants from the country, finished in third place — and they held the key to a parliament where the governing coalition lacked an absolute majority. Politically speaking, the project conceived by Núria Güell raised twofold concerns: it would attack a system that was now politically weak but that was oriented towards positions that could be regarded as ideologically akin, and it could also have been turned into a populist weapon by the extreme right. The programme of the Social Democrats increased the allocation set aside for the purpose of bringing contemporary art to districts on the outskirts of cities, which meant that Statens konstråd stood to play a major role in managing substantial funding.

Núria Güell’s project continued under development until a totally unexpected factor emerged: transparency. Given that Statens konstråd is a state organisation, all of its projects are open to public scrutiny. This means that citizens, even if they’re not aware of it, can access information about the process of work being developed by the curators there. A news agency that specialised in tracking public documentation to see whether it could drum up and sell some item of news discovered that Statens konstråd was working on something having to do with Romanian immigrants. They called around and made inquiries and got the scoop they were looking for, perfect for radio and TV news. Then nervousness set in, a great deal of nervousness. Just three hours passed between an email engaging with the process of work and an email cancelling the project. Magdalena Malm stated on a TV program that they weren’t prepared to provide answers about what they were doing and that as she didn’t want to put anyone at risk, she was cancelling the project. The Sweden Democrats, the party that advocates a return to cultural purity, also inquired about the money that was to be spent on the project; as a party with representation in parliament it was entitled to demand all of the relevant material from the agency. Núria Güell asked not to be forced to reveal the identity of the four migrants hired by the state to do fundraising for Swedish culture. With a substantial amount of money having already been spent, the project was unilaterally cancelled.

Núria Güell met with the four Romanian gypsies in a highly emotional meeting during which some significant statements and concepts were voiced. The four migrants were surprised that no one had asked for their opinions and that everyone else was deciding on their behalf. If there was any risk involved, they argued, they were able to make up their own minds; they knew perfectly well when someone was taking advantage of them. They were upset and didn’t understand why others were allowed to make the decision for them. Because they lived in the streets and slept in waste ground, it seemed, anyone could do whatever they wished with them without any consequences. The Swedish state had given them a real chance, and now it had been snatched away.
They had been told that they were no one and would never be anyone. They could continue to be paid to do nothing, but they saw no sense in that. They believed that every individual should be allowed to set his or her own limits, no matter how extreme the circumstances. They declared, for instance, that they would never work as prostitutes. The girl — there was one girl and three boys — explained that she would work as a cleaner, but one of the boys vowed that he would never do such work. Another boy replied that he would clean windows. They started to talk about the boundaries between the dignified and the undignified, but all of them agreed that when a contract puts you on an equal footing, and when everything is specified on paper, you have the right either to sign it or not. They had a contract, and the state had breached it. The NGO had also been the victim of a breach of contract; they had carried out many of the procedures and they were the ones who had been tasked with finding a person to conduct Swedish classes — another salary to be paid by the Swedish state. Already there were five external salaries to be paid for several months for a project that nobody wanted to have anything to do with any longer. If the NGO wished to sue the state they would probably have won, but they elected not to.

The Creative Time Summit arrived. Caught up in the middle of this situation, Núria Güell took part in the conference and made her presentation, which had been on the schedule right from the word go. Each artist was allotted ten minutes, and Güell used her time to speak about other projects, not mentioning the one that had just been cancelled by the body organising the Summit. Later, someone from an art journal asked her why she hadn’t spoken about the cancelled project, since the information about it was in the public domain and, even though it had been cancelled, it was in some ways still active. Núria Güell replied that the format of the Creative Time Summit didn’t provide for a discussion, nor did she have enough time to explain satisfactorily what was happening. A large part of the article about the Creative Time Summit published by that journal focused on the cancelled project. The Summit was divided into various sections, with presentations dealing with emigration, political action, or nationalisms, with the participation of Saskia Sassen, Tania Bruguera, Jonas Dahlberg, and Joanna Warsza, among others. Several projects were explained and a discussion took place about the need for art to be engaged in an increasingly worrisome reality.

The government went into crisis mode. In the national parliament, the extreme-right party and the alliance of right-wing parties rejected the budget. The crisis meant that there would be more elections in a few months, and the coalition of Social Democrats and Greens was forced to continue working within the budget drafted by the previous right-wing government.

Núria Güell proposed redirecting the project to take stock of everything that had happened, either through interviews or discussion. Much was at stake — a lot of groundwork and investment. But Statens konstråd didn’t want to “uncancel” Núria Güell’s project. It had already been cancelled, therefore doing something with it would mean starting a new project, and there were no plans for a new one. Everything was becoming entangled in the logic of red tape.

Another project by Núria Güell had been cancelled. Another project that didn’t get beyond the production stage, another project that didn’t reach the situation of real confrontation that it had been intended to achieve. Another project that remained in the domain of art and couldn’t step onto the street. Another project by Núria Güell for which “people are not ready.” It’s a phrase she has had to hear on more than one occasion, although this time it was the institution itself, rather than the society interrogated by her works, that was not prepared. However, on some level, the project has continued working: it has triggered a crisis, it has forced a rethinking of the acceptance of political diktats from a governmental organisation, it has been taken up by the media, and it has sparked a debate on the limits of what can and cannot be done. The various stances adopted are cloaked in morals, the structure of informal power has become formalised, and terms like institutional racism and classism are starting to be taken under consideration. The attempt to alleviate problems gives rise to new ones and introduces doubts about the management of an agency that promises to give shape to a new hub in the country’s institutional contemporary art system. The shot backfires. Stopping the bullet means becoming the victim. And with victims, just as with Romanian gypsies, the best thing to do is to keep them at a prudent distance.
Ignacio Navas’s photographs invite us to rethink certain anthropological universals. The question of identity, the reconstruction of the past, and the limits of sociability are some of the issues that cut across these images charged with nostalgic potential. Having been fortunate enough to have known Navas personally well before he began showing his work on the alternative art circuit, I can safely claim — like a hipster who sees the indie singer of his youth make it big and come to be adulated by Johnny-come-latelies who finally (too little, too late) grasp the potential of the diamond-in-the-rough — that from the outset Navas has always been hunting after reality, trying to frame it. In his case, though, “too little, too late” came at the age of twenty-three, the age Navas was when he exhibited at the Ponce + Robles gallery as the youngest artist on its roster. Since that time, and thanks to prizes and articles that attest to the quality of his output, he has gradually staked out a place for himself among “promising young artists,” a tag that ought rightly to be regarded as unfair when speaking about a practice that is already bearing fruit in the present and doesn’t have to rely on the prediction of a potential that will be realised tomorrow or the day after.

More than almost anyone, Ignacio Navas represents the virtues of leaving college when the time comes to begin working professionally. To be precise, Navas juggled his university studies with classes at BlankPaper and then subsequently worked in Berlin as an assistant to the illustrious Andrés Marroquín Winkelmann. As you can imagine, his life’s motto — “offer instead of ask” — has little in common with the philosophy of those schools of fine art where you enrol with a fine paintbrush and come out the other end with a roller, thanks to castrating teachers and research programs that lack any vocational specialization (a situation that now seems to be the norm in those generally claustrophobic academic spaces). Take careful note, young people, because what we’re talking about is the drama of Spanish education, about the fact that we score so low in international rankings, something that may have as much to do with budgetary restrictions as it does with any lack of initiative on the part of the students.

I remember ruining the artist’s first (or perhaps it was his second) exhibition in Madrid. We were presenting the opening to some fellow writers, when I, acting as master-of-ceremonies, had a sudden romantic whim that, to cut a long story short, involved drawing a charcoal silhouette on one of the photographic projections while holding forth on some forty philosophers whose work had absolutely no bearing whatsoever, superficial or otherwise, on the work of a perplexed Ignacio Navas. Later I had to personally scrub off the traces of my pedantic creation, as a result of which I quickly learned the value of an image. I also learned the importance of (i) letting the works speak for themselves, a conviction that will be reflected multiple times in this article; (ii) speaking from the immediate appearance the works generate, from a phenomenology
of ignorant reception; and (iii) dispensing with grand theories, a precept I will do my best to obey in what follows.

According to the generally accepted model of essayistic exposition, by this point I should already have talked a bit about the artist himself, instead of going on about our personal relationship or revealing my plan for what is to follow in the text. I will do so now, fulfilling my obligations as profound theorist and henceforth following the Kantian-Baconian principle of de nobis ipsis silemus. Navas was born around 1989 in Tudela (Navarre), where he spent his teens; he was a student with a mixed bag of friends in Madrid, a Spanish migrant in Berlin, and finally a returnee to Madrid (for some time to come, we hope) who currently is working “freelance” — a euphemism for the precarious situation of any creative vocation — using his camera and his gaze. Ignacio Navas has the advantage of being the first person I ever heard actually pronounce aloud the word epistemology. Now that we’ve gotten the introductions out of the way, let’s move on to the work itself.

Our photographer is well-known for works exploring personal identity and the construction of the past. His Yolanda in particular made quite a stir. An immensely engaging reconstruction, in historiographic terms, the Yolanda project put what we generally think of in terms of abstract relations under a visual lens. How does one mine the concept of family? It’s not enough to dig up the old graduation photo, the group snapshot, nor is it sufficient to draw family trees. The goal is to work with absence itself, to make visible hypothetical pasts that never existed, parallel realities that fell by the wayside, crumbs left on the tablecloth of history. Though the rhetorical turmoil characteristic of this essay might suggest a certain intellectual transcendence, we ought to brush aside any suspicion of petulance in the artist’s intentions. Navas’s conception of the project contained a great deal of the quotidian and precious little in the way of intellectual baggage. Everything began, as Tania Pardo explained in her text in the journal Exit, “when Ignacio Navas discovered in a photograph of his own baptism the existence of an unknown young woman — Yolanda — [1] holding him in her arms.” From that curtain-raiser arose a moment of anagnorisis, a search for who, how, and when, that became the driving force behind a quest to reconstruct yesterday out of its ruins. Responding to the big questions of philosophy and journalism (what was that woman’s name?) entails a retrospective process of construction in which the boundaries between reality and fiction are set between parentheses.

“A series of snapshots taken from family albums is intermingled with recent pictures taken by the young photographer in the settings in which the life of this young woman unfolded. It is a story loaded with generational references, remnants of a life cut short, a tale imbued with considerable emotional restraint,” according to the precise analysis of Pardo, whose judgment of the process is spot-on inasmuch as it underscores the indelible presence of Gabriel — Yolanda’s partner and Ignacio’s uncle — who also proved instrumental to the truthfulness of the reconstruction of the settings by volunteering his own personal photographic archive. Gabriel offered, in addition, his testimony, because each ordinary image hides a story of drug addiction (Yolanda died of AIDS in 1996). A photo that any unthinking Instagrammer would have tagged as #cute, the silhouette of Gabriel walking in shirtsleeves on a snow-covered mountaintop [2] actually conceals an attempt to run away, a longing to escape from himself. In an interview with Ignacio, Gabriel regrets that “with all the money I blew, I’ve never had a holiday in my life. Every holiday we were going to try and get clean. But when you kick the habit, you have to go cold turkey. And you never feel like doing it. You’re living it up but you’re not able to enjoy it. All we did was waste our time, our money, our lives, and throw everything away.” What more can we add to the homey photograph [3] where the red eyes of Yolanda and Gabriel’s Cocker Spaniel distract our attention from the aluminium foil and lighters between bottles of Kas orange soda? The image itself suggests, without any need to appeal to Edgar Allan Poe’s The Purloined Letter, all of the reflections imaginable about our propensity to hide truths

1 - “Yolanda” (2011-2013), C-print. Facsimil from original. 20x25 cm
2 - “Yolanda” (2011-2013), C-print. Facsimil from original. 10x15 cm
3 - “Yolanda” (2011-2013), C-print. Facsimil from original. 10x15 cm
Among the images in *Yolanda*, I am particularly struck by one in which the protagonist is taking a photo of herself in the mirror. [4] We have no idea whether it was a spontaneous snapshot or whether it was carefully posed. But does it really make any difference? The very gesture of making oneself visible on a reflecting surface, the very action of believing oneself alienated onto glass, the desire to immortalise the fleeting moment, all of these things entail, to begin with, a set of dramatic registers, a battery of attitudes towards otherness that makes the very distinction inane — and so it goes. I especially appreciate this image because I also wish to perceive in it a kind of joke, one of the knowing nods mentioned by Tania Pardo, but in a direction opposite to what one would expect when speaking about the 1990s: the David Bowie poster flanked by shiny Japanese swords, that triangle formed between the windshield and the passenger window of old cars, or the bitter pill of having your hair cut for military service. The interesting thing about the self-portrait in the bathroom mentioned above lies in its capacity to foreshadow today’s hegemonic strategies for the construction of specular identity, when the asphyxiating presence of digital cameras and smartphones means that nobody, not even Scarlett Johansson, can escape what a court decision has defined as a reflecting image on a surface.

II

In some of the photographer’s works we can appreciate, if you’ll permit me the liberty, Navas’s “documentary” side. Take for instance *Linde*, a collection of instants culled from a marginalised underworld, a series of faces where we verify a kind of emptying-out, [1] spaces that the pedant might mistake for non-places. As our essay is committed to avoiding proper names — as befits a series of captionless black-and-white images in which the subjects reveal their character through anonymity — we will spare the readers from meditations on number 647 on Marc Augé and his overrated publications. We are more interested in drawing attention to detail, and not because we’re looking for a way to introduce Roland Barthes’s celebrated passages about the *punctum*, reflections that anyone who has reached this point in this essay will surely already be conversant with. At this juncture I have to confess that I’d like to draw responding to a premeditated or suggested will. This teleological illusion, the apparent disorder, when seen from a lofty elevation, can also be seen as the undeniable focus of the scene. [5] Nothing could be further from my mind than refuting the objective interest of these social postcards, these portraits of customs collected by Ignacio Navas, of women dancing in front of the camera. [6]

It’s true that the visual connections they evoke often tend to engage with an outmoded symbolism, as happens when the branches of a tree hemmed in by some railings seem to want to suggest a lack of freedom, but we’re talking from a distance for fireflies, those self-illuminating insects that Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke of when musing on self-organized citizen enlightenment, on the waning ability of Italian citizens, due to the decay of community life, to shine with a light of their own. [8] Besides stimulating the audience’s tear ducts, what function can be served by these truncated instants of privacy? [7]

But, returning to the question in hand — the background — I’d like to draw attention to trivial details like the lights of the city, those lampposts that anyone might mistake from a distance for fireflies, those self-illuminating insects that Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke of when musing on self-organized citizen enlightenment, on the waning ability of Italian citizens, due to the decay of community life, to shine with a light of their own. [8] And what can we say about the unexpected geometric constructions composed of parked cars? Anyone who has ever played with toy cars as a child knows that any such apparent disorder, when seen from a lofty elevation, can also been seen as responding to a premeditated or suggested will. This teleological illusion, the
belief in the existence of intention, but also the feeling of vulnerability that is transmitted by — among many other things — an electric rocking-horse ignored by its child riders, [9] can always be found lurking behind Ignacio Navas's photos.

The photographer manages to give meaning to neighbourhoods that have none.1 Madrid’s urban planning policies, whose delivery on the ground we are trying to portray in images and in words, are the epitome of electorally-organised meaninglessness, a bricked expansion (who’s going to unbrick it?) whose economic muscle has been flabby since 2008. While we wait for the new shoots of business confidence, as announced by the unexpected and extravagant new-shootism of our parliamentary representatives, of our own personal Godot, we can interrupt for a moment the cry of “every man for himself” and contemplate Ignacio Navas’s photographs in a gaze to take seriously — whether we are fish or fishermen — as the troubled waters of our times grow more turbulent.

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1. “Linde” (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermülhe Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.

2. “Linde” (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermülhe Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.

3. “Linde” (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermülhe Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.

4. “Linde” (2010-2011)
Glicée impression on Hahnermülhe Baryta paper
315 gr, 40x40 cm.
1 It would be a great shame if I didn’t share publicly some of the comments, disagreements, and reflections that Ignacio Navas came up with in response to questions broached in the main body of this article. In this space below the text, I will give the artist room to speak with his own voice. The idea is for these footnotes to appear like smoke signals in the face of the misunderstandings of the know-it-all critic or, to put it another way, to serve as alternative interpretations. Specifically, on the thorny question of “hunting after reality, trying to frame it,” Navas has expressed his intellectual disagreement: “I don’t agree with this idea of photography as hunting/capturing or other such synonyms. It’s something we have got beyond by now, and photography today is elsewhere. Photographers have other needs. It’s almost a cliché trotted out whenever we discuss photographers. Personally speaking, I like to think of photography as an excuse to set out on an adventure, as a tool to undertake pursuits or processes that would otherwise be fairly complicated to achieve. And the fact of making public these paths that I have taken is an act of sharing. It’s not about saying that this is like that, but rather about creating a map so that anyone who cares to can take the same path if they want and how they want, and reaching whatever destination they want, through my images. It’s wonderful to be able to build new worldviews from these premises.”

2 “Well-known? Well. I suppose so. I’ve been lucky. I’ve worked a lot and I am grateful to many people who have put their faith in my work and have supported it. But don’t forget that I’ve only published two collections of work, so I’m not sure whether that’s the best way of talking about someone who is just starting out. But hey, don’t get me wrong, I appreciate the gesture.”

3 The artist is not entirely comfortable with the term “emptying-out” but he does accept the terms “emotional limbo” and “emotional restraint” to designate psychological depths that are often difficult for the camera to plumb. He continues: “This is not a ‘maginalised underworld,’ it is the outskirts of Madrid. I went to neighbourhoods like Barrio del Pilar and La Gavia because they don’t have any kind of strong visual identity. It’s just everyday life as it is, without any kind of stage setting. The emotional boundary of this context is highly visible. They are states in which we as individuals submerge ourselves and which end up filtering into the surroundings and shaping them, just as they are responsible for guiding a large part of our life decisions. I know what you are trying to say but I think it could be misconstrued. There is an emptiness in these places (and some of them have only been recently built and still don’t have basic things like pharmacies, there is still no neighbourhood life even though there are people living there), but not in that sense, of the faces you are speaking about. Who am I to say that a person I hardly know is empty? I hope I never end up falling into that trap!”

4 “The tree branches” Ignacio Navas responds, “are just tree branches next to some railings. I never intended to evoke anything like the lack of freedom you mention. It’s simply a question of demonstrating the ugliness, carelessness, and slovenliness that have taken over many corners of these places. Once, when I was talking to a photography curator, he told me that he loved it when I photographed things that took place in the lower part of these buildings, the part which it seems all architects overlook, but which paradoxically is the nearest to us all, and I found his observation to the point: I don’t believe that this symbolism is there.” Which came first, the chicken or the egg, the successive real estate booms and busts or the fragility of personal relations? And here, a commendable exercise in humility on behalf of the photographer: “Luzio was my first step in photography, a project that arose when I was studying at BlankPaper, and for me it was a learning process and a sort of place-taking as a photographer. A way of delimiting the areas I wanted to work with, starting out in that vast jungle which is closest to us: the everyday.” And he went on to add, “like any apprentice, I was awkward, but you learn things by doing them.” As he explained, “my approach to the project was intuitive. I was bold enough and naive enough, and I really wanted to learn. It’s like the experience of publishing my first fanzine, and the healthy arrogance it takes.” And what’s the story with all the hugging? “It wasn’t a case of ‘stimulating the tear ducts’ (though the whole body of work does have an emotional quality to it) but of creating a rhythm, some visual echoes with the idea of boundary: in a certain way a hug is also a limit. That said, it’s also true that in retrospect I would change a lot of things about that project. It is not well edited, the sequence is poor and as a consequence the narrative is awkward... chalk it up to a learning curve.”

5 “I don’t know whether these neighbourhoods have meaning or not. I don’t like to think of anyone as foolish. I suppose that when they were originally planned these neighbourhoods made sense or tried to respond to a need (or interests) and now there they are,” Ignacio Navas corrects me. “They serve me as an excuse, a backdrop, to photograph and explore my interests or curiosity.” Regarding this last aspect, Ignacio Navas mentions a documentary (The Century of the Self), an interview (Jordi Évole with Arturo Pérez-Reverte), and the work of Jiro Taniguchi. And he added: “Emotio, I really like the title of your article because I wasn’t aware of it. But in one way it is true that my projects (especially the ones I told you I was working on now) do not speak about what is happening, about the bricks, but – from a really trivial, everyday perspective – about what the bricks cover over. Ultimately, that’s what really matters to us. A while ago I read an interview with Javier Krahe where he made the celebrated statement that ‘Spain is the land of easy money: get rich quick and line your pockets.’ Our generation is the product of that idea.”
ENTREATOS: 
Situaciones breves

INTERMISSIONS: 
Brief Situations

Un proyecto para
A project for

Liliana Porter - Ana Tiscornia


Teatro Sarmiento, Buenos Aires, Marzo 2014

fotografías: Federico Lo Blanco, Bruno Dubner, Sebastián Elsinger, Carlos Turman, Ines Tamería
Como el fasgo central de la pandurga
remumucia la pinola plateca
así el chungo del gran Perrontoreca
con la garcha cuesquina sopreturga
...
демонстрация

Un sonido de multitudes se acerca, en una antigua marcha rusa irrumpe. Personajes diversos, con ideas y propósitos disímiles e inespecíficos atraviesan el escenario. La gráfica de los panfletos, pasacalle y estandarte connotan un estereotipo de manifestación que parece estar instalado en una memoria colectiva más fantástica que real.

A: ¿Dónde situar esta manifestación que une distintos tiempos y circunstancias?

L: en un arquetipo complicado donde el tiempo se construye con contradicciones, con diferentes temporalidades pero también con distintas substancias.

A: ¿Se trata de enfatizar la multiplicidad y su inevitable diversidad?

L: se trata de desarticolar los conceptos de jerarquía, belleza, tiempo, verdad ...

A: en definitiva desestabilizar cualquier posibilidad de certidumbre. De alguna manera se parece al “Retrato de familia”

L: así, en realidad siempre vuelvo al mismo tema. En el “Re- trato de familia” otra vez los personajes son disímiles, se junta un personaje histórico del siglo XIX como Mari quita Sanchez de Thompson con una metáfora como el camino, con bailarines contemporáneos, y personajes de ficción.

A: los personajes de “Retrato de Familia” entran todos juntos riéndose, como si se conocieran. Esa risa llena uno en un tiempo y en un espacio improbable.
Resurrección

Un actor entra en escena llevando un pato blanco embalsamado. Lo pone en el suelo y lo mira. Acto seguido un gemelo del actor entra con un idéntico pato blanco que está vivo, y grazna. Se miran asombrados del milagro.
Concierto de Violín

En el escenario ya vacío y en silencio, entra la violinista. Después de una pausa se pone en posición de tocar el violín. En ese momento comienza el concierto, aunque ella seguirá inmóvil hasta el final.

A: ¿Por qué esa dislocación?

L: porque ese es el tema central: la distancia entre las palabras y las cosas. En este caso entre la violinista, el instrumento, y la música.

A: ¿En qué medida la belleza de la violinista contribuye a ese tema?

L: en la medida que hace la situación más perfecta, más sublime o si se quiere menos terrenal.
More than a decade ago the Peruvian philosopher and drag queen Giuseppe Campuzano (Lima, 1969) created the ephemeral project called Museo Travesti del Perú (Transvestite Museum of Peru). Founded in 2004, the museum was an attempt at a queer counter-reading and promiscuous intersectional thinking of history, one that collected objects, images, texts and documents, press clippings, and appropriated artworks in order to propose actions, stagings, and publications that would fracture the dominant models of production of bodies. The project, halfway between performance and historical research, proposed a critical revision of the so-called “history of Peru” from the strategic perspective of a fictional figure he called the “androgy nous indigenous / mestizo transvestite.” One of the museum’s achievements was to have introduced a politically corrosive and discontinuous narrative of transgender into the public domain, a narrative that imagined new forms of community and undid the foundational myths and ideological fantasy that lay hidden under the rubric of the nation or the state.
The museum made its first appearance in 2004 as an intervention at the Museo de Sitio de la Batalla de Miraflores, one of the municipal museums in Lima that commemorate the War of the Pacific between Peru, Chile, and Bolivia during the late 19th century. The title of the project, Certamen: El otro sitio (Competition: The Other Site), was a play on words alluding, on one hand, to military combat, and on the other, to a beauty pageant. The Transvestite Museum intervention was held in two small rooms inside the Museo de Sitio that are normally used to display contemporary art, but it also took over the permanent exhibition galleries where the history of the War of the Pacific is explained didactically. Throughout the various spaces, the Transvestite Museum deployed photocopies, photographs, crafts, and objects from various fields of transvestism, confronting patriarchal emblems of nationalist heroism with other true minority heroisms of sexually-dissident bodies that have been forced to meet the normative social order head-on if they want to continue living.

Shortly thereafter, the Transvestite Museum moved out into the streets of Lima, into a small pink kiosk that exhibited historic images and documents from transvestite culture in the form of banners, cheap prints, and photos on paper. Located at the entrance to the Parque de la Exposición — where the Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru’s leading art institution, is also located — this appearance in the public space was a declaration of the nomadic, parasitic, and ephemeral quality of a project that would subsequently come to occupy various locations, including public squares, fairs, markets, and universities. This portable museum did not seek to “represent” minorities and integrate them into dominant discourses of progress and happiness. On the contrary, it served as a device to underscore the theatrical nature of all history and to challenge the privileged place of heterosexual subjectivity in all historical narratives. But this “mobile” condition also referred to several other transits and movements, including the movement of the masses in a cycle between the provinces and the capital, as well as the various forms of migration of people whose lives have always been lived on the margins: the HIV-positive, undocumented immigrants, the intersexed.

However, the materials that the Transvestite Museum placed in the public eye did not aspire to a fixed and established identity. Campuzano, and indeed all the museum’s operations, demonstrated a profound distrust of the apparent transparency of images that lay claim to social representation, instead deploying the possibilities of betraying their meanings and subverting their uses in the public realm. His work parodied the rigidity and sharply defined boundaries between genders, pointing out the ways in which these de-normalised practices and queer representations interfered with the social dynamics that shape subjectivity. In this sense, the Transvestite Museum can be viewed as a large archive of performative practices that defied the sites of traditional analysis of oppression by taking the transvestite body as the locus of enunciation, as a false, prosthetic body “whose nature is uncertainty.” There is no other truth in these signs than the processes of transformation and disidentification through which one body can become another. No other reality exists than their frauds and displacements. A new, more fabulous and joyous truth emerges from this very artifice.

Soft Cartographies

Among many others issues, the Transvestite Museum posed two key questions. First, how is one to write the history of subjects who have been continuously erased from history? And secondly, what kinds of knowledge do the bodies of sexual minorities produce that are still unintelligible to the dominant modes of discourse and narrative construction? When thinking about non-normative sexual bodies, we are faced with a set of bodies for whom the divestment of their human condition has historically persisted not through registering and surveillance, but through silence and the general effacement of their traces from official directories, that is, when their few existing traces have not been used simply to pathologise, exclude, or normalise difference. If the disappearance of these bodies has been a feature in the formation of classical archives and traditional historiographies, the task of designing trans-feminist and queer cartographies requires an approach that rejects identifications and opts instead for (re)inventing those histories that do not exist, through reinvented bodies and identities in the making.
Precisely because sexually-dissident bodies are to be found in this area of almost symbolic illegality, the traditional maps and cartographies run the risk of functioning as “records of surveillance” that, in seeking to document and grant visibility to “minorities,” can end up operating as devices of social control and discipline. This paradox requires rethinking the tactics and methodologies used to “historicise” the multiplicity of sexual morphologies, and further, requires that we consider how to approach social practices that even today are viewed as clandestine activities (sex work and pornography, for example) when conventional forms of registration may jeopardise their existence. In this regard, the Transvestite Museum suggested alternative hypotheses for imagining “critical cartographies” through fiction that didn’t fall back on the dominant taxonomy of identification and sexual recognition but instead enabled a visualisation of maps that showed how subjectivity is produced and how the historical significance of bodies can be altered.

It was there that the importance of the figure of the museum resided. At a time when the market had turned sexual identities into consumer products, and museums seemed removed from any agenda reflecting on sexual politics, the emergence of the Transvestite Museum was an opportunity to redefine the political role of the museum and respond to an official history erected upon the erasure of sexual disobedience. Its emergence was a deliberate perforation of the museum apparatus — which is also a sexual apparatus — at a time when the neoliberal pragmatism of transnational economies and the corporate marketing of the cultural machinery had attempted to establish a hegemonic pattern of the museum. Setting up a Transvestite Museum seemed to declare, on one hand, that the subject had changed and that the historical struggles of “women” and feminism today come up short when they attempt to think about all of our mutant, insurgent bodies, whores, the intersexed, trans people. And, conversely, to choose to speak from the museum was also to state explicitly that the museum is not a neutral technique of representation but a political device that sanctions the gaze, controls pleasure, and produces sexual identities in the public realm.

This is where the transversal readings of the Transvestite Museum became powerful tools for the subversion of heterosexual spatio-temporality: for instance, in the form of micro-cartography based on the concept of pluma (literally meaning “feather” and roughly translatable into English as camp), which connected the grand imperial gown of Manco Capac (the first leader of the Inca Empire) with the 18th-century colonial paintings of the Cuzco School, a movement that appropriated colonial Catholic iconography to represent winged warriors draped in glamorous clothing, and with the costumes of contemporary showgirls and drag queens. Or in the set of images that Campuzano called mestizaje, which wove together representations that provided an account of ethnic and sexual migrations, such as the veiled tapadas limeñas of the 19th century — presences that proved ambivalent and therefore subversive for gender identification — with a transvestite singer from a Chinese opera staged in Lima in 1870, or with images of black queers portrayed by watercolourists from the Pacific Scientific Commission expeditions of the 19th century.

By appropriating the “museum” device and its queer cartographies, the Transvestite Museum collaborated in denaturalising the false sequences of heteronormative history, summoning a new coalition of monsters, post-porn virgins, native androgynes, and trans-Andean indigenous people, all of whom were able to bring into question the modern-colonial Western construction of sexuality and offer other possibilities out of which to resist and to act. This alliance no longer responded to the demands of heterosexual morality and identity but instead celebrated and inspired solidarity with the deviant body.
Marian Post-porn
Campuzano also examined forms of local religiosity, putting in tension the sacredness of certain representations through montages and performances that rummaged through and updated instances of androgynous devoutness and figures of unauthorised fag worshipping, ranging, in his words,

from the rituality of the indigenous androgyne to the Patron Saints’ Festivities in rural towns and the Catholic mestizo transvestite... to a post-industrial rituality as consumption and social access. Transforming the psychiatric and spiritual tropes of uniqueness (the multiplicity of indigenous idolatries and Marian apparitions) and poverty (the Virgin as the quintessential transvestite with her magnificent trousseau and performative appearances).5

Campuzano himself on more than one occasion staged the Catholic iconographic repertoire through performances. For example, in 2007, he cross-dressed as the Virgin of the Guacas on a cliff by a beach in Lima. Campuzano remained stationary (performing an “inaction,” as he called it) and induced a series of “aborted pilgrimages by those bystanders who, imagining seeing a glowing Virgin over the sea, hastily approach until they spot the faggot and beat the retreat.”6

These queer forms of theatricalising power and of re-signifying religious morality have evoked a wide repertoire of visual disobediences in Latin America over recent decades. For instance, the drawings of phalluses-altars of virgins by the feminist Mónica Mayer in the late 1970s; Nahum Zenil’s homoerotic self-portraits inspired by popular Mexican religious iconography; posters and stickers with prayers for the right to abortion distributed by the feminist collective Mujeres Públicas; the sadomasochistic representations of political violence by the Grupo Chaclacayo (Helmut Psotta, Raul Avelaneda, and Sergio Zevallos) during the 1980s in Peru; the subversive liturgical experiences of the Chilean duo Yeugas de Apocalipsis (Mares of the Apocalypse); the street processions of the first trans saint Karol Romanoff that were organised by Coordinadora Universitaria de Disidencia Sexual (CUDS) in Chile, among various others. These works and experiences undo Catholic imagery’s devout models of femininity (the saint, the Virgin, the blessed), but also disable the strong component of heteronormative religious morality that organizes and controls behaviour in the public space. In a sense, these representations are a critical response to colonial processes in Latin America, a continent where religion has played a key role in the training of Eurocentric civilising discourses. State and religion, alongside police authoritarianism and Catholic devotion, have been part of a strong social matrix that these queer practices have confronted and subverted by parodying holy heterosexuality, and also by intervening in the codes that divide the social body into normal subjects and sick subjects, into proper sexualities and deviant sexualities.
Campuzano also theatricalised the sexualities that appeared in his Transvestite Museum. In his different presentations, Campuzano and various collaborators dramatised the various characters of the museum, from androgynous figures from pre-Columbian ceramic portraits of the Moche culture, to apocryphal saints and masks from Andean dances. These invocations were marked by the desire to multiply utopian bodies, as if they were tools to be used. To follow a critical formulation by Gregg Bordowitz, these restagings of non-normative bodies represented an “act of taking control of history by becoming its subject through repetition. Rather than producing a revolutionary break with history, the artists repeat moments of queer liberation over and over to the point where the past becomes an ever-present tense.”

Transvestite Futures

It is worth noting how certain performative practices and experimental methods of production of history can renew modes of social intervention, and furthermore, how the reappropriation and perforation of bourgeois institutional devices like the museum can open previously blocked conduits in order to imagine other territories of non-normative existence. The question continues to be how to give shape to the social field that is politically necessary for us. The fact that the silence surrounding sexuality has been longstanding is no mere oversight. This silence has been an enduring place of production of behaviours that have been passed down to us as reality. As the US writer and activist Douglas Crimp has declared, “what is at stake is not history per se, which is a fiction in any case, but what history, whose history, history to what purpose.”

The mere existence of a Transvestite Museum underscored the question of the meanings that we need in order to go on living and resisting everyday forms of domination and normalisation. It is a question of the demand for a narrative of our own, for fictions able to liberate other forms of existence without which any image of the future worthy to be imagined would be unthinkable. There is no possibility of remaining faithful or tied to any history — “reality can suck my dick, darling.”

1 On the background to the project and its various working strategies, see: Giuseppe Campuzano, Museo Travestí del Perú, Lima: Institute of Development Studies, 2008.


4 Beatriz Preciado, ibid.


6 Miguel A. Lopez and Giuseppe Campuzano, ibid.


8 Renate Lorenz, Queer Art. A Freak Theory, Bielefeld; Transcript-Verlag, 2012, p. 49.

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Photographer Jo Ractliffe has spent the better part of the last decade photographing the effects of the prolonged civil war in Angola (1975-2002), both in the country itself and in her native South Africa. She currently has solo exhibitions at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (extended to 29 April, 2015) and at Fondation A Stichting, Brussels (until 29 March, 2015).

Peruvian-born José Falconi is a fellow in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literatures in 2010. He has contributed to several journals as writer, editor, and photographer, and has curated more than twenty exhibitions of work by emerging Latin American artists.

Raqs Media Collective enjoys playing a plurality of roles, often appearing as artists, occasionally as curators, and sometimes as philosophical agents provocateurs. They make contemporary art, have made films, curated exhibitions, edited books, staged events, collaborated with architects, computer programmers, writers, and theatre directors, and have founded processes that have left deep impacts on contemporary culture in India. The collective was founded in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. They have been published in magazines and journals such as Afterall, E-flux journal, Art Journal, Art in America, ramona, Manifesta Journal, The Exhibitionist, and Art Nexus. Among his most recent exhibitions are Un cuerpo ambulante, Sergio Zavallés en el Grupo Chacalacay (1982-1994) at Museo de Arte de Lima - MALI (2015-2014); Pulso Alterado. Intensidades en la colección del MUAC y sus colecciones asociadas at MUAC-UNAM, México D.F. (2015-2014); and (with Red Conceptualismos del Sur) Perder la forma humana. Una imagen sísmica en los años 80 en América Latina at the Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid (2012-2013). He recently edited Giuseppe Camuncoli: Saturday Night Thriller y otros escritos, 1998-2013 (Estruendomude, 2013).

Emesto Castro graduated in Philosophy from the Universidad Autónoma, Madrid (2012), received a Masters in Analytical Philosophy from the Universidad de Barcelona (2013), and currently is a Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy at the Universidad Complutense, Madrid. He is the author of Contra la postmodernidad (Alpha Decay, 2011), coordinator of El arte de la indignación (Delirio, 2012), and a contributor to Red-acciones (Caslon, 2010), Tenían veinte años y estaban locos (La Bella Vesoría, 2011), Humanismo-animalismo (Arena Libros, 2012), and Indignación y rebeldía (Abada, 2013).

Lilian Porter is an Argentinian-born artist whose work has been shown nationally and internationally at various museums and institutions and can be found in numerous public and private collections. Among various honors, she was a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient in 1980. She was formerly a tenured professor at Queens College, CUNY. Liliana’s first theatrical production, Entreactos: situaciones breves, premiered in Buenos Aires in 2014. The play was co-directed by Ana Tiscornia, a Uruguayan artist and writer whose work has been the subject of many national and international exhibitions. She is an emeritus professor at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury. Porter and Tiscornia have collaborated in the production of art works and public art installations. Both reside in New York.


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