Utopia seems to have been one of the culturally unconscious aspects of our society. If for a while its study was limited to literary traditions drawing on Thomas More, in recent years many authors have been updating and expanding the narrative about what constitutes the utopian tradition, incorporating fields such as art, architecture, performative practices, communities, and political movements. From the sphere of utopian studies, this type of analysis has been systematised, understanding the utopian impulse as a human element that has taken various forms. But, while this approach opens the space of what we can consider utopia, it sometimes continues granting a fundamental importance to texts, without always addressing some of the ambiguities and paradoxes that are put forward by the world of the image.
La utopía parece haber sido uno de los inconscientes culturales de nuestra sociedad. Si bien durante un tiempo su estudio se limitó a las tradiciones literarias que partían de Tomás Moro, en los últimos años múltiples autores han ido actualizando y ampliando el relato de lo que constituye la tradición utópica, incorporando campos como el arte, la arquitectura, las prácticas performativas, las comunidades y los movimientos políticos. Desde la esfera de los llamados *utopian studies* este tipo de análisis ha venido sistematizándose, entendiendo el impulso utópico como un elemento humano que ha ido tomando diversas formas. Pero, si bien esta aproximación abre el espacio de lo que podemos considerar utopía, a menudo se continúa otorgando una importancia fundamental a los textos, sin siempre abordar algunas de las ambigüedades y paradojas que plantea el mundo de la imagen.
INTRODUCTION

Utopia seems to have been one of the culturally unconscious aspects of our society. If for a while its study was limited to literary traditions drawing on Thomas More, in recent years many authors have been updating and expanding the narrative about what constitutes the utopian tradition, incorporating fields such as art, architecture, performative practices, communities, and political movements. From the sphere of utopian studies, this type of analysis has been systematised, understanding the utopian impulse as a human element that has taken various forms. But, while this approach opens the space of what we can consider utopia, it sometimes continues granting a fundamental importance to texts, without always addressing some of the ambiguities and paradoxes that are put forward by the world of the image.

LITERARY UTOPIAS, POPULAR UTOPIAS

It is certainly undeniable that, as a word, “utopia” is born with a novel. When he published his *Utopía*¹, Thomas More was creating a new term that would enrich itself with meanings and polysemy over the following centuries. It has often been claimed that one of the triggers for More’s text was the recent invasion of the American continent and the numerous legends that were spread about its territories². Following the example of the English humanist, a whole tradition of authors set about writing treatises that generally described the voyage to a perfect place, where human beings had succeeded in perfecting collective government through the exercise of reason and ethics.

However, despite the claims to universality, each utopia is strongly tied to the ideology and cultural assumptions of its place and time. Western utopian literature emerged from the 16th Century not only as a fantasy derived from the news of those far-off lands which had driven the idea that anything was possible. Its own articulation can also be read according to the keys of the colonial project itself³.

¹ The work’s full title is *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*.


In any case, beyond the literary genre opened by More, utopian studies today tend to consider utopia as a yearning common to most cultures, which existed independently of European humanism and from long before this started to develop. Before More’s publication and his invention of the term, there had been many other traditions that reflected the desire for a better world, more pleasant and enjoyable.

These fantasies often were a spatial expression of desire. While most religions had paradises that could be attained after death, these had their counterparts on Earth itself through prosaic myths of places of physical pleasure and sensory delight. Cucaña, Scharaffenland, Cockaigne, and the País de Jauja were different names given to those landscapes of material plenty whose legend was transmitted mainly by means of oral storytelling. While these tales were a constant of the Middle Ages – when they appeared represented in the margins of manuscripts or in choir stalls – during the Renaissance they gained strength and were made more present in the visual field.

In a critical way, Brueghel painted his Scharaffenland as a place where abundance seemed to reach the point of becoming indigestion [Fig. 1]. Other authors located these spaces in maps, using the graphic language of verisimilitude to chart imagined territories [Fig. 2].

![Fig. 1](image in the public domain, from Wikimedia commons).
[FIG. 2] Map of Sclaraffenland, c. 1730-40, National Library of Norway (image in the public domain, from Wikimedia commons).
In a transversal way, and with distinct peaks, art was accompanying religious, social, and political fantasy. In a superficial tour, invoking examples known by everyone, certain landmarks in the history of art can be read in this way.

The representation of Paradise, for example, passed from the reticular organisation that belonged to the religious hierarchy and the scholastic mentality – which we can see in the mediaeval imaginary – to the exuberant gardens that sometimes become ample and generous woods as painted by Brueghel the Elder [FIG. 3]. On display at the Doria Pamphilj gallery, his representation of Eden seems an inventory of real and imaginary creatures, revelling in the immense and beautiful variety of divine creation. In this landscape painting, the presence of Adam and Eve is almost incidental, and they are located at the back, near a unicorn.
Some paintings seem to have inaugurated a unique genre. This is the case of the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, whose central panel seems to mix religious and profane paradises in an environment of fruits and hypertrophied animals where, with voluptuous innocence, a humanity in the very spring of existence – which seems happily to ignore both childhood and old age – enjoys itself [FIG. 4]. Various interpretations have tried to decipher the utopia that Bosch created in this triptych. However, its true meaning remains obscure, and the painting remains open to multiple interpretations.

In this vein, Juan Antonio Ramírez has studied the architectonic influence of speculation about the Temple of Solomon, which had been designed by God himself. See Ramírez, J.A. (ed.) (1991). *Dios Arquitecto El Templo de Salomón según Juan Bautista Villalpando and El Templo de Salomón según Jerónimo del Prado*. Accompanying these two volumes, a third book of studies edited by the same author, *Dios, arquitecto* (with contributions from J. A. Ramírez, R. Taylor, A. Corboz, R. J. van Pelt, and A. Martínez Ripoll). Madrid: Siruela.

Invoking other imaginaries, the *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* of the Palace of Sienna proposed, in the 14th Century, the question of public management. Also, representations of the Heavenly Jerusalem raised the question of what a perfect city would be like. And, at the same time that Bosch was painting his delights, artists of the Italian Renaissance, fascinated by the recently rediscovered classical culture, used their brushes to imagine scenes concerning the *polis*. In his *School of Athens*, Rafael seems to be painting an entire enlightening social structure, which inevitably points to Plato’s *Republic* [*fig. 5*].

Many painters and architects of that time dedicated themselves to imagining non-existent buildings and cities, where painted image often preceded physical construction. Expressed through painted architectures or maps, the tradition of the ideal city produced projects such as Filarete’s *Sforzinda* [*fig. 6*]: in this type of work, urban thinking imagined social formations in an equivalent way to that which had been carried out in the tradition of utopian literature. This also had its intersections with reality, with real buildings derived from architectonic speculation, such as the Italian city of Palmanova.

Painting also bestowed fauna and flora on arcadias and pastorals, which proliferated once again with neoclassicism and its recovery of mythology. In a reflection on the impossibility of a perfect human life, Poussin painted the traces of death in the ideal place with his “*Et in Arcadia ego*” [*fig. 7*].

*fig. 7* Nicholas Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds (Et in Arcadia ego)*, 1637-38, Musée de Louvre, Paris (image in the public domain, from Wikimedia commons).
The 18th Century, with the development of Enlightenment though and its reflection on the best forms of government, also witnessed the emergence of a type of strange buildings, often limited to models, and which have been generically named as “utopian architecture”. Ledoux, Lequeau, and Boullée in fact tended to work for monarchs that had not yet been dethroned, but their work was soon associated with the Enlightenment and with ideals of Platonic perfection, which the architectural projects would symbolise through their purity of forms.

Étienne-Louis Boullée produced proposals as radical as Newton’s Cenotaph, intended as a kind of cosmic sphere [fig. 8]. Despite the varied personality of these architects, their work was later integrated into the accounts of novel social configuration that ambitiously tried to remake society and finish off the ancien régime.

With the French Revolution, politics and political art emerged simultaneously. The French Revolution provided the conditions for the development of first great political artist, in the modern sense. Jacques-Louis David was not only a magnificent painter of the martyrs and heroes of the Revolution (we all recall his powerful Death of Marat): his activities ranged from the management of monuments and artistic memory to the launch of educational projects and propaganda, the administration of death sentences, and the design of suits and swords6 [fig. 9].
The utopian would see itself overflowing with the possibility of creating a new world on a large scale, after the violent destruction of all the previous world. Since then⁷, between the micro notion of the archipelago and the macro scale of the Revolution and the State, utopian practice has oscillated between escapism, politics, and creativity. Moreover, the interweaving of art and revolutionary politics accompanied the course of the avant-garde movements, whose great utopian project was the merger of art and life. Both spheres were unified through elements tied to the everyday (fundamentally to design), or also by joining the political practices of the time.

⁷ There are numerous precedents, not only in the American Revolution. Nonetheless, it is clear that in the Western context the big epistemological change was produced after the 1789 revolution.
NON-TEXTUAL UTOPIAS

Starting out from this rich legacy, this issue of REGAC Journal seeks to investigate the updating of these traditions through the dimensions of the experiential and the visual. The special section has sought to reflect some of the possible interpretations of non-textual utopia, through authors who address three relevant issues: the possibility of utopia in the history of exhibitions, the peculiarities of utopian art in socialist contexts (and, specifically, in Cuban art), and the specificity of vernacular architecture, developed in the area of intentional communities.

With “Is Another World Possible? The Politics of Utopia in Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” the art historian and curator TJ Demos turns towards utopia in curatorship in the early 2000s. Demos addresses the question from the point of view of the history of exhibitions, studying exhibition projects that associate utopia and politics in diverse ways: the itinerant Utopia Station project (2003), the Forms of Resistance (2007) show, and the Istanbul Biennale of 2009. Demos takes the analysis of these exhibitions as the starting point for an interrogation of the political agency of utopia.

Author of the book To and From Utopia in the New Cuban Art, Rachel Weiss has studied the characteristics of an art developed in an environment hugely conditioned by utopian references, as happens in countries governed by so-called “actually existing socialism”. She follows this line in her article for REGAC, entitled “The Body of the Collective and the Changing Fortunes of Utopia in the New Cuban Art.” Here, Weiss reflects on the activity of various Cuban art groups in the 1980s and 1990s, whose work can be considered utopian. In the Cuban context, this is “a story about art moving to and from utopia, in which the inverse journey is no less fuelled, and no less prefigured, by the energies and commitments of utopian ideas.”

With regard to communal practice, the special section ends with the visual essay by Timothy Miller, expert in the study of intentional communities and author of books such as American Communes, 1860-1960 and The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond. In his combination of text and images entitled “Visionary architecture of utopian communities,” Miller shows a wide collection of examples of vernacular architecture of different communities, some of which are tied to minority religions and strange belief systems. Other examples are linked to ecologist groups and reflect their experiments in terms of forms of sustainable construction. Vernacular architecture tied to heterogeneous communities puts forward the issue of the construction of place and the affirmation of identities through urban planning, architecture, and (self)construction. Miller also


takes classic examples where the history of art and communal practice are united, such as the artistic commune of *Drop City* in Colorado and Paolo Soleri’s (still unfinished) project for building the city of Arcosanti. Together with the built spaces, the text ends up showing several unrealised projects, in part linked to the tradition of utopian socialism. Through the profusion of examples, an extravagant architectonic vocabulary\(^\text{11}\) is shown, proposing the dichotomy between fantasy and reality, between idealised projection and the more modest possibilities of groups that tend to lack the means to put their urban visions into practice.

After that, articles continue with this study of the various facets and possibilities of non-textual utopia, discussing its expressions in the field of activism, architecture, design, and art. Starting this section is the text “The Retopian Approach to Art”, in which Dirk Hoyer reflects on the various types of utopia, proposing the category of “retopia”. With this new term, Hoyer puts forward a typology that tries to escape both political action without a vision of the future and escapist daydreaming without transformative undertones.

This volume then presents two analyses that focus on the utopian practice of activism. Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini, in “A Preview of the Future. Workers’ Control in the Context of a Global Systemic Crisis,” understand collectivised factories as a possible model of organisation. Focusing on the cases of RiMaflow in Milan and Officine Zero in Rome, they explore how in everyday life these taken-over spaces develop human relations based on solidarity and mutual support, pointing towards other possible worlds.

This investigation into prefigurative politics and the potential for collaboration continues in the very methodology of the following article: writing collectively, Fernando Araujo, James Block, Lorenzo Ganzo Galarça, Manoela Guimarães Gomes, Edson Luiz André de Sousa, Sofia Tessler and Léo Tietboehl, perform an analysis of the Occupy movement at the Brazilian university of Rio Grande do Sul. In “Occupying hope: notes from a university Occupy experience in Brazil,” the authors start from a posture of personal involvement and commitment to study the occupation of the university, analysing the “style” of its gestures and rituals. Following Marielle Macé, style is understood as a way of expressing concepts and visions of the world, that speak of another social reality.

With “When faith moves mountains: poetic and political utopias,” Laia Manonelles tackles art-action projects in relation to utopia. Manonelles addresses the action of Francis Alÿs in Mexico in which a group of volunteers moved a sand dune, the adding a metre

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\(^{11}\) Although its direction is collective, the non-professional character of these projects – between the marginal and the extravagant, between the sculptural and building – reminds us of the “escultecturas margivagante” [marginal-extravagant sculpture-architectures] studied by Juan Antonio Ramírez. See: Ramírez, J.A. (ed.) (2006). Escultecturas Margivagantes. La Arquitectura fantástica en España. Madrid: Siruela-Fundación Duques de Soria.
to the height of a mountain by the group *Beijing East Village*,
and Martin Andersen’s project of bringing sunlight to a dark
Norwegian valley. Developing in very different contexts, the various
works have in common the fact that symbolic actions carried
out in a collaborative way serve to alter the environment, functioning
as metaphors for social change.

This 1:1 scale brings us to the field of architecture and design.
**Efrén Giraldo and Jorge Armando Lopera** are the authors
of “Fiction and projecting: architecture and image in the work
of the *Utopía* group (Medellín, 1979-2009).” From the study
of the trajectory of a group comprising three Medellín architects,
the authors address the utopian meaning of urban thought,
while contributing to the analysis of an important chapter
in the history of architecture and art in Columbia.

In relation to the traditions of design and the legacy of the
countercultural communes, there is the text by **Kylie Banyard,**
“Andrea Zittel’s *A-Z West: An artist’s community for the 21st Century.*”
Banyard studies the group founded by the North American artist
Andrea Zittel in the Mojave Desert, investigating to what extent
this can or cannot be located within the tradition of the
countercultural communes.

**Concepción Cortés Zulueta**, for her part, draws a parallel between
human society and social insects in her text “Mundane little ants,
huge utopian insects: the myrmecological works of Yukinori Yanagi.”
Focusing on a work whose protagonists are insects
and the architecture of the ants’ nest, she studies the work
of the Japanese artist Yukinori Yanagi, in which flags made
of coloured earth containing ants’ nests show the expansive
tendency of animal societies, which end up erasing borders.
The organisation of the ants is read in a specular way: through
the entomological parallel the author shows us how this artist
presents the utopia of a world without national divisions,
exposing their artificial character.

There is also a whole tradition of individual utopias that seek
to escape the world. Some of these have been developed imagining
ideal houses, such as the small symbolist paradise that Huysmans
describes in the novel *À Rebours*, whose protagonist enshrouds
himself in a home full of objects, books, perfumes, and pictures
that represent his ideal aesthetics. **Magdalena Schultz-Ohm**
approaches this particular genre of the artists’ house: in “Living
a Utopia. The Artist’s House as a Total Work of Art,” the author
explores the homes of Johann Michael Bossard, Wenzel Hablik,
and Kurt Schwitters.
Following a line far away from the interpretation of utopian art in relation to socio-political concerns, Nadja Namus points to the meaning of “good place” in the sensorial environments of James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, and Anthony Gormley. In “AFTER IMAGES OF THE PRESENT. Utopian imagination in contemporary art practices,” she speaks of how these works would have an abstract utopian meaning, related to the production of situations and perceptive experiences, potentially transformative for spectators.

For her part, Mercè Alsina’s “The utopian potential of subjectivity in the period of neoliberal globalization. Strategies of the video essay,” starting from some concepts of Peter Sloterdijk, studies the utopian sense of the video essay and of subjectivity within the context of advanced capitalism.

Closing the issue, within a section of artists’ projects, Antonio R. Montesinos offers a visual essay showing his series Inopias, proposed as an exercise consciously related to the reflection about the “good place” and its structures.

This issue of REGAC magazine seeks to open the way towards the reflection on the possible forms of non-textual utopia. This is part of a long path, full of twists and turns, and prone to deviations. Between the macro and the micro, between escapism and social reform, utopia will continue to be an open question, a yearning that takes different names and adopts diverse forms, following the evolution of our desires and our deficiencies.
SELECCIÓN ESPECIAL

TJ DEMOS
IS ANOTHER WORLD POSSIBLE?
The Politics of Utopia
In Contemporary
Art Exhibitions
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RACHEL WEISS
THE BODY OF THE COLLECTIVE
AND THE CHANGING
FORTUNES OF UTOPIA
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TIMOTHY MILLER
VISIONARY ARCHITECTURE
OF UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES
[ pp. 42—73 ]
We live in a world where there is no alternative to the ruling politico-economic order—or so the reign of “capitalist realism” would have us think, a term that, for the late critic Mark Fisher, defines the world hegemony of the free market economy. Ever since the “New World Order” proclaimed by the chorus of world leaders after the fall of the USSR in the early 1990s, we have been led to believe that henceforth the united world of globalization would be one of liberal democracy and free market capitalism.

Political economist Francis Fukuyama glimpsed the philosophical ramifications in 1989 when he wrote: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”¹ The slogan of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “there is no alternative,” would take on added significance in the post-socialist age, not only in that there would no longer be options to capitalism as such, but also in ostensibly necessitating the market reforms, cuts to social spending, and privatization that have defined neoliberalism ever since, and particularly following the 2007 financial crisis.²

One additional consequence of the so-called post-historical era is what Susan Buck-Morss has called “the passing of mass utopia in East and West,” as there is no longer any need to think beyond the present system. Indeed, recent US elections in 2016 have shown capitalism’s triumphalist claims too have passed, and we now confront a cynical age where new modes of extreme wealth accumulation, driving a xenophobic and intolerant culture of resentment of popular struggles, accompanies illiberal, even increasingly authoritarian governance, as rightwing political movements gain ground internationally and democratic legitimacy exists as formal at best. Socialism, we’re reminded by rightwing ideologues, degenerated into totalitarianism, and has proved itself to be no more than modernity’s catastrophe, despite encouraging attempts to revive its political viability as well as reinvent the “idea of communism.”³

Apparently there’s nothing more to do than let the free market run itself, for, as critics such as Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe have pointed out (and importantly have contested), the system of post-political consensus necessitates only the technical attention of managers and experts for maintenance—and in times of crisis, of course, militarized police enforcement.4

Against these developments, a diverse range of experimental and politically committed exhibition projects have proposed critical alternatives in the first decade of the twenty-first century to the triumphalist globalism following the fall of the Wall in the early 1990s—including the itinerant Utopia Station (2003-), organized by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Molly Nesbit, and Rirkrit Tiravanija; the Van Abbemuseum’s “Forms of Resistance” (2007), curated by Will Bradley, Phillip van den Bossche, and Charles Esche; and the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, organized by the Zagreb-based collective WHW (What, How and for Whom?5). Of course there have been additional exhibitions in recent years worth considering for their challenge to the West’s politics of neoliberalism, such as Catherine David’s critical engagement with globalization in Documenta 10, 1997, and her subsequent investigations of Middle East zones of conflict in “Contemporary Arab Representations”; or the arc of Okwui Enwezor’s projects, including Trade Routes (1997), The Short Century (2001), Documenta 11 (2002), and the Gwangju Biennial (2008), which have drawn on the postcolonial to destabilize the West’s legacy of imperialism.6

But here I want to examine specifically how the endorsing of the utopian has operated in exhibitions that have transformed since the ’90s into sites of research, experimental presentation, and the adoption of Leftist politics. This move in exhibition practice, at least during the early 2000s, may itself be indicative of a trend toward a form of curatorial utopianism, defined by bringing utopian thinking into the art institution in a desirous, perhaps paradoxical, attempt to escape that context’s grasp or transcend its control, as well as by attempting to transform political reality in a significant and immediate manner, to create alternatives in the here and now. Then again, such imaginative thinking is doubtlessly welcome in today’s environment of cynicism and political fatigue.

Certainly the notion of utopia lends itself to the posing of alternatives to reality: Thomas Moore’s original sixteenth-century conceptualization of a beautiful non-place implies the rejection of the present, which suggests a critical logic for theorists like Louis Marin, for whom, writing at a much later stage of historical development in the 1970s and 1980s, it works precisely against present political arrangements. As a negative shadow of reality, utopic practice criticizes society and its laws, and, for Marin, lashes back.


5. The collective consists of curators Ivet Žurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, Sabina Sabolović, and designer Dejan Kršić.

on the real world in initiating “the beginning of revolutionary practice.”7 Of course the turn to utopia in the early 2000s is by no means simple or uncontestable, and many were opposed to it for legitimate reasons. Interviewed by curators of “Utopia Station,” Rancière warned about “misguided utopian metaphysics,” and Étienne Balibar explained that owing to its disastrous history “we need a vacation from utopia, while at the same time freeing the powers of the imagination.”8 According to Michael Hardt and Tony Negri, “One primary effect of globalization...is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no ‘outside’.”9 With such scepticism in mind, it is nonetheless worthwhile taking seriously—and critically—the recent mobilizations of utopia, and to study them in their singularity, for these projects insist on posing alternatives to the political status quo, even if each engagement does so in specific and complex ways. In approaching this material, one overarching question for me is the following: might the distancing from reality occasioned by utopian thinking represent a further instance of the postpolitical, even coming to parallel, by virtue of an unintended consequent, capitalism’s own utopian imaginary?

Or, conversely, might the commitment to the utopian represent a crucial and necessary counter-hegemonic political-aesthetic project—one that has also deeply informed radical social movements, such as those participating in the 2011 Arab Springs, the international Occupy formation, and the movement of the squares—in constructing the basis of real alternatives to neoliberalism and thus a challenge to its postpolitical degeneration?10

“Forms of Resistance—Artists and the Desire for Social Change from 1871 to the Present” focused on various moments of Western modernity when revolutionary politics intertwined with radical artistic practice. Organized around key revolutionary flashpoints—the Paris Commune in 1871, the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Popular Front in the early 1930s, the May Revolts of 1968, and the fall of the Wall in 1989—it gathered examples of Leftist artistic engagements that corresponded to each moment, including the Arts and Crafts wallpaper of William Morris, the socialist textile designs of Liubov Popova, the Proun Room of El Lissitzky, the Workers’ Club of Aleksandr Rodchenko, the posters of the Atelier Populaire from the events of May ’68, and a mini-survey of post-’89 activist works and anti-corporate globalization interventions in the video-based “Disobedience Archive” curated by Marco Scotini.11

On the whole, the show was not explicitly concerned with the utopian, although that tendency entered prominently with certain inclusions, particularly the Soviet avant-garde, redolent of the hopes of joining
aesthetics and politics in the expression of a post-capitalist culture, one founded on revolutionary perceptual experience and subjective and collective participation. But by virtue of its breadth, the survey worked to highlight the significant differences between art at different historical junctures:12. Morris’ decorative objects looking back to pre-modern modes of communal production that resisted industrialized forms of exploitation, for instance, strongly contrasted the Soviet’s futurist-oriented commitment to modernization and modernist functionality. As well, the optimistic political posters of May ’68 differed significantly from the doomsday anti-Nazi photomontages of John Heartfield. Such diverse approaches offered significantly varied political affects from room to room—from the utopian to the critically desperate—proposing both a comparative methodology of art-historical investigation and an engaged, activist mode of contemporary politicization.

While the installation presented custom designed galleries in order to individualize the presentations, one setback was that the exhibition nonetheless tended to reinforce the museological dimensions of its show, in that the work lost some of its interactive dynamism, social engagement, and dialogue with the present. Ultimately more research exhibition than activist engagement, the project also included an important reader, Art and Social Change, to supplement the artistic presentation with radical offerings of important political and artistic texts covering the same period; yet while the reader will certainly be useful for future research, the visitor’s experience of the work remained contained under the museum’ roof, which existed in tension with many of the original intentions of the pieces to break down the division between art and life exemplified by the museum institution.13.

That situation too characterized the Disobedience archive, which reflected on the art and politics of the post-‘89 context. Comprising an ongoing, multi-phase project, its diverse and constantly changing selection of videos presented instances of artistic activism surrounding events including the fall of the Berlin Wall, the financial collapse in Argentina in 2001, the ongoing conflict in Israel-Palestine, and the formation of anti-globalisation protests in post-9/11 America. In Eindhoven, the “rhizomatic” assemblage of videos, in the curator’s words, was built of fluctuating material in order to engender unexpected connections between engagements by artists, activists, film producers, philosophers and political groups, such as Dario Azzellini, Canal 6 de Julio, Guerrillavision, Huit Facettes, PILOT TV (Experimental Media for Feminist Trespass), Oliver Ressler, Dmitry Vilensky, Paolo Virno, and Peter Watkins. Presented in a large gallery on white tables and pedestals, forming a somewhat daunting labyrinth of time-based works, the sheer mass of material far surpassed the time allowance of the exhibition’s typical day visitor.


While there was clearly much valuable material presented, the framing of the archive had several weaknesses, beginning with its conceptualization. For Scotini, the project was meant to resist the temptation of “the reterritorialisation of the classic Left as a possible response to the advancing neo-capitalistic cultural barbarism,” by aiming instead “to provide an alternative model of thought and action.” What matters “is not so much an ‘alliance’ between activist demands and artistic practices in order to achieve common goals,” we are told, but rather the “common space or a common base that is emerging,” wherein it is “impossible to draw a precise line between forces and signs, between language and labour, between intellectual production and political action.” It is far from clear, however, what that means, although the intended rupture from party politics and union-based collective mobilization clearly adopts the lessons of Italian autonomists like Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno. However, the danger remained that what Scotini termed “a polyfocal approach that is not immediately directed, channelled, and disciplined” would end up instead presenting itself as a directionless dispersion of diverse but unrelated positions, articulations, and historical and cultural references, which was not saved by the structureless installation. Nor was it clear in the end how the archive’s conceptual framing identified a new political configuration, or how its embrace of the abandonment of the classic Left escaped from a depoliticizing evacuation of political engagements with the state and its corporate masters—a still unresolved challenge for promoters of the ‘micropolitical’ and those who have retreated from governmental politics.

* Utopia Station shared Scotini’s commitment to building a mutating research-exhibition over several years, one with a significantly expanded magnitude of possibilities, even while it dispensed with Disobedience’s and Forms of Resistance’s explicit radical political commitment. Utopia Station comprised various manifestations since its inauguration in 2003, including an expansive poster project in collaboration with roughly 150 artists disseminated by e-flux, various art exhibitions, and educational seminars and social gatherings in multiple cities, such as Paris, Venice, Frankfurt, Poughkeepsie, and Berlin. For the curators, these activities functioned without hierarchy of importance, as, for them, “there is no desire to formalize the Stations into an institution of any kind.” In their catalogue essay for Venice—the clearest formulation of their project—the curators introduced the subject of utopia by referencing the well-known 1964 discussion between Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. Whereas for Adorno, utopian thinking means fundamentally to imagine “the transformation of the totality”.

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15. bid.

16. See Raunig, G. [op. cit.]; this issue was also discussed at the panel I moderated at the 2nd Former West Research Congress on “Horizons: Art and Political Imagination,” in Istanbul, 6 November 2010, with Gerald Raunig, Hito Steyerl, and Ernesto Laclau.


—for which he had in mind social, political, and economic realities as an integrated system—for Bloch, utopia issues from the realization, as Brecht put it, that “Something’s missing.”

What is this something? To find out, the curators met with various philosophers—among them Rancière, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Édouard Glissant—to discuss the topic, which typifies the Station’s interrogative approach to utopia.

Whereas Rancière stressed the importance of dissensus, Wallerstein, the need to build non-hierarchical, decentralized non-profit institutions, and Glissant, the “poetic” heart of utopia, the curators “use utopia as a catalyst, a concept so much useful as fuel” and “leave the complete definition of utopia to others.”

And so Utopia Station’s contribution to the 2003 Venice Biennial followed the same logic of non-partisan curatorial promotion. Situated in the final room of the Arsenale and on the lawn outside, the Venice instalment presented the work of sixty artists, architects and groups, along with the poster project. A large plywood structure created a series of small rooms containing installations and video screenings, and an assembly of circular benches and tables placed in front of a large platform equipped the space with a performance-meeting-lecture area, the Station completed by a program of performances, concerts, lectures, readings, film programs, and parties. Among the various pieces were Atelier van Lieshout’s Total Faecal Solution, The Technocrat, 2003, a series of biomorphic toilets equipped with video surveillance, which proposed to transform human waste into biogas and purified drinking water over a 21-day cycle, thereby joining ecological recycling, scatological systems, and voyeuristic control; and Elmgreen & Dragset’s U-T-O-P-I-A (2003), a number of sculptural blocks inscribed with letters out of which two chimps, during the opening weekend, tried to form the word ‘utopia’ (their failure to do so elicited the concept’s elusive nature).

In addition, Superflex served bottles of Guaraná Power, a soft drink they produced in collaboration with Brazilian farmers, encouraging the reclaiming of local resources from multinational corporations’ monopoly on raw materials, including guaraná seeds, in the Amazon.

Any one of the many works in Venice could be considered at length for the way it specifically engaged utopia, and considering these few examples it is clear that no shared program—aesthetically, politically, conceptually—unified the Station’s inclusions, resulting in what some (including myself) have seen as a chaotic presentation.

Yet this elusiveness was also the point; for the curators, utopia necessarily “resists capture and summary as a single image,” and suggests “the image of open possibility.” While the Station’s gatherings and discursive basis recalls past exhibition projects, such as the geographically dispersed, discursive “platforms”
of Documenta 11, its manifestation pushed the transformative
dynamism and non-finite flexibility to the extreme. In this regard, 
the curators’ version of utopia as “open possibility” recalls as well 
the development of relational aesthetics during the ‘90s, which 
similarly emphasized the “space of human relations” as a “social 
interstice” within the capitalist economic field, and it is not surprising 
that several of its key participants and organizers—Tiravanija, 
Gillick, Huyghe, Gonzalez-Foerster—were affiliated with that earlier 
formation. More theoretically, Utopia Station’s peripatetic machine 
of social connectivity and knowledge production proposes a Deleuzian 
omadology, one with shades of Hardt and Negri’s elaboration 
of the multitude mixed in—but notably without these philosophers’ 
explicit political ovations, as exemplified in the famous last line 
of Empire where the authors’ confessed their “irrepressible lightness 
and joy of being communist.” And here the Station’s risk becomes 
manifold: by resisting conceptual definition in an effort to defy 
ideological dogmatism, the project courted a paradoxical convergence 
between its pledge to flexibility and capitalism’s post-industrial 
directions, defined similarly by the indeterminacy of work and life, 
creative cooperation and individual freedom (itself a lasting critique 
of relational aesthetics, where indeterminacy “inverts [its] 
anti-capitalist impulse,” as Stewart Martin has argued).

But before dismissing Utopia Station, though, one should consider 
what might be taken as its most radical move: to exit the cosy 
familiarity of its art world framework and join the anti-capitalist left 
under the slogan “Another World is Possible”—a longstanding 
mantra of the anti-corporate globalization movement—the WSF 
has served over recent years as a platform for international members 
of civil society, including the radical voices of Arundhati Roy, 
Mustapha Bargouti, Shirin Ebadi, and Gilberto Gil, and a multitude 
of environmentalists, human rights advocates, labour organizers, 
and antiwar activists, all allied in opposition to neoliberalism 
and in support of an equitable distribution of wealth, resources, 
and political participation worldwide. The 2005 meeting in Porto 
Alegre was unique in that the Forum placed “the role of culture” 
in emancipatory politics on its agenda. Utopia Station/Porto 
Alegre would be “a Station without Walls,” diffused and informal, 
comprising several appearances and interventions, including six 
ninety-minute video programs broadcast on late-night TV (with works 
such as Philippe Parreno’s The Boy from Mars, 2003; Allan Sekula’s 
Tsukiji, 2002; Pierre Huyghe’s Streamside Day Follies; and Paul Chan’s 
Now Promise, Now Threat, 2005); a bi-lingual radio show, hosted 
by experimental musician Arto Lindsay, on Radio Ipanema; and a 
presentation of the Utopia Station poster project on the city’s walls.

24. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were explicit politically too, and they write: “to say the revolution is 
its own utopia of immanence is not to say that it is a dream, something that is 
not realized or that is only 
realized by betraying itself. On the contrary, it is to posit 
revolution as plane of imma-
nence, infinite movement 
and absolute survey, but to 
the extent that these features 
connect up with what is real 
here and now in the struggle 
against capitalism, relaunch-
ing new struggles whenever 
the earlier one is betrayed.” Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1994). What is Philosophy? 
London: Verso, p. 100.
tude. Part, 12, at: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ 
dept/arthi/part/>
metamute.org/en/content/ being_liam_gillick>; and 
Third Text 21, no. 4, pp. 369-386.
explains: “the World Social Forum is an open meeting 
place for reflective thinking, 
democratic debate of ideas, 
formulation of proposals, 
free exchange of experiences 
and interlinking for effective 
action, by groups and 
movements of civil society 
that are opposed to neoliberalism and 
to domination of the world 
by capital and any form 
of imperialism, and are
The Station’s Porto Alegre edition was significant in that it brought experimental artistic practice to the centre of the global justice movement, a place where visual presentations are commonly politically instrumentalized and often “folkloric or just plain stiff,” as curator Molly Nesbit reportedly said of the offerings at such gatherings, probably referring to the political posters, ad hoc installations, and home-made media interventions of participants.\(^{29}\)

In this regard, the Station attempted to enact what Rancière terms a “rupture” in the distribution of the sensible—meaning, as the curators summarized it, “the inevitable relation between the arts and the rest of social activity… that together distribute value and give hierarchy, that govern, [and] that both materially and conceptually establish their politics.”\(^{30}\) By disrupting the political orthodoxy of ideological positions and their visual manifestations in favour of open-ended speculative process and collective creativity, the Station meant to destabilize the politically directed representations of the Forum. But what did it mean to insert Matthew Barney’s *De Lama Lâmina*, 2004, or Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, *Returning a Sound*, 2004, on late-night Brazilian TV during the Forum, the latter characterized by panels dedicated to “Organic Agriculture, Biodiversity and Climate Change” and “Speak-out on Fight for U.N. Treaty on Right to Water”? With little trace of the Station’s presence registered in the art media and political press, it is impossible to say, which is one cost of operating outside of the familiar channels of artistic dissemination.

Ironically, the Station’s commitment to “open possibility” mirrored the WSF’s own definition as an “open meeting space,” one constitutionally forbidden by its charter from making shared political declarations, for which the Forum has been criticized.\(^{31}\) As Heikki Patomäki and Teivo Teivainen, of the Network Institute for Global Democratization based in Finland, wrote of the 2005 meeting: “is it possible to do anything else than merely organise a pluralist space for meetings, discussions and festivities? Can transnational civil society organisations and movements accomplish anything efficacious to bring about ‘another world’?”\(^{32}\) These questions should also be addressed to Utopia Station. One wonders, in other words, whether the Station’s implicit challenge to activist visual culture resulted in merely an art world gesture, drawing attention to its own representational complexity, aesthetic play, and experimental form, but defusing the pointed messages of the Forum’s own politicization of aesthetics. The Station’s very openness, directed against political orthodoxy and institutionalized positions, risked diluting the directed, pragmatic energies of the Forum, especially given the Station’s decision not to organize any collaborative intersections between itself and the Forum’s events. As confirmed by some of the participants, Utopia Station was ultimately lost in the Forum’s overwhelming environment, with its Woodstock-like carnival of meetings, parties, committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth." <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2>


\(^{31}\) According to the WSF Charter of Principles: “The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body.”


For further criticism, see: Callinicos, A. and Nineham, C. (March 20, 2005). Critical Reflection on the Fifth World
With little reciprocal interest by Forum-goers in the presentations of Station artists, a frustration resulted regarding the perceived alienation of art from politics amidst the Station’s desires for renewed synergy. Still, Utopia Station deserves credit for attempting to link its micropolitical artistic projects to broader social and political movements, even if the results may have been ultimately invisible and disappointing.

Utopia Station’s non-committal position appears as the converse of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, which put utopia to task politically from an explicitly articulated leftist curatorial position. It did so by drawing on Brecht’s “belief in the utopian potential and [the] open political engagement of art” as inspiration for the show. WHW contended that if art’s utopian political potential seems “dated, historically irrelevant, in dissonance with this time of the crumbling of the institutional Left and the rise of neoliberal hegemony,” then this is “symptomatic” of the fact that “something has gone wrong with contemporary society, and with the role of art within it.” But here, this “something” was specified, as WHW titled its biennial after Brecht’s devastating *Threepenny Opera* finale, “What Keeps Mankind Alive?”, whose refrain answers the blunt question in the harshest of terms—"The fact that millions are daily tortured, stifled, punished, silenced, oppressed.” That contention—foretelling Germany’s dark future at the time of its writing in 1928—was adopted by WHW as an analogy for our present, in the grip of global changes with disastrous effects including the growing inequality of wealth and poverty, political corruption, gender oppression, and increasing totalitarian domination worldwide (indeed, from today’s perspective it’s doubtful that an exhibition like this could take place in current Istanbul, given its repressive political climate). Against our dystopian present, the curators turned Brecht’s call to politicize art into a rallying call in their effort to re-situate aesthetics in renewed solidarity with socialist modernity. As they contended in their catalogue essay, “communism,” with its “basic values” of “social equality, solidarity, [and] social justice,” remains unique as an emancipatory politics capable of challenging the global hegemony of neoliberalism, which, in an environment of increasing political authoritarianism and military domination is leading, they claim, toward fascist tendencies.

Reanimating communism is a risky venture—what of the catastrophic totalitarianism of its lived experience?—and raising the spectre of fascism may be potentially hyperbolic, if not irresponsible, especially if it cheapens our appreciation for the uniqueness of its mid-twentieth century formation. Yet WHW articulated its goals guardedly, seeking to avoid a nostalgic return to the past.
in their effort to extract the current potential of socialism; and they defined fascism today as any system that promotes extreme economic disparity, political disenfranchisement, unjust warfare, and environmental destruction (in fact such conditions appear to be growing still, and the term fascism, not surprisingly, continues to be invoked in political discourse). While WHW’s proposals may not ultimately satisfy the most contrary of critics, they do warrant serious consideration. Whereas all analogies, one could argue, are monstrous—because they eliminate historical singularity in creating superficial continuities—such comparisons may nevertheless be valuable, for on a strategic level they grant foresight and raise warnings of disastrous potential futures, warnings from the past capable of inspiring the energies of resistance now. In addition, historical juxtapositions allow instructive differences as well as useful parallels to emerge: Brecht’s time, as WHW acknowledges, was one of socialist struggle clearly posed against a mounting German National Socialism, whereas today’s post-socialist era leaves sympathizers without existing Leftist options to contest the intensification of neoliberalism, even while recent waves of financial crisis recalls the disastrous years after the 1929 economic collapse—hence the need to rejuvenate a project of emancipatory politics.

Set in three post-industrial buildings in Istanbul’s nineteenth-century European Beyoğlu district, the biennial’s inclusions focused largely on practices from the immediate region of Eastern Europe and the Middle East, exemplifying areas of post-socialism and postcolonialism now enthralled to so-called free-market democracy. Presenting work by a high proportion of lesser-known and underrepresented artists (only 22 of the show’s 70 artists are represented by commercial galleries, we learned from the show’s publicized statistics), the exhibition’s spaces were visually united by constructivist-red wall texts and signage. The biennial, however, was not so much a matter of forcing Brechtian aesthetics onto contemporary art, although certainly the use of defamiliarization, reflexive theatricality, and pedagogical experimentation—Brecht’s signature devices—surely appeared to inspire certain of the selected works, as did the playwright’s positioning of art as a means of popular education and political agitation. Rather, WHW made selections that dramatized the erosion of liberal democracy and offered a political imagination that was inventive rather than doctrinaire. Advancing the curators’ intention to politicize aesthetics, the biennial included numerous historical works that retrieved former engagements with anti-capitalist and socialist art, such as Mohammed Ossama’s documentary film *Step by Step*, 1977, portraying nation-building in socialist Syria; Uzbekistani artist Vyacheslav Akhunov’s reuse of socialist propaganda imagery in his cycle of collages, *Leninania*, 1977-82; and Turkish artist Yüksel Arslan’s allegorical paintings
from his 1973-74 series *Capital*. Such pieces, oscillating between ‘70s socialist realism and post-constructivist agit-prop, granted the show historical depth, operating much like the archive of revolutionary practices in “Forms of Resistance,” but here more regionally and historically focused. Revealing the earlier hopes for a socialist future now largely forgotten, the display reanimated an alien prehistory to our own environment of depoliticized consensus, but all the more inspiring as a result.

That depoliticization was most powerfully—and depressingly—captured in Polish artist Artur Žmijewski’s multi-channel video installation, *Democracies*, 2009, which presents a row of some 20 flat-screened monitors depicting various street rallies and public protests that had occurred recently across Europe, including the funeral of Austrian right-wing leader Jörg Haider, an Irish Loyalist march in Belfast, and Palestinian demonstrations against the Israeli occupation along with Israeli counter-protests against the Palestinians. Playing simultaneously without commentary, the cacophonous display of videos reveals the ominous transformation of public space into an arena of mob spectacle, one of fanatical nationalism, ethnic and religious exclusionism, and neo-fascist intolerance—precisely the kinds of impassioned and collective acting-out that Mouffe’s theory envisages as becoming characteristic of the post-political environment today.

WHW also called on art to invent a socialist aesthetic that would “set pleasure free” so that society can regain the “revolutionary role of enjoyment,” rather than submit to the mechanisms of social regulation and repressive control, suggesting an important attempt to join utopian imaginings to political desire and aesthetic affect.36. Coming closest to answering this imperative was the St. Petersburg-based artistic and political collective Chto delat/What is to be Done?, whose *Songspielen* presented a series of videos documenting and re-enacting the last days of Gorbachev’s USSR under Perestroika. Video footage of energized street discussions, a form of spontaneous grassroots socialist democracy, corresponded to the group’s graphic timeline of political history ending with the Soviet Union’s dissolution, while another of the installation’s videos, a kind of contemporary *Lehrstück*, showcased an allegory of the descent of post-communist Russia into the hands of greedy entrepreneurs, as the wall text posed the question “what might have been?”—which in the present context reads as one apt retort to the diktat that “there is no alternative.” Alluding to the potential of a reconstructed socialism—one of democratic participation, economic equality, and social justice—that was lost in the fragile last days of the USSR, Chto Delat’s project inspires political desires to imagine a future beyond the horizon of the capitalist-realist present.37.

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37. Chto Delat was also included in the “Disobedience Archive” at “Forms of Resistance,” although their presentation at Istanbul was significantly larger in the context of the expansive biennial.
While the exact relation of many of its contemporary inclusions to socialist utopia was often tenuous, the curators argued “that a just world order and distribution of economic goods and services is viable and absolutely vital—and that communism is still the only name for that desirable project,” making its position clear, even if all questions were not answered.\(^{38}\) And while the biennial could have integrated a greater awareness of actually-lived communism’s history of oppression into its program, in order to advance its attempted re-invention with greater credibility, WHW’s was an ambitious paradigm-shifting agenda, moving away from the neoliberal consensus in the former-Soviet bloc counties and in the Middle East. Nonetheless, critics took WHW to task for playing along with the Istanbul Biennial institution and its corporate sponsors (particularly the industrial conglomerate Koc Holding), ostensibly rendering the curators’ radical rhetoric hollow, if not hypocritical. Pointing out that the biennial would run during Istanbul’s hosting of the annual meeting of the IMF and World Bank, yet was doing nothing about it, Resistanbul, a formation of several leftist activist groups involved in the planned protests, sarcastically asked “What [does] enthusiastically clapping [after] the speeches of the CEO of Koc Holding and the Minister of Culture [mean], right after shouting out ‘every bourgeois is a criminal’”—as WHW quoted Brecht during the biennial’s opening—“if not a symptom of cynicism?”\(^{39}\) In an Afterall discussion of the biennial, editor Pablo Lafuente added additional charges, namely that “The exhibition was—in terms of its display, of its mechanisms of discourse production and distribution and its relation to funding and supporting institutions, private and public—business as usual,” which, in his view, “allows Resistanbul to dismiss it easily, as it’s not apparent how this format may contribute to changing anything.”\(^{40}\)

However, even though the exhibition was indeed conventional in format (particularly compared with Utopia Station’s experimental approach) in that it presented objects, installations, and videos in post-industrial spaces according to a standard art gallery display, and was also instrumentalized by corporations for cultural capital (typical of most contemporary biennials today), the above criticisms strike me as problematically determinist and facile—as if sponsorship automatically overrides an exhibition’s content, as if modernist installations cannot yield critical engagements today. In fact, WHW entered the fray aware of the risks, writing explicitly about how mega-exhibitions subject art to “cultural tourism” and serve as vehicles of self-promotion for cities in a globalised world, yet they nevertheless tried to “functionalize” the biennial as a revolutionary form, precisely to counter the reduction of art to global spectacle and crass entertainment.\(^{41}\) And their exhibition, in my view, did so quite compellingly. In this regard I would agree with those

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\(^{39}\) Posted September 21, 2009, on Brian Holmes’ weblog, “Continental Drift: the other side of neoliberal globalization”. In <http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/istanbul-biennial/> They continue: “13,000 robbers under the name of the IMF and the WB will be in Istanbul on 6-7 October... the streets of Istanbul will be shut down for them. Let the carnival of our resistance be their nightmare!” For further criticism, see Goodfield, E., Harutyunyan, A. and Ozgun, A. (2011). Spectacle and Counter-Spectacle: The Political Economy of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial. Rethinking Marxism. A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society. 23: 4, pp. 478-495.


\(^{41}\) See WHW’s statement in the Istanbul Biennial catalogue, where they write: “Is it possible, instead, to follow Brecht as a kind of (red) thread that leads the way in a search for a form and format for the exhibition, which would be, so to speak, ‘beyond looking,’ and could transform a viewer into a more productive participant—even accomplice?” In: <http://www.iksv.org/bienal11/icsayfa_en.asp?id=66&k1=content&k2=conceptual>
such as Brian Holmes who responded to Resistanbul’s critique by arguing that the counter-globalization movement should enter and change institutions, not merely criticize and ignore them. To form strategic alliances with projects such as WHW’s would diversify activists’ social base, expand the sites of its desired political transformations, and connect aesthetic practices to pressing social concerns on a local, regional, and international scale.42.

In fact, WHW’s biennial parallels recent developments in Europe geared toward rethinking the political possibilities beyond capitalism. While it is impossible to identify all such formations, the biennial brings to mind, for me, not only Chto Delat’s wider political activities in St. Petersburg, but also educational initiatives such as the EIPCP Transform project in Austria that investigates art’s relation to radical politics and emancipatory policies and institutions, and the series of public discussions “On The Idea of Communism” led by Slavoj Zizek and Alain Badiou at London’s Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities and Berlin’s Volksbühne during 2009-10. The latter included philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Toni Negri, Jacques Rancière, and Terry Eagleton, who have been involved in rethinking “the question of what could be today a positive meaning of the word ‘Communism’,” twenty years after the fall of socialist regimes, that is, in defiance of the notion that “society organised above all around the rules of competition and maximum profit-making [is] really the only option left nowadays,” as conference organizers put it.43.

The question for WHW is how it could have done more to connect its biennial with social movements beyond the art world, expanding the ambition of their project and the scope of its political and aesthetic aims and dissemination—something about which they could have learned from the ambitions and mistakes of Utopia Station/Porto Alegre.

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Rather than conclude by arguing for or against any one of the models considered above, in my view more discussion is needed to assess the strengths and weaknesses of such initiatives. All three projects, as we have seen, creatively challenged the imprisonment of aesthetic and political imagination by the enforced conviction that “there is no alternative” to present reality; what is needed are more, even stronger engagements. To review the lessons, it appears that one risk of curating the utopian is to end up in the non-place of its institutional and discursive invisibility (as in the case of Utopia Station/Porto Alegre)—but that is not to say that such activity is inconsequential, only unreported. Conversely, to bring the utopian into a dominant institutional location courts charges of complicity that may polarize stakeholders who might otherwise form political alliances. Perhaps owing to its very flexibility, Utopia Station held the promise of building bridges to independent

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42. Brian Holmes: “For that we need many events like What Keeps Mankind Alive, better ones, stronger ones, more deeply connected to active social forces which cannot only be protesters but must go much further into the whole cultural, professional and class structure of the contemporary societies.” [http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/istanbul-biennial/](http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/09/01/istanbul-biennial/)

voices and disparate social movements, creating political solidarities beyond clearly delineated sectarian positions—even if that promise was not fully realized or articulated. Conversely, the politically entrenched Istanbul Biennial, and the militant Disobedience archive may have drawn lines that exclude the non-committed, narrowing its range of supporters to the already ideologically sympathetic. Then again, desperate times call for desperate measures, and here declarations of Leftist solidarity defy the post-political flexibility that mirrors third-way consensus and non-agonistic pluralist agendas. In this regard, the Istanbul Biennial represents a compelling counter-hegemonic proposal that does not merely offer a platform for thinking beyond the horizon (beyond freedom without responsibility, and speculative process without commitment), but does so with a clear political alternative, venturing a real rupture in the system of capitalism, even if its site of presentation is deeply contradictory—but where today is not?

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In a neat schematic for what he calls ‘the prison house of meaning,’ David Joselit has mapped the various locations of where art does what it does. Works in which the meaning resides ‘beside’ the work correspond to a social vocation. When the import or impact is found ‘behind’ the work then we’re in the presence of iconography. And when meaning lies in the future, he says, then we’re dealing with art as utopia.1.

Utopia is always a contentious subject, and perhaps never more so than in cases where it has been taken seriously by people who are still alive. Cases, that is, like Cuba. I’ll confess that the theme of utopianism is one that I’m reluctant to emphasize too much in relation to Cuban art, since utopia is so often understood in terms of idealist dreaming and the key thing about recent art in Cuba, in my view, has been its very real agency and social presence, in its own moment. Nonetheless, many of the artists have been propelled by what we’d have to call a utopian impulse, namely the idea that art could actively participate in the process of building a just society. And their utopian faith in art was, of course, in continual dialogue with the utopian project of the Cuban Revolution overall, even if it was increasingly at odds with it.

The pattern I’ll trace here is of something that has come to be called the new Cuban art. It’s an art that, in the course of a few rapid-cycling iterations, was nested within, and in some sense tried to cope with the utopian project of the Cuban revolution and which then, after less than a decade, already had to contend with its own utopian legacy and with the double exits of exhaustion and exile. An unreliable corpse, however, the new Cuban art then reconstituted and rededicated itself, in apparently parallel though very different terms. All of this, by the way, between around 1981 and 2001.

It’s a story about art moving to and from utopia, in which the inverse journey is no less fuelled, and no less prefigured, by the energies and commitments of utopian ideas. This is a history in which the figure of return is a primary architecture, and at various points that doubling has signaled everything from reassertion to refutation. As this suggests, a major element I’m interested in here is that of generational transfer, of how the utopian cargo—whether

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felt as legacy or burden—moves from one generation to the next (and keeping in mind that in Cuba an artistic generation only takes about 5 years).

Utopia in this art had to do with constituting or repairing a social body. As an arena, it was not only fundamentally social but also quotidian—a space very close at hand, not the utopia of the horizon. In place of utopian certainties—however prospective and future-oriented—it formed a landscape of negotiation, as befits the condition of daily life. A dream not so much of destiny, but of belonging. Precisely because of its social basis it was an argumentative rather than narrative kind of utopian voice.

The first few years of this “Cuban Renaissance” had a strong spirit of recuperation and renewal, with a lot of the work emerging from an anthropological or a vernacular grounding. Idioms ranged from Afro Cuban spiritual traditions to kitsch (in both popular cultural and ideological forms) to an extremely personal and de-heroized adoption of revolutionary mythology. The work occupied an everyday space, keeping in mind that the everyday was, of course, the site of Cuban socialism’s most important promises: housing, health care, education and dignity. Artists created a novel everyday, whose range intersected the political, ethical and ideological; a social field that lived in a permanent quarrel with the theological and metaphysical; an actual, which worked to correct the speculative’s bad memory. Most of all, this everyday was a space of interaction, the place where meanings were built through social relations and where the social body came into being.

Cuba, as a socialist society, obviously accepted the idea of a collective body as its very substance: the social body in toto is claimed to be, or at least aspired to be, a collective. But what interests me here is the compound body that has been created in various ways over the decades as Cuban society formed and re-formed a whole cascade of bodies—collectives-within-the collective, we might say. To form a collective-within-a-collective somehow confounds the overall project since it demarcates zones of separateness, and in fact an absolutely crucial aspect of artistic activity from around 1986 until the mid-90s was the work of small and mostly informal collectives. This might sound paradoxical, but it’s through these collective projects that I want to take up the question of utopian energy in the new Cuban art.

By the second half of the 1980s, a significant shift in artistic production had begun to take place. This was spurred both by the fact of generational transfer and a rapidly changing national political and economic landscape (the result, in part, of perestroika and glasnost in the USSR). As the Cuban situation deteriorated into a crisis of intense ideological isolation and the beginnings of profound economic collapse, the work of younger artists took on an urgency
and radicality that matched those new circumstances. Many of the artistic proposals of those years sought to reinscribe a space for a critical culture within the broad emergencies that were quickening at the time. It was an astonishing interval in which young artists wound up leading the way in raising for public discussion the taboo subjects of corruption, dogmatism, cult of personality, lack of democracy and so on.

Art was in the middle of things. It was an acceleration of force, a performative extension concerned with public space in the form of a collective being or will. The audaciousness of the young artists soon rose up into a sustained, raucous crescendo, as did the velocity of their public presence in Havana, as did the battery of retaliations against them. The new Cuban art became an uproar.

In some cases the works took up residence in and took issue with ‘art’— and in others they rejected that cloister in favor of ‘public’ space—though it may be worth it for us to rethink this question of what really counts as ‘artistic’ and/or ‘extra-artistic.’

Among the former were works such as Arte Calle’s No queremos intoxicarnos, an intervention at a roundtable discussion on “The Concept of Art” to which they arrived wearing gas masks and carrying placards mocking political slogans: “Art critics: know that we have absolutely no fear of you,” (mimicking the billboard which has stood for years in front of the US Interests Section, declaiming “Señores imperialistas, know that we have absolutely no fear of you!”).

Significantly, though, Arte Calle also painted murals on the run, fulfilling their promise of taking up positions in the city, whether in obscure corners or right in the middle of things. What’s significant about these projects are the kinds of energies they created and released in public space. In one of their earliest outings, before the day was out, the neighbors had taken over what had started out as basically a neighborhood beautification project and turned it into a full-on public carnival, even calling in fire fighters to participate so they could climb their ladders and shoot their water hoses, all as part of making a nice painting on a building wall.

Arte Calle’s nocturnal guerrilla actions fed avid rumor circuits throughout Havana, elasticizing the institutional borders of art. When they made a mural that said “Art is just a few steps from the cemetery” in front of the Colón Cemetery in Havana, a rumor spread that a group of youngsters had painted a poster on a tomb that said “Freedom has been buried by the Revolution.” Or, when they abbreviated the group name in signing a mural as “AC,” people would interpret it as “Abajo Castro” (“Down with Castro”).
Grupo Provisional started at more or less the same time as Arte Calle, and shared their anarchic ethic, their roughhouse aesthetic tied to the punk and rockero subcultures and, most importantly, their para-artistic conception of art’s relation to politics.

Grupo Provisional’s 1988 performance “Very Good Rauschenberg” took place on the occasion of Robert Rauschenberg’s gargantuan ROCI-Cuba (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Exchange-Cuba) exhibition that was stuffed into Havana’s museums and galleries at the time. Provisional stormed the National Museum’s auditorium bearing signs reading “Very Good Rauschenberg” which they insisted (in Spanish, which he did not understand) that the befuddled artist autograph. Meanwhile Aldito Menéndez, dressed only in a loincloth and sitting on the floor directly before the artist, listened intently and inscrutably. Provisional’s silly, faux-groupie play farted on myth at several levels, from the art student’s adulation of fame, to the anti-imperialist position of the Cuban national institution, the ‘Indian’s’ warm embrace of the conqueror, and the ‘universality’ of the language of art.

But it was not all a joke. Arte Calle staged “Easy Shopping” in 1988 as a response to the government’s establishment of casas de oro, establishments that bought back gold and silver heirlooms from citizens in an attempt to generate hard currency revenues. In the artists’ view this amounted to the return of Hernán Cortés: “the Spaniards come with their little mirrors, the Indians hand over the gold,” as they later put it. As a gesture of anti-neo-colonialism they painted their bodies gold and silver and paraded through the Old City’s streets until, having attracted a substantial crowd that followed them to the edge of the harbor, they threw themselves into the filthy, oil-slicked waters. It was, according to Glexis Novoa, “like an act of suicide. For ethics.”

Performances, exhibitions, interventions, debates, disturbances, aggressions, retaliations and counter-retaliations all piled up like tightly packed isobars throughout 1987, ’88 and ’89. The wave carried a feeling of danger, an affirmative aggression as popular as it was energetic—popular precisely because it pulled the rug out from under the hero worship and piety of officially mandated selfhood, and replaced it with an imbedded pest. The work was charismatic not only for its humor but also for what it did to public space: the rising pulse of activity created a sense of public dialogue, accumulating into a substantial and ongoing presence. Gossip and rumor—historically among the most important means of communication on the island—spread the word about the constant onslaught of events, attracting a public that was not only effervescent but also heterogenous.

Never before had stories about visual art “been on the lips of workers like one incendiary more,” as Aldito Menéndez put it.

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3. Ibid.

Meanwhile, the group *Art-De* (Arte-Derechos) staged a series of weekly events in a popular city park, taking the decisive step of abandoning ‘art,’ and the shelter of its various institutional mechanisms. The Brigada Hermanos Saiz (the youth wing of UNEAC, the Cuban Artists’ and Writers’ Union and therefore an organ of the Communist Party) had actually provided support and cover for even the most provocative works—so long as they were legitimated on the grounds of being art. The Brigada’s role was to manage the situation, working with the manifestations of the “adolescent rebellion” to produce a more positive dynamic. But Art-De’s cardinal sin was to position itself outside of this official safety net, seeking neither recognition as art nor the support of the cultural apparatus for the presentation of their work. By taking over public space and inviting totally unmediated participation from anyone, there was, as one spectator put it, “no divorce between their role as citizens and as artists.”

*Me han jodido el ánimo* (They’ve Fucked Up My Spirit) was a typical work for them: in it, Juan-Sí González wrapped himself in a large plastic bag and slowly suffocated in a display of existential agony until a panicked spectator finally stepped in and tore the plastic away from his face. The happenings in the park magnetized crowds, and became the site of extraordinary public debates about Cuban society and its problems.

With their direct invocation of the issue of human rights,..., Art-De brought into play one of the dilemmas that artistic collectives faced under socialism: in Cuba, where priority is placed on a collective conception of human rights, Art-De located those rights within the individual, as is typical in western liberal tradition. By forming a collective based explicitly in political dissent—and it’s worth emphasizing that they were the only one of the artist collectives that positioned itself as dissident—they declared the socialist collective promulgated and prophesied by the state to be a fraud. And of all the contestatory groups, it was Art-De that received the full measure of the State’s displeasure.

While there may have been general agreement among artists about goals, there were real differences on strategy and tactics. These were perhaps most clearly manifested in the piece done by an assembly of artists in the Plaza de la Revolución on the occasion of Che Guevara’s 60th birthday in 1988, twenty years after the martyr’s death. The Youth Ministry solicited the young artists to do a work for the occasion, as part of a policy of constructive engagement with Cuban youth who were agitating for change.

After much debate, the group decided to make a large sign reading *MEDITAR*, a plaintive demand for reflection. The other option that had been considered was a much harsher statement, restaging an earlier work by Aldito Menéndez that consisted of a sign reading *Reviva la revolu*...—mocking the revolutionary slogan and meanwhile...
suggesting that the revolution was not only unfinished but a mess. The disagreement among the artists was not only over the conciliatory tone of the MEDITAR idea, which was a basically reformist proposition, but also with regard to the nature of the pact with power that would, or would not, be conserved. The way that some artists formulated things at the time, the goal was not the overthrow of socialism but rather the emergence of a ‘real,’ or ‘radical’ form of it. In these terms, the neutral, philosophical and inoffensive tone of MEDITAR represented a fundamentally unacceptable compromise in agreeing to coexist with power, and on terms acceptable to it.

On Sept. 24, 1989, practically every artist and critic left in Havana met up in the old Vedado Tennis Club in Havana. The event had been announced on a few posters around the city under the banner of “Cuban art dedicates itself to baseball” and, forewarned, State Security had arranged a game of its own on the next field over. “If we can’t make art, we’ll play ball” the artists said and that’s exactly what they did, on the day that many consider to have been the swan song for the new Cuban art.

It has often been said that what the young artists accomplished was to “say out loud what everyone was thinking,” but it was probably more than that: the dynamic exchanges they set in motion changed the nature of discussion about the country’s problems, and thrust it into public space. The avalanche of events and performances in Havana was almost entirely organized by the artists themselves, and so it was a kind of public address that left behind the designated physical spaces of art and its institutional horizon, framing the artistic context rather than being framed by it.

Official reaction to the artists was increasingly harsh. By 1989 exhibitions were being closed almost routinely, apparently under the direct supervision of the ideology chief of the Cuban Communist Party, because of content that was deemed to be offensive, counter-revolutionary or irredeemably ambiguous. Although no new policy was announced, it became possible for artists to emigrate. This was either an effort to rid the island of the pest or to get the artists out of harm’s way, depending on who you ask, but in any case the artists’ facilitated departure was sharply contrasted by the horrific spectacle of thousands of others who left—many of whom died—on improvised rafts in the same years.

On the island, the 1990s began with the near-total collapse of the nation’s viability, both economic and psychic—including precipitous drops in the availability of food and basic goods, transportation and electricity, not to mention hope. There was a concurrent spike in rhetoric and the public performance of commitment, and a concurrent (triangulated) ascendance of the doble moral, the new gold standard that underwrote the new
dollarized economy. The everyday was now (again) stealing, lying, pimping, hustling, deceiving, disbelieving, desperation, cheating, embarrassment, shame: survival. Artists then coming of age had to contend not only with the orphaned status that resulted from the exodus, but also with a daily struggle for survival and a generalized disillusionment that was as pervasive as it was profound.

The exodus and Special Period were blows against the body of collectivism and solidarity. Tania Bruguera felt the loss with particular force, and her 1993 project *Memoria de la postguerra* had the utopian ambition of bringing the dispersed, broken body of the new Cuban art back into a totality—not only among those in Havana but rejoining them with those who had left, no matter how provisional and fragile that reunion might be. With *Memoria*, it became clear that the collective was as much a figure of mourning as of generation. With *Memoria*, the idea of mourning as a constituent element of utopia was introduced.

Strategically and sarcastically, Bruguera produced *Memoria de la postguerra* as an underground newspaper that collected work from across the diaspora, and its unpublishable compendium concluded with a list of 106 artists who had recently left. *Memoria* embodied the camaraderie—protective, jumpy, benighted, and blasphemous as ever—of the new, chastened present. But for all of Bruguera’s mournful tone, the paper was marked by a very strange mixture of torment and silliness. With its ambiguous logo (the lettering either the work of a rushed street graffitist or else a victim’s last words, dripping in blood) and mock promotional campaigns (that included matching plastic ashtrays), *Memoria* was a difficult work to parse.

The war was over and *Memoria* was at the press conference, held at “the Center for the Salvation of Plastic Arts, in the capital.” A painter confirmed the rumors, Rafael López Ramos reported, “although an armistice has not been signed.” “Asked by this reporter about the possibility of a rejoining of forces by the army known in bygone days as *Young Art*, he responded with a laconic “No comment”.”

When grand programs have failed, the space around the edges gains enhanced authenticity. In the early 1990s, the rhetoric of community supplanted that of the collective—a more intimate and unrehearsed formulation. It was a romantic turn.

Romanticism’s ethos of the personal repudiated social consensus, and injected doubt into the heart of ideas about history and destiny. If, as Adorno had it, the loss of utopia is the loss of the capacity to “imagine the totality” as something radically different, then this occasioned, in the new Cuban art, a rethinking of the most basic question of socialism, namely of the individual’s identity vis-à-vis

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the collective. And so it was not just the limits of tolerance that changed, but the very persona of the individual as agent in society.

Much art is motivated by conflict, and the question of the relation between private and public had been also a question about where the conflict was seen to arise. For many artists, the deep internal corrosions of life in the Special Period had located the most urgent conflicts within themselves. While the public space that was imagined before was a valiant one where important things were possible, once faith in that possibility died, the revolutionary Public repaired to the domestic, distaff space, or to a public space that was now relatively minor.

A new bunch of collectives formed in these shadows. It was not only nostalgia, though it was certainly that in part: an almost schizophrenic sense of vocation took hold, at once a suspicion verging on conviction that art’s radical calling had become anachronistic, and a powerful desire for exactly that kind of restorative, self-determining agency. But the young students were not simply pawns or surrogates; they were youngsters— again— unrequited in their idealism and yearning to be artists in a way that mattered: mattered deeply, mattered broadly, mattered as Cuban. René Francisco’s DUPP (Desde una pedagogía pragmática, From a Pragmatic Pedagogy) was the first of these new collectives to solidify, and the new era was marked by René’s own rebirth in Beuysian vest and fedora.

Art-into-life returned, or remained, as a dream, but now as a means of escape from the orbit of the official, the administered, the deadened falseness of consensus and collectivity. The new collectivity entrusted the responsibilities for proper conduct of the society to the private sector, and to the even smaller subset of the individual: a kind of Dickensian belief that it was in the cultivation of empathy for the sufferings of others that social change could be effected. It was a politics of compassion and description, definitively not mass, and definitively not confrontational.

La casa nacional was DUPP’s first project, done in 1990, and it consisted of making home improvements in a solar. The artists solicited the inhabitants of the slum and fulfilled their requests—which included, for example, “repairing personal objects, remodeling the house, paint for doors, numbers to identify its rooms, dining tables, pictures of martyrs for the communal living room, pictures with religious themes and with descriptions of historical characters, a mural to give information about the community, a plaque to identify the building historically, cleaning the house and update chats with the neighbors.”

“Projects of social-cultural insertion” had been a mainstay of the early 1980s in Cuba, and had been undertaken from both

sides of the artist-institution fence. One collective project in particular, undertaken the year before in the remote and impoverished town of Pilón, was a key antecedent for DUPP’s ministrations. The project in Pilón was utopian, and some read it as utopian-revolutionary. The artists’ idea was to live together with the people of Pilón, and to make art with them in a fully collaborative process. The work, and the idea of “art,” would arise from those people and that place, not from any prior expertise or professionalism that the artists brought with them.

The project’s move out of the gallery and museum — like Arte Calle’s street commotions or Art-De’s actions in the parks — drew a parallel between the idea of the public body and public space, and implied a change in the identity of the spectator that was being sought. But it went further: the project was structured such that—in removing all of the assumptions and tacit agreements about art—it fundamentally challenged the artists’ view of themselves and of what they were doing. In this, it was perhaps the most honest collective project of all, if we understand collectivity as essentially a manner of relinquishing the defended self-identification in search of a truly social one.

Against that historical backdrop, DUPP’s revival of “projects of social insertion” in the 1990s took on an ambiguous status. The old avant-garde dream of art-into-life again raised its head, but then mostly settled for a conflation, or confusion of the two, an aestheticizing remediation of the everyday.

With the ideational core of collectivity hollowed out, the impulse to come together came mostly from a need to “belong to something.” With that spirit infusing both its utopian rhetoric and the lyrical dystopianism of its intervention, La casa nacional was, in many ways, a moment of willed innocence, a wistful gesture made in the face of the enormous new fear of the future that gaped across the country. And although it is easy — too easy, probably — to dismiss the project as opportunistic, or light, that would keep us from noticing something important: the assumed substrate of promise. But it was a different kind of promise, neither of the horizon nor the abyss, but one of lateness.

Lateness was not simply a function of age, maturity, failure, or some combination thereof, and its relation to loss was not simple or direct. It was lateness in the sense that the dying Edward Said used the term, as a “catastrophic commentator on the present”. It had to do with creativity after the engines and inspirations of youthful hope had to be left behind by young people. La casa nacional’s lateness had nothing to do with snatching victory from defeat; in fact it had nothing to do with victory (although it would have been impossible without defeat at some point).

This lateness might indeed have been a transitional time and state but, if it was, that could never be evident because *La casa nacional’s* lateness did not place its bets on what it paved the way toward: it therefore had to simply fill itself with what it was, along with what little it could rescue from the past without undue keening. This is the prerogative of late style: “it has the power to render disenchantment and pleasure, without resolving the contradiction between them.” Ultimately, according to Said, lateness comes when the limits of art have been encountered, but it does not satisfy itself with accepting them. Late works are the catastrophes, “able neither to draw back from nor fully to consummate [the] desire for the beloved, yet elusive object”.\(^9\)

The reiterated desire to fuse art and life in DUPP’s works, among other things, was strangely also a means of depoliticizing, or apoliticizing, it. The “life” that received attention was “daily” rather than “ideological,” as though those realms could be so surgically detached from each other. A minimization of the maximalist proposition of the earlier, more utopian proposition regarding art, DUPP’s iteration of the old dualism often sequestered “life” in the smaller zone of privacy, an ideology that renounced “ideology” and mustered its own, sad, tautological demise. DUPP had discovered a terrible quandary.

Just slightly later on, Lázaro Saavedra’s students banded together as the collective Enema in mid-2000. The group’s name—which means the same in Spanish and English—was a succinct declaration of their opinion of Cuban art, what it had become, and what it needed. Living in and working out of the national art school’s derelict facilities, the students developed an artistic practice that consisted in using classic performances as readymades, and reenacting them. They were especially drawn to the kind of harrowing, somatic works that artists like Marina Abramovic and Chris Burden produced in the 1960s and 1970s, based in physical ordeals, tests of endurance and quietistic displays of pain.

The collective body itself was Enema’s principal concern, and their performances often manifested it as the site of difficulty, conflict, or impossibility, with a recurrent motif of individual bodies forced into a kind of trans-individuality that never quite fuses into a collective self. The overall effect was of an ambivalent, estranging zone in which the continual passage back and forth between individual-and-collective manifested an enormous tension between public and private selves, between confession and display. This was never more forceful than in *Uds. ven lo que sienten/Nosotros vemos*, their reprise of Abramovic’s 1984 *You See What You Feel I See*, which they knew about from a single black-and-white photograph. Enema took the original work’s odd, occult feel into public space, hanging by their ankles for 25 minutes, hands behind their backs, from

scaffolding erected in the middle of a gallery patio during the opening of the National Salon. The artists dangled silently, high above the crowd, their presence and perception inverted from it, and meanwhile a live video feed doubled the inversion: the crowd saw them upright in the monitors but bizarre, hair pulled vertically, expressions strained by an invisible reverse gravity. A shocking, incomprehensible, mesmerizing private space, thick around these spectral cocoons, overflowed the gaiety of the event and silenced it.

Although Enema was often seen as a revival of the “spirit of the ‘80s,” they had a relationship to the cultural apparatus that complicated that continuity: their projects were facilitated and funded by the state. Thus, although for example in April 2001 they restaged the infamous Baseball Game, theirs was done with the cooperation—rather than in defiance of—official agencies. “It was like Ah Ha!,” one member explained, “like an action of the ‘80s but in the spirit of the ‘90s. It was like, The artist has acted— the artist of the ‘90s— and has survived and has gotten involved and has understood how it works.” The collective had become a supple enough vessel to contain various contradictions: both outlaw and client, refuge and launchpad.

However uncompleted it may be, what’s striking about this history is its persistence, its continual return to some version of the utopian formulation in spite of repeated failure and disappointment. It has been through artist collectives that some of the most important work was done—important in the sense of being meaningful participants in a process of transformation, of social betterment—and it was also in self-defining as a collective, rather than simply as part of the assumed mass collective of the socialist public body, that these artists most clearly articulated their own agency in relation to the utopian dream of revolution. The operative sense of utopia here—if we can use that term—is of an art that has clear and unique agency, that is capable of acting on and in history—in other words, a utopia of creativity. This is a utopia that has to do with three main factors of special interest to me, namely of a utopian formulation that revolves around creative activity, a utopian process rather than utopian plan or object and finally of a significant interplay between that creative output and people and questions that extend well beyond the usual reach of ‘art’, that has a magnetizing and catalyzing effect on public space.

“The finished time of tragedy,” Marc Augé wrote, making a case for oblivion, and the “continuing time of the return”.10. That ‘return’ is the key. What I’ve tried to do here is trace a dynamic of striving that passes from one moment to subsequent ones, from one generation to the next. A dynamic that was continually reformulating itself in order to do new work, despite all the news to the contrary. Whether refried, ‘late,’ or otherwise tarnished, utopianism has been—I would argue—the key energy that kept Cuban art intent

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on an ambition of social justice. The asymptotic nature of this trajectory—probably inevitable, and the result both of the difficulty of achieving such a goal and also of the very nature of art—is a propellant as much as it has been a marker of failure. I wouldn’t discount the importance of either factor in trying to understand this lingering impulse, and this insistent itch, toward utopia.

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Distinctive, and sometimes visionary, architecture has often been envisioned for, or constructed at, utopian communities around the world. Sometimes the plans are fantastic, so much so that they never get built. Others get built, but often not exactly as planned. Sometimes such structures are built in pursuit of a great vision, often spiritual or religious; sometimes motivations are ethical, as in the case of the ecovillages that are creating new architectural forms not as works of beauty, but as positive improvements for the planetary environment. Those kinds of visionary commitments have led to such innovations as cob construction (which is essentially dirt, sand, and a small amount of organic material), straw bale, and earthbag buildings. Some underground structures have also been innovative. Another motivation is efficient use of labor, making buildings that promote communal productivity as well as values. And some innovative structures are adopted as a result of economic necessity when members of a community live on very little money.

Many contingencies affect communal architecture, sometimes giving it dramatic form, but more often making it less ambitious than originally projected. One problem frequently encountered by communities is inadequate funding, a situation that can impact building plans heavily. Thus projects are started that never can be completed, or entirely new projects emerge to fit the financial, human, and material resources of a community. Another problem is that communitarians devoted to a high ideal are not necessarily good architects or builders, and thus a grand plan can turn out dismally.

But visionary structures and landscapes do get created in many cases, and even where they do not, visionary plans are sometimes left behind to inspire us.

This communitarian journey has several components. I will show some original architecture that did get built, much of it still available to see today. I will also show some imaginative architecture that did not survive very long. Finally, I will show some imaginative plans that never did reach construction.
A NEW ARCHITECTURE EMERGES

I want to start with an American example, one that inspired a whole generation of communitarians to build domes. Drop City, located in Colorado, USA, was envisioned by three artists in Kansas and built beginning in 1965. It had its origins when two of the founders lived together in a loft while attending the University of Kansas as art students and started doing art work from their loft. One such piece of art was a boot swung from a rope over the sidewalk. Another was a complete breakfast, ready to eat, set on the sidewalk in front of a local hotel. They called their creations Drop Art, and they watched the reactions of the pedestrians who happened to walk by and see the situational artworks, which they called Droppings. [FIG. 1]
Soon they decided to set up an ideal community, and found a small plot of rural land in Colorado. They knew nothing about construction, so the first buildings they built were a bit idiosyncratic. But soon one of the founders went to a lecture given by Buckminster Fuller, inventor of the geodesic dome, and excited by his work the group decided to build their own domes—in their own way, because they really had no idea how a geodesic was properly constructed. The Droppers were impoverished, so they had to make up their own form of doing things. The used scrap lumber for their frames and chopped out the tops of junked cars to cover their domes. Soon their structures became more elaborate; these joined domes were known as *the Complex*. [FIG. 2] [FIG. 3]
Drop City continued for several years as a wildly creative community of artists, enjoying a largely unstructured common spirit. They often worked together on art projects, as in the creation of what they called the *Ultimate Painting*, which was mounted on a pivot and spun amid flashing strobe lights.

But most of the founders left after two or three years and, with no membership screening process in place, some of their replacements were troubled or even violent. Drop City finally closed after eight years and the property was sold back to the man from whom the Droppers had originally bought it. No buildings survive.
Perhaps the most ambitious piece of communal architecture in many decades is the underground temple at Damanhur. The temple was built illegally; workers chipped out the rock from inside a mountain and then provided fantastic decorations for the finished temple. The result has been a most unusual and beautiful, if idiosyncratic, structure that has attracted visitors from around the world.

Damanhur members take names of plants and animals. Thus the founder of Damanhur, whose given name was Oberto Airaudi, was known within the community as Falco Tarassaco (Falcon Dandelion). Located in northwestern Italy, Damanhur, which was founded in 1975, has sought sustainable living in harmony with nature as well as the spiritual development of its members and guests. But it is the imaginative underground temple—the Temple of Humankind—for which it is best known. It consists of a series of interconnected rooms with different motifs, several of them with marvelous stained-glass domes. [FIG. 4] [FIG. 5]

And there is much more creative artistry at Damanhur. There is an outdoor temple, and one might encounter an altar, a sculpture or an elaborately painted house. [FIG. 6]

Part of the Damanhurian philosophy has to do with “selfic” devices that are said to have powers that promote healing, rejuvenation, and personal development, and are artistic treasures in themselves. [FIG. 7] [FIG. 8]

[FIG. 7] Selfic device, Damanhur.

A NEW AGE AND A NEW ARCHITECTURE

The Findhorn Foundation, in Scotland, the flagship community of the New Age movement, first came into public view as the place where members cultivated giant vegetables. You might think that the extraordinary growth came from the long sunlight of the far north country, but the Findhorn founders said it was from the members’ attunement with the nature devas, or nature spirits. [FIG. 9]

From the beginning in 1962, Findhorn was a spiritual community. One of its three founders was Eileen Caddy, who heard what she called an inner voice and communicated her spiritual messages to her associates. The reputation of the community spread, and more people began to arrive, until residents came to number in the hundreds and visitors in the thousands. Members began to build beautiful, if unconventional, buildings. [FIG. 10]

Perhaps the most unusual and creative of Findhorn’s buildings are the barrel houses. What does one do with used whisky barrels, which are abundant in the north of Scotland? The longtime Findhorn resident Roger Doudna decided to turn one into his house. [FIG. 11]

[FIG. 11] The original barrel house with its builder, Roger Doudna. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.
BLACK EGYPTIANS IN AMERICA

A group originally known as Ansaaru Allah originally was one of the Black Muslim movements, but its leader, Malachi York, stretched his religious vision enormously. At one point, he claimed to be a black American Indian; later his movement was characterized as Egyptian and called itself the Nuwaubian Nation. During its Egyptian phase the movement built these monuments at its community in Georgia, USA, known as Tama-Re: [FIG. 12] [FIG. 13]

Tama-Re is no longer to be seen, however. It was closed and the buildings and sculptures destroyed following Malachi York’s conviction on child molestation and financial charges in 2004.
PRACTICAL VISIONARIES

But other communal architecture is very much with us. The people of the Tamera community and ecovillage in Portugal are what we might call practical visionaries. Tamera was founded in 1995 in southern Portugal by several spiritually-minded peace activists who had originally come together in Germany, where they created the ZEGG community (the name is an acronym for Zentrum für experimentelle Gesellschaftsgestaltung, or Center for Experimental Cultural Design) in 1991. At their new site in Portugal they set out to reclaim land that was turning into desert, and thus to restore the local environment and make the land productive once again. Among other things, the environmental projects at Tamera are using the power of the sun in several innovative ways, and straw bale and other environmentally sound building practices are the community’s norm.

[FIG. 13] Entry gate at Tama-Re. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.
The project’s name, Tamera, is said to be an old Egyptian word meaning “at the original source.” The people of Tamera, who recently numbered about 170, are combining some old ways of living with the latest technology. Using solar energy is certainly not new; ancient peoples in several far-flung places developed curved mirrors that intensified the sun’s energy for cooking. In the last several decades, however, great advances in efficiency and design have brought the concept to the point that it could be used in normal daily life, and the ecovillages get a good deal of credit for the technical progress that many have made. Tamera has a project it calls the Testfield for a Solar Village, described as “a prototype for the testing of decentralized energy systems under the everyday conditions of a village of about fifty people.” The results of these experiments are to be used to build a true solar village that is self-sufficient in food and energy. This mirror focuses the sun’s rays on an oven that heats very quickly to cooking or baking temperatures. [FIG. 14]

Other projects at Tamera are focused on creating energy-efficient buildings. This large central assembly hall, called simply The Aula, is of straw-bale construction with a green roof, and is said to be the largest straw-bale building on the Iberian Peninsula. Several other structures at Tamera are also of straw-bale construction; the community also has adobe structures in its quest to test building techniques both old and new. These adobe-arch buildings are simple but quite energy-efficient. [FIG. 15]
The land in which Tamera is situated is known in Portugal as the Alentejo, a southern area of low population and, often, high summer temperatures. It has undergone significant desertification over many years, and one Tamera initiative is the making of water projects. Community members have built several lakes that are not sealed, but allow water to soak away, thus refreshing the water table in the area by diverting water that otherwise would have run into the ocean.

Tamera’s vision for the future goes beyond physical projects; the community also works for world peace, leading peace pilgrimages to troubled parts of the world and providing a retreat space for peace workers. It also incorporates spiritual sites where members and visitors can meditate and the community can come together for rituals. One special place is a hilltop stone circle, designed and in part constructed by Sabine Lichtenfels, a theologian and one of Tamera’s co-founders. [FIG. 16]
Another visionary endeavor resides in a different part of southern Europe. Aumism was founded by Gilbert Bourdin, a Frenchman who had investigated esoteric traditions in several different parts of the world, especially India. Back in France in the 1960s, he began accepting disciples into his Association of the Knights of the Golden Lotus. In 1969 they purchased land in mountains northwest of Nice in the South of France where they began to construct the Holy City of Mandarom Shambhalasalem at a place where they believed the Messiah would soon arrive. Over the next two decades the Aumistes built several temples and several large statues of such figure as the Buddha, the Cosmic Christ, and the Cosmoplanetary Messiah—the latter bearing a strong resemblance to Bourdin, now known as Swami Hamsananda Sarasvati. In all the Holy City was a statement of the unity of the world’s religions. [FIG. 17] [FIG. 18]
France has had a strong “antisecte” movement since the 1990s, a movement that opposes new religions and their influence. For many years the Aumists have been the objects of scorn and vocal opposition. Finally the antisecte forces prevailed, and in 2001 the statue of the Cosmoplanetary Messiah was toppled by explosives set by local public authorities. The Aumists were outraged, of course, but Bourdin had died in 1998, and the movement has dwindled somewhat since.

[FIG. 17] Entry to the Holy City of the Mandarom.Courtesy of Timothy Miller.
SAVING THE EARTH, CREATIVELY

The vision in some communities is environmental. Our modern construction methods are usually quite wasteful in construction, use, and demolition, and contribute enormously to the climate-change crisis that is rolling over us. Here the ecovillages, which have emerged over the last several years, are making important strides to minimize the environmental impact of wasteful humans and at the same time creating visionary architecture. Some examples of environmentally sane architecture are not spectacular, but their beauty lies in the economy and environmental values they present. At the Farm in Tennessee, USA, for example, a range of experiments in building is taking shape. Some of the new buildings there are of straw bale construction. But others are even more innovative than that. The Farm recently has been experimenting with green roofs and with earthbag construction. [FIG. 19] [FIG. 20]

Some of the Farm’s buildings are constructed with recycled materials, as in the case of dish antennae that have been lifted up to make roofs for tiny houses, or for an outdoor oven.

And even the sewage disposal is environmentally sound, with a sewage lagoon made of old automobile tires.
A CONCRETE EDUCATION

Attempts to make buildings unusually durable can result in striking structures. The members of Tolstoy Farm in Washington state, USA, decided to put a concrete roof on their schoolhouse, and many years later it is perfectly intact, even though the school no longer meets there. [FIG. 21]
The Earthship Community in New Mexico, USA, is especially creative. Its houses and other structures are built largely of old automobile tires and other castoff materials, including aluminum cans and glass bottles. [FIG. 22] [FIG. 23]

CREATIVE CASTOFFS
REDUCE AND RECYCLE

Environmentally sensitive construction often reuses existing materials. At Dancing Rabbit in Missouri, USA, one of the houses was made from a grain bin. [FIG. 24]

[FIG. 24] Grain bin house at Dancing Rabbit. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.
BUILDINGS CREATED BY ARTISTS

Sometimes visionary buildings never get built, or if they do, they don’t work. At the Libre community in Colorado, USA, one imaginative building failed badly. That house was built around a boulder. Before the house was built, the boulder would get hot in the sun and so it seemed that the heat retained by the rock could help heat a house there. But once the structure was in place, it cut off the sun and the rock became cold, making the house harder than ever to heat. Libre is a community of artists, and the whole community is filled with innovative buildings and other artworks. [FIG. 25] [FIG. 26]

THE SPIRITUAL PATH IS NOT STRAIGHT

Some visionary building and landscape designs are related to religious beliefs. The Harmony Society, which originated in Germany and then moved to America, built labyrinths at its communal villages. The labyrinth stood for the complicated way of the spiritual path, with its false starts and backtracking. At the center of each Harmonist labyrinth was a simple and rather crude hut—a reminder that what we encounter at the end of the spiritual quest may well surprise us. [FIG. 27]
[FIG. 26] Another house at Libre. Courtesy of Timothy Miller.

[FIG. 27] Labyrinth at New Harmony, Indiana, USA. Courtesy of University of Southern Indiana.
BEAUTY IN SIMPLICITY

Some buildings can be built with practical use in mind and still be strikingly beautiful. The American Shakers built this barn into the side of a low hill. They could drive their wagons right into the upper level and unload hay; the cows could be driven in on the lower level, and the hay could be tossed down to them. [FIG. 28]

WE ARE ALL ONE

At Yogaville, the ashram of Swami Satchidananda in Virginia, USA, a shrine called the LOTUS—the Light of Truth Universal Shrine—stands for the unity of the world’s religions. The shrine has twelve sides, each with an altar for one of ten major world religions, plus one for all other known faiths and one for religions yet unknown. [FIG. 29] [FIG. 30]
[FIG. 29] The LOTUS shrine. Courtesy of Panoramio, via Wikimedia Commons.

[FIG. 30] Interior of the LOTUS shrine. Courtesy of Pinterest.
Kashi Ashram is the spiritual community founded by the late eclectic spiritual teacher known as Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati. She was sometimes characterized as being in the “crazy wisdom” mode—funny, compassionate, demanding, outrageous, unpredictable. She founded Kashi Ashram as an interfaith center in Florida, USA. The many shrines on the grounds represent all religions and ways of worship. [FIG. 31]

THE MYSTICAL ART OF THEOSOPHY

The Theosophical Society and its many offshoots have produced esoteric and mystical literature and many unusual works of art and architecture. Perhaps the greatest assembly of Theosophically-inspired art was produced at Point Loma, in California, USA. There, with the generous support of the sporting-goods magnate Albert Spalding, several large temples and other buildings were erected in a variety of styles envisioned by the community’s leader, Katherine Tingley. Tingley believed in the spiritual power of the color purple, and thus purple glass was found in many windows and ornaments in the community. [FIG. 32]
Several other Theosophical communities produced their own visionary art and architecture as well. One early branch of the original Theosophical Society, known as the Temple of the People, settled at Halcyon, California, and there built an unusual temple in the shape of an inflated triangle. Its shape was the intersection of three overlapping circles. [FIG. 33] [FIG. 34]
The Georgian-Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff believed in the great cosmic significance of the enneagram. When his disciple J. G. Bennett decided to build a hall to house meditation and the “movements” (a kind of ritualized dancing) that were essential to the Gurdjieff work, he based his design on the enneagram. The resulting building, at a Gurdjieff center in Coombe Springs, England, was a remarkable nine-sided, fifteen-meter-high building. Built in 1956, it was destined to last only a decade. The property passed into different ownership in 1965 and the buildings on it were soon leveled. [FIG. 35] [FIG. 36]
JEZREEL’S TOWER

Also in England once stood Jezreel’s Tower in Gillingham, Kent. James Jezreel, originally called James White, became involved in the Christian Israelite Church, a group of believers who claimed spiritual descent from Joanna Southcott, the eighteenth/nineteenth-century English prophet whose ongoing influence resides mainly in her claim that she was leaving the secret of world peace in a sealed box that could be opened only in a time of crisis and only in the presence of all the bishops (then numbering twenty-four) of the Church of England. In the 1880s Jezreel directed the erection of a massive headquarters building in the shape of a cube. He died before its completion, however, and after several attempts to make it useful the building was finally demolished in 1961. [FIG. 37]
The Arcology Solution

One of the most ambitious and visionary architectural projects ever is still under construction in the American desert. Paolo Soleri was an Italian architect whose most famous work was done in the United States. He developed what he called “arcology,” meaning architecture plus ecology. He believed that radically innovative urban design was required by an environmentally challenged world, and set for to show what an improved urban way of life with a lowered environmental impact could look like. North of Phoenix, Arizona, USA, he purchased land and began to build what he called an urban laboratory to test his ideas—a town he called Arcosanti. Students come to Arcosanti to study Soleri’s ideas and to help build its structures, now numbering about a dozen. Soleri refused to accept government funding for Arcosanti in order to retain control over it. Some funding came from the community’s manufacture of bronze bells.
A PLAN FOR A GREAT SOCIALIST CITY

Other visionaries planned utopian ideal cities as well, although in many cases they never got built. Their city plans, with geometric street layouts, are often works of art in their own right, usually showing expansive parkland and orderly housing and shops. For example, the Llano del Rio colony outside Los Angeles, California, projected this design that would demonstrate the colony’s values:

[FIG. 40] Llano del Rio city plan. Public domain.
And the Koreshan Unity similarly projected a symmetrical pattern for its “New Jerusalem,” the city the movement sought to build in Florida, USA. The Koreshan Unity had other visionary ideas as well, notably a belief that the earth was hollow and we live on the inside. Members built many models to show how the earth “really” was structured. [FIG. 41]

They also conducted an elaborate experiment by which they claimed to have proven their hollow-earth hypothesis. It consisted of a long horizontal beam said to be perfectly straight that was mounted over the ocean near their property. If the earth were hollow, then the beam would eventually meet the water as the hollow earth curved upward.
Perhaps it is not surprising that many extravagant proposals were never actually constructed. Historians of the utopian tradition note that the detailed plans for Fourierist phalanxes, as proposed by the French social dreamer Charles Fourier, were elaborate and never really came close to fruition. It is said that Fourier waited daily for his benefactor to appear and finance his grand plan, but that never happened. [FIG. 42]
The British utopian Robert Owen similarly had a grand plan for a massive unitary building for his project at New Harmony, Indiana, USA, which was also never realized. \[\text{FIG. 43}\]

More recently the New Vrindaban commune of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness proposed to build a massive temple in South Indian style in West Virginia in the United States as part of its monumental “City of God.” Neither the temple nor the city ever was built. \[\text{FIG. 44}\]

Utopian communities have been envisioned and constructed by men and women for well over 2,000 years. No age lacks visionaries who, seeing the pathetic shortcomings of the world as it is, proclaim a new and better way for the human race to live and find fulfillment. No one knows when the first utopian community (which I define as a community that has specifically set itself apart from its larger social milieu, or mainstream society, on the basis of adherence to a common goal or vision) appeared, but it must have been thousands of years ago. The community of Pythagoras at Crotona, in present-day Italy, seems to have fit the model of a utopian
community, and it existed is the sixth century B.C.E. It is perfectly reasonable to believe that the human race has had utopian communities continuously for thousands of years.

Scholars are always tempted to generalize, to find universal causes and themes and outcomes, but it is difficult to see any unifying thread in the utopian communities that sprout up in all times and places. One problem is that each one generally sprouts from one person’s vision (or, less frequently, the vision of a few individuals working together), and the nature of such visions is given to wild variation. So in this brief survey we have such disparate projects as a fantastic underground temple, an attempt to prove that the earth is hollow, and a neolithic-appearing stone circle. There’s not much that is common about those visions.

But wait—there really is a unifying thread after all. These non-literary utopian projects are just that—utopian. If we understand utopianism to be, as Lyman Sargent has put it, social dreaming, then that is present in each one of these cases.

We are inclined to think of utopian schemes as literary, and indeed the world is full of literary utopias. But utopianism is not at all bounded by one cultural form. Utopian visions can be executed in painting, sculpture, music—and architecture.

Visionary architecture is a tribute to the human imagination, no matter that it sometimes is never built. Utopian dreaming and unlimited idealism are great faculties of human beings, and may they ever be with us.
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THE RETOPIAN APPROACH TO ART

Since the early 2000s Utopia has made its return into the art world. Utopian thinking became an increasingly relevant theme which inspired a multitude of artworks which were reconsidering and reevaluating the utopian heritage and its contemporary relevance, its contents, forms and functions. Notably after the 2008 economic crisis an increase in the number of exhibitions indicated that the quest for utopia was seen by many curators and artists as a way to confront the dominant social order. Among the exhibitions were Utopia Station (2003), Venice Biennale; Utopia Station Porto Allegre (2005); How to improve the world, 60 years of British Art (2006), Hayward Gallery, London; Thomas Hirschhorn: Utopia, Utopia (2006), ICA Boston; What Keeps Mankind Alive (2009) Istanbul Biennial; Utopie Gesamtkunstwerk (2012) 21er Haus Vienna; News from Nowhere: Chicago Laboratory (2013) Sullivan Galleries, Chicago; The Spirit of Utopia (2013), Whitechapel Gallery, London; Anarchy and Beauty (2014) National Portrait Gallery, London; Utopia and Beyond (2016), Castello Di Rivara Contemporary Art Centre, Turin; Paths to Utopia (2016), King’s College, London.

The ubiquitous use of the term utopia in these exhibitions makes a clearer classification of the concept paramount. The actual role art can play in shaping political (and by extension utopian) discourse is defined by the ambition (whether or not to engage with the world outside), the scope (whether or not being confined to cordoned off areas of the traditional art circuit) the functions of utopia in the context of contemporary art (and contemporary society) and the scope of hope (whether the hope for eutopia is framed in individual/privatized or larger terms). The overall question is: what is the basic attitude towards utopia in terms of utopian mental pictures and concrete political agency?

THE FUNCTION OF UTOPIA AND THE SCOPE OF HOPE

Utopian thinking is per definition an active imaginative project on a better society with the implied understanding of implementing these ideas. So utopian ideas have consequences, as the history of utopian thought has shown, utopias can have an actual impact on society. Even though some utopians (like More) were articulating their alternative visions from the privileged stand-point of being part of the political elite, they ultimately developed mental images that inspired the political struggle. Visual art, at least theoretically,
should be the key site for the articulation of mental images that could inspire the political struggle and it could be the locus for the birth of new ideas.

If art actually wants to articulate utopian visions it has to enter in dialogue with the society and not just, be appalled by the displays of social injustice in the framework of international art-shows. The first finding would be: there is an outside. Engaging with the outside could provide the material for images that are different from the master narratives of the art circuit, a starting point for any utopian thinking that, per definition, is not reduced to a partial understanding of one segment of society (e.g. the art world) but about the complex interrelationships of all aspects of society. A full engagement with the complexities of society would provide a different perspective than the punctual and diffusely focused topical approaches which change according to the seasons and the new thematic fashions. This condition sine qua non, for any utopianism in contemporary art fulfilled, the artist’s utopian function can then be analyzed in the framework of the functions of utopia as described by Ruth Levitas. Levitas defined three functions of utopia – compensation, critique and catalyst – and art has the potential to fulfill all three functions. Whereas the compensative function is akin to escapist dreaming, the critical function reduced to the negation of the existing society arrangements, it is the catalyst function that can actually effect change.

Richard Noble states that art has two utopian functions: diagnostic and programmatic. The diagnostic function is similar to Levitas’ critical function and the programmatic corresponds to Levitas’ catalyst function. For Noble the question is whether the utopian proposals have an explicit or implicit prescriptive solution. Noble gives no further explanation of the programmatic (catalyst) function but sums up the basic diagnostic (critical function): “Utopian art asks us if we ask enough of ourselves, if we look beyond the pre-digested platter of clichés about the possible we are fed on, to something better and less safe.” This definition leaves the question of concrete agency unsolved and reduces utopia to a self-interrogation device. In order to have a catalyst function, utopian thinking needs to identify a concrete political agency.

The absence of a clear definition of the catalyst function of utopia (in art) poses the risk that utopia becomes a label for diffuse critical reflections or well-intended idealism without consequences. Without the identification of a concrete political agency and a utopian mental image (that should not be confounded with a dogmatic view, but rather seen as dynamic ideal) utopian discourse risks being reduced to discourse about utopia. The absence (or the unwillingness of articulation of a utopian mental image can be explained by the fear


of being ridiculed, by the dogmatic rejection of meta-narratives, by the incapacity to imagine a different future (the *There is No Alternative* doctrine) and possibly by the absence of hope for change or by a downsized scope of hope.

Russel Jacoby describes the current scope of utopianism: “Thomas More dreamed of a utopia without war, money, violence or inequality. Five centuries later the most imaginative futurists foresee a utopia with war, money, violence and inequality.”  

But not the only the political ambition but also the scope of hope is articulated more modestly than in the times of Ernst Bloch. Bolaños acknowledges that hope might be ungrounded “for it will not allow itself to be justified in terms of naïve conceptions of humanism, teleology, and divine providence.”

This conception ignores Bloch’s idea that human agency has a transcendent potential in itself. Bolaños’ hope is at best a negative hope. “Nostalgia without content” and hope that is not grounded on any form of agency are concepts that lack the power to inspire political action. This defeatist utopianism has been summarized by Weiss: Perhaps now we have truly lost our innocence with respect to utopia, but along with the lost confidence in the possibility to conjure a prodigal utopia there seems to stand a response grounded in an ethical insistence of art, imbued with and immersed in catastrophes of the utopias that we have already known. Utopia is not a means of countering disillusionment; rather, the interest in utopia lies in noticing that we do in fact continually counter disillusionment, that we do return again and again to the question of a good (read, ethical) life – that this is a struggle which, never completed, is also never abandoned. Utopian imagining comes from awareness on some level of this persistence. It is an imagining which leaves us determined to pursue, yet perhaps even more frightened of, our own lingering impulse for utopia.

Weiss narrows utopia to individual impulses and brings down ethics to the level of individual choice. By taking the reference to the collective out of utopia, it becomes a mere foil for individual projections. Peter Thompson diagnoses a privatization of hope, and ultimately a loss of hope (due to its privatization) and notes, that in the context of the work of Bloch, the present day “apparent loss of hope for change or improvement seems to have become a self-fulfilling and debilitating condition.”

In this understanding utopia is just another ingredient in the excessive self-contemplation process and reduced to its basic compensatory function. As Levitas underlines: “In situations where there is no hope of changing the social and material circumstances, the function of utopia is purely compensatory.”
In order to make any statements about society, any utopia with claim for a critical or even catalyst function has to have a reference to collective imagination and a however defined notion of agency. Even if utopia, like art, is action on the unknown, the driving ideal must transcend the narrow frame of the self. In order for art to have a utopian potential, the scope of hope has to be larger than the privatized and individualized perspective of self-improvement.

**THE FOUR TYPES OF UTOPIANISM**

In order to frame the approach of contemporary artists, a more concrete examination of the possible reality-transcending concepts and their articulation in utopian mental pictures as well as the conceptualization of political agency are at the key criteria. Utopian approaches can be defined by their intent, their scope and their political effectiveness. In this context, the focus is on the artists Thomas Hirschhorn, Liam Gillick, WochenKlausur and the art-scene in post-industrial Detroit which serve as archetypes for four different types of utopianism in contemporary art. The research is in the archeological mode which Levitas defines as an “archaeological exercise, in that it involves digging around in speeches and policy documents, and piecing together actions, statements and silences…”9 The aim of the archeological mode is to “lay the underpinning model of the good society open to scrutiny and to public critique”. Thus the discourse of the artists on utopia will be the criterion for the evaluation of the attitude toward utopia. Henceforth the following classification is proposed:

**01. contemporary outopia — THOMAS HIRSCHHORN —**

the attitude towards social alternatives is critical because the contemporary outopia is implicitly based on the premise that social change is not possible in an all-englobing system. The world is more likely to change for worse, become a non-place, an outopia and the political imagination is forever locked in the present framework.

**02. contemplative utopia — LIAM GILLICK —**

the attitude towards social alternatives is generally positive, the need for utopian transformation is recognized and social change is considered to be theoretically possible however, no concrete agency is articulated or even identified. The general positive function of Utopia as a reality transcending political concept is recognized however often with an ambiguous angle because of the historical failures of certain utopian concepts.

**03. activism without utopian mental picture — WOCHENKLAUSUR —**

the attitude towards social alternatives is positive, activism is recognized as a way of changing the framework of society, theory is important but action is primordial. The reality transcending
concepts generally do not contain a concrete image of utopian futures but are more ideological orientation points, which conceptually frame the political struggle.

04. retopia — CONTEMPORARY ART IN DETROIT —
The fourth archetype the “retopia” can be preliminarily defined as “reconstructive utopia”, based on a critical return to definition of Mumford as “a reconstituted environment that is better adapted to the nature and aims of the human beings who dwell within it than the actual one”. Unlike Mumford’s reconstructive utopia the retopia is a eutopia (so the explicit aim is to improve the social arrangements) that does not make any claim on human nature and explicitly grounds the utopian on the local environment and not in abstract universals. Retopia is a utopia with the claim to be put into practice through social experimentation on the ground (with an open outcome).

CONTEMPORARY UTOPIA

The Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn is famous for his oversize-installations made out of cheap and recycled materials and often displayed in environments other than museums, one of his influential works was the “Gramsci Monument” (2013) in which he pays tribute to the famous Italian philosopher. Hirschhorn likes to coquet with his past communist affiliation. In an interview with Okwui Enwezor, Hirschhorn gives his definition of utopia: A utopia is something to aim for, a project, a projection. It is an idea, an ideal. It is right; it is wrong. Art and making artwork are utopian. But a utopia never works. It is not supposed to. When it works, it is a utopia no longer...

In this definition utopia is a formal strategy for art-making in general. This reduction of utopia to a project (among projects) gives no specific primacy to a lasting outcome and reflects the common understanding of seeing art as a sequence of projects that are abandoned once their final stage, the show, is reached. The fragmentary nature of the organization of the international art circuit is making such a perception a pragmatic attitude towards the ever-shifting scenes in which artworks are shown.

Hirschhorn had an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston with the title “Utopia, Utopia = One World, One War, One Army, One Dress” in 2006 and the curators, Nicholas Baume and Ralph Rugoff were framing Hirschhorn’s utopianism with the words: ...this exhibition stands in opposition to the fashionable invocation of utopia that has flourished over the past decade in the fields of urbanism and architecture, as well as in certain
corners of the art world. Concerned with proposing hypothetical social models rather than dealing with the world as it is, that discourse has often been naively idealistic. In contrast, Hirschhorn’s project directly engages the dystopian realities of our time in order to relocate our conception of utopia.11.

In addition, the curators underline that the exhibition does “not advance a particular political position or comprehensive social theory.” This is at least a curious position for the premise of “relocating the conception of utopia”. It excludes, without further explanation, the very essence of utopian thinking, hypothetical social models and a political position, from the concept of utopia. Hirschhorn himself asserts that utopia “is not coming from reflection on society and theoretical thinking” but from “headlessness”, “practice” and from art. His driving force is not illusion but hope, which he understands as “the principle of taking action”. As the philosopher Marcus Steinweg writes in catalogue to the exhibition:

Art and philosophy only exist as this breakthrough, as the violence of transgressing the horizon, as the violence of assertion of a subject of decision, of a decision which breaks through the horizon of the possible to the dimension of the impossible which is the dimension of truth.12.

While the discourse in exhibition catalogues in most cases is nothing more than the bubbles which make the fluid visual universe consumable, Steinweg’s claim about the impossibility of truth is a reflection seen through the postmodern rear-view mirror. And Hirschhorn’s diffuse utopianism, in which any utopian ideal is absent, is a manifestation of contemporary utopia, which cannot make any claims to counter-hegemonic positions (even if he pays tribute to Gramsci). The TINA premise is manifested by an absence of a utopian mental image. The agency (of art) is reduced to a self-appraisal without any foundations. Through the absence of any political imagination or agency, Hirschhorn’s contemporary outopia is locked in the present framework.

**CONTEMPLATIVE UTOPIA**

Liam Gillick already pointed out the problem of the undefined use of utopia in 2003 when he co-conceived one of the early manifestations of a return to utopia, the *Utopia Station*, at the Venice Biennale. Gillick underlines that the problem is “linked to the wide-ranging use of the term utopia – the literally no place – in our current language. It is a common enough word so we don’t think twice about using it.”13.

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12. Ibid., p. 5.

For Gillick “the situation is effectively post-utopian in terms of the absence of functional alternative visions” and utopia has effectively become a “flawed dysfunctional accusational tool”. In the context of the Utopia Station at the Venice Biennale, Gillick asks: ...how to proceed when you are not convinced by current conditions. Working in a relativist, parallel fashion appears to be sufficient at various moments, yet with a continuing proliferation and appropriation of models of radicality by others, it becomes more and more difficult to divine the differences between one named structure and another. It is possible that there is some kind of irony at the heart of its use here. An acknowledgment that the activities of the artists concerned has reached a point of perfect irrelevance.14.

For Gillick, the best strategy to counter the irrelevance of art and to re-conceptualize Utopia, in the context of the exhibition is to present Utopia as a “free-floating non-defined sequence of propositions that wander in and out of focus and avoid being lodged within the consumable world of the concept.”15: The question is if a free-floating non-defined sequence of propositions with a diffuse focus might not become irrelevant in itself. For the fear of being co-opted, Gillick wants to sacrifice coherence. The contradiction here is evident: how is it possible to present a functional utopia without conceptualizing the possible alternative politico-economic arrangements?

As a re-conceptualization, Gillick offers a ‘post utopian’ approach, “an attempt to break free from the application of the word utopia to any old alternative structure that happens to have existed.” The term ‘post utopian’ is an attempt to disconnect the word from its history, a history that Gillick sees as irrelevant, as his remarks about Thomas More’s inaugural work indicate. For Gillick utopia is “a word that was originally used to title a book that was intended as a localized critique of a particular historical circumstance has no relation to its original meaning.”16: This maximum downsizing of the contemporary relevance of utopian concepts indicates a genuine disinterest in the reality-transcending potential of utopian visions. In addition, Gillick’s speculation about Thomas More’s original intentions to write Utopia are unfounded and lack any historic evidence. Gillick’s understanding of the book as a localized critique shows a lack of knowledge about Utopia’s actual historical influence.

In the very end, Gillick is inconclusive on whether the functional utopia is an appropriate tool to counter the dominant system. He writes: So one question might be – is it necessary to resurrect the notion of a functional utopia in order to provide a set of rhetorical tools that might help us out of the currently reactive situation we find on the progressive left, or should we keep with a relativist form of multiple interest development that remains mutable, fluctuating, responsive and inclusive.17.

14. Ibid., p. 3.
15. Ibid., p. 3.
17. Ibid., p. 154.
The implication here is that utopia is immutable, irresponsible and exclusive shows that Gillick (involuntarily) echoes the neo-liberal critique of utopian thinking. Gillick’s reflections about utopia show all the characteristics of a contemplative utopia.

His attitude towards social alternatives is generally positive, the need for a conceptualization of utopia is recognized but his overall attitude shows an ambiguity towards the concept of utopia because of historical failures of certain utopian concepts. There is no articulation of agency in Gillick’s writing. His utopian mental image can be described as vaguely free-floating, an abstract utopian becomingness. What Gillick fails to recognize is that the free flow is actually the metaphor for the global markets, and thereby of the neo-liberal order that he attempts to criticize.

**ACTIVISM WITHOUT UTOPIAN MENTAL PICTURE**

The Austrian group WochenKlausur has a fundamentally different approach to art than Gillick. Instead of finding theoretical foundations for the articulation of social alternatives through art, the group, founded in 1992 by Wolfgang Zinggl, attempts to find new forms for social interventions. In their first project “Medical Care for Homeless People” (1993) they designed an artwork, an ambulance car, that was not presented in the institution that commissioned it, the Vienna Secession, but used for practical, free of charge, healthcare for homeless people in Vienna. After the exhibition project was over, the social organization Caritas took the project over and the medical care in the mini-bus is continues until the present day. The group, since then, on the invitation of art institutions, is practicing social interventions in a variety of fields such as city development, integration of immigrants, community development, education, the treatment of drug addicts, civic engagement...

WochenKlausur (2003) explicitly claims that one of the functions of art “has always been the transformation of living conditions” but, in contrast to Beuys or the Russian Constructivists, contemporary interventionist art is no longer “mercilessly implementing an ideological line”. The position the group articulates is more pragmatic: Activist art no longer overestimates its capabilities. But it does not underestimate them either. It makes modest contributions. And yet, in the proper dose art can change more than is assumed. Art must devote itself to very concrete strategies of effecting change.

In contrast to 1980s Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Homeless Vehicle* (1988-89), they do not aim at creating valuable exhibition pieces that transport street flavor into the museums but see social renewal as an important function of artistic production. For WochenKlausur, art has the “ability to offer the community something that also
achieves an effect.” The group wants to use the artists’ competence in finding creative solutions and the skill to shape materials also in relation to problems that arise in society. Through intensive actions that are limited in time they want to use the infrastructural framework and the cultural capital of art institutions for their interventionist art. The space for art, as WochenKlausur states, is not the museum: The demand has been coming up again and again for a long time now: Art should no longer be venerated in specially designated spaces. Art should not form a parallel quasi-world. Art should not act as if it could exist on itself and for itself. Art should deal with reality, grapple with political circumstances, and work out proposals for improving human coexistence.18.

While the approach is situated in a longer tradition of interventionist art, the Austrian group is more modest in its scope than comparable 1960s movements, the artists acknowledge that “it would be wrong in a society in which every discussion of basic principles has been lost, to expect that something like art can make decisive changes.” As the focus of WochenKlausur is on intervention, a contribution to the discussion of utopian visions is largely absent in this artist group. WochenKlausur uses the word utopia more in the colloquial sense as something impractical, as their description of Wodiczko’s work indicates: “Wodiczko’s approach – he looks for solutions within the realm of existing possibilities, even if they do seem a little utopian – is certainly worthy of mention.”

WochenKlausur’s approach can be described as activism without a utopian mental picture. Their attitude towards social alternatives is positive, activism is seen as a way of improving society, but there are no coherent reality transcending concepts, which the group denounces as “ideological lines”, the conceptual framework is intervention but there is no clear utopian image that motivates the intervention. The attempt to reconstruct society is not locally rooted but happens selectively, depending on which art institution invites the group, and is limited in time. The hegemonic structure that might be at the root of the social problems is largely left unchallenged, the group is rather trying to soften the social impact on a punctual level.

Perhaps utopia is difficult to locate in the still relatively prosperous centers of Western world. It could be that the most fertile ground for reality-transcending concepts are the places that were left behind by the global markets, or, to remind the comments of Mumford\textsuperscript{19}, it would be possible “if the foundations for eutopia were established in ruined countries; that is, in countries where metropolitan civilization has collapsed and where all its paper prestige is no longer accepted at paper value.” Following the media reporting of the last few years, one of these ruined places in a non-war zone where metropolitan civilization has at least partially collapsed is Detroit.

It might be difficult to judge from the distance whether the ex-boomtown, having just recently recovered from bankruptcy, is becoming what Carl Swanson\textsuperscript{20} called “another twee urban utopia”. The city infrastructure of Detroit was designed for 1.8 million people (1950) but is currently inhabited by less than 700,000 people. Thus the question arises, once (and if) the city is recovering from the aftermath of the neoliberal shock therapy, can the problem of the scarcity gap be solved in an innovative way. Does the abundance of space provide the topos for the creation of a new place? Or to formulate the question differently: is Detroit becoming what Bolaños\textsuperscript{21} called a “nostalgia without content”, a “Soho in the 1970s” as Swanson described it, or can the ruins of capitalism give birth to different social arrangements?

In any case the metropole in decline is attracting a number of artists with two fundamentally different motivations: revitalization of urban communities or continuation of artistic practice under cheaper living conditions. The latter case is exemplified by the move of the former New York based Galapagos Art Space. The group bought nine buildings with the total size of more than 180,000 square meters for the price, as the Galapagos website\textsuperscript{22} boasts “of a small apartment in New York City”. Galapagos\textsuperscript{23} claims that Detroit has the three ingredients that any city needs: To flourish, a well-functioning creative ecosystem needs three things in abundance; time, space and people. Arguably, New York City has people but they no longer have time or space. Detroit has time and space and is gaining its critical third component – artists – at an astonishing rate.

Arguably the implication that only artists are the critical third component (people) is betraying a certain sense of disinvolvement with the local Detroit community and hints at the abuse of the Detroit city space for cheap living costs.

\textsuperscript{19} Mumford, L. \textit{The Story of Utopias}. [op. cit.], p. 14.


The relocation will show, if the art space is just looking for another, a cheaper, New York City in which the 1970s nostalgia can be projected. If this motivation to move to Detroit becomes the predominant tendency, then (a part of) the city will recover along the global lines of gentrification, individualist (pseudo-)bohemian life styles and cosy artistic escape at the edge of the status quo.

**THE RETURN OF THE COMMONS?**

However, the current situation, has at least the potential to find genuine links to the post-break down symptoms of capitalism and develop social alternatives. As it seems, the urban dismantling left space in abundance in Detroit, the question would be if the space, at the moment dominated by the phenomenon of social disintegration, can be transformed into a place, a eutopia. Reports that indicate that there are 1300 community farms in Detroit that produce enough fruit and vegetables to supply 20% of the city are encouraging signs of a positive transformation.

So, will Detroit be the place that shows what happens after the enclosed space (the critique of which motivated Thomas More’s *Utopia*) is opened up again? Can the city be a model for the reestablishment of the commons?

One of the negative societal developments that led Thomas More to write *Utopia* was a profound transformation process society that started already in the 12th century and gradually accelerated in the early 16th century: the local gentry paved the way for excluding a significant part of the rural population of their livelihood by enclosing land. Previously common lands (the Commons), which were at the disposition of the rural community, were privatized and the act of theft was later legitimized by the British legislation through the so-called Enclosure Acts. These acts drove a significant part of the country-side population into abject poverty which partly also resulted in the rise of criminality. In his world-systems theory Immanuel Wallerstein sees the 16th century as the starting point of the capitalist world system (which he predicts to come to an end in the first decades of the 21st century). So the question arises: is Detroit prefiguring developments that might at a later point become global tendencies?

In his blog, Vince Carducci, sees tendencies that could indicate a partial return to the idea of “the commons” He writes: The first iteration has been to think in terms of something I call the art of the commons. This lens reveals a significant (though certainly not exclusive) tendency within contemporary Detroit art that has emerged in those spaces where the distinctions between public and private

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seems to have dissipated as part of the process of demassification of the city’s core, which has taken place over the last four decades.

Carducci describes the situation referring to the concept “real utopias” by Eric Olin Wright. Wright argues: The idea of “real utopias” embraces this tension between dreams and practice. It is grounded in the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history, and while it may be naively optimistic to say “where there is a will there is a way”, it is certainly true that without a “will” many “ways” will become impossible.

Based on Wright’s optimistic claim, Carducci sees the potential of artistic interstitial strategies to create social alternatives outside of the modern state. The “withering away” of capitalism in Detroit thus provides space for art of the commons which for Carducci is a return to the medieval (pre-capitalist) roots of defining property. Carducci writes: Referring back to the medieval commons (land left open for grazing, farming, and other uses by anyone without requiring individual ownership – the term “commoner,” i.e., one without hereditary title, comes from it), the art of commons trespasses the boundaries of conventional property relations of the modern capitalism.

By pointing at the property relations, Carducci (without even referencing Thomas More), returns to the roots of utopian dissatisfaction with the economic system. The decisive question for the future development will be whether the Galapagos Art Space understanding (dislocate to Detroit, because it is possible to acquire cheap property) or the art of the common (ignoring property relations and create open spaces) will dominate the cityscape.

New relations of solidarity could be created through the art of the common approach while the “Galapagos” solution might turn Detroit into the new Berlin (another trend city in the globalized lifestyle circuit). (Eastern) Berlin was showing what happens to the open spaces after the breakdown of communism: a short period of freedom followed by a long, and still ongoing, period of Disneyfication of freedom in the form of lifestyle. Ironically, with the rise of the techno-subculture in the end of the 1980s some people used to say “Berlin is the new Detroit”, the transformation of Detroit into a cheap lifestyle oasis might result in the sentence “Detroit is the new Berlin”. The fashion city cycle has then enclosed another city in transformation.

The success of the art of the commons approach is difficult to judge from the distance. Art projects like Detroit Beautification Project, Grand River Creative Corridor, Object Orange have actively


used the city as a canvas. The Heidelberg project led by Tyree Guyton has created open-air art environments to revitalize urban communities (although recent developments hint at a closing down/commercialization of the project). But the idea of the commons can be pictured, it can be demonstrated, it can be artistically stimulated (not in pseudo-manifestations of communality such as relational aesthetics) and it can be located.

The “commons” can have a place and the commitment is not just limited in time (at least not in short time). As Carducci clarifies: ...the art of the common proposes alternatives for inhabiting and nurturing the urban landscape by using values other than those based on the logic of pure economic exchange, such as concern for environmental sustainability, social equity and respect for community as a site of human interaction.28.

Will Detroit be the ground for new social relations, based on the absence of scarcity of urban space, will artistic and civic agency reconstitute the city and create a eutopian environment? Will the “commons” find their image in successful projects that are realized and will the image of the “commons” become a utopian mind picture? The outcome is open, as the social experiment is ongoing. But the retopian approach to contemporary art (and politics) has the potential to reintroduce reality transcending political concepts that do not replicate the authoritarian cul de sacs of past utopias while at the same time reaffirm the catalyst function of utopian thinking. The options for Detroit (or as matter of fact any city abandoned by capitalism) are limited: either dystopia (in the form of a gentrification mixed with extreme levels inequality) or retopia.
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A PREVIEW OF THE FUTURE WORKERS’ CONTROL IN THE CONTEXT OF A GLOBAL SYSTEMIC CRISIS

The global financial and economic crisis starting in 2008 and the response of the political elites have discredited representative democracy, politicians and the capitalist order in the eyes of many, as huge movements, mass protests and uprisings throughout the world showed. More and more people realise that the existing order does not have to prevail forever, that it can be altered and changed. Utopian rehearsals, experiments with new economic forms and horizontal ways of social organising can be found all over the world. They are testament to the demand for a ‘real democracy now!’ raised by 15 million in Spain, among others.

While acknowledging that utopias serve only to be pursued, always incomplete, in the very process, social rights will be won or at least consciousness awakened. Utopias articulate the desire for a different way of how to organise reality and society, other ways of being in the world. Social transformations begin in the imagination, in hope, in desires and must not any more be imagined as an island with an alternative social order, such as was first done and named in the sixteenth century. In a situation where the physical and ecological limits of the planet are obvious, there are no islands left to be discovered, nor any unknown societies with a more egalitarian social order. ‘Utopia’ cannot be thought of anymore as a ‘nowhere’ (no place), but we have to look – and fight – for it in society as it exists, in the here, there and everywhere. One of these ‘concrete utopias’, as Ernst Bloch called them, realistic possible concepts for a better world, that can already be found in the here and now, are ‘recuperated companies’. These worker-controlled workplaces allow a glimpse of how society could be organised differently. In 2017 there were some 360 recuperated workplaces in Argentina, at least 77 in Brazil, 22 in Uruguay, approximately 100 in Venezuela and a few in several Latin American, European, North African and Asian countries.

1. PSJM (2013). Discourse ethics, the imperative of dissent and ethiconomics. Nolens Volens No. 6, p. 41.

In the early years of the new millennium, factory occupations and production under workers’ control took place almost exclusively in South America, with a few isolated cases in Asia and Mexico. It was beyond the imagination of most workers and theorists in the northern hemisphere that workers would or could occupy their companies and run them on their own. Since then however, the global financial and economic crisis has led to the occupation of workplaces and production under workers’ control in the United States, Western and Southeastern Europe and North Africa.

Dozens of companies were occupied by workers as a means of struggle in order to exert pressure for the fulfilment of demands regarding unpaid wages and compensation in cases of factory closure or mass dismissals. But for the first time in decades several struggles were also carried out from the perspective of production under workers’ control. Some of these struggles gained a little international attention, like Vio.Me in Thessaloniki, Greece. Some, as with the French Fralib Tea factory in Gémenos excited national interest. Most cases however, are not well known, such as Officine Zero in Rome and RiMaflow in Milan or the Kazova Tekstil factory in Istanbul. It is likely that more company takeovers and struggles for workers’ control are taking place which remain almost unknown to the wider public. Compared to other historical moments when factory takeovers and workers’ control were part of offensive struggles, the new occupations and recuperations developed out of defensive situations. Workers carried out occupations and recuperations motivated by the crisis, in reaction to closure of their production site or company, or relocation of production to a different country. They have tried to defend their workplaces because they have little reason to hope for a new job. In this defensive situation, the workers not only protest or resign, they have also taken the initiative and become protagonists. Some well-intentioned authors calculate 150 recuperated work places under worker control in Europe.

A closer look shows that very few of these can really be considered ‘recuperated’ and under worker control. The number given includes all workers’ buyouts of which most have, at best, adopted the structure and functioning of traditional cooperatives. Many, if not most, have internal hierarchies and individual property shares. In the worst cases unequal share distribution is made in accordance with the company’s social hierarchy (and therefore economic power) or even external investors and shareholders (individuals and major companies). Such structures reduce the concept of recuperation to the continued existence of a company originally destined to close and simply changing ownership from one to many owners, some of whom work in the company: they do not provide a different perspective on how society and production should be organised.

Cooperatives rarely question private ownership of the means of production; they tend to see this individualistic notion as the source of the right to participate in decision-making and benefits. This same idea and logic is a fundamental characteristic of capitalism. Cooperatives may represent a positive step in democratising ownership of enterprises within the frame of capitalist economy, but they are not therefore an alternative.

Imagine all the cooperatives founded during the last 100 years having remained as such with non-capitalist ideas; they would constitute a significant sector of the economy. But they haven’t. Most see their ideals fading away as their members age, while having to act in a capitalist economy and not follow its rules is extremely difficult. They started with great ideals but over time ‘sold out’ both ideologically and materially. Often, they have been sold to corporate business or investors once they reached a certain size. Their individual notion of property makes that possible.

As Rosa Luxemburg noted: Co-operatives – especially co-operatives in the field of production – constitute a hybrid form in the midst of capitalism. They can be described as small units of socialised production within capitalist exchange. But in capitalist economy exchanges dominate production. As a result of competition, the complete domination of the process of production by the interests of capital – that is, pitiless exploitation – becomes a condition for the survival of each enterprise. [...] The workers forming a co-operative in the field of production are thus faced with the contradictory necessity of governing themselves with the utmost absolutism. They are obliged to take toward themselves the role of capitalist entrepreneur – a contradiction that accounts for the usual failure of production co-operatives which either become pure capitalist enterprises or, if the workers’ interests continue to predominate, end by dissolving.⁴

That most cooperatives are embedded in the framework of the capitalist economy and compete on the capitalist market following the logics of profit-making has serious consequences for the company model they develop. Many have employees who are not part of the cooperative, and have wage differentials which, although perhaps smaller than in normal private enterprises are real enough so that a manager’s income nevertheless might end up being several times that of a worker. And while many cooperatives might be worker owned, they are rarely worker managed, especially larger cooperatives such as the famous and often praised example of the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation in the Basque country.⁵


Contemporary worker-controlled companies almost always have the legal form of cooperatives because it is the only existing legal form of collective ownership and collective administration for workplaces. Usually, however, these are based on collective ownership, without the option of individual property, where all the workers have equal shares and an equal voice. It is an important and distinctive characteristic that they question the private ownership of the means of production. They provide an alternative to capitalism based essentially on the idea of a collective or social form of ownership. Enterprises are seen not as privately owned (belonging to individuals or groups of shareholders), but as social or ‘common’ property managed directly and democratically by those most affected by them. Under different circumstances, this might include, along with workers, participation by communities, consumers, other workplaces, or even – in some instances – of the state as for example, Venezuela or Cuba. When workers control the production process and are decisive in decision-making, they are likely to become social and political agents beyond the production process and the company. As Gigi Malabarba emphasises:

It is essential that forms of cooperative self-administration are strictly situated in a frame of dynamic conflict, in tandem with social struggles as a whole, and, starting with workers’ struggles together with union militants willing to fight, they cannot be isolated. We can’t stop thinking of ourselves as part of the class war. How should we alone be able to bring about a law that really makes it possible to expropriate occupied spaces to give them a social use? In other words, how can we build social and political balances of power that can stand up against the dictatorship of capital and achieve some results? This is the only way self-administrated cooperatives and economic sectors based on solidarity can play a role in the creation of workers’ cohesion and prefigure an end to exploitation by capital, showing up the contradictions of the system. This is especially the case in a period of deep structural crisis like the present. 6

In Italy some 30–40 bankrupt small and medium enterprises have been bought out by their workers during recent years and turned into cooperatives. Even if some commentators compare them to the well-known Argentine cases, 7 many are neither really under full and collective workers’ control, nor do they in any way envision an alternative to capitalism. Two recent cases, RiMaflow in Milan and Officine Zero in Rome, are different and fully comparable to several Latin American cases of workers’ takeover.

The Maflow plant at Trezzano sul Naviglio, in the industrial periphery of Milan, was part of the Italian transnational car parts producer Maflow, which during the 1990s had become one of the most important manufacturers of air-conditioning tubes worldwide with 23 production sites in different countries. Far from suffering the consequences of the crisis and with enough clients to keep all plants producing, Maflow was put under forced administration by the courts in 2009 because of fraudulent handling of finances and fraudulent bankruptcy. The 330 workers of the plant in Milan, Maflow’s main production facility, began a struggle to reopen the plant and keep their jobs. In the course of the struggle, they occupied the plant and held spectacular protests on its roof. Because of their struggle, Maflow was offered to new investors as a package including the main plant in Milan. In October 2010 the whole package was sold to the Polish investment group Boryszew. The new owner reduced the staff to 80 workers. But the new investor never restarted production and after the two years required by the law preventing him from closing a company bought under these circumstances, the Boryszew group closed the Maflow plant in Milan in December 2012. Before closing it, it removed most of the machinery.

In reaction, a group of workers from the Maflow plant first occupied the square in front of their former factory and in February 2013 they went inside and occupied the plant, together with precarious workers and former workers of a nearby factory shut down after another fraudulent bankruptcy. Gigi Malabarba, a worker at RiMaflow, explains in a film on the factory: For practically one and a half years, we have worked voluntarily in a dedicated manner, without which it would not have been possible to make this place usable again. There was no electricity, no infrastructure, no doors and windows, etc. It had to be put in order again. I think it’s a great result to have brought it up and running again, maintain it, something that was deserted and would have turned into an environmental problem. We have decided to constitute ourselves as a cooperative and at the same time to create an association on two levels: first, at the level of production, we were able to design a new industrial strategy, which uses the factory for the reuse and recycling of electrical material, but also with a broader approach to co-initiatives that have helped us and were helpful to achieve some income and to make the factory known to the outside world. In the matter of food, we have created a group for solidarity purchasing, in direct relationship with the producers at the south agricultural park. That was the key to establishing a relationship with the local population, food being a central concern and the agricultural park being next to us. On the other hand, developing these activities allows us to present a model for an open factory.8.

8. *Occupy, Resist, Produce – Rimaflo* w, a film by Dario Azzellini and Oliver Ressler, 34 mins, 2014.
In March 2013, the cooperative RiMaflow was officially constituted. Meanwhile the factory building itself passed to the Unicredito Bank. After the occupation, Unicredito agreed not to demand eviction and permitted the cooperative free use of the building. The 20 workers participating full-time in the project completely reinvented themselves and the factory. Ri-Maflow worker Nadia De Mond describes the concept of the ‘open factory’: The open factory allows people who have political or social sympathies for what happens inside here, to be active. They get specific tasks to support the project. For example, in-house production: this producing always takes place in the context of an ecological, agricultural economy of solidarity. We make food and beverages with its ingredients. We then distribute them through a solidarity circle and beyond. The income generated assists the workers of RiMaflow and the project.9

What can seem like a patchwork to traditional economists is in fact a socially and ecologically useful transformation of the factory with a complex approach based on three premises: ‘a) solidarity, equality and self-organization among all members; b) readiness to engage in conflicts with the local authorities and private counterparts; c) participation in and promotion of general struggles for work, income and rights.’10

OFFICINE ZERO, ROME

The core business of Officine Zero, former RSI (Rail Service Italia), and before that Wagons-Lits (French), was the maintenance and repair of railway sleeping carriages. When in December 2011 Italian train services decided to stop night-train services and invest in fast-track trains, RSI closed. At that time the workforce consisted of 33 metal and 26 transport and administration workers. All began to be paid a special low unemployment income on account of the abrupt closing of their company. But not all accepted the closure, and 20 workers started a campaign. Together with the activists from the social centre, ‘Strike’, they started a ‘laboratory on reconversion’, organising public assemblies attended by hundreds of people. The ‘crazy idea’ of the Officine Zero was born. Precarious workers, craftsmen, professionals and students joined the occupation. On 2 June 2013, Officine Zero was officially founded as an ‘eco-social’ factory and presented to the public with a conference and demonstration. Officine Zero means zero workshops: ‘zero bosses, zero exploitation, zero pollution’, as their new slogan says. The name also points out that they had to find a new model. The former RSI workers dedicate themselves mainly to the recycling of domestic appliances, computers and furniture while the mixture between old and new work forms; bringing together different precarious work situations; and trying to overcome isolation and individualisation are important core ideas of the project.11

9. Ibid.


COMMON CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALS FOR WORKERS’ RECUPERATIONS

Contemporary occupied or recuperated workplaces often face similar challenges: a lack of support by political parties and bureaucratic unions or even their open hostility; rejection and sabotage by the former owners and most other capitalist entrepreneurs; a lack of legal company forms that match the workers’ aspirations and any institutional framework; obstruction by institutions; and little or no access to financial support and loans, even less from private institutions.

The general context of global economic austerity which contemporary recuperated factories have to face is not favourable. Starting new productive activities and conquering market shares in a recession is not easy. Moreover, the capital backing available for worker-controlled companies is also less than for capitalist enterprises. Usually an occupation and recuperation of a factory takes place after the owner has abandoned both factory and workers: either he literally disappears, or he abandons the workers by firing them from one day to the next. The owners owe the workers unpaid salaries, vacation days and compensations while starting to remove machinery, vehicles and raw material before the closure of the plant. In such a situation, with the prospect of a long struggle with little or no financial support and an uncertain outcome, the most qualified and often the younger workers, leave the enterprise, hoping for a better option. The remaining workers have to acquire additional knowledge in various fields to be able to control not only the production process itself, but also to administer the entire company, with all that that implies. And then, once the workers take over the factory, the former owner is likely to re-emerge and wants ‘his’ business back.

It is not true that capitalists only care about business no matter how it is done and with whom, worker-controlled businesses face not only capitalism’s inherent disadvantages for those following a different logic, but also often the constant attacks and hostilities from capitalist business and institutions as well as the bourgeois state. Worker-controlled companies that do not adopt capitalist functioning are considered a threat because they show that it is possible to work differently. The Venezuelan worker-controlled valve factory Inveval, for example, had the experience that the valves it ordered from privately-owned foundries were intentionally produced with technical faults.12

Given this, it is important to re-state the potential and possibilities of worker-controlled companies when recuperated workplaces are democratically administered. Decision-making is always based

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on forms of direct democracy with equality of vote among all participants, be it through councils or assemblies. In the better documented cases we also find that ecological concerns and questions of sustainibility became central, be it one of recycling, as in both Italian factories; the change from industrial glue and solvents to organic cleaners in Vio.Me in Thessaloniki; or the factories in France switching to organic products and using local and regional raw materials and also distributing their products locally and regionally. These emphases are seen by the workers in the larger context of the future of the planet, as well as more immediately related to health threats to workers and surrounding communities.

The struggle of the workers and the occupied or recuperated workplace becomes also a space in which new social relations are developed and practised: reliability, mutual help, solidarity among the participants and solidarity with others, participation and equality are some characteristics of the new social relations built. The workers of the recuperated factories recognise themselves in each other and consider themselves to be part of a broader movement.

Nadia De Mond, a worker in the film *Occupy, Resist, Produce – RiMaflow* describes it like this: For me, self-administration is also a project for a different society. It is not only a matter concerning a factory, even if it is an open workplace, but it is also linked with all that surrounds us. For if we think about what will happen next year (2015) here in Milan with the Expo, concreting everything in sight, the degradation of the land, the decisions that are made, especially those that affect the production of food you ask: How can you change these things? It needs direct participation and self-administration of the people. I think that another society, a change that is absolutely necessary from an anti-capitalist and ecological perspective, can only be based on self-administration, understood in a broader sense, one that affects us as producers, as well as consumers. What should you produce? For which needs? A redirecting of everything from this viewpoint, then you will see how this can be organised at the level of a city, a country.13

Not every single characteristic taken out of context and separated from others carries the prospect of a different society beyond capitalism. It is the combination of several that turns the recuperations into laboratories and motors of the desired alternative future. The direct democratic mechanisms adopted by worker-controlled companies raise important questions not only about individual enterprises, but also about how decisions should be made throughout the whole of society. In doing so, it challenges not only capitalist businesses, but also liberal and representative ‘democratic’ governance.

13 *Occupy, Resist, Produce – RiMaflow* [op. cit.].
LESSONS FOR UTOPIA

There are a number of important conclusions regarding utopia we can draw from the example of the recuperated workplaces. One of the most obvious is that Utopia is not a pre-designed configuration which has only to be put in place. The workers don’t occupy their workplaces driven by revolutionary intentions. In contrast to takeovers under self-management of the past which happened during offensives of the working class and of revolutionary forces, the occupations of the past 20 years are out of a defensive situation. They are accomplished mainly out of a context of need, in which workers have little alternative options and get little or no support by parties, unions and the state. The workers do not have any prior experience in struggles for the takeover of a workplace and the administration of the production they can build on. They never thought before that they would occupy their company in order to produce under workers’ control. Nevertheless, they develop offensive struggles out of the defensive situation and become agents of their destiny instead of resigning. In the course of the struggle most workplaces develop and adopt egalitarian and directly democratic practices and structures and connect with other social and labour movements and struggles.

This brings us to a second crucial point: the Company recuperations have to be seen much more as a social process than an economic process. Every worker of a recuperated workplace will confirm that through the recuperations and the collective democratic administration everything changed: from the labour process to social relations among the workers and with the surrounding communities to the value and values produced by the company. The struggles of the workers and the occupied or recuperated workplace have become a space in which new social relations are developed and practiced: affect, reliability, mutual help, solidarity among the participants and solidarity with others, participation and equality are some of the characteristics of the new social relations built. Therefore the recuperated enterprises are not only a way to gain back initiative in struggles, but also a kind of Benjaminian Now-Time, a glimpse what a future alternative society could look like, a concrete utopia.

The recuperated factories usually develop a strong connection with the territory. They support close by neighbourhoods and in turn are supported by them. They interact with different subjectivities present in the territory and develop joint initiatives. Connections with different social movements and social and political organizations are built and strengthened. All the factories mentioned here have developed direct relations with social movements and especially the new movements that were part of the global uprising since 2011.
This is a clear parallel with Latin America where successful factory recuperations are characterized by having a strong foothold in the territory and close relations with other movements.14

This anchorage in the territory helps them to face another important challenge. Changing forms of work and production have radically diminished the overall number of workers with full-time contracts, as well as reducing the number of workers in each company. While in the past job and production processes automatically generated cohesion among the workers, today work has a dispersive effect, since workers of the same company often work under different contracts and with a different status from each other. Generally, more and more workers are pushed into precarious conditions and into self-employment (even if their activity depends totally on one employer). How can these workers be organized and what are their means of struggle? This is an important question the Left must deal with to achieve a victory over capital. RiMaflow and Officine Zero in Italy have built strong ties with the new composition of work practices by sharing their space with precarious and independent workers. Officine Zero declares: “We want to restart from the origins of the workers’ movement by connecting conflict, mutual aid and autonomous production.”15

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ball I threw when playing in the park has not touched the floor yet. —DYLAN THOMAS

Jean Pierre Vernant, in his book *L’individu, la mort, l’amour* proposes a thesis stating that the writing principle of Homer’s *Iliad* is based on the use of poetry as an expression of a fight against the forgetfulness. Underlying the more than fifteen thousand verses of the oldest and largest literary work of the Western culture, endures, therefore, the gesture of carving the word to make it the flame that keeps the memory of the heroes alive.

Similarly, as Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin reminds us, the Greek word *Sema*, before taking its most abiding meaning of “sign”, was used for centuries in the Greek culture as a synonym of tomb.1. Additionally, the author reminds us of the fact that the earliest known glimpses of written signs in the Western culture have been found in the form of funeral inscriptions. Both memory and writing have a double weakness stemming from the fact that both are based on the paradigm of “trace”, that is, they represent the presence of something that no longer exists, and that always threatens to be permanently erased.

As in Homer’s endeavor in *Iliad*, this text also takes on this historic compromise in undertaking memory and writing as a form of struggle against oblivion. Therefore, the desire that motivates this text is to keep alive the presence of an episode of campus occupation among college students whose utopian character is our outlining goal.

Following the idea of Unger, according to which societies are “built and imagined”,2. we aim to reconstruct, from the depiction of four image-scenes that took place within this occupation experience, the multiple forms of refusal that were expressed in the plane of the ordinary routine practices of life in the occupation.

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that accomplish the fundamental need of the utopian thought: the exercise of imagining “better futures”.\(^3\)

That way, it is speculated that the description of these small gestures costumary to the everyday life in the occupations — its temporality, its urgency, its art, its erotic, its particular form of promoting meetings and negotiating differences —, perhaps more than its macropolitical goals, can illuminate the production of new images, not yet available, that indicate ways to build a non-existent social reality, yet to come, and about which we still know little.

2. UTOPIC IMAGES: STYLE AND METHOD

*Surgissez bois de pins, surgissez dans la parole L’on ne vous connaît pas. Donnez votre formule.* — FRANCIS PONGE

*Non, pas question de paix: nous sommes inépuisables en expériences.* — HENRI MICHAUX

the bet in describing the image-scenes of everyday life in the occupations as a way to tell the story of this movement makes justice to the methodological option chosen in this essay to continue unique experiences from its “form”, that is, covering the traces of its style.

From the recent contributions of Marielle Macé for a reflection on the sense of style — emphasizing its content of concept, at the same time anthropological, moral and political\(^4\) — we understand the notion of style as the Foucauldian thought program proposed in the 1970s, the problem of the “stylistic of existence” as an approach that allows one to think of “forms of life” in terms of an “experience of engagement”. Here, the term “engagement” refers to the forms from which, by argumentative route\(^5\) or by the traces of a style\(^6\) people qualify life and the world, that is, put into question the good or bad character, fair or unfair in the world and the situations in the world around them. In doing so, people thus mobilize values and conceptions of the good life and good society on behalf of which they believe that life is worth living, against the backdrop the “story of a future to-come”, namely a future to be built collectively. That implies pursuing what is not yet known, the dimension of the “not yet” of Ernst Bloch.

This perspective of thinking about human action and the repertoires of criticism is very much in tune with the works of the so-called “pragmatic sociology of criticism” which, from the so-called “pragmatic gesture” in the field of social sciences in the French

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\(^6\) Macé, M. (2016). *Styles: critique de nos formes de vie*. [op. cit.]
context, brings as a fundamental proposal the resumption of the reflection on the centrality of morals and values in social life from the analysis of critical repertoires and justification of people in common situations of dispute in the ordinary life.7.

This theoretical constellation, reactive to the tradition of structuralist sociology, focuses the sociological analysis on the actions, in the arguments, and in the forms of life that the actors perform and take as theirs, in the speeches that they sustain from their moral point of view, from what they see as bring the good, the well and the right.8. This proposition seems to be especially interesting when one has the objective of analyzing repertories of contestation and criticism of social movements that, from different moral grammars, call into question the fair or unfair character of the present social reality, thus producing diverse forms of construction of the new.

In these terms, the small gestures, the rituality, the rhythms, everything that concerns the “how” of life, come into play as traces/tracks of a style, i.e. as tools for classifying life in terms of an “experience of engagement”. It is in these terms that “the vocabulary of the style makes up a vocabulary of the value,” that is, it brings with it a critical reflection about the meaning of forms of life and living, viewed here from their formal aspects (relating to form, to the “how” of everyday life) in which the form also becomes the gateway to the question of values.

Not by chance, Marielle Macé starts from the poetry of Piero Pasolini to approach the question of style. According to the author, Pasolini’s “poetic rage”, consumed in every small trait of his incendiary poetry, becomes the basis of his style, which seeks to elaborate a vigorous reflection (and a forceful criticism!) on the violent transformations of the forms of existence in the first half of the twentieth century. Literature serves in this context as a privileged gateway to the reflection on the “style”, as it is one of the fields of artistic production where the full extent of the question of “form” is most clearly perceived. As Macé argues, “the literary texts, in their variety and singularity, constitute the place par excellence where one thinks — without fixing oneself on — the sense of the form, of the ‘how’ (...) attention to the various engagements of the literary style is at the same time its object and its practice”.9.

At a given point in the essay entitled “É antes o fim de um mundo” (“It is before the end of a world”) the writer Manoel Ricardo de Lima invites us to think about the discussion of what the poet Pasolini called “creative fiction of the lived”, the ideation of the poetry of “inventing everything” as an ethical commitment. It is a radical perspective of invention perhaps in proportion to the size of the refusal of what is set as the only setting for life. In the poem

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“País” (“Country”) Eduardo Sterzi writes, “- this is almost a country. / But this country / doesn’t exist. This country / is no good...”:10.

When Sterzi writes “this country”, it is as if we could read “not mine”. A kind of refusal to accept this country as one’s own. The need to invent everything. The need to invent a language as a tactical field, or, as Deleuze said, “to invent a missing people”.11 It is in the attempt to “organize the pessimism”, as Walter Benjamin said, that this fragment is placed, that is, a historical and critical gamble so that we can invent new ways of life and experience loving the world we hate, once again paraphrasing Pasolini.

The only possible answer may be that of Pierre Naville, which became famous in Walter Benjamin’s pen.12 According to them our mission would be to organize the pessimism. Walter Benjamin is explicit in saying that organizing pessimism means discovering a place of images in the field of political conduct.13 It is interesting that Naville’s text “The Revolution and the Intellectuals”, written in the late 1920s, will precisely draw the landscape of violence and obscurantism of an Europe marked by Stalinist tyranny and the rise of Nazism. The triggering question of the text, however, is a fierce defense of surrealism against all criticism of this artistic revolution. Naville’s text is impressively up-to-date. Thus, we will highlight from this text the concept of utopia in a critical pessimism, in which the author shows us the utopian power of true pessimism.

In these terms, Naville defends the idea of a responsible and consequent pessimism indicating that hopelessness can fulfill an important function in the political scenario. He criticizes the naive hope associated, according to him, with the mediocre aspects of an era. In this sense, we can say that Naville proposes an active pessimism and that it must find its lead. “It is necessary to organize the pessimism, or rather, since it is not a matter of submitting it to a call, it must be allowed to organize itself”.14 The challenge would be the needed resistance to what he names the tyranny of the future. However, the question that remains is precisely how it is possible to inject utopian power into hopelessness. The path is not simple, but certainly the only way out is to be able to narrate and witness affection to this world. In other words, pour into language what we experience. Therefore, some powerful images may come up helping us to see and understand better what we live.

It is in behalf of this refusal to accept the present state of things as they are presented that this text proposes a reflection on the new modalities of life and social criticism that germinated from an experience of an university occupation in Brazil. In this sense, we also aim to re-launch the presence of this “non-textual utopia” in the hope that it may inspire the ever-present need.

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13. See here the essay by Georges Didi-Huberman on this question. Ibid.

for invention of better futures, thus taking on its commitment to poetic ethics and the utopian method, which together make up a method for producing knowledge and intervening in the world.

3. THE OCCUPY EXPERIENCE IN TIMES OF “CONSERVATIVE TURN”

“But where the danger is, also grows the saving power.” —HOLDERLIN

Over the last years, it has been noticed in the global geopolitical scenario what has been conventionally called the “conservative turn” in the scope of the political representation. A series of more or less recent historical events converged for the design of a global social order in which the conservative thinking seems to strongly re-emerge, turning its rhetorical arsenal in the recent “losses” caused by the major global economic crisis.

For example, we could list: i) the collapse of successive leftist governments in Latin America; ii) the election of President Donald Trump in the United States after one of the most overtly conservative campaigns of a presidential candidate in the United States; iii) the migratory crisis in Europe and the corresponding popularization of radical proposals of nationalist parties; iv) the strengthening of ethnic tensions, especially in Europe, under the so-called “culturalist neo-racism”, understood as a mode of sociability, from which one rejects certain social minorities whose cultural practices or identity traits are not accepted by a majority. The list could go on at length.

On the other hand, the impasses produced by the structural crises that capitalist development has been undergoing since the end of the twentieth century favor the upsurge of important social tensions around the world which, in turn, give rise to several critical repertoires related to the difficulties of modernity in sustaining its promises of emancipation and affirmation of rights.15 As examples of these structural crises, we can mention: i) the ecological crisis in the face of the destruction of ecosystems and the limitation of biodiversity; (ii) the economic crisis and the deepening of unemployment, stagnation and increasing social inequalities throughout the world; iii) the political crisis stemming from growing disbelief in the autonomy of the political space before the merging with the economic power, and many others.

It is important to point out some of the political developments that emerge as an initial response and expression of a latent subjectivity capable of opposing the discourses that “nothing can be done” in relation to this state of permanent crisis of capitalism. Reassembling a political narrative of the global struggle cycle of this last decade directs our eyes to the year of 2011,

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when a tsunami of mobilizations and social protests started in North Africa, overthrowing dictatorships in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, stretched across the Mediterranean Sea to find Spain and Greece. The historian Enrique Carneiro recalls the event that originated these revolts: A Tunisian fruit seller commits suicide by immolation on December 17, in 2010. This desperate gesture, seemingly an individual act, has brought to light the “psychological exhaustion of many peoples at once.” The popular rebellions of North Africa are taken as an example of revolutionary courage by the Outcasts of the Sun Gate; of the Generation to Scratch, in Portugal; and by the occupants of Syntagma square in Greece. Carneiro recalls that “in all countries there was the same form of action: squatting, use of alternative communication networks and political articulations that rejected the traditional institutional space.” However, the anarchic breeze of the cycle of struggles was not extinguished in Europe. Unknowing boundaries, it traveled the Atlantic Ocean and erupted in Chile in student claims by public and free education. Then, it stretched to the northern hemisphere to kick off Occupy Wall Street in New York at the center of the global financial heart. The union of the bodies in the public space in a state of occupation made appear the popular demand for real democracy, political demand for truth against the false politics of bureaucrats, those who represent the 1% of the political and financial caste. Since its beginning, the Occupy Movements were taken as political anomalies, a product of subversive and intoxicated young people. What is important here is to emphasize the relevance of a resistance movements which still with precarious names, but that can be taken as an experiment of invention of new political dispositions.

In the Brazilian issue, a possible starting point for thinking about the eventual “conservative turn” dates back to the scenario of 2013 and the wave of popular demonstrations that took place that year. Initially, the demonstrations were based on an eminently progressive agenda, led by the Movimento Passe Livre around the demand for the lowering of ticket prices and improvement of the public transport system. In this context, which also coincides with the anteroom of the 2014 World Cup, a series of left wing social movements spread over the streets of major Brazilian cities, denouncing the roughness of urban life. In these repertoires, a series of denunciations was aimed at criticizing the high cost and poor conditions of the public transport and public health services options, as well as, on the other hand, the enormous expenditures of the Brazilian State with the construction of large Arenas for the World Cup.

Little by little, the “June journeys” gained a massive adhesion of traditional sectors of the Brazilian middle class that, until then,
seemed to have remained outside the mobilization. Thus, with the increasing blooming of the origin and of the social class of the protesters, there is also a movement of increasing ideological heterogenization of the demands in the agenda. In this context, the posters and slogans painted in the colors of left-wing progressivism, originally organized in the orbit of “a city without turnstiles,” also orbit around the old themes more aligned with the conservative spectrum: the fight against corruption, the excessive payment of taxes, the reduction of the penal age, the inefficiency of the State, etc.

One year after the “Journées”, Brazil watches the fiercest presidential election of the Republican period, which results in the reelection of the Workers Party candidate, Dilma Rousseff, with a narrow margin in relation to the second place candidate, Aécio Neves. In these same elections, according to the Inter-Congressional Department of Parliamentary Advice, the Congress elected is the most conservative since 1964, with a significant draw of politicians linked to social groups traditionally committed to conservative agendas (including the armed forces, ruralists and members of neo-Pentecostal churches).

On the other hand, the recent effects of the economic crisis in Brazil seem to reintroduce in the daily agenda conservative conceptions and measures in the field of economic policy. In this context, there is a growing apology to the free market, to the reduction of the State’s role in regulating economic exchanges, to the curtailment of public banks, and a growing questioning of the extent of social rights and public services in the face of recession. In the field of security, with increasing violence and crime rates, there has also been an upsurge in authoritarian and life-threatening punitive measures, such as the popularization of support for the death penalty, reduction of age of criminal liability, and life imprisonment for heinous crimes.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the vertiginous thickening of the cultural conservative broth in Brazil. The rise of an intellectual body of Brazilian journalists, writers and columnists who dedicate themselves to writing works for dissemination of Brazilian conservative ideology moves the publishing field in an extraordinary way. In this fashion, the so-called “politically incorrect guides” proliferate or, moreover, books that tell stories of people who enjoy some public prestige (artists, writers, intellectuals) and who have made political conversions toward conservatism. In addition to these works, it has been seen in the Brazilian publishing market a massive amount of “popular” books whose commitment is the dissemination of ideas that are dear to conservative thinking and of open controversy and detraction before the social movements that present themselves with the colors of left wing progressivism.
In this worrying scenario, Michel Temer illegitimately takes power with an agenda aimed at forcefully implementing, without the proper democratic debate, a series of conservative policies driven by a troupe of politicians involved up to their necks in scary corruption scandals.

It is on this context, thus, of conservatism turn on the political representation and public discussion on Brazil, that we also observe, on the other hand, the flowering of an important movement of resistance pulled out by some social movements, including high school students. Throughout the year of 2016, young people from all around Brazil, mostly between 14 and 18 years old, high school students, have occupied their schools in protest against the austerity measures and the education reforms imposed by the Brazilian government. Among these reforms, we can highlight the PEC 55 and the High school reform.16.

These reforms, whose texts were produced without any consultation or popular discussion, found in the students themselves their most dedicated critics. Discontent with their content and with the undemocratic way in which the reforms were imposed, the students themselves took responsibility for their own future and, in a gesture of courage and political protagonism, occupied their schools as a form of protest in the name of public education.

It’s worth sharing here one scene of the documentary “Lute como uma menina (Fight as a girl!” (2016)17 which will lead us to find, right here next, on the different styles of students narratives, the transmission of an occupation experience. Just as the act of occupying the secondary school was the great motivating force for university students to have this courage as well, the scene of this documentary that will be described also forms part of the quest for the ways of narrating. This film, directed by Beatriz Alonso and Flávio Colombini, is an excellent material to understand the various reasons why the schools were occupied.

We also find that the scenes narrated by these girls convey a great political engagement, a living indignation, a force of resistance and the testimony of the violence they suffered.

A student speaks of an episode during a demonstration in which the violence of a police officer upon her and her colleagues highlight the intentions of the State and its police apparatus when we speak and fight for a quality public education. “Then I was holding [the chair] so I grinned good, waiting for the boys to negotiate there with the police, then a policeman comes and picks up my chair, then I pulled him back and there we were: I’m holding one now and he pulling the other, pulling, pulling, pulling.”

16. The so-called “PEC55” consisted of a Draft Constitutional Amendment that transited and was approved by the Brazilian Congress over the last months of 2016. In the context of the economic recession that has dominated the country on that time, this Amendment had as objective the freezing of public expenditures for the next twenty years based on the 2016 budget. Thus, this project was seen as an instrument of public expenses reduction looking towards an improvement of the economy. This way, also in Brazil we have seen the confirmation of a (dangerous) global trend of coping with the economic crisis faced by fiscal austerity programs that reduce investment in the “non-market” areas of social life, such as health and public education, whose commitment of investment by the State, in the Brazilian case, is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution of 1988.

On the other hand, the High School Reform consists of a political maneuver aimed at removing the compulsory nature of certain disciplines in the humanities field of the high school curriculum, such as sociology, philosophy and arts.

17. The movie “Lute como uma menina! (Fight as a girl!” (59:00) can be accessed through the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OCUMGHm20A&t=3853s>
The tension in front of a chair. It was not just a chair. It was a high school chair. It was a chair held by a student struggling for education. And even at the insistence of the student in the tension in the chair, the policeman pulls out of his hand and throws away on the floor. She finally says, “No! The chair is from school, it’s going to break!” It was not just a chair. It was a symbol of the care about education. And after this, we can see many cases of students tried and found guilty of depredation of the public patrimony, as the girl from the movie mentions. [FIG.1]

We can start our reflection from the point of view of a chair to think about the ‘how’ of the relation between social movements and the apparatuses of the State. A school chair paralyzed by the tension of the hand of a high school student who fights for a quality education with the hand of a policeman who insists on taking her and throwing away, through violence and abuse of power. In this narrated scene, it turns out that not only the chair of his school is taken from his hands and destroyed with the violence of state powers, but also the education of a country.

The so-called “urgency of suspension” was, therefore, a concept and a political *praxis* of intervention created by young people among 14 and 18 years old that, as perspicacious observants of their present time, did not cease to take responsibility for their future time. And in the Brazilian context, this fundamental responsibility is hampered by the criminalization of social movements, transforming a political demand into a police / judicial issue, as well as the publication of the book *Busy Schools* (2017). In this written record, we come across various testimonies of the student resistance in the face of a scary scenario of precarious services to the population as well as the excessive state violence that daily violates human rights. As an example, we can mention an occupation in the Department of the Treasury that culminated in the arrest of a journalist who fulfilled his work, of a filmmaker and of supporters, among them a student of the psychology from the same university as the authors of this article. In addition to the 33 underage students who were detained but had their cases dismissed later. And even more than a year after the event occurred, their trial is still not over. Even though aware of the state strategy of demobilization, students have been showing us the struggle to rethink the forms of teaching and learning in schools, finding in the occupations possible responses of refusal face an overpassed educational system. By doing this, the students also take advantage of this space-time to strengthen the networks of affection that will make all the difference in future resistances. In this book, we find reports of many high school students who teach us to invent other possible ways of thinking what a quality education is.
“We’re trying to bring some culture to school, because we do not have any of it. The arts course is offered only in the first year and it is an art that ‘there, go draw something and hand it to the teacher’. We think that art is music, it’s theater, it’s graffiti and it’s promoting workshops like that. There are people here who like music, who sing, and why do not we bring it to our conviviality? Why can not we have a diversified class, a cinema-debate? Why can’t we use a space that is ours? We want to bring this in the workshops because there are a lot of people who feel this difficulty of not being able to bring what they like into the school and many times when they try, it is barred. “ Ana Paula, Protasio Alves High School.

Some months later, the high school boldness have contaminated the college students that, similarly, also began to occupy the university’s buildings on behalf of the public education defense and as a way to ask for more democratic debate concerning the measures of fiscal austerity and education reforms “proposed” by the government. Thereby, universities all over Brazil had their buildings occupied by students who, just like the high school students, promoted a radical critique not only of austerity measures but also of the classical forms of participation and political representation.
One of the arguments that this text pursues is that, in the day-to-day of the occupations, the daily practice of the students in this space of coexistence, as well as the experiences produced there, promoted a true uprising against the apathy of the “conservative turn” which takes place in Brazil nowadays and, in the same way, contributed to the emergence of new repertoires of criticism and contestation of the dominant forms of life, inside and outside the university.

It is in this context, therefore, that the four scenes below try to make emerge some images lived by the students who participated in the occupation of the building of the Institute of Psychology of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The essayistic tone of each one of them tries to preserve the power of invention, of risk and of hope within the scenario in which they were born.

4. GROUNDINGS

“The ground when it flees from the feet,
Everything loses its gravity,
Then we will be alone,
A foot from the city floor.” —LENINE, CHÃO (2011)

Walking is the act that presses me, in rhythms that are giving way to a style of each being; and there is no choice... I pressure them at the same intensity. At each step, one glance, looking for an image that walks, never to be fully captured. I witness the walk of those who experience the slowness of the moment in which they stop to meet other’s steps; to stop, as life blossoms. There is also those who rush, they are forced to run, as if the sound of the footsteps resonate production. Usually the worried footsteps are those who consume me more valiantly, not frightened by what they may cause – be it a stone, an uneven patch of land, a strange object sort of left out on the middle of the road, a hole in the ground – it seems that the fear of tripping comes from something harder, deeper, brighter and more forgotten. The rollers, the feet that became wheels teach me that there are bumps in life, I love trying to follow them, unlike the authoritarians, who impose a kind of step as if no one could supersede theirs. And I must confess, what is common among all of them, or at least almost, they all fall, there is always that fall, the boldness in embodying life’s gravity. That’s the risk.

Each way of walking traces a line in the composition of an unfinished drawing. On this textual ground, in which you stand as well, the eyes stroll looking for memories of a students’ surge occupying their schools. Aren’t we all occupying with a body-thought in a determined time and space? Why do we occupy?
In the moment in which the weight of our presences, on October 31, 2016, in a circle made me feel a pressure I had never felt before, a vibration made me question: what was that pressure that transformed an everyday place into something else? What was that place where I lay? So many teachers, students, workers, together on the court of a university building and the not knowing was a breath of fresh air. Why do we occupy? The act of the high school students had a major role on the decision. They taught and still teach the world the courage of trying some new ways of teaching and learning, owning a place that belongs to them, but makes itself distant as a control mechanism. They were the ones that magnified a crack in me, which now creates its ramifications. Is it possible to think that crack as an act that cuts on the surface of appearances, so as to make an image out of darkness? Or should we consider the crack as grounds that escape our feet, as the Brazilian musician Lenine says? Isn’t it in darkness where we find a background, almost a ground to the creative act? Putting our foot down, literally; the act of refuse.

Facing this frightening scenario of instability and violence that looms over us, facing this blinding light, we occupied. The need for a suspension made new ways of walking possible, since I not only lay my feet on the ground, but also, from that day on, was a pillow for many dreams.

**5. BEGINNINGS**

“And suddenly you know:
It’s time to start something new
and trust the magic of beginnings.” — MEISTER ECKHART

ABOUT ONE OF THE BEGINNINGS.

For a moment I stop this writing to know what day of the month it is today and I realize that the day of the month that appears on my cell phone is not correct. I tell Matthew that my record of memories of everything that has been happening since the first day of the occupation is not recorded according to the linearity.
of the conventional time presented by the days of the month, by the appointment of the days of the week and even by the clock that marks a complete turn of the Earth to the surroundings of the Sun. This is how I begin my account of the beginning of something that escapes time, which suspends the temporal logic of beginning and end, because each day the beginning and the end are lived and experienced. Each day the movement dies and is born again and again and again. On the last Monday of October 2016, we held an assembly for the entire community of the Institute of Psychology - students, teachers, technicians, servers, and finally all those who travel through this space. It was a large assembly outside the IP, on the patio. The students-occupants of the course of Letters, the first course to occupy their building, came to give a support and to tell how the occupation process was there; and also to talk a little about PEC 55, the High School Reform and the No-Party School, which are the main reasons why students are occupying the university. The idea of whether or not to occupy the Institute was already circulating in the mouth and imagination of the people present, so it was not long before we began to talk about the possibility of occupation. In an historic meeting, we decided to occupy the Institute of Psychology. The large number of students, who were first outside the building, enter the building, go up the stairs and announce that the Institute is OCCUPIED. Here is one of the beginnings.

PICTURE OF A CHAOS-AFFECTION:

It was Friday night, after the first less tense and less time-consuming assembly of the last days. We were between 10 and 15 people in DASEIN (Academic Directory of Psychology) drinking, smoking, singing, laughing, shouting, talking wildly. Moment that talks about the necessity of the chaos and everything that with it breaks, it flows, it destroys and reborns. A need that, after days when we tried, in various ways, to find and put into practice a kind of collective discipline so that we would feel safe, cohesive and belonging to a collective under construction that went in a direction not yet known by all.

Revisiting this scene now in the present that was just to that past, I wonder about the singular nature of a movement that paradoxically feeds from chaos to endure discipline; creates and lives in another time to understand, to face and to resist the frightening real time that is denounced by the news of every day and that decides literally to occupy with different bodies the space that represents the right that they want to destroy us. Why or for whom do we put our body on the street today?

It seems difficult, perhaps still recent, to be able to describe the nature of the occupation movement, but it contains the disposition
of construction from the differences of each subject that occupies, in the sense of asserting the heterogeneity of a collective. The search for a uniform and homogeneous body is something impossible to a movement like this in which the different bodies, which bring with them singular ways of life, share the daily life. They wake up and fall asleep together; clean the place and cook collectively; organize the tasks of the week, as well as deliberate the next actions of the movement. That is, the collective is not produced collectively only in institutionalized spaces such as assemblies, the collective occupation is literally in the daily chores.

So in this daily coexistence, differences - of color, of gender, of thought, of belief - not only appeared, but also shouted and constituted the movement of occupation. The great power and also the great challenge of the movement is really to be affected by the constituent differences of it, as well as to sustain the movement and its political force by the bet on the heterogeneity. Otherwise the movement runs the risk of killing itself by trying to live from the old strategies of social movements or weakens until it is swallowed up by hegemonic discourses that easily delegitimize them. It is in this sense that movement becomes a challenge and a power at the same time, since the construction of a social movement based on the union of differences disturbs social structures of a current social system that is bankrupt, organized and subjective through stratifying and supposedly incommunicable divisions, that when they communicate much more is to place limits and barriers between them.

In times when representative “democracy” humbly asks only the “unified” black, white, homosexual, female, poor, rich people to vote for it, how to cause them more panic than to see a movement that brings all these differences together? What was common in the midst of differences was the need to interrupt any further discussion in order to think collectively about the dangerous course that the Brazilian illegitimate government was giving to public education. After a parliamentary coup d’état, which placed an unlawful president in the presidency of the Republic, a vote on Constitutional Amendment Proposal 55 was sent to the national congress, which provides for the limitation, as well as the drastic reduction of public spending for 20 years in the areas of health, education and public safety.

Coined by the discourse of the need for economic recovery, what the government intends with this proposal is to make public education precarious and then privatize it. It is through measures like this that the neoliberal prescription is updated in Brazil. It is against this proposal of dismantling public education that hundreds of Brazilian students decide to occupy their universities. They occupy to think about what is happening, occupy to carry
out activities and debates on the political, economic and social conjuncture of Brazil, occupy to show resistance and existence of subjects, who no longer paralyze as a form of subversion, but rather put bodies into action in an attempt to invent other ways of resisting, being and being in the world.

To think of the nature of the occupation movement not as an analysis that aims at its mere reproduction or that gathers its characteristics in a primer on social movements; to think of it, however, in the perspective of trying to understand the limit zone that the collective of an occupation movement seems to constitute. The boundary between the ideological crisis of the old institutions and the need to occupy them; the boundary between following the old strategies and affirming the creation of new ones; the boundary between leaving the comfortable place of being with equals to go out and building the place of differences; zone boundary between having to walk under chaos to invent the new. It is not seeking answers that this writing proposes, it is to keep asking: why or for whom do we put our body on the street today?

6. ANOTHER ENCOUNTER

“Fully inhabiting is all that can be set against the paradigm of government.” —INVISIBLE COMMITTEE

We were walking in the street, my friend and I. We met accidentally and decided to keep on together for a while. It was night time. Cars passed by, while we walked through a slightly illuminated street. It was almost summer. The wind was wildly blowing, yet it was hot, so that we felt it as a warm breath gently touching our tense bodies. We were in a bohemian neighborhood in Porto Alegre. There were lots of people around us, drinking, spending time together and cheering. Yet, we were alert. It’s said that streets aren’t as safe as they used to be. We kept on our path, glancing backwards eventually, and open to an eventual veering; but definitely resolute about keeping on.

Some rare condition was operating over that atmosphere. It looked like we were in one of these moments in which every eventual judgment about things could – and maybe should – remain sort of suspended. We felt, at the same time, fearful and courageous.

Maybe it was this feeling that brought up the subject on the way we inhabit public spaces nowadays. My friend is a law student, and I already knew many of his opinions about this particular matter. However, something new was happening in our city. Since the month before, the students of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul had been occupying some of its buildings, demanding
for a qualified and public education that could be offered by a universal access. Someone was reciting the poems of Carlos Drummond de Andrade. We sat and listened it for a while. We talked about how our system provides this education, but only in theory.\textsuperscript{18}

We started walking again and passed by a person standing still in a strange and inquiring position. That picture given, I brought up the occupations as an interesting way for claiming these matters we were discussing. He then said that he didn’t defend the occupation at his college. Two people beside us started an argument. A few steps ahead, we saw a couple kissing, right in the middle of the street. For my friend, the occupation was a mess and that, in his opinion, was making the students lose their argument. I didn’t (and still don’t) agree with his opinion. A group of people laughing appeared. Youngsters with graffiti cans were singing loudly rap and funk\textsuperscript{19} songs. We kept on by the street.

I said that I supported the occupation at the Institute of Psychology, the place where I finished my undergraduation studies. For me, the profanation of space that the students proposed in an academic place was precisely the potency of the movement. So we diverged exactly on that issue. But still, we kept going.

Now that I think about our encounter, I start to believe that our fundamental diverging was what kept us talking. Maybe affected by such fact, I explained to my friend about the assemblies, and the resignification that outcomes from this particular way of taking decisions. Or, taking the idea of the occupations to its radical practice, we might say: this particular way of not necessarily taking decisions. Even time, in the occupations, is something that comes to a resignification. You have to give time and space for the eventual traversements that have “not yet” happened. In this context, one’s priorities are the opinions of people, more than the decisions that might come out of these. In many of the assemblies that I have participated at the occupation, that was what assured the singularity of each one’s opinion.

So we talked about that, while a juggler in the street manipulated the suspension of four lemons. We then talked about the logistic and the conditions of each occupation and agreed that they were different, and he and I decided to keep our standings about the occupations. And, at some point, I remembered the beginning of our conversation, and the fact that we had the same purposes behind our approaches. We both wanted a public university, of quality and universal access, that does not refrain from difference. We had that in common.

\textsuperscript{18} In order to be admitted in a university, people in Brazil have to go through a test called \textit{vestibular}. In this test, essentially, prevails a sort of knowledge that is taught at private schools. Considering that and the discussion on racial inequality, a national law was recently created, establishing a quota system for black people and for people that studied in public schools. We agreed that this was a plausible initiative for the admission of students; however, there are social and cultural inequalities that persist after this admission and do not receive its proper visibility.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Funk} is the local designation for a musical genre from Brazil, known internationally as \textit{funk carioca} or \textit{baile funk}.
I then understood something new. The proposals of our approaches weren’t properly opposites. Thinking by opposites works when you rationalize by a closed logic, that considers the variables only in a restrict system. It works when you have to think on alternatives to a specific problem, or when you propose methods of government. But that wasn’t the case. We were there to exchange experiences and create some sort of collective narrative. When we see things by only one perspective, that’s when we tend to analyze processes by a binary argument, and that’s how fascism finds its roots to grow. We could diverge and yet keep on walking together, composing a narrative by that fundamental difference.

And so we did, until we said goodbye to each other and separated. The juggler kept there, juggling his four lemons. No perceptible decision was made. I didn’t convince him of my ideals, neither did he convince me of his. Yet, we didn’t come out of that conversation like we entered it.

What matters in an occupation is not the occupation itself, but the different and singular styles that reverberate in these circumstances and eventually interfere in the general ways of being. The point of the assemblages (and the occupations) is not to convince or interfere in someone’s standings. The real power of these assemblages is in its exchange of experiences.

My friend may not be in favor of the occupations, and maybe he shouldn’t be. But that night we fought together against the same enemy that, in my opinion, the occupations resist to: the fascism of absolute opinions and the suppression of hope, which leads to a generalized and monstrous lack of narrative. At that moment, we suspended our opinions and were able to wait. I’m glad we were courageous enough to let it happen.

7. THE DESIRE, OUR ONLY WEAPON

«mes yeux sont l’aveugle foudre
mon couer est le ciel
où l’orage éclate» — GEORGES BATAILLE

Sitting at the diner on a sunny cold winter afternoon, I warm my hands in the steam of my coffee as I follow the street drive: bicycles passing, boarding and landing in the bus corridor, meetings and farewells at the corners. The Institute of Education in the background, the austere architecture of its neoclassical columns. Were it not for the posters hung outside the grate, the graffiti painted in the marble, and the barricade mounted on the entrance just above the first staircase, it might have been just another old-fashioned building for my pupils, but today this building
is the first trench of courage. I think about the story my mother recounts over and over again about that day in 1974 when the police invaded school while she listened to the biology teacher talking about the life cycle of flowers. The unbearable noise of the explosions added to the tear-gas cloud made the panicked students run under the tables. My mother avoided crying, because of what the teacher shouted: “Do not cry, children, tears increase the burning sensation of the tear.” On that day, my mother would see her high school classmates sneak into the black cars with some teachers from the second-floor window. “The subversives are those who disappear in the vehicles,” she might have thought. Or, “Why do they do this to us?” Those moments were enough that she would never want to touch her memories of school time again. For her, school and fear were only two versions of the same name. More than forty years have passed and now I see in the faces of the young students who occupy this same Institute of Education a face different from the one I imagine to be my mother’s face. My mother’s face in horror. I finish my coffee and then I go to the bakery on the side street to get the breads with which we will make our barbecue in the occupation in celebration of a friend who, after more than ten years in prison, began his life again. At the bakery, I get all the bread my money can buy. I think of that story of the UNE congress in Ibiuna in October 1968, when thousands of students were caught by surprise by soldiers from the Public Force and DOPS police. In the situation, the population of the small town in the interior of the state of São Paulo suspected that something was happening when the stock of bread from the bakeries ended overnight. One could write the history of revolutions from the perspective of breads, the most democratic food of all. Armed with two giant bags of bread, I cross the street and smile at a fourteen-year-old boy who serves as the doorkeeper for the occupation. His cap back, his sneakers damaged by the skateboard, the Real Madrid reserve team uniform. Everything in him infects me with unspeakable joy. That boy, for an ephemeral second, was my mother’s colleague, who, after the cops had left, put her hand on her shoulder and said, “Be cool, Chris, everything will be all right”. We walk down the corridor and he leads me to the kitchen. “The kitchen is the heart of the occupation,” he says. Making sure to explain everything in detail, such as a night watchman, he knows every corner of the school, entrances and exits, stairways and warehouses, and especially escape routes, emergency exits. Then he takes me to the teachers’ room. Two young students kiss each other on one of the many sofas in the room. Unrelated to the presence of any foreigner they kiss. He sticks his tongue into her mouth, she sticks his tongue into his mouth, they kiss. From a quick motion in the camera, this scene sucks for itself all the brightness
of the school, the sunny day above us. The exact moment when the image pulls all the others into a disappearance region where they are lodged and remain sending messages. The hidden center of the movie. Like that kiss was the only one meaning of the whole occupy. The lover’s community. There’s no way to cross the purple mystery cloud without getting wet.

8. CONCLUSION

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this Stony rubbish? —T.S. ELIOT

The Wasteland
“The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing
the future can be, I think.” —VIRGINIA WOOLF

We invent utopias in order to take out the roots that are already dead, opening space to the brewing of new ideas. The main principle of this essay was the belief in the living testimony of university students that were engaged in a political occupying movement, one that has spread through hundreds of Brazilian universities by the end of 2016. In the face of an uncertain future, full of disputes and hesitations between a libertarian acting and a conservative chain, such occupations insurge, creating a singular style of resistance and questioning the establishments of a common living. It is by this singularity, affirmed in front of and in a dialogue with the shared space of a polis, that one can take the uncertainty and propose, by that, some hope.

It is in the face of a Wasteland - devastated by conservative state politics that limitate the funds that are saved for public teaching and give themselves the right to legislate (in an authoritarian way) on the disciplines program of the basics and university courses - that a great occupying movement took place in the Brazilian schools and universities, bringing as a reminder the proposal of Harald Szeeman at Berna’s Kunsthalle exposition: “When attitudes become Form”.

What turns up as a challenge to the occupying movements are the ways of proposing new attitudes of political resistance, breaking away from instituted grammars: ones that are already subordinated to power but, under the veiling of a democratic state, mask violent and imposed acts. Besides the innumerable operations that are made in a micropolitical field, that is the main potency of this occupying movement in a social field: it proves that something else, or something different, is possible.
Thousands of students got together to say “no”, experiencing something original and introducing different political experiences, ones that were built by the responsible act of living together and by the bet in new strategies for the political acting; above all, by regaining the right to dream.

What is here written tries by some meanings to this memory alive, by the assumption that for that is necessary to register the reports of the students that lived this moment. By that, we intend to point out the situational and singular nature of such happenings. Also, this text serves as a trace that takes back to the intense conversation between its authors; one that followed up (and still follows up) to the occupying experience. By this audacious form, what matters here is saving the storm, as Tomas Morus says in his Utopia: “You must not abandon the ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds”.

REFERENCES


CUANDO LA FE MUEVE MONTAÑAS: UTOPÍAS POÉTICAS Y POLÍTICAS

INTRODUCCIÓN

En el gran arte, tant l’exageració com la fabulació s’orienten de la manera més palesa vers la conséquència tendencial i la utopia concreta. Tanmateix, si el crit per la plenitud – el qual pot dir-se pregària atea de la poesía – esdevé també pràctic, ni que sigui d’alguna manera, i no roman simplement com a pre-aparició estètica, és una qüestió que no resta resolta en la poesía, sinó en la societat.

Ernst Bloch se aproxima al arte entendiéndolo como “un laboratorio de posibilidades” orientado hacia la creación de utopías concretas. Dicho pensador profundiza en los vasos comunicantes que se establecen entre la experiencia vital y la poesía, subrayando tanto el potencial simbólico de las fábulas como el carácter abierto de la creación y la existencia. En la misma dirección, Lyman Tower Sargent recuerda que para Bloch el pensamiento utópico, central en el marxismo y el cristianismo, es una vía para huir del totalitarismo puesto que Bloch relaciona directamente la utopía con la libertad, con la habilidad de soñar y construir alternativas. La utopía puede devenir un detonador para potenciar un pensamiento crítico y transformar la cotidianidad y, dentro de estas premisas, Tower Sargent expone cómo ésta puede convertirse en un espejo que refleje aquello que la sociedad debe mejorar: It is a constant mirror held up to the present, showing the faults of contemporary society. I like to think of it as a distorting mirror in reverse showing how good we could look. Utopia rightly upsets people because it constantly suggests that the life we lead, the society we have, is inadequate, incomplete, sick.

Justamente, la voluntad de llevar a cabo profundos cambios sociales aparece en los relatos de fábulas que apelan la potencialidad del colectivo para trascender los límites de lo que se considera posible. Las utopías poéticas y políticas son el punto de partida de iniciativas artísticas que enfocan diversas problemáticas sociales y ahondan en la utopía y en el potencial de las prácticas colaborativas. Aquí es preciso apuntar, tal y como Tower Sargent señala, que las utopías no se limitan a un contexto occidental sino que germinan en diversas tradiciones puesto que – aunque cada marco cultural produzca sus propios imaginarios – el pensamiento utópico es un fenómeno intrínseco del ser humano.
En el presente artículo se analizarán ciertas propuestas del colectivo *Beijing East Village* (*Dashanzhang, 1993-1997*) y de los artistas Francis Alÿs (1959) y Martin Andersen (1973) a partir del concepto de utopía concreta, entendida como el motor de ciertas prácticas artísticas que recogen la determinación de transformar el malestar social. Se examinarán determinados proyectos del trabajo de dichos creadores, en coordenadas geopolíticas distintas, que crean un relato mítico y forjan una alegoría social. Ejemplos de estas prácticas artísticas utópicas se concretan en una *performance* del grupo *Beijing East Village* en la que elevaron una montaña anónima un metro (Beijing, 1995), en la acción organizada por Francis Alÿs en la que pidió ayuda a voluntarios para desplazar una duna de su emplazamiento original (Lima, 2002) y, también, en la instalación que Martin Andersen realizó para devolver el sol a su pueblo natal ubicado en el fondo de un valle con grandes montañas (Rjukan, 2013).

En tales propuestas es esencial “creer” que lo que puede parecer imposible puede devenir posible gracias a la perseverancia y la fuerza de la comunidad. El creer, el querer, la fe y el deseo son fundamentales en toda acción metafórica y ritual. Una muestra de ello puede verse en el título de la acción colectiva *Cuando la fe mueve montañas* de Francis Alÿs, puesto que el propio artista subraya la relevancia de la fe como principio de toda hazaña que pueda parecer inalcanzable o increíble. A continuación, se esbozarán distintas prácticas utópicas en las que la creación se convierte en un instrumento para dar visibilidad a ciertos conflictos e impulsar una transformación social.

**UTOPÍAS CONCRETAS; CÓMO ELEVAR UNA MONTAÑA ANÓNIMA UN METRO**

1. Utopianism (social dreaming) is a common human phenomenon;
2. Every culture has produced body utopías;
3. There are city utopías and even independent utopian traditions outside the Christian West.

Lyman Tower Sargent sostiene, tal y como ya se ha expuesto, que el pensamiento utópico no es exclusivo de un marco cristiano occidental sino que diversas tradiciones también lo desarrollan, como la árabe y la china. Dentro de tales parámetros es necesario delimitar el escenario en el que se llevan a cabo las prácticas utópicas puesto que es fundamental que éstas se entiendan y ubiquen en un determinado contexto temporal, lingüístico e histórico y, también, en relación a lo que comunican y transmiten a un lector contemporáneo.

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10. Ibid., p. 3.
Si nos aproximamos a las utopías concretas en el marco del País del Centro y del arte contemporáneo chino es pertinente mencionar la *performance* grupal *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* (1995) [fig. 1] llevada a cabo por diez artistas del colectivo *Beijing East Village* (*Dashanzhang*, 1993-1997)én una montaña cercana a Beijing. En dicha acción los artistas se pesaron en una balanza y, acto seguido, se colocaron unos encima de otros y un colaborador midió cuántos centímetros había crecido la montaña con los volúmenes de sus cuerpos desnudos. Hacer crecer un metro una montaña anónima quizás pueda parecer una hazaña absurda, sin embargo el colectivo nos recuerda con esta acción – tan literal como metafórica – la potencialidad del deseo para transformar la realidad en la que vivimos. [fig. 1]

Zhang Huan, uno de los miembros de dicha comunidad artística, explica cómo *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain* surgió de una necesidad compartida, fundiendo en dicha acción la experiencia vital y la artística. Zhang Huan revela que se inspiró en un refrán chino que advierte que “tras una montaña, hay más montañas” recalcando así la importancia de la humildad cuando uno emprende una gesta: Yes, these Works were a necessity for me. The mountain and pond pieces referred back to my need for the countryside. *To Add one meter to an anonymous mountain* was inspired by an old saying, “beyond the mountains, there are more mountains”, which is about humility. Climb this mountain and you will find an even bigger mountain in front of you. *To raise the water level in a fishpond* was an extension of this idea. It’s about changing the natural state of things, about the idea of possibilities”.

Asimismo, Zhang Huan explica que dicha performance también partió de la leyenda “De cómo Yukong movió la montaña”: “En realidad se trata de conquistar lo inconquistable. Quiero convencer a la gente de que todo es posible””. Llegados a este punto es preciso introducir el cuento de *El Viejo loco que removió las montañas* (*yu gong yi shan*), recogida en el libro *Lie Zi* que fue atribuido al pensador taoísta Lie Yukou (IV a.C). Dicha fábula destaca las virtudes de la perseverancia y de la osadía para alcanzar aquello que parece imposible gracias a la potencialidad de la comunidad. El relato explica el mito del anciano Yu Gong quien reunió a su familia para proponerles que removieran dos montañas que tenían que rodear cada vez que quería salir de la aldea. A la tarea de abrir un camino se les sumó una vecina viuda y su hijito, aunque muchos se reían de ellos y les decían que nunca lo conseguirían. Frente a tales burlas Yu Gong respondía que lo lograrían aunque él muriera sin verlo, pues sus hijos y sus nietos se sucederán por generaciones y las montañas no iban a crecer. Entonces: ¿Por qué no iba a ser posible allanarlas?”.
El cuento explica que tal determinación conmovió al Emperador del cielo, quien decidió enviar a dos hijos de Kua E para que transportaran las dos montañas sobre sus espaldas. Esta leyenda reflexiona sobre la fuerza de la comunidad, sobre la potencia de la voluntad y ha sido recogida en distintos períodos de la historia china con el objetivo de “adaptarla” a necesidades distintas. En Cómo hacer una montaña anónima un metro más alta aparece la idea de lograr lo que parece quimérico y Cang Xin, otro artista que también participó en dicha performance, explica: Cuando hicimos esta acción todos nosotros éramos muy pobres. No éramos bien vistos por la comunidad, éramos como extraños y la policía siempre venía para chequearnos. Todos nos sentíamos muy frustrados. Esta performance la hicimos en marzo, hacía mucho frío y durante la acción nos sentíamos muy excitados pero también desolados. No sabíamos lo que pasaría. Nos sentíamos tristes haciendo la performance y, como éramos tan pobres, tuvimos que pedir dinero a nuestros amigos para pagar a personas para que nos llevaran


15. La ponencia Moving Mountains: The Potential of Collaborative Projects, en el marco del Congreso “Ecologies of Art” (School of Oriental and African Studies, Londres, septiembre, 2016), ahondó en el trabajo de Xu Beihong, Zhang Lin, Zhang Huan y He Yunchang que interpretan la leyenda de Yu Gong en el marco de períodos sociopolíticos distintos del siglo XX y XXI en China (Autor (2016)).
allá y para medir el metro. Todos teníamos miedo de que viniera la policía a arrestarnos. Durante el proceso estábamos nerviosos. Es uno de los trabajos de “arte heroico” en China. Es una obra muy representativa del heroísmo. La acción Cómo hacer una montaña anónima un metro más alta, tiene muchas interpretaciones16.

Aquí es importante recalcarn la importancia del colectivo, la necesidad de formar una comunidad para poder encontrar un apoyo en un contexto gubernamental represivo después de los incidentes de la plaza Tian’anmen en 1989. En tal escenario, a inicios de la década de los noventa, el arte de acción se convirtió en un instrumento para enfocar determinados conflictos y se llevaba a cabo de manera clandestina en enclaves de difícil acceso, en edificios abandonados o en las viviendas de los artistas, siendo esencial el papel y el apoyo de la comunidad para poder articular un arte alternativo al oficial17.

En clara relación con lo expuesto otra performance que pone de manifiesto la potencialidad de la comunidad es To Raise the Water Level in a Fishpond (1997) [FIG. 2] de Zhang Huan. En dicha acción Zhang Huan contrató a unos cuarenta migrantes procedentes de zonas rurales, que habían llegado a Beijing para buscar empleo, para que entraran dentro de un estanque para hacer subir el nivel del agua con sus cuerpos. Cómo hacer subir el nivel de un estanque cuestiona la precariedad de dichos trabajadores a la vez que recuerda que un colectivo puede cambiar el relato de la historia. Zhang Huan explica: Deseaba enfrentarme con límites insuperables aun sin poseer la energía necesaria para hacerlo. Tenía ganas de levantar una montaña, o de desplazar un edificio. De este deseo, casi obsesión, surgieron trabajos como To add one meter to an Anonymous Mountain (1995) y To Rise the Water Level in a Fish Pond (1997). Si bien se trataba de objetivos prácticamente imposibles, la fuerza interior que me estimulaba no se agotó por esas limitaciones ni mucho menos, sino que se me metió dentro de mi corazón y de mi cuerpo, empujándome hacia una dirección distinta, tratando de salir de mí mismo y de explorar los límites de mi cuerpo18.

Tales obras interpelan al espectador, señalan que lo increíble puede devenir posible gracias a la fuerza del colectivo. Estas utopías concretas recogen la esencia de todo mito: querer conquistar lo que parece a priori imposible. El arte de acción deviene el medio a partir del cual lo incierto puede concretarse y convertirse en real y, dentro de tales premisas, el pensamiento utópico es el punto de partida de diversas propuestas artísticas que esbozan el anhelo de conectar el cuerpo individual y el cuerpo social19.


**CUANDO LA FE MUEVE MONTAÑAS: CÓMO DESPLAZAR UNA DUNA DIEZ CENTÍMETROS**

_Cuando la fe mueve montañas_ es un proyecto de desplazamiento geológico lineal. El artista convocó a quinientas personas con el fin de formar una hilera que desplazó, con la ayuda de palas, una duna de 400 metros de diámetro a diez centímetros de su posición original. El desplazamiento fue una dimensión infinitesimal pero no así sus resonancias metafóricas.

El artista belga Francis Alÿs en su acción _Cuando la fe mueve montañas_ (Lima, 2002) [Fig. 3] ilustra el empeño de intervenir la realidad con el propósito de transformarla. La _performance_, que se realizó dentro de la Bienal de Lima el 16 de abril de 2002, se empezó a preparar unos días antes cuando – el 11 de abril – el crítico de arte Cuauhtémoc Medina recorrió con un megáfono las calles y las universidades de Lima comunicando “1000 voluntarios están convocados para formar una línea con el fin de mover con palas una duna de 500 m de diámetro a 10 cm de su sitio original”21. Respondieron a tal anuncio 500 personas y, en una tarde, desplazaron una duna de una zona conocida con el nombre de Ventanilla. Dicho lugar limita con un barrio de chabolas, ubicado a 35 minutos del centro de Lima, que se caracteriza por ser una zona donde vivían campesinos, indígenas y refugiados políticos que escapaban de la guerra civil entre el Estado y grupos guerrilleros como Sendero Luminoso22. Tal acción debe contextualizarse en el marco político y social de la dictadura de Alberto Fujimori que había terminado recientemente en Perú, puesto que Alÿs realizó su primera visita a Lima para preparar su proyecto durante el último mes.
de la dictadura de Fujimori y la Bienal tuvo lugar seis meses después de su caída: Lima estaba convulsionada, con enfrentamientos en la calle, una tensión social abierta y un emergente movimiento de resistencia. Ésta era una situación que demandaba una respuesta épica: infiltrar una alegoría social en aquellas circunstancias parecía más apropiado que la participación en un ejercicio escultórico. Y también, como dijo Cuauhtémoc (mirando una copa de pisco) “La Fe es un medio a través del cual uno renuncia al presente para invertir en una futura promesa abstracta” 23.

Francis Alÿs reitera la dimensión heroica de la gesta un mes después de la acción: “Fue una respuesta a una situación desesperada que exigía una respuesta épica, que pedía un “beau geste” a la vez inútil y heroico, absurdo y urgente” 24. El poder simbólico de las prácticas artísticas utópicas evoca la posibilidad del pueblo peruano de vislumbrar posibles cambios a partir del esfuerzo y la determinación colectiva. Una voluntad que se había mostrado previamente con la organización de manifestaciones y marchas de protesta contra el autoritarismo de Fujimori, respaldadas principalmente por los estudiantes universitarios y los campesinos. Alÿs recalca que el propósito de la acción es infiltrarse en la historia local y la mitología social, convirtiéndose en un mito urbano que se desvina de un Land Art relacionado con un concepto “contemplativo”, que puede encontrarse en las caminatas de Richard Long en el desierto peruano, para intentar esbozar – según Alÿs – un “Land Art para “los sin-tierra”” y construir una alegoría social 25.

Precisamente, Jesús Segura vincula Cuando la fe mueve montañas con la alegoría social de la identidad nacional del pueblo peruano y remarca la relevancia de concebir la noción de esperanza como categoría política en sí misma. La acción deviene ética, política, reafirmando la capacidad de las personas de cambiar la realidad, incitando a la conciencia activa de todo individuo 26. Segura contextualiza las conceptos de “vivencia utópica” y “resistencia utópica” en un marco pautado por la economía latinoamericana: Como apunta Cuauhtémoc Medina Cuando la fe mueve montañas es una aplicación del principio no desarrollista latinoamericano: una extensión de la lógica del fracaso, dilapidación programática, resistencia utópica, entropía económica y erosión social de la región. En efecto, la acción en sí misma traduce la escasa productividad con un esfuerzo titánico que alude directamente a las economías sudamericanas, que son la expresión constante de una modernización fallida. No obstante habría que convenir que el propósito de obras como Cuando la fe mueve montañas (2002) despliega momentos de ilusión colectiva en una crisis perpetua donde las intervenciones artísticas aportan, a lo sumo una operación crítica o utópica que dialoga con una realidad diaria en la tragedia agónica de un país 27. [FIG. 3]

Cuando la fe mueve montañas se llevó a cabo en un espacio altamente politizado, tras el derrocamiento de la dictadura. La acción muestra la importancia de la “ilusión colectiva” y del trabajo en equipo para iniciar un cambio, siendo uno de los objetivos principales convertir dicha acción en un relato que interpele a la comunidad. Como ya se ha apuntado el querer y el entusiasmo son fundamentales en estas prácticas artísticas utópicas que ahondan en el esfuerzo, el coraje y la determinación necesarios para emprender cualquier iniciativa. Cuando la fe mueve montañas refleja la tenacidad titánica del individuo y de la colectividad para llevar a cabo aquello que a primera vista puede parecer una quimera, recordando la leyenda del viejo Yu Gong. En la publicación Cuando la fe mueve montañas se recogen los ecos, en Lima, de la proeza del anciano chino: En China, nos informa Man Ray Hsu, tener una montaña frente a la casa se considera una desgracia. De ahí la moraleja de un cuento popular: Había una vez un hombre que estaba obsesionado porque había un monte frente a la puerta de su casa. Un día, muy decidido a librarse de él, empezó a acarrear tierra con una cubeta. Un vecino entrometido le advirtió que nunca acabaría la tarea. El hombre le respondió: “Sí, pero yo tendré un hijo, y mi hijo otro hijo, y el hijo de mi hijo un hijo”, etcétera. El martes 16 de abril un estudiante me contó que alguna vez vio una revista china de la época maoísta con fotos de uno de esos milagros atribuidos al presidente Mao: un pueblo entero había movido un monte a mano para cubrir una barraca.

Alÿs, al igual que los artistas del grupo Beijing East Village que decidieron hacer crecer un montículo, decide pasar a la acción sin importarle el esfuerzo y la energía que tal hazaña requería. La ilusión, la esperanza y la valentía son los ejes de unos desplazamientos geológicos tan simbólicos como políticos. En tales procesos colaborativos no hay un espectador pasivo ya que la parábola se concreta con la participación activa. Aparece la necesidad de crear situaciones y se forja un relato polifónico construido con la cooperación de múltiples narradores. La oralidad deviene esencial puesto que el mito es contado por distintas voces y, en este sentido, Alÿs cita La República de Platón: “dejemos que la tradición oral se ocupe de nuestra historia”. Dicho de otro modo, estas acciones simbólicas generan un relato que deviene un eco, una alegoría social.

Otra cuestión a recalcar, en Cuando la fe mueve montañas, es que la mayoría de los participantes eran estudiantes voluntarios, principalmente de la Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería del Perú (UNI). Alÿs señala el simbolismo de llevar a cabo una obra
de ingeniería civil con la fuerza de personas – sin ningún prejuicio sobre qué es “arte” – que transformaron una formación geológica gracias a su esfuerzo30. Los estudiantes fueron convocados por altavoces, mediante las tácticas clásicas de agitación política de las universidades latinoamericanas, para llevar a cabo una acción de resistencia utópica que pervertía el dogma de la “eficiencia” neoliberal31.

Si se ponen en relación las acciones esbozadas hay que considerar diferencias sustanciales entre la propuesta de Alÿs, que parte de una invitación pública y en la que participaron voluntarios que compartieron la intensidad del momento – un “shock emocional” o una experiencia estética que el artista denomina “sublime social”32 – y las acciones grupales Cómo hacer una montaña anónima un metro más alta, que fue realizada por la propia comunidad de artistas, y Cómo hacer subir el nivel de un estanque en la que Zhang Huan remuneró a los migrantes para que entraran en el estanque. Estas diferencias es necesario delimitarlas en los contextos políticos específicos del fin de la dictadura de Fujimori en Lima, que provocó dicha respuesta civil, y del período restrictivo de la década de los noventa en China después de la matanza de Tian’anmen. En las acciones Cuando la fe mueve montañas y Cómo hacer subir el nivel de un estanque los artistas devienen mediadores, agentes que propone un imaginario poético en el que se funde la creación con la vida, subrayando el compromiso y la determinación de impulsar un arte que se convierta en un instrumento para pensar transformaciones sociales. También cabe observar que las acciones Cuando la fe mueve montañas y Cómo hacer subir el nivel de un estanque se llevaron a cabo en distritos periféricos, en Lima y Beijing, habitados principalmente por migrantes procedentes de las zonas rurales que llegaban a la ciudad para buscar una mejor vida. A la vez es pertinente recalcar que en las acciones analizadas no se bosqueja la figura del héroe individual puesto que el poder se teje en la fuerza colectiva, apareciendo también la potencialidad de la vulnerabilidad y la capacidad de empatizar y dejarse afectar, pues es preciso recordar que tales iniciativas no pretenden adoctrinar sino dar que pensar, parten de la necesidad. Jean Fisher relaciona Cuando la fe mueve montañas con la creación de nuevas tácticas capaces de penetrar en imaginarios colectivos: “To keep alive the will to imagine is also to invent new ethical landscapes, new narratives and new agents of social change. It is utopian without promising Utopia” 33.

SOLSPEIL: CÓMO DEVOLVER LA LUZ DEL SOL A UN VALLE SOMBRÍO

a partir de las iniciativas esbozadas del colectivo Beijing East Village y del artista Francis Alÿs, en las que elevan montañas y desplazan dunas, se han esbozado diversos modos de intervenir la realidad – en distintos contextos geopolíticos – con el objetivo de enfocar


31. Ibid., p. 179.


ciertos conflictos y transformarlos de manera colectiva. A continuación, se analizará el proyecto *Solspeil* (Rjukan, 2013) del artista noruego Martin Andersen para ahondar en utopías concretas en el marco de un país con unas problemáticas distintas a las previamente bosquejadas.

La instalación *Solspeil* (Espejo de sol) de Martin Andersen ha permitido devolver la luz del sol a una pequeña aldea de unos 3.000 habitantes durante los seis meses de invierno. Rjukan se encuentra en medio de un valle de altas montañas y el artista, con la ayuda de técnicos, ha creado un sistema de tres grandes espejos de 17 metros cuadrados cada uno. Dichos espejos, controlados por ordenador, siguen el curso del sol – mediante un motor movido por placas fotovoltaicas – para reflejar la luz solar a la plaza que hay en el centro del pueblo. Andersen explicó en su presentación del proyecto en la Jornada *Xarxes d’Opinió con Mazda Rebels* organizada por el FAD y Mazda: A pesar de que al inicio este proyecto generó oposición y escepticismo, ahora los habitantes de Rjukan se sienten muy orgullosos de esta iniciativa que ha transformado completamente la vida del pueblo”, afirmó Andersen. “Solspeil no sólo ha llevado el sol a esta pequeña aldea, sino que ha convertido la plaza principal en el punto de encuentro de la comunidad.

La plaza del pueblo se ha convertido en el principal punto de encuentro de la ciudadanía de Rjukan, reforzando la idea de crear un espacio común, un ágora para compartir, tejer y fortalecer los lazos sociales. En esta propuesta vemos que se hace posible lo que parece inimaginable, recalculando la importancia de salir de lo establecido para impulsar una transformación a través de la creación. En una entrevista Martin Andersen manifiesta el orgullo de llevar el sol a su pueblo, inundando de luz blanca un foco circular de 600 metros cuadrados. El artista explica: Me había instalado allí, cerca de mis padres. Tuve una hija y me harté de perseguir con el cochebello una rayita de sol en la plaza, buscando su calor para el bebé y se me ocurrió. (...) Pensé: “Si hubiese unos grandes espejos allá arriba, en esa cima en la que pega el sol, ¡sus rayos rebotarían hasta aquí! Y propuse mi idea al Ayuntamiento. ¿Y no se rieron? «Si quieres sol, vete a la montaña», me decían algunos vecinos, orgullosos su pueblo. No tiré la toalla, pese a las dilaciones. Estaré loco, pero que era una idea interesante de un artista loco35.

Andersen expone que tardó doce años en poder inaugurar el proyecto y que hubiera deseado que los espejos fueran cóncavos. Sin embargo, pese a las dificultades y los cambios, finalmente lo consiguió, costando la obra 600.000 euros. Asimismo, el artista apunta que la repercusión mediática de la iniciativa conlleva muchos visitantes y equivale a millones de euros en promoción del pueblo. De hecho, en la página web del municipio se explica el proyecto y se recogen las tentativas previas que hubo de Sam Eyde, en 1913,

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de “transportar” el sol a la aldea. Esta determinación prosiguió y, en 1928, construyeron una góndola denominada Krossobanen (que sigue funcionando) para trasladar a los habitantes de Rjukan a la parte más alta de la montaña donde pueden disfrutar del sol de invierno\textsuperscript{16}. Justamente, en la entrevista que Víctor M. Amela realizó a Martin Andersen, Amela relaciona Solspeil con el “viejo chinito del cuento” que quería mover una montaña con una cucharita porque la gente estaba triste al vivir en la penumbra y no desistió aunque se burlasen de él\textsuperscript{37}. En relación al relato del “cuento chino” Andersen respondió al entrevistador: “¡Me gusta! Yo pienso así. La función del buen artista es crear una obra que enriqueza la vida de las personas”\textsuperscript{18}.

### RESONANCIAS METAFÓRICAS Y CONSIDERACIONES FINALES

¿No has oído hablar de la teoría del aleteo de la mariposa? Cuando una mariposa bate las alas en alguna parte de China, ese aleteo afecta al resto del mundo. Ese pequeño aleteo está conectado absolutamente con todo lo demás. No hay nada, nada, ni una mínima acción, por insignificante que sea, entre las células de la sangre… que no ponga en movimiento lo de al lado, y esto, lo siguiente, y así sigue, y sigue, y sigue…Y cambia el mundo (Jonas Mekas en la improvisación filmica Step Across the Border (1990) de Werner Penzel y Nicolas Humbert, con Fred Frith)\textsuperscript{39}.

La teoría del aleteo de la mariposa recuerda la trascendencia de los actos, por minúsculos que puedan parecer, para lograr un cambio social. Este pensamiento utópico, metafórico, enfatiza la relevancia de lo potencial, de aquello que está latente. Llegados a este punto es preciso retomar los planteamientos filosóficos de Ernst Bloch, esbozados previamente, puesto que teorizó sobre el “principio esperanza” señalando las posibilidades futuras en las que se anticipa lo posible-real y otorgando al arte un papel fundamental en su capacidad de crear utopías y alternativas a la realidad. Francisco Serra remarca que el principio esperanza es donde la utopía alcanza un mayor desarrollo: “La utopía entonces se convierte en dimensión antropológica esencial que está siempre en trance de realización, en constante omnipresente de todas las culturas y que adquiere múltiples variantes y determinaciones. Por eso puede decirse que en El principio esperanza se encuentra una auténtica “enciclopedia de las utopías”\textsuperscript{40}. En relación a tales ideas cabe recordar, como ya se ha apuntado, que Bloch vincula el pensamiento utópico con la libertad y la capacidad de soñar e imaginar alternativas.

En el presente recorrido se ha pretendido relacionar diversas prácticas artísticas utópicas de la cultura visual contemporánea que inciden especialmente en la dimensión política y comunitaria. El itinerario propuesto ahonda en ciertas obras que parten de relatos míticos para recordar que el empoderamiento es posible y subrayar
la potencialidad de los procesos colectivos. Los proyectos que se han esbozado se nutren de un pensamiento utópico y, desde distintos contextos culturales y sociopolíticos, comparten la misma determinación de promover una transformación social. No obstante, cabe destacar que existe una clara diferencia entre las iniciativas del colectivo Beijing East Village y Francys Alÿs, que nacen como respuesta a unos sistemas políticos autoritarios y represivos, con el proyecto de Martin Andersen que parte del anhelo de resolver una problemática concreta originada por la orografía del paisaje noruego. Otra cuestión que es preciso considerar, en relación a la polifonía de aproximaciones al “cuento chino” del viejecito que quería remover una montaña, es que las acciones colectivas del grupo Beijing East Village y de Francis Alÿs fueron efímeras, siendo concebidas como gestas “heroicas” para responder a la opresión política que padecían e imaginar alternativas. Tales gestas coinciden en la necesidad de pasar a la acción aunque el resultado fuera mínimo, efímero, pese al gran esfuerzo realizado. Por el contrario, la instalación de Martin Andersen perdura y se ha convertido en un reclamo turístico para el municipio. En relación al impacto de tales propuestas en la sociedad hay que mencionar que los habitantes de Rjukan – antes escépticos con el proyecto ideado por Andersen – ahora disfrutan de la plaza principal del pueblo como un espacio de encuentro. De un modo distinto, por su clara connotación política y su naturaleza efímera, las iniciativas del colectivo Beijing East Village y Francis Alÿs se caracterizan por el compromiso – desde el inicio – de todos los agentes que participaron para hacer tales hazañas posibles. Cómo hacer una montaña anónima un metro más alta fue llevada a cabo por los miembros del grupo Beijing East Village a las afueras de Beijing, sin público y de manera clandestina, y la acción Cuando la fe mueve montañas de Francis Alÿs fue realizada por voluntarios. Todos ellos se implicaron por la necesidad de hacer un gesto simbólico que abriera nuevos espacios y alternativas. Tales acciones poéticas y políticas evidencian la osadía de dichos artistas de pensar distintas tácticas de intervenir la realidad y promover que la ciudadanía se implique. En estas propuestas no existen espectadores pasivos puesto que el arte se disuelve con la vida. Las prácticas artísticas utópicas recuerdan la capacidad de abrir posibilidades de cambio a partir de la creación y – tal y como expone Alÿs – es preciso rastrear y explorar los vasos comunicantes entre la poesía y la política: ¿En verdad puede una intervención artística hacer surgir un modo inesperado de pensamiento, o será que más bien crea una sensación de “sinsentido” que muestra lo absurdo de una situación? ¿Puede un acto absurdo generar una transgresión que te haga abandonar las presunciones comunes sobre las raíces de un conflicto? ¿Pueden esta clase de actos artísticos abrir posibilidad de cambio?... En todo caso, ¿cómo puede el arte seguir siendo
políticamente significativo sin asumir un punto de vista doctrinario ni aspirar a convertirse en activism social?... Por ahora, exploro el siguiente axioma: A veces hacer algo poético se vuelve político y a veces hacer algo político se vuelve poético. (De un e-mail de Francis Alÿs, mayo de 2004).


REFErEnCIAS


—— (21 Agosto de 2015). Entrevista a Martin Andersen por Víctor-M. Amela. La Vanguardia.


INTRODUCTION

The 70s marked a series of ruptures with hegemonic models of modernity in Colombian art. The canons that had led to a history of art in the country and had shaped a national art scene for at least three decades underwent transformations that inaugurated new reflections on social representations, aesthetic approaches, and assessment of artistic production. The case of architecture was no different, for in the international context, postmodernism blurred the premises inherited from the modern movement, which resulted in new aesthetic approaches freed from tradition. Between the 1960s and 1970s, architectural groups such as Archigram in the UK or Superstudio in Italy provided utopian reflections on urban space, which, by way of fiction, speculation, and figurative language, brought them closer to the fields of art. It is worth noting that these groups used the notion of utopia to propose enhancements in urban space which were expected to have an impact on social conditions – particularly with large scale constructions – as stated by the architect and critic Terence Riley: “In megastructures a new generation of architects saw potential for the transformation of culture, and for making the post-1968 world a better one.”1

Against this backdrop, the Utopía group was one of the artist collectives which most meticulously sought to establish a relationship between art and architecture in Colombia. Their work fits into a time when postmodernism proposed new ways of thinking and producing artwork. The openness and pluralism brought by this time is clearly observed in this architectural collective, composed by Jorge Mario Gómez, Fabio Antonio Ramírez and Ana Patricia Gómez, insofar as they took the language employed in architectural design processes into the field of art by means of references to art history and literature. These references – which reveal the use of intertextual strategies – while usually considered in narrative and literary studies, can also be traced in art. In this regard, some authors, such as the Spanish theorist Simón Marchán Fiz, point out that artistic rupture processes occur due to a change in language studies, which is commonly referred to as the linguistic turn:

[FIG. 1] Utopía group, From the series *The river route. Mies Walls. Calle Colombia*, 1979, colored photomontage, 40 x 40 cm. Suramericana de Seguros Collection, Medellín.
What is decisive is that if art, on the one hand, verifies its own negation – a hypothesis resulting in the “death of art” in Dadaism as well as in certain forms of Constructivisms – and its dialectical end, either in the increasingly deep separation between form and content or in the breakdown of the traditional notion of *art work* (...), on the other hand, with its coming of age it celebrates its autonomy with the analytical, experimental and “self-reflexive” dismantling of its own structures.²

This reveals how modernity in art has given rise to a reflection on its own language through creative practice, which following Marchán Fiz, has to do with the ‘return of language’. Particularly, in the work of *Utopía*, a clear dialogue is observed between major works of art history and architecture which are referred to, parodied, or refigured. In this context, refuguration, perhaps one of the most recurring strategies used by *Utopía*, refers to the representative stage in which the reader or viewer must reconstruct, through reading the work, the plot implicit within. [FIG. 2]

As part of these intertextual strategies, it is worth mentioning the reference to Swiss architect Le Corbusier in the works *La ruta del río* (The river route) (1979), *San Sebastián* (1991), *Jardín Concreto* (Concrete garden) (1999), *Armazón* (Frame) (2002), *Umbral* (Threshold) (2003) and *El Caminante* (The walker) (2009). Also, we should consider the work *La isla de los muertos* (Isle of the Dead), which echoes the series of paintings produced by Arnold Böcklin between 1880 and 1886. The work engages in a dialogue with major referents from the history of western architecture such as the Pyramids of Egypt (2500 B.C.), the Sydney Opera House (1973), and the Real Club Náutico de San Sebastián building (1929), all of which are part of the parodic speculation carried out by *Utopía* on the spatial configuration the island painted by Böcklin might have. Finally, a work that can also be considered under this strategy is *Remodelación para un sector del centro de la ciudad* (Remodeling for an area of downtown) (1982). By means of architectural drawings, the work puts into dialogue the project for *Oikema* (1780) by the French architect Claude-Nicolás Ledoux, an area of Medellín’s city-center and the Tower of Pisa (1372). Thus, this intertextuality allows *Utopía* to understand and build a discourse that revolves around history which is revised and criticized by the group. [FIG. 3]

Not uncommonly, the work of *Utopía* relies on *imaged architectures*, which are only realized through in three-dimensional models or in drawings that allude to the language of an architectural project. These *possible architectures* (as termed by the Spanish theorist Juan Antonio Ramírez) which, given their speculative and narrative nature can be considered fictions, offer a perspective in addressing the relationship between art and architecture in Colombia.

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They also evidence the visual, imaginative, and fictional nature of western utopian and dystopian thinking, which is embodied by the work of *Utopía* in the Colombian scene. They show one form of realization of narratives defining the reflection on the city and the social order. Nonetheless, the utopian discourse on the city proposed by the artist collective should be understood in parallel with reality, as stated by Ramírez himself:

Reality and utopia are two specular terms, whose relevant position varies according to the moment and place within which they are considered. The ultimate iconicity of “the real” is defined solely by comparison with the ultimate abstraction of “the utopian”, and the other way around. Societies have imagined themselves living in a factual and dense world, inhabited by objects, only when they have been able to imagine another symmetric and non-existent world.⁶ In the work of *Utopía*, while architecture addresses both the real and the factual, that is to say, the creation of buildings, utopia refers to a discourse about an unreal world or a ‘non-place’, where architecture could only be present through representations in the artistic realm.

Against the background of this relationship between art and architecture, the methodology used by *Utopía* plays a key role. They use a workshop-based approach to address specific projects, taken as architectural endeavors. This methodology involves the group gathering around a worktable to speculate about the aesthetic possibilities for each artistic project. And it is right there, inside the workshop, where speculation leads to the realization of an art form, where the process takes on a creative dimension, derived from a traditional view that can be described as project-oriented. This methodology raises, in turn, the issue of how collaborative work is inserted as a production strategy in the Colombian context.

This paper proposes a review of the *Utopía* group in light of a historical moment that was paramount for contemporary art in Colombia. A moment where events such as the Cuarta Bienal de Medellín (Fourth Medellín Biennial) and the Coloquio de Arte No-Objetual y Arte Urbano (Non-Object and Urban Art Colloquium) became starting points for incorporating other disciplines, such as architecture, into the art field. Colombian art historian Carlos Arturo Fernández refers to the context of these aforementioned events as a period of consolidation of art in Medellín on the national scene, thanks to the Coltejer Art Biennial and the foundation of the Medellín Museum of Modern Art.⁴ Two questions are addressed in this paper. Firstly, how does the project-oriented speculative language of architecture challenge the ‘concrete’ languages of sculpture, drawing, painting and installation? Secondly, how can the image be a means to speculate about a possible vision of urban

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spaces through a dialogue of local and global elements with the hegemonic discourse of art history in Latin America? [FIG. 4]

1. THE Utopía GROUP, A CONTINGENT GROUPING

The three members of the group were born right in the middle of the twentieth century, something which, considered in social and cultural terms, defines a generation of architects characterized by a critical view on space and urbanism. Towards the 1960s, the space emerged as a category of interest among social and human sciences. This marked the thinking of the city during the second half of the twentieth century and it is still a subject inciting anthropologists, sociologists, historians and architects interest. In this regard, the Spanish art historian Javier Maderuelo states:

Certainly, in the sixties (...) a particular interest in all matters related to space is observed, which will be reflected in the use of space as a theme in art and architecture, an interest resulting from a new understanding and appreciation of space.5

The Utopía group began its work in 1979, in response to a suggestion from the curator Eduardo Serrano to participate in the V Salón Atenas (Fifth Athens Salon) in Bogotá (Lopera, 2014: 91). After participating in the Salón Atenas, the group maintained its visual production in response to exhibitions and specific events, where their concerns about space, territory, geography and architecture were reaffirmed in the artistic discourse. Such is the case of the artworks made for the Arte erótico (Erotic art) (1981), El MAMM sobre la ciudad (Museum of Modern Art of Medellin on the city) (1984), La arquitectura en Colombia (Colombian architecture) (1985), Concurso Nacional de Arte Riogrande II (National art competition Riogrande II) (1989), Utopía. Una mirada retrospectiva (Utopia. A retrospective) (1991), Rosas diabólicas (Diabolical roses) (1997) and Archipiélagos (Archipelagos) (2005) exhibitions. These exhibitions not only were turning points in the aesthetic discourse of the artist collective, but also reflected a local and national interest in the relationship between art and architecture.

While these interests have been always marked by reflections on the space in its different scales, in recent years they have shifted from concerns about urbanism and architecture to questions around geography and territory (Giraldo & Roldán, 2014: 25). This shift has probably been driven by the MA degree in Geography completed by Ana Patricia Gómez at the Instituto Agustín Codazzi (Agustín Codazzi Institute), as well as by the link Jorge Mario Gómez and Fabio Antonio Ramírez have kept with aviation. The overhead look over the territory has prompted the collective to see geography as a potential object of study in visual arts.

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It is important to bear in mind that the architects who graduated from architecture schools in Medellín during the 1970s were strongly influenced by some formulations of the modern movement, particularly by Le Corbusier or Mies Van der Rohe. At the same time, they began to assimilate a post-structuralist discourse that was consolidating in the international arena as it established relationships with art and architecture. In Los manifiestos del arte posmoderno, Anna Maria Guasch defines postmodernism as follows:

It is the history of an era that, relying on the principle of difference, and leaving aside the term that defines it, (...) has generated a revealing spread of artistic and exhibition discourses, from those imbricated with the philosophy of the “weak” subject to those proclaiming the gaze of the other and globalization, through appropriationists, simulationists and deconstructivists.⁶

As expected, the intersection between these two models of thought led to an aesthetic result influenced by philosophy, present in the initial conception of the creative process. Thus, the project was conceived, not relying on the pure functionality claimed by the modern movement, but on the philosophical reflection that could be done on context and history. It should be recalled that in 1988 the philosopher Jacques Derrida and the architects Philip Johnson and Peter Eisenman organized the Deconstructivist Architecture exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art of New York, where the relationship between French post-structuralist thinking and architecture was consolidated:

The notion of architecture that will be reflected in the exhibition (...) expresses the translation, into architectural terms, of a new way of reading in which the conflicting elements of a text are exposed in order to contradict and shatter any sort of definitive and irrevocable interpretation. The inspirers of this movement, which eventually made its way into architecture, were Mallarmé, Roland Barthes and Derrida.⁷

Architects such as Rem Koolhaas or Peter Cook (direct referents of the Utopía group’s work) were influenced by this new relationship between space and philosophy. In the case of Koolhaas, the relationship between utopia and urban configuration is established in the notorious study Delirious New York, about New York City. In this book he designates Manhattan as a laboratory of architecture that has created a simulacrum where the utopian discourse is repeatedly embodied in the formal development of the city:

Not only are large parts of its surface occupied by architectural mutations (Central Park, the Skyscraper), utopian fragments (Rockefeller Center, the U.N. building) and irrational phenomena
Radio City Music Hall), but in addition, each block is covered with several layers of phantom architecture in the form of past occupancies, aborted projects, and popular fantasies that provide alternative images to the New York that exists.8

Koolhaas’s thinking was perhaps one of the strongest influences on Utopía’s aesthetic gaze on the city. His thinking is closely related to the notion of fragment and is considered to be part of the deconstructionist movement. It is worth mentioning that the immediate antecedents of deconstruction, both in art and in architecture, can be found in Russian Constructivism, developed during the second decade of the twentieth century by artists and architects such as Vladímir Tatlin and El Lisitski. This movement aimed, through abstraction, to be an art in service of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Utopía manifests an interest in this movement through works such as Monumento a José Martí (Monument to José Martí) (1980), carried out for the Un arte para los años ochenta (An art for the eighties) exhibition, held at La Tertulia museum. This work combines a political reference to the Cuban hero and poet in Cali, a markedly Colombian left-wing city in the 1960s, with the presence of El Lisitski and Russian constructivism. The Utopía group brings into contact the cities of Cali and La Habana through revolutionary architecture resembling the podiums designed by El Lisitski for Lenin.

Both the formal closeness with Russian constructivism and the relation between the work referents observed in this work seem to fall under the category of pastiche. [FIG. 6] The work of Utopía can be divided into three decades, characterized by a continuous process of strengthening of the relationship between art and architecture, all the way to the construction of an ‘actual’ architectural project. In the first decade, we observe proposals that, while having an underlying aesthetic discourse, are not part of a consistent and continuous reflection around art. Instead, they deal with circumstantial issues that serve as a pretext to introduce processes and forms of development of architectural projects into the field of art. The second decade is characterized by a marked interest in the relationship between memory and landscape, a frequent theme in works such as Memorias de viaje Manaure (Manaure travel memories) (1991), Memorias de viaje Cali (Cali travel memories) (1991) and Paisaje Inédito (Unknown landscape) (1997). Also, in this second decade, an interest emerges in speculating about spaces that exist only verbally. This new interest is observed in works such as La Catedral (The Cathedral) (1992), Casa verde (Green house) (1992) and Fábrica de leche para niños (Milk factory for kids) (1992), where the group explores spatial and constructive possibilities of places linked to particular political situations and to safety concerns, both nationally

and internationally. Finally, the decade between 1999 and 2009 reveals a process of consolidation, where gazes on the territory and geography are constant in their reflection and representation processes. We observe here works containing visual references characteristic of maps, exposing the implications of imaginary boundaries on the territory. Here, it is worth highlighting the work *La ruta del sur* (The south route), carried out in 2005 for the Archipiélagos (Archipelagos) exhibition, held at the *Sala de Arte de Suramericana*. In this two-dimensional piece, the group used digital strategies to do a utopian mapping of Latin America. The urban plan of Medellin overlaps the Latin American territory to make a variety of statements, namely architectural, geographical and political. The architectural statements are evidenced in the replicas of the walls of the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe that are placed at a disproportionate scale on the South American Pacific coastline, along with artificial constructions on the maritime space. This suggests, on one hand, a relationship between urban planning and project art in architecture and, on the other, a relationship between the expansions onto the sea of coastal cities and configurations of cities within the continent. Geographical statements are, as the work proposes, landforms and boundaries that form a new landscape. Finally, political statements are made by placing planes in formation flying to the south of the continent, which alludes to the trafficking routes used between Colombia and Argentina. [FIG. 7]

In this last decade, it is also worth mentioning the architectural renovation of *Talleres Robledo*, the current headquarters of the Medellín Museum of Modern Art. This renovation was carried out by the *Utopía* group and it is the only construction actually built by them as an artistic collective. In this place, the utopian elements that have been used in their visual production are materialized in the building design process. This is clearly observed in the digital drawings made before the actual renovation project for the building was underway. In these initial drawings, the group made a series of material speculations both on the facade and on ways to inhabit the indoor spaces. The renovation of *Talleres Robledo* can be seen
as the realization of utopian discourse, which is here manifested into a space proposal that houses modern and contemporary art in the city of Medellin. Here the irrational characteristic of utopian proposals is transformed into the rationality of a building renovation where a new set of functions is proposed. [FIG. 8]

2. PAINTED ARCHITECTURE AND ‘TRANSLATION’

Juan Antonio Ramírez9 has proposed three types of representation in architecture: literary, graphic, or three-dimensional. From this typology, classification criteria can be derived to reflect upon the Utopía group’s work, particularly their graphic and three-dimension works, since it singles out the types of processes and results obtained.

In the first group, we find two-dimensional works commenting, alluding or appropriating architectural works. This is what is conventionally known as illustrations, which are considered an attempt to copy reality “faithfully”. However, the illustrations carried out by Utopía go beyond reproducing aspects of the visible world. According to Ramírez, this type of representation, inspired in architecture, can be understood in the following terms:

*The fantastic non-disciplinary architectural drawing will also exhibit differences from the feasible drawing or painting, which can be “executed” or at least imagined as part of, or derived from,*

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a project. This latter will include all details and specifications required to realize the three-dimensional actual building, either going through the previous intermediate stage of the models or directly from the drawings.10.

The members of Utopía deviate from the classical notion of illustration. The images produced by them are not used to account for a fragment of reality but for a building or a city landscape through means typical of fiction and utopia. The illustrated, or rather translated, element is an object with functions which are not only aesthetic, but also practical. Thus, they do not merely explore the visible aspects of the referent but also its interpretations in the history of art and architecture. Such is the case of La ruta del río (The river route) (1979), a series of colored drawings where some buildings are devoid of their monumental character and are eventually located in figurative contexts allusive to areas of Medellín, specifically those crossed by the city’s river. Additional works that exhibit similar procedures are Coltejer (1982) and Remodelación de un sector del centro de la ciudad (Remodeling for an area of downtown) (1982). In these works, the extrapolation of realities alien to the landscape of Medellín is the distinctive feature. Thereafter, such extrapolation becomes a permanent operating principle for the artists, a way to inquire about authorship in an era where all the concepts underlying the notion of artists and artwork have changed.

Secondly, there are the three-dimensional works, which, in the form of sculptures, installations, or models, contain two-dimensional references, so far as they interpret or materialize an image. In this case, three-dimensionality allows the group the use of an icon, its variations of meaning and, above all, its cultural inscription. Interestingly, their three-dimensional works, while reminiscent of an architectural plan, go beyond in its proposals. In the Utopía group, the image, usually part of tradition, is not meant to be materialized. In this case, a diagram is not interpreted and materialized but rather, as previously stated, an icon or symbol is commented. This occurs, for example, with paintings or drawings made only with an aesthetic aim. It becomes the crystallization of a fiction, the change from a described and painted architecture to an inscribed and situated architecture. The most emblematic works derived from this procedure include La isla de los muertos (Isle of the Death) (1986) and La catedral (The Cathedral) (1992). [FIG. 9]

In the former, Utopía provides graphical, pictorial, and sculptural interpretations around one of the versions of the Isle of the Dead (1886) by Arnold Böcklin. The plans, drawings and models related to this work stem from an atavistic desire: to expose the hidden side of things. In the drawings, and particularly in the constructed three-dimensional model, a sensitive and intellectual inquiry
is observed within the limits of the work being cited. In the latter work, the referent is not art-related, but news-related. Here, the work gives visual embodiment to something which was nothing but a rumor: *La Catedral* (The Cathedral), the famous prison where Pablo Escobar, the drug lord, was detained in the early nineties. Here, something which is not visible has left a verbal trace on the collective imaginary. The artists speculate on what might have occurred in that place of horror, built with words and rumors, parody conventions and, again, extrapolate historical and geographical realities that are part of the canonical repertoire to a local event.

However, intertextual relationships are not exclusively established with the history of art, or architecture, or even current journalism. The projects of *Utopía* can also create autonomous worlds in which the different parts relate to one another. They complement one another and make sense when exhibited together. This occurs in works where two and three dimensional versions, architectural models, scale models, installations and sculptures are produced around the same creative or constructive problem. Consider *La piscina* (The pool) (1989) or *Puente de los vientos* (Bridge of winds) (1989), projects featuring graphic and sculptural...
versions of something which was never realized, but is articulated through the language used by architecture. The representation strategy becomes the reflection object itself. This leads, firstly, to offset the notion of artwork in Colombia, but also, paradoxically, it leads to an affirmation of the autonomy of artistic ideas and their ability to lucubrate and create self-sufficient realities.

As noted above, these are typically two types of relationships which go beyond the logic of illustration and which, indeed, are part of the broad universe of ekphrasis. The ekphrastic relationship is the result of a particular baseline situation, namely, an artistic milieu commenting on another artistic milieu, though it also involves a collaboration in which traditional conditions, under which authorship is exercised, are modified. The work of Utopía can be inscribed into two traditions typical of ekphrasis, which are necessary and important to understanding contemporary art: the issue of sister arts and the aesthetics of the total work of art. The former, as is known, can be traced back to the Horatian statement about the similarities between painting and poetry and is developed in later times, reaching the contemporary art scene. This dialogue may be considered one of the antecedents of the growing interdisciplinarity in the current practice of arts. Responding to a relatively old aspiration in the aesthetic thinking, the second tradition crystallizes in Wagner’s vindication of German musical drama and it is crucial to the enthronement of the idea of an open, versatile and pluralistic artwork which has room for a variety of stimuli and formal modes. As will be recalled from the well-known statement by Hal Foster in his essay The Artist as Ethnographer?, the contemporary artist is characterized by their ability to navigate through forms, strategies, and formal possibilities as well as techniques to avoid any confinement to a single expressive option.11

With Utopía, we are, then, dealing with a milieu that is not subordinated to another. Their work does not involve disciplinary deepening, but rather an articulation of results revolving around an issue or concept. It is, when the relationship between paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations is considered, a process of translation. This process appeals to symbols, metalinguistic terms and a number of extrapolation strategies activating the latent meanings of the referent, regardless of whether that referential world is imaginary or not. The subject matter requires sometimes one particular milieu and sometimes another. Artworks refer not to buildings but rather to the action of building, to its symbols and ideological possibilities, not to the city, but rather to the way we conceive it, imagine it, and conceptualize it. Again, the approach by Juan Antonio Ramírez is relevant here, since the architectural thought has implicitly accepted that it is an endeavor centered on the activity of a constructor, and has neglected

the aesthetic dimension proper of architectural design, where the project is accompanied by texts, images, descriptions and paintings. [Fig. 10]

These consequences, which as mentioned above, might be called ekphrastic, are at a midpoint between the initial conception of the architect and the pragmatic, tectonic and constructive development required by a construction. They are related to the visual-aesthetic thinking of utopianism, which did not always produce visual models to be materialized, but rather produced powerful symbols. Consider, for example, the great exponents of utopian writing, such as More, Bacon, Campanella and Fourier, who, despite proposing spatial organizations and complex urban mechanisms, never expected a literal execution of their proposals, —with the exception, perhaps, of the phalansteries proposed by Fourier—. [Fig. 11]

The entire graphic tradition associated with utopia, with illustrations in books, with works of art, appears as referents in the Utopía group. Islands, enclosures, and isolated buildings are commonly found in their repertoire.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this paper, it is worth considering the methodological implications of the analysis here undertaken for the study of art in Colombia and even in Latin America. Most importantly, to consider whether the case of Utopía, in its singularity, would lead to infer potential lines of enquiry and analysis about similar or historically related artistic practices. Not necessarily to examine artists interested in similar subject matters — an always feasible enterprise in art history —, but rather because some of the production tactics and strategies used by this collective shed light on a series of particular artistic phenomena. In short, it is important to examine their interest in reflections upon the territory and its representations, recognizing a line of operations which integrate conceptual, technical, and ideological components with the architectural projecting metaphor.

In this regard, based on the way they organize their work, Utopía can be considered a landmark group as it largely defines the activity of later generations of artists. In the late eighties and early nineties, the Utopía group has been, together with Taller 4 Rojo, one of the few artistic collectives making use of teamwork as a relevant factor to articulate their production. Teamwork led to redefining the notion of a work of art, the notion of artistic undertaking, as well as the relationship between a project and a completed work.

[FIG. 10] Utopía group, from the series The river route. Mies Walls. The confectioner house with “A big splash” from D. Hockney, 1979, colored photomontage, 40 × 40 cm. Suramericana de Seguros Collection, Medellín.
[FIG. 11] Utopía group, from the series *The river route*. Purification plant with Chicago Tribune buildings from Adolf Loos, 1979, colored photomontage, 40 x 40 cm. Suramericana de Seguros Collection, Medellín.
Interdisciplinarity is one aspect in which the work of *Utopía* is exemplary of the situations encountered in contemporary art and, therefore, of the demands posed by art forms after modern art, to historians, critics and curators. This facet reveals a group of artists no longer interested merely in deepening a language or a medium, but who rather seek to explore the possibilities of pluralizing resources, as well as authorial viewpoints. [FIG. 12]

The work of *Utopía* reveals the prominent role played by artistic interdisciplinarity in contemporary art processes and ruptures with modern art. While this has not traditionally been one of the strongest lines of analysis in Colombian art criticism and art history, it is relevant to find in undertakings such as those of *Utopía*, an operating principle which was later fairly used by artists in Colombia. Strategies that became, long after, usual — shifting from one expression form to another, adding up values from a variety of art forms and languages — can be traced back to *Utopía*. This entails at least two considerations, one about the authorial regime and another about the production strategy. On one hand, *Utopía* introduced collaborative forms of work in Colombian art. On the other hand, by dealing with works articulated around a project or critical revision of a representation, we understand the wide range of possibilities offered by art forms as well as the way these reveal the primacy of mediation and the interpretive appropriation in art history dynamics.

Moreover, the place architecture occupies in the artistic processes of the city of Medellín should be highlighted, a fact fully confirmed when examining *Utopía*’s projects. This place is critical rather than discursive, thematic or even technical or formal. Architecture holds a symbolic role, since it is studied as a system susceptible to recreation, criticism and analysis. While the aesthetic playfulness and the imaginative relish appear as distinctive features of the collective’s work, their approach to urban phenomena contains a good deal of conceptual challenging. By proposing a review of representations of local and global architectures, the ideological dimension of the phenomenon — its cultural inscription and its reliance on history — is somehow being emphasized.

When art processes in the city of Medellín during the second half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century are taken into consideration, the centrality that the query urban development and social capital had, and still have, in the local art is confirmed. As we have tried to show here, it is this query which situates *Utopía* in a special position. Two-dimensional symbols of architecture involve other representation systems and operate as a kind of metalanguage, or artifact, of cultural and social criticism.
In this regard, it is important to understand the predominant function that, in projects such as the *Utopía* group, plays the iconographic review of architecture as a way to assert the historical determination of the very artistic practice. This type of review should undoubtedly be further considered when examining art processes that have taken place in different Colombian regions. This seems to entail a different attitude towards artistic behaviors originally associated either with a return to the figurative order or with sculpture and painting languages. Even though these languages have been previously disdained, in some cases such as with the *Utopía* group, they expand both the operating possibilities and the artistic thinking.

[Fig. 12] *Utopía* group, Proposal for José María Córdova Airport, 1985, drawing, 70 x 100 cm. Particular collection, Medellín.
Utopía’s work challenges the understanding of the artistic practice in Colombia. Their forms of association, the centrality of interdisciplinarity, the predominance of project-oriented endeavors, and their consideration of the city as a historical, ideological, and aesthetic issue are only some of the possible approaches to the study of a work offering plenty of interpretive possibilities and materializations for Colombian art. [FIG. 13]
REFERENCES


In March of 2017, I accepted a full-time position at La Trobe University in Mildura, a remote regional town in far North-Western Victoria, Australia. Around the same time, I accepted the role I received notification of this paper’s acceptance for publication. The way these events coalesced has affected the shaping of this paper. After several years researching and writing about American artist Andrea Zittel not until now has her decision to establish a life and fulltime studio practice in high desert country, hours from a major city centre shared a correlation with my own situation. This paper is written from an artist’s perspective from the outside looking in at Zittel’s all-encompassing desire to question “how to live.” Zittel’s approach is direct; her artistic practice poetically and systematically addresses the construction of human needs as they are directly felt within her immediate desert community. Conversely, my approach to practice is indirect and operates from the point-of-view of the daydreamer musing about what a radically different and experimental way of living and learning might be like. In other words, if hers is a pragmatic methodology then by contrast mine is utopian and deeply speculative. Although in this regard we approach our artistic practices from diametrically opposed positions (direct verses indirect), our lines of questioning have revealed a shared understanding. That is, when faced with the question of what it means to be an artist in our experience of daily life under the late stages of global capitalism, we have each in our own way discovered that many of the standard regimes within neo-liberalism such as, individualism and the conventional family structure have become problematic. As Felix Guattari observed in The Three Ecologies, we will need to reinvent the ways in which we live, we will need to reconstruct the modalities of group being.¹

My analysis of Zittel’s A-Z West community is problematized in light of the contention it be considered in the context of historical understandings of the commune model. I acknowledge it does not fit within a conventional or strict definition of communitarian practice due to the fact it is not built on the premise of shared possessions or income. Rather, Zittel’s community has formed organically over a period of time in response to the demands of her artistic practice and has grown through the achievements of a single persona

to develop into an economy requiring she employ a small workforce. For this reason, I propose an examination that highlights the points of intersection between A-Z West and the early back-to-the-land communards who established the first wave of North American communes. I will tease-out what I have come to describe as the neo-countercultural characteristics of Zittel’s art and life. At the core of this shared pioneering spirit is what Guattari deemed a desire for the reinvention of the ways we live, to allow for new modalities of group being. In this way, I propose A-Z West might represent another layer within an expanded understanding of the existing models that have come to define communitarian practice, particularly given the way her community has evolved from a highly individualistic project in its early life into the multi-faceted social experiment it is today. This paper will not simply summarise Zittel’s long list of artistic achievements, instead it offers a specific account of aspects of her artistic practice and self-proclaimed “somewhat experimental life”.² The paper focuses on what Zittel’s art and life has come to represent amongst other contemporary artists living and working within the international community.

INHABITING THE MARGINS

Recalling Leo Marx’s notion of a “middle landscape”, Zittel has established a relatively ecologically sensitive, technologically innovative and highly collective site responsive place to live and work.³ Like the self-determined actions of the back-to-the-land communards of the 1960s and 70s, she has chosen to inhabit the margins, in this instance the area where the garden (high-desert wilderness near Joshua Tree National Park) sits at the edge of the machine (the extremely large-scale suburban sprawl of Los Angeles). When Zittel first moved to her property (referred to by the artist as A-Z West) in the Mojave Desert near Joshua Tree National Park (2000), she had already gained international recognition and an established art practice in New York City, with the support of a dynamic network of artists, gallerists, curators, and collectors behind her. Although she retains her association with the east (as well as the ownership of property), she claims her move to the west was driven by a need to return to the desert because of a lifelong connection. She says, “I knew I would end up in the desert living a somewhat experimental life, more than I knew I would end up being an artist”.⁴ Reportedly, Zittel’s initial intention to move to the desert was part of a fanciful desire to seek out an unencumbered lifestyle. In one of the catalogue essays for Critical Space titled ‘Live/Work Space’, Cornelia Butler refers to this “ultimately thwarted fantasy as hiding in plain sight complicated by her gathering of artists around her, creating a kind of collective compound from which she can create art”.⁵

Zittel’s ‘workforce’ has brought to life a dynamic mix of local community and visiting artists and it represents one characteristic that underpins the unique functioning of A-Z West. First, the payed employees consist of local community members who seem to have little to no prior connection with the artistic community but through their labour have become integrated participants of the local arts ecology. Second, a recent community of local artists have come together through a desire to utilize the A-Z West Weaving Studio, the weavers also assist Zittel in the production of her woven works. Third, a proposal based (and therefore competitive) artist in residency program requires selected visiting artist residents contribute a couple of hours labour each day in return for the experience of staying in the A-Z Encampment. The encampment is a communal camping facility complete with communal kitchen facilities and a cluster of A-Z Wagon Stations (an actual series of well-known and widely exhibited Zittel artworks). Finally, Zittel invites artists from across the globe to apply as interns, the recipients work closely with and for the artist while staying at her property. Sitting outside of this amalgamation but adding to the flow of people engaged with A-Z West, is the popular and periodically organised payed tours allowing interested members of the public to witness Zittel’s art and life in its ‘native’ context.

In addition to all of this is the High Desert Test Sites (HDTs) event which Zittel and a group of like-minded artist friends, curators and collectors founded in 2002. Since then, the group has hosted the event almost every year. Zittel explains that HDTs came out of their shared interest in putting art into the world at large. She became interested in exploring other ways she could facilitate this by sharing her experience of life as an artist in the desert with others. On the HDTs website one of the aims of the program is outlined as follows:

To create a ‘center’ outside of any pre-existing centers. We are inspired by individuals and groups working outside of existing cultural capitals, who are able to make intellectually rigorous and culturally relevant work in whatever location they happen to be in.6.

The pressures associated with the professionalization of the artist today are often a source of anxiety, much of what artists do has nothing to do with the making of art. Artists are just as engaged in public relations, social media networking and administration as most people running a small business. It is clear part of the collectivism that has come to characterise A-Z West comes with Zittel’s dual critical awareness and perceptive ability to work with the structure of contemporary artist as highly professional and entrepreneurial. Her early decision to adopt the semi-corporate branding A-Z for almost all of her projects stemmed from her inability to have fabricators take her seriously when trying to order elements for artworks. Once she adopted a brand, namely A-Z Enterprises people

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started to take her requests seriously. The A-Z brand possesses a self-reflexive almost comic critical awareness of the demands for overt professionalization placed on the artist today, in this way it reads as an institutional critique that speaks to Zittel’s ability to manipulate the system while also finding a way to make it work in her favour.

All of this begs a number of questions: is Zittel in fact a highly astute business woman who foresaw the potential for substantial professional advancement and commodification in developing and diversifying the cultural capital that flows from the nuanced collective social structure she has constructed around her practice and the A-Z West community? Is Zittel aware of this point of difference and has she capitalised on the fact these factors set her apart from other contemporary artists operating on the same global stage? On the other hand, a case could be made for this distinction between the way Zittel operates in comparison to most contemporary artists working at her level who simply choose to pay assistants and forgo the many levels of community engagement she appears to be invested in. What is distinctive about the way Zittel works and the model she has developed is that it does not only support her practice and its labour demands. Through her willingness to open her door to strangers and let the outside world not only witness but play a part in her practice, in a number of ways, she demonstrates a range of meaningful social impacts for the local community as well as the international art community.

NEW MODALITIES OF GROUP BEING

The aspects of Zittel’s art and life I want to highlight owe to her self-determination, enthusiasm for simple human-scale technologies and experimentation with alternative ways of living. As previously mentioned, these qualities share points of intersection with early countercultural environmentalism from the late 60s and early 70s. Furthermore, my previous research has situated some of Felix Guattari’s theories from The Three Ecologies concerning modalities of group-being in relation to this early countercultural history.7

In this light, Zittel’s practice also bears a distinct relationship to Guattari’s project. Instructive here is a consideration of Guattari’s proposed “reconstructing modalities of group-being”, through practices of experimentation, instead of clinging to general recommendations, such as the predetermined homogeny and standardised behaviour characteristic of consumer society.8

Keeping in mind the first wave of modern countercultural communes occurred in the mid-twentieth century, at this time the accepted definition of communal living was understood as a group of people living together and sharing all possessions

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and day-to-day responsibilities. I am proposing a loosening of the strict terms in which we define a commune in order to propose a Guattarian reconstruction of another form of group-being. The aim is not to replace the historically established model of the counterculture commune nor to suggest A-Z West is a commune, but to accept multiple understandings and examine another form of artist’s community and position it alongside its historical commune precedents as one of the many ways people experiment with other ways of living in contrast to the status quo – understood as the pervasive behaviour characteristic of consumer society. For Zittel, who often uses the phrase ‘how to live’, the search for radical reconstructions forms a central tenet of her practice. In this light, Zittel’s experimental testing ground at A-Z West can be understood through a Guattarian lens as searching for new modalities of group-being.

According to Guattari, social ecosophy consists of developing specific practices that will modify and reinvent the ways in which we live as couples or in the family in an urban context or at work. He states:

Obviously it would be inconceivable to try to go back to old formulas, which relate to periods when the planet was far less densely populated and when social relations were much stronger than they are today. But it will be a question of literally reconstructing the modalities of group-being [l’étreengroupe], not only through communicational interventions but through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity. Instead of clinging to general recommendations we would be implementing effective practices of experimentation, as much on a micro-social level as on a larger institutional scale.9.

The A-Z West community has “develop[ed] specific practices that modify and reinvent the ways in which we live as couples or in the family in an urban context or at work, etc.”10.

Zittel has facilitated an alternative family structure through the professional demands of her practice. Her intensely productive ‘art farm’ attracts younger artists who, whilst working with and for her, often spend time living with her. Zittel appears to be a private person who craves isolation, yet paradoxically her daily rituals are a central component of her practice and thus has become an object of public display. Moreover, Zittel’s way of living and working construct a unique environment, partly driven by her position within the contemporary art world and partly inspired by her connection to the desert. Despite herself, and possibly as a counterbalance to her need for solitude, Zittel and the network of friends and family that surround her experiment with a very open and public way of living – providing a unique example of Guattari’s new modality of “group-being”. It is precisely in this regard that Zittel’s experimental community offers another alternative and different perspective to those previously described.

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10. Ibid.
as communitarian in relation to Guattari’s ideas about “social ecosophy”.^{11}

For example, The A-Z Wagon Stations (2003 to the present) function as personal shelters, with just enough room for one or two people to eat, sleep and contemplate. Inspired by camping, station wagon cars and old-fashioned Wild West covered wagons, each structure has the same exterior shell shape with a curved powder-coated steel front hatch, which doubles as a large door and opening. Zittel describes her A-Z Wagon Stations as a project that encourages people to engage with her works in an active way once they own them. She was worried people were buying her works and not using them as functional art objects, so when it came to the wagons, rather than sell them, she give them to friends to own and customise. They also became somewhere to stay when they came to visit her. The customisation resulted in a scatter of similar shaped structures across the land adorned with idiosyncratic decorations – one wagon has even been customised to look like a hot-rod car, with red and yellow flames licking the outside of the structure, another has been customised for meditation. All of the wagon’s interiors start minimal, with a small set of corner shelves prompting owners to fill them with objects of their choosing. It is also up to the owner to introduce simple comforts, such as seating mats and sleeping surfaces. The ongoing development of the wagon project has given rise to an incredible looking camping ground where Zittel’s friends and collaborators spend time. In recent years, a second generation of wagon stations has become the designated shelters in the camping ground known as A-Z Encampment for invited artist’s in residence.

In many ways, the wagon stations along with other dwellings and structures the artist has scattered across the landscape at A-Z West are reminiscent of the configuration of a community of artists who moved to Colorado in the 1970s to establish the commune Drop City. However, instead of ad-hoc geodesic domes spread across the rugged landscape, at A-Z West a fleet of beautifully designed wagons provide collective shelter. A-Z West differs in many ways to Drop City, the most obvious being Zittel as the figurehead at the helm of A-Z West, by contrast Drop City developed as a holistically collective experiment with no leader and all possessions and land shared. It is precisely because Zittel owns the land and her highly successful art practice sustains the running and growth of A-Z West that I propose it might offer a glimpse into how a reconfiguring of communal styles of living has evolved over time towards another model with a long-term sustainable potential. A-Z West is just one of the many ways people are living collectively. When compared to earlier communal models like Drop City, A-Z West possesses an increased chance for a long and sustainable future (unlike Drop City’s short life).

^{11} Ibid.
because of Zittel’s strength at its core. Additionally, because of the social collectivism that has naturally evolved over time at A-Z West, Zittel often talks about the future of the property becoming more of an arts-based educational and community facility or foundation, at which stage she sees herself moving-on to another homestead. This shift will lead to the communities’ structure changing again and will perhaps see it become less hierarchical and fall in-line with the total collectivism of a traditional commune; it might however shift in the opposite direction towards a highly regulated bureaucratic structure – time will tell.

ZITTEL AND CREATIVE PEDAGOGY

In an interview with Laila Pedro for the Brooklyn Rail Zittel explains her experiences and opinions surrounding the ‘lifestyle industry’. She says: I’ve been kind of obsessed with the issue of lifestyle because I think it’s something that problematizes the ground that my practice is built on. I’m entirely committed to making work that functions within life and living. To me, life is the thing that matters most. I think life matters even more than art. But there is now an entire “lifestyle industry” that potentially co-opts this idea. The commodification of lifestyle is about creating the illusion of living, and it represses us by instilling a sense of inadequacy that our lives don’t measure up to the displays in decorating magazines or Instagram feeds. How do I create an alternative to “lifestyle?” I think a better term for what I’m after is a life ethic, although that can also be problematic because the word ethic suggests a moral or ideological platform. But my personal life ethic is about having a life in which you pay attention and think about how and why things are the way they are, rather than just trying to have a sense of “style” or create “good design”12.

Zittel’s thoughts on the repressive aspect of the ‘lifestyle industry’ and the role Instagram plays in perpetuating a sense of inadequacy to fuel further consumption of goods to give the illusion of a better life bares an interesting relationship to my own experience of Zittel’s very active and intimate Instagram feed. Like many artists today Instagram has become a useful promotional tool, it also allows artists to stay connected to the artistic community no matter where they are. Given Zittel’s remote location at A-Z West, Instagram keeps us (the public) in-touch with the daily rituals Zittel undertakes in a very casual and immediate way. For me, as one of thousands of artists and members of the general public who follow Zittel – and importantly in stark contrast to her critical commentary on the way the ‘lifestyle industry’ co-opts ideas surrounding how to live – hers is a richly inspiring and empowering feed to follow. In many ways, Instagram helps to keep the utopian imaginary associated with Zittel’s community alive. Although we are located on opposite sides of the world, Zittel is one of few established figures

within the international art community who self-initiates and provides opportunities for artists like myself to experience valuable time within her community, not as a tourist but potentially as an active contributor – as a potential artist in residence.

It is well documented that Zittel has issues with conventional institutional forms of pedagogy and although she may have never intended it she has become a key figure within the international artistic community for developing an alternative and experiential educational model. In an essay titled ‘Academy: The Production of Subjectivity’, Simon O’Sullivan refers to the importance of understanding political art practice as not just being about institutional and ideological critique, but as also involving the active production of our own subjectivity. The collectivism Zittel’s practice perpetuates and depends upon envelops others into the subjective realm of her artistic practice, pointing to larger questions about the agency of art and the social. O’Sullivan highlights the importance of “creative pedagogy”, methods that involve student participation through workshops or laboratories, models that do not mimic top-down structures in “existence elsewhere”. Zittel’s carefully constructed community fosters this model of creative pedagogy – of skills and experiential sharing. Whilst she requires many hands to help produce her artworks, she incorporates artist interns and residents into the A-Z West working and living environment, unlike many other artists of her generation who simply solely employ paid staff. The stream of enthusiastic artists coming into the community at A-Z West provides an atmosphere that reflects Guattari’s conception of “processual creativity”. O’Sullivan states, “to become involved in our own production of subjectivity, to move from passive spectator to become active participants, to take what we need... in our own project of ‘processual creativity’; [is] precisely to treat our lives as a work of art”. Andrea Zittel’s art and life appears to have managed to achieve her own take on ‘processual creativity’. This element of creative pedagogy and Zittel’s unique brand of unconventional mentorship contributes to the unique structure of A-Z West. Although it cannot be described as a commune in the traditional sense, A-Z West possesses a neo-countercultural quality through its echoing of some of the most potent characteristics attributed to the early counterculture communes, such as, self-determination, enthusiasm for simple human-scale technologies and collective experimentation with alternative ways of living. It is precisely in this way and through an expanded and reconfigured lens that I propose A-Z West represents a new style of communalism. A-Z West is aspirational, it symbolises just one of the many potential contemporary examples of what an artist’s community can look like sin the 21st century.

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14. Ibid.


REFERENCES


PEQUEÑAS HORMIGAS MUNDANAS, ENORMES INSECTOS UTÓPICOS: LAS OBRAS MIRMECOLÓGICAS DE YUKINORI YANAGI

En 1989, durante su estancia forativa en Yale el artista japonés Yukinori Yanagi (1959) presentó su primera granja de hormigas, que inauguraba sus series mirmecológicas¹: *American Flag Ant Farm* [Fig. 1] El artista había introducido el popular juguete de la empresa Uncle Milton² en una caja de madera y cristal con una bandera estadounidense de arena coloreada en la tapa. Dentro había imágenes - un hombre con una granja de hormigas, una diana, un Mickey Mouse, una hormiga -, y anotaciones. Los insectos iban y venían entre interior y tapa por unos tubos transparentes, según horadaban la bandera y trasladaban los granos al interior de la caja, dando forma a una amalgama multicolor. Pasado un tiempo las hormigas serían desalojadas, y el resultado fijado con un pegamento.

¹ Como precedente, Yanagi habría recurrido a hormigas en al menos dos ocasiones anteriores, pero no incluye esas obras en la cronología de sus dos series mirmecológicas: <http://www.yanagistudio.net>
A esta obra le siguieron muchas otras en las que variaban tanto banderas como especies de hormiga, ambas en función del contexto geopolítico. Una de las más significativas, *The World Flag Ant Farm* (1990), se exhibió en la Bienal de Venecia de 1993 [fig. 2]. Contaba con 180 compartimentos (siete filas por veintiséis columnas) de los que unos 170 eran banderas de países diversos, cifra próxima a los entonces integrados en la ONU. Los restantes servían como depósito de los granos multicolores que las hormigas trasladaban mientras excavaban sus túneles.

Además, empezando en 1988, Yanagi habría agrupado un segundo grupo de colaboraciones mirmecológicas bajo el título *Wandering Position*. A diferencia de su otra serie, la maduración de esta fórmula sería más lenta. Sin embargo, su impulso inicial parece similar al de la primera granja de hormigas: una reflexión acerca de las barreras (geopolíticas, institucionales, culturales, personales) que el artista iba superando. Yanagi había volado diez mil kilómetros hasta Yale “para escapar de un gueto [Japón] sólo para encontrarme dentro de otro tipo de celda – un estudio dentro de una importante universidad estadounidense”4. El artista colocó a una hormiga en el suelo de su estudio-celda, y con gran paciencia se dedicó a seguirla, trazando en rojo su zigzagueante trayectoria según avanzaba rebotando con las paredes4 (The Ant Following Plan, 1988) [fig. 3]. Esta acción-instalación no adoptaría su forma definitiva hasta 19945 en inSITE94, exposición celebrada entre Tijuana y San Diego (México- Estados Unidos). En una estación - lugar especialmente apropiado por las asociaciones de ideas cruzadas entre vías, trenes, fronteras y la línea trazada por hormiga y humano – Yanagi delimitó un cuadrado con perfiles metálicos para, días después, retirarlos y devolver la criatura a su colonia [fig. 4]. Tras varias extenuantes sesiones de horas de duración registrando sus movimientos con una cera roja, los bordes del dibujo acababan repletos de trazos apretados correspondientes a sus intentos por salir del área acotada [fig. 5]. Estos elementos, con algunas variaciones, configurarían el desarrollo básico de la serie *Wandering Position*6.


Con anterioridad he recurrido a los estudios animales y a la biología para poder entresacar, en estas dos series mirmecológicas de Yanagi, las agencias y perspectivas de las propias hormigas de entre los simbolismos humanos proyectados sobre ellas. En este marco, las interacciones entre humano e insectos pueden abordarse como una colaboración, enfoque congruente con la postura del artista que subrayaría la co-autoría de las hormigas, que en sus términos entomológicos contribuirían a enriquecer tanto el proceso como el resultado final7. Sin embargo, en este texto me acercaré a estas obras en función de varios ejes y dimensiones que suelen aparecen asociados a lo utópico de modo significativo.

Conviene indicar que en las mencionadas series Yanagi no se identifica con lo utópico de manera explícita. Tampoco hay que olvidar que Japón no tiene una tradición utópica tan prominente como las de otras culturas. Incluso se cuestiona que pueda hablarse de la existencia de tal tradición antes de la introducción del concepto occidental de utopía a finales del siglo XIX, mediante varias traducciones del libro de Thomas More realizadas durante la era Meiji8. Sin embargo, en estas obras sí se ubican rasgos y lecturas ligados a lo utópico que se hacen evidentes cuando se contrastan con los proyectos actuales del artista, con los que pretende mejorar las condiciones sociales, culturales o medioambientales de ciertas islas y comunidades japonesas.

Asimismo, la larga historia de las variadas y cambiantes metáforas utópicas que en la cultura occidental han sido ligadas a insectos sociales como abejas y hormigas es bien conocida9; connotaciones que alcanzarían a la cultura japonesa junto con otras influencias occidentales10. La observación y estudio de los enjambres y colonias de estos himenópteros los convirtió en plantillas convenientes sobre las que proyectar ideologías de uno u otro signo, o teorizar acerca de modelos alternativos de organización social, política o incluso sexual11. En este texto mostraré cómo ciertas características y comportamientos de las hormigas las aproximan a las dimensiones y elucubraciones utópicas, y en particular a las que se manifiestan en las obras mirmecológicas de Yanagi y en su trayectoria. A su vez, en función de las épocas, contextos, intenciones o necesidades de los implicados se habría optado por destacar - o incluso distorsionar - unos u otros de estos rasgos, vertiendo sobre las hormigas una fructífera ambigüedad12 que Yanagi, como otros antes, aprovecha desde un punto de vista expresivo.

Sin embargo, en los planteamientos utópicos se ha recurrido también a otros animales no humanos, al margen de a los insectos sociales. Tiene sentido, sobre todo si lo utópico se plantea como un juego de sustituciones en el cual un narrador o viajero se desplaza – en el espacio, en el tiempo, en lo conceptual – a un lugar o no-lugar en el que se encuentra con una realidad alternativa,
y como consecuencia se desarrollan una sucesión de comparaciones entre la realidad desconocida y la conocida, seguidas de reflexiones que apuntarían maneras de reorganizar o mejorar esta última. Si son otros animales los que bien encarnan ese no-lugar – como cuando una hormiga o su colonia son visitadas y desentrañadas como un ideal a seguir –, o bien lo pueblan – como los inteligentes equinos houyhnhnms que Gulliver trató en su último viaje13-[FIG. 6]-, esa sustitución de lo humano por una alternativa no humana pero también animal cobra cierta relevancia.

Después de todo, con frecuencia acudimos a otros animales para remplazar a seres humanos no sólo en situaciones demasiado arriesgadas o perjudiciales – un viaje espacial, un experimento científico, otros tipos de sacrificios – sino también en busca de algún efecto didáctico o expresivo, como sucede en fábulas y parodias. En términos conceptuales, esta sustitución implica remplazar a los humanos por lo que en la tradición occidental tendemos a concebir como sus opuestos, los demás animales14. Por lo tanto, supondría una inversión de los términos que nos permitiría evaluar la situación bajo una luz distinta que, catalizada por nuestra empatía – es decir, por nuestra capacidad para ponernos en el sitio de otros – nos ayudaría a conectar y a juzgar qué es lo mismo, qué diferente, y en qué medidas. Todo lo cual contribuiría a romper o distanciarse de esa situación conocida dada, de las implicaciones y sobreentendidos que quizás habíamos pasado por alto. Esto, a su vez, podría impulsar la concepción de soluciones y mejoras, o como mínimo de cambios.


Cuando, debido a obras como las de Yanagi, son las hormigas o sus colonias las que son señaladas como el lugar a visitar, del que aprender, esta sustitución por inversión se ve enseguida condicionada por las diferencias de tamaño entre humanos e insectos, de las que suelen derivarse reflexiones en torno a esa y otras dimensiones como la escala - de lo micro a lo macro\(^{15}\) -; el espacio, el territorio y sus recorridos; el tiempo y sus desarrollos, o el número - desplegado entre el individuo y la multiplicidad de lo colectivo, y algo a tener en cuenta por la creciente superpoblación de nuestro planeta. Son estas dimensiones las que desgranaré en función de las relaciones que se establecen entre lo utópico y las hormigas en estas series mirmecológicas de Yanagi, empezando por lo referido al tamaño.

En el tipo de interacción que conforma el núcleo de la serie *Wandering Position*, las diferencias de tamaño entre humano y hormiga, entre el artista y la criatura a la que ha convertido en su maestra, se ven subrayadas [FIG. 7]: “Yukinori Yanagi se arrastra sobre sus manos y piernas en un esfuerzo definido para registrar los serpenteos de una única hormiga con una cera roja. [...]. Aunque abdujo a esta diminuta criatura de su colonia y la seleccionó para ponerla al servicio del arte, es el artista el que está siguiendo el rastro de la hormiga [...] el miembro humano del equipo se arrastra torpemente, como [si fuera] un niño pequeño [al que hubiera] revertido, detrás de la ágil hormiga\(^{16}\).”

En una fotografía que pretenda registrar una vista general de la acción, la presencia de Yanagi siempre será visible, evidente. Por el contrario, la de la hormiga sólo se intuye allí donde el encorvado artista apunta con su cera roja. La disparidad de tamaño influye también en las relaciones de poder establecidas entre humanos y hormigas, por lo que son habituales las reflexiones al respecto. Yanagi abduce o secuestra a la hormiga y la introduce en el recinto, para a continuación someter su posición y movimientos a los del himenóptero, decisión que terminan sufriendo sus rodillas y espalda. Es como si el artista buscara deshilvanar la relación entre ambos entre la omnipotencia y la insignificancia, entre la soberbia y la humildad. Yanagi traslada a la hormiga y sí, se impone sobre ella; al tiempo que se identifica con la criatura y la sigue, como si reconociera en sí mismo esa indefensa y diminuta hormiga, encerrada contra su voluntad en un marco identitario tras otro: Japón, Estados Unidos, las convenciones del arte...

Entremedias de ese abanico de poderes y envergaduras, la cita anterior también invoca a un Yanagi niño, más grande que una hormiga pero más pequeño que un hombre adulto, que intuye en su postura encogida y torpes movimientos. Y puede que no sólo en ellos, puesto que no es extraño que infancia y hormigas aparezcan asociadas; sea debido a que unos y otros seres son percibidos

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\(^{16}\) Weintraub, L. *Obeying Ants: Yukinori Yanagi*, [op. cit.], p. 236.
como pequeños, en distintos modos y medidas, o a la recurrencia de estos insectos en los juegos infantiles al aire libre, que llegan a inspirar las primeras incursiones o experimentos naturalistas, o incluso artísticos.

En su libro Ant, Charlotte Sleigh entrelaza las experiencias infantiles de los mirmecólogos Auguste Forel y Edward O. Wilson. Forel (1848 – 1931), que se consolaba entre las hormigas de su jardín de la asfixiante atmósfera religiosa impuesta por su madre, empezó a escribir una epopeya homérica con dos de sus especies como protagonistas, y en su imaginación poseía un globo mágico con el que podía magnificar y minimizar a amigos y enemigos según sus deseos; esto es, aumentar el tamaño de las hormigas y reducir el de aquéllos que le atormentaban. Wilson (1929), forzado por la situación de sus padres, llevaba una existencia nómada y solitaria en la que sus mejores amigas eran las hormigas que guardaba en un tarro con arena debajo de su cama. Sleigh relaciona estas vivencias con la necesidad de contener, personalizar e interiorizar un mundo tan enorme que escapa a nuestro control, y enmarca tanto las casas de muñecas como los formicarios y las granjas de hormigas - muy populares entre los niños – dentro de ese mismo impulso.


De niño, Yanagi también se entregaba a este tipo de pasatiempos: Crecí en el campo. Mis juguetes eran insectos, peces, pájaros. Me gustaba mirar sus hábitos y actividades. Jugaba con insectos, especialmente la hormiga. Es un animal familiar para mí. Hacía granjas de hormigas [...]. También hice mapas desde la altura de los ojos de una hormiga, mostrando una piedrecita como una montaña enorme, y las hierbas como bosques.19 [FIG. 8]

Estos juegos de escala20 resultan familiares, dada su presencia en cuentos y películas infantiles, y en otras historias. Cuando tratamos de ponernos en los tres pares de zapatos de las hormigas, la empatía nos induce a desplazarnos hacia abajo o hacia arriba en el eje del tamaño. Las opciones son varias. Se puede agrandar a las hormigas hasta alcanzar nuestros estándares, como hacía Forel con su globo mágico, o incluso llevarlo más allá y convertirlas en enormes monstruos y en una seria amenaza, como en la película Them! (1954) [FIG. 9]. Pero también se puede reducir a los humanos a términos hormiguiles, como en el cuento Ladis, un gran pequeño, entre otros ejemplos21. En otras ocasiones, el humano no cambia y son los mundos que se encuentra los que le convierten en gigante o en hormiga. Como en los viajes de Gulliver, donde no hay hormigas presentes como tales, aunque sí se las mencione22.

En este punto, es llamativo que en estos utópicos23 viajes estos desplazamientos en el eje del tamaño coincidan con otros como los derivados de las mencionadas sustituciones o inversiones de lo humano por lo animal. Esto es, houyhnhnms por yahoos o caballos por humanos, lo que implicaría la manipulación de otro eje, el de la scala naturae, de modo que los que en otro mundo estaban por encima ahora están por debajo, y viceversa. Aunque parece lógico que una utopía o un mundo alternativo se construyan con la realidad
conocida como base, mediante idealizaciones pero también otras manipulaciones como distorsiones, exageraciones, reorganizaciones o fragmentaciones, que a su vez pretendan desestabilizar esa realidad de la que parten. Y que, por tanto, diversos tipos de distorsiones, cambios de tamaño u otros se empleen como recurso para tratar de mejorar el entorno que nos rodea, o para demostrar cómo podría cambiar.

Por supuesto, en estas divagaciones referidas al tamaño se mezclan tanto las implicaciones pretendidamente físicas como las conceptuales, en grados diversos. En la película Them! o en las aventuras de Ladis se imaginan y representan esos cambios en el tamaño como reales pero, en otros casos, éstos se inclinan más hacia lo conceptual. Así sucede con los mapas creados por Yanagi desde el punto de vista de una hormiga, que podrían entenderse como el resultado de una narrativa interna similar a las anteriores por la cual el artista ha reducido su mirada para tratar de ver a través de los ojos y el tamaño de una hormiga, para a continuación traer la experiencia de vuelta a las dimensiones humanas.

En cierta manera, y aunque no resulte algo tan evidente como en los viajes narrados por Gulliver, en todos los relatos ligados al discurso utópico parecen darse este tipo de desplazamientos en cuanto a tamaño o escalas. Porque se tiende a tomar como modelo una isla, ciudad, o estado que se presenta en forma condensada, y acerca del cual existe la aspiración de exportarlo, de expandirlo o globalizarlo. Cuando el hormiguero o sus hormigas se toman como tal isla o modelo encajan muy bien en este esquema previo, y contribuyen a reforzarlo al tiempo que lo amplían no sólo hacia arriba, sino también hacia abajo. Ya no se trataría
sólo de las idas y vueltas entre las escalas de hormigas y humanos, sino que emergerían analogías y paralelismos que conducirían de lo diminuto a lo inmenso, de lo infinitesimal a lo cósmico, deteniéndose por el camino en todos los niveles comprendidos entre los átomos y las estrellas, entre las células y las galaxias.

Por lo tanto, cuando te encuentras con las 170 banderas de arena coloreada de la instalación *The World Flag Ant Farm* [fig. 2], entras con facilidad en esa dinámica de reducir y aumentar, de identificarte e identificar a las hormigas como diminutos humanos que recorren los diferentes países; simultáneamente, continúas viéndolas por sí mismas, como criaturas que no entienden de fronteras y que las desbordan, mientras destruyen sus símbolos. Pero las implicaciones y significados no se detienen ahí, lo que ofrecen las hormigas iría más allá y podría aplicarse también a aquello que engloba el sistema económico y sociopolítico que se representa en la obra: el planeta, y todos sus (eco)sistemas y ciclos no sólo humanos. De hecho, Yanagi terminaría por dar este paso adicional, y en una exposición contrapondría ese efímero sistema cerrado de su granja de hormigas con la laberíntica ciudad de Tokio, cuya vista se podía contemplar desde el ventanal del rascacielos en el que se ubicaba la galería. Como veremos, el artista enfatizaba de esta manera algunas de sus preocupaciones y proyectos posteriores, asociados con la gestión de los desechos y de la energía; asunto relevante, en su correspondiente medida, tanto en un hormiguero como en una gran ciudad.

Si los párrafos anteriores se referían a las modulaciones de tamaño y escala que se detectan entre hormigas y utopías en relación con las obras mirmecológicas y la trayectoria de Yanagi, a continuación exploraré la esfera de otras dimensiones como el espacio y el territorio, o el tiempo y la historia. Las lecturas o representaciones de las hormigas y de sus colonias en clave territorial son una constante que alcanza al arte contemporáneo, como se comprueba en las granjas de hormigas de Yanagi y en otros ejemplos. Esto se deriva de la forma en que numerosas especies de hormigas defienden tanto su hormiguero como los alrededores de éste frente a intrusos, incluidas otras hormigas a las que no reconocen como integrantes de la colonia. El hormiguero, pues, es el centro de las vidas de las hormigas, y desde este centro irradián un cierto número de cambiantes rutas que, señalizadas con mayor o menor intensidad por sus feromonas, conectan a estos insectos con los lugares en los que – en función de su especie – recogen o cazan su alimento; ordeñan a sus protegidos, los pulgones; cortan fragmentos de hojas para cultivar hongos, etc. Observar las ordenadas idas y venidas de una carretera de hormigas, limpio de obstáculos y vegetación, o los avances en y por los túneles de un formicario, trae a la memoria el tránsito humano. O la noción de desplazamiento, de progreso, de viaje; sea en el espacio o en el tiempo, en un sentido físico o conceptual.
[FIG. 11] Ingrid Taylar, *The Carpenter Ant Challenge* [entrada hormiguero], 2009. Licencia Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>
Así, durante su etapa escolar Yanagi se recuerda a sí mismo como a “una hormiga zigzagueando y devorando cualquier cosa con la que me topara a lo largo del camino”\(^{29}\), un pequeño insecto en ruta. Para después, tras su maduración personal y artística, pasar a sentirse: 

[...] atrapado en una gigantesca bandera japonesa, en una jaula, ¡sepultado por la identidad nacional! Al tercer año de carrera, caí en la cuenta de que era justo como las hormigas dentro de la caja de cristal, trabajando en un área limitada. Me impulsó el deseo irresistible de salir del gueto llamado Japón\(^{30}\).

Momento éste en el que se marchó para establecerse en Estados Unidos. Yanagi, pues, a semejanza de las hormigas articula su paisaje, su identidad en función de un centro o centros, así como de las vías o desplazamientos entre ellos. Esto se recalca en algunas de sus granjas de hormigas, con claras resonancias autobiográficas. Como la caja con la bandera de Estados Unidos en la tapa, realizada durante su estancia en Yale [fig. 1], que sería seguida por otra con una gran bandera japonesa en vertical (Ants and Japanese Flag, 1995) [fig. 12], y después por otra más con ambas banderas, la de Japón y la de Estados Unidos (Pacific, 1997) [fig. 13]. En este último caso, las hormigas replicaban la propia trayectoria vital y artística de Yanagi: su marcha hacia Estados Unidos, y su posterior abandono de Nueva York de vuelta a la periferia de Japón años después, desencantado por las connivencias entre el sistema del arte y el del capital.

El artista habría alternado estas granjas de hormigas remarcadamente autobiográficas, las que fijaban el eje de su trayectoria, con otras concebidas para países y eventos concretos, para exposiciones con las que recorría el globo y en las que desplegaba diversos contextos geopolíticos, zonas de fricción o áreas de influencia como América, Asia, el Pacífico, el Atlántico, Eurasia, la Comunidad...
Europea... Por ejemplo, *The 38th Parallel* (1991), exhibida en Corea del Sur y referida a la zona desmilitarizada que la separaba de Corea del Norte, en la que se conectaban las banderas de los dos países [fig. 14]. Debido a lo sensible del tema, agudizado por su nacionalidad japonesa, Yanagi fue “advertido por las autoridades y deportado”31. En otras como *Pacific -The Ant Farm Project 1996*, creada para el museo australiano QAGOMA, se mostraban todas las banderas del Pacífico más las de los países europeos que habían tenido colonias allí, así como los símbolos aborígenes32. Lo cual conllevaba una asociación de ideas y connotaciones, casi infecciosa, entre las colonias de hormigas parcialmente desplazadas a las instalaciones de Yanagi – en general, de especies locales –, y las naciones coloniales y colonizadas representadas por las respectivas banderas33.

Justo en este punto se imbricarían, con mayor claridad, la historia global y la personal, tendidas ambas sobre el territorio. En la versión reducida de *Pacific* (1997) [fig. 13], las banderas japonesa y estadounidense se veían igualmente excavadas y degradadas por las hormigas, dando lugar a una bandera intermedia en la forma de un pequeño montículo con capas alternas de tonos rojos y blancos en los que se confundían las barras y el sol o *hinomaru*, mientras que el azul del fondo estrellado se propagaba de un lado a otro como la omnipresente influencia norteamericana. Este llamativo resultado visual, además de actuar como un comentario

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33. Estas connotaciones coloniales, migratorias e incluso invasoras que se asocian a las hormigas se desarrollan ampliamente en: Sleigh, C. *Ant*, [op. cit.] pp. 87-141. El propio Yanagi fue mirado con sospecha por presuntamente importar hormigas japonesas a Italia para la Bienal de Venecia, cuando en 1993 fue denunciado por maltrato, lo que provocó la liberación de los insectos “italianos” por parte de la organización.
sobre las experiencias vitales de Yanagi y su cuestionamiento de los símbolos de los países en los que había vivido, también aludía a las complicadas relaciones entre ambas naciones tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial, la ocupación estadounidense y las influencias cruzadas. A la inversa, el resto de granjas de hormigas no eran sólo instantáneas de contextos geopolíticos concretos, de asociaciones o fricciones apuntaladas por medio de constelaciones de banderas, sino asimismo hitos del diario de viajes de Yanagi, convertido en un artista ubicuo y globalizado, y en cierto modo, privado de centro. Viajes, por cierto, en los que la presencia de las hormigas -con una distribución planetaria equivalente a la de los seres humanos- le hacían sentirse más acompañado, mientras le ayudaban a comunicarse prescindiendo de idiomas que no dominaba.

En concordancia con el momento histórico, algunos contemplaban las granjas de banderas con optimismo, celebrando una disolución de fronteras que ilustraba “la enorme fuerza de los mansos para desestabilizar poderosas instituciones”, o cómo “las personas son liberadas de las influencias de políticas opresivas”, siendo “finalmente libres para perseguir [sus] visiones”. Poco a poco, la actitud de Yanagi se revelaría más ambivalente; cercana a la ambigüedad aparentemente caprichosa con la que las propias hormigas, ejerciendo sus agencias, algunas veces destruían casi completamente las banderas y otras apenas las tocaban. Yanagi construyó la granja con la bandera estadounidense en 1989, y la de 170 países en 1990, tras la caída del muro, en lo que parecía una conmemoración del acontecimiento y de sus implicaciones: grano a grano, cientos o miles de hormigas obreras sin reina conocida derribaban fronteras y creaban banderas multicolores, universales. Sin embargo, próximo ya el cambio de milenio, concibió nuevas granjas en las que los símbolos a disolver por sus quitinosas habitantes eran otros: billetes y obras de arte, en referencia a los pilares de un sistema cuyas convenciones y manejos comenzaban a resultarle opresivos. Invitaba, pues, a las hormigas a acabar con los símbolos de esa otra cara de la globalización que, sí, había traído consigo libertad. Pero más para el dinero que para las personas, muchas de las cuales se estaban quedando atrás, al margen de la tan cacareada fiesta.

Por este motivo, Yanagi decidió abandonar ese sistema del arte, Nueva York y los viajes, y regresar a su lugar de origen, Japón. Aunque, como se verá, no al mismo punto desde el que había partido. Así pues, el artista estructura su trayectoria como una sucesión de desplazamientos entre varios centros, como si se identificara con una hormiga errante que se establece por un tiempo en un hormiguero para después marcharse en busca de otro. En cierto modo, es como si él mismo fuera el protagonista o narrador de un libro de viajes, o de un relato utópico.
y en su camino fuera probando opciones, buenos lugares, los comparara con lo ya conocido, y a continuación procediera a desenmascarar sus defectos y contradicciones; se tratarán éstos de la ilusoria armonía de la sociedad japonesa, del engañoso sueño americano, de las bonanzas liberadoras e ilimitadas de la globalización, o del hormiguero como perfecto modelo de comportamiento. Es como si denunciara la manera en la que las cosas eligen presentarse a sí mismas, sus rostros públicos (omote), y expusiera las partes traseras o mecanismos íntimos, lo que sucede dentro o entre bastidores (ura38).

Para todos estos recorridos y cuestionamientos, y en particular el dirigido hacia el hormiguero, el artista se habría apoyado en su otra serie mirmecológica, Wandering Position, en la que reivindicaría una posición errante inextricable
Y o no sólo porque a los dos términos les separe una letra. Además de su insistencia en aspectos meditativos, Yanagi tiene otras obras, no mirmecológicas, con el nombre Wondering Position.

Palabras de Yanagi citadas en: Weintraub, L. Yukinori Yanagi. [op. cit.], p. 140.

Probablemente, una afirmación que cuestionarían bastantes mirmecólogos dado que, por ejemplo, en un hormiguero hay tareas que se empiezan y dejan a medias, aunque esto tienda a resultar beneficioso para la adaptación del hormiguero a circunstancias cambiantes.

Weintraub, L. Obeying Ants: Yukinori Yanagi. [op. cit.], p. 239.


A pesar de moverse, permanece encerrado con ella en el mismo lugar, y reflexiona acerca de la contradicción que se desarrolla ante sus ojos, como si se estuviese enfrentando a un k an zen que acabara de plantearse. Porque la diminuta criatura trata de escapar de los límites de ese cuadrado pero para volver encerrarse en su hormiguero, en su centro, y “retomar la tarea para la que ha sido programada, no para adquirir ‘libertad’”⁴⁰. Por lo que, aunque Yanagi califique la estamentada sociedad del hormiguero como “perfecta”⁴¹. y considere que las “funciones de la hormiga son las mismas que las nuestras” (comer, reproducirse, velar por su seguridad), también afirma que son muy diferentes a nosotros⁴². El artista discutía esta conclusión en el contexto del sacrificio individual y la obediencia ciega propios de la cultura japonesa, exacerbados durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial pero con cierta continuidad posterior, que consideraba manifestaciones de un control sobre la expresión individual que hacía extensivo a otros estados e identidades nacionales⁴³. En definitiva, lo que era ideal para una hormiga y para su colonia no lo era para los humanos, y al artista el hormiguero y su jerarquización tampoco le servían como ese buen lugar que andaba buscando.

De hecho, este mismo conflicto se despliega entre las dos series mirmecológicas de Yanagi, al igual que aparece con frecuencia asociado a la dinámica hormiga-hormiguero. Si en Wandering Position la relación es uno a uno, hormiga a humano, en las granjas de hormigas lo que se aprecia de manera más inmediata son los efectos conjuntos de la suma de esfuerzos. A raíz de esta contraposición se podría plantear la discusión recurrente sobre cuál es el verdadero organismo: si el insecto simple o la compleja colonia.

O si es posible – y cómo – ver algo del todo en cada uno de sus partes: del hormiguero en la hormiga, de la armonía de una fuga en cada uno de sus motivos⁴⁴, de la utopía en cada uno de los elementos que la componen. Y en cierto modo, la paciencia meditativa que demuestra Yanagi al seguir a la hormiga y registrar sus trazos, al desplegarse y entremezclarse en el tiempo y el espacio, consigue hacer visible no sólo la agencia de la hormiga - su infatigable búsqueda de la salida y del camino de vuelta - sino también algo de esa estructura que, insecto a insecto, dará forma al conjunto del hormiguero.

En línea con esto, es como si el humilde recorrido espacio-temporal⁴⁵ de Yanagi y la hormiga fuera como la esencia de su gran viaje vital y artístico, como un jardín seco (karesansui) podría serlo del archipiélago y la cultura japoneses. En palabras del artista: La pieza es mi propia meditación. [...] Construir esta obra es muy relajante, aunque sea duro para mis rodillas y espalda. La pieza quiere ser como un jardín de piedras, muy simple.
Pero el contenido tiene un significado profundo. Como el jardín, la obra está enmarcada fuera del mundo. Podemos encontrar un gran significado espiritual en eso.

Dada la imagen que evoca Yanagi, resulta difícil no pensar en un monje peinando la grava de un jardín como el icónico Ryoan-Ji; como si los ordenados surcos fueran las olas que rebotan en los grupos de rocas rodeados de musgo. Como si éstas fueran islas, un archipiélago, y el universo estuviera contenido en cada piedra, en cada grano de arena, en cada hormiga que lo acarrea. Asimismo, Yanagi sitúa la pieza fuera del mundo, como un lugar no-lugar que le permite modular y desplazar los parámetros y ejes de todo lo que se encuentra a su alrededor puesto que actúa desde una distancia, desde un punto externo, como también es propio de las utopías.

En su viaje, un Yanagi cansado y desencantado abandonó Nueva York y se puso en marcha, pero para detenerse y establecerse en su país. De vuelta al origen pero no a su centro, sino a su periferia; no hacia Tokio sino hacia unas cuantas pequeñas islas del mar de Seto, el mar interior de Japón, donde iniciaría proyectos artísticos, sociales, ecológicos, de inspiración utópica: Inujima, Kosagijima, Momoshima. Proyectos que, como otras muchas utopías isleñas, no sólo actúan donde se instalan sino que aspiran a convertirse en modelos, a pequeña y contenida escala, y a ser ampliados y exportados para contribuir a mejorar las relaciones entre el planeta y sus habitantes.

En una charla impartida en octubre de 2016, Yanagi insistía en su abandono de los excesos del mercado del arte y se declaraba en rebeldía frente a la fagocitadora centralización de Tokio, que devora a los trabajadores, naturaleza y cultura de las áreas.


47. El carácter shima, a veces jima, significa isla. A estas tres islas japonesas habría que añadirle una cuarta, Alcatraz, donde Yanagi también realizó un proyecto que sitúa junto a los otros tres, como se ve en su web.
circundantes. Lo que le había decidido a exiliarse a esa región remota del mar interior, que mostraba en un mapa en el que figuraban las tres islas en las que él y sus colaboradores habrían intervenido [Fig. 17]. En estos proyectos se materializan, ya de manera explícita, diversos aspectos de las coordenadas y dimensiones utópicas que hemos visto dibujarse en sus obras mirmecológicas.

Ahora, en la forma de pequeños grandes ejemplos, funcionales, que pretenderían modificar la desencaminada deriva planetaria actual que casi se diría encabezada por un Japón envejecido y con una juventud desechable, con un modelo energético y de consumo muy cuestionado tras el desastre de Fukushima, y con abruptas desigualdades entre las desbordadas ciudades y las despobladas áreas rurales. A muchas de las cuales es cada vez más complicado acceder debido, por ejemplo, a la progresiva desaparición de las líneas de ferris.

Por ello, cuando en una exposición Yanagi yuxtapone alguna de sus granjas de hormigas con un ventanal que se abre a la ciudad de Tokio, o ambas con uno de sus proyectos-isla, es como una invitación a desplazar unas sobre otras para reflexionar: hormigas, ciudad, islas, utopías. Entre otras cosas, sobre lo aprendido observando a estos insectos y meditando acerca de ellos, manipulando, creando y recreando sus contenidos ecosistemas e impracticables sociedades, tratando de extender esas ideas, confluencias o contrastes en otras direcciones.

En Inujima, una pequeña isla degradada que alojaba las ruinas de una refinería de cobre de la era Meiji, al artista le llevó trece años recuperar la fábrica y el entorno gracias
al apoyo financiero de la multinacional japonesa Benesse52., y en colaboración con arquitectos y constructoras locales53. Yanagi evoca la soberbia de Ícaro y la excesiva confianza humana en la tecnología como lema del proyecto; al tiempo que, en el interior del edificio, hace recorrer a los visitantes-hormigas el laberinto de su padre Dédalo, y que un sistema de ventilación renovable aprovecha las antiguas chimeneas fabriles como si el edificio fuera un gigantesco hormiguero – o quizás termitero. Un contraste, pues, entre la contaminación producida por la fábrica en el pasado y su potencial futuro.

En Kosagijima54 [fig. 19], la intención era y es la de concebir y cuidar la isla como si fuera un organismo vivo al completo, con su propio carácter y peculiaridades. Una suma compleja como la que caracterizaría cualquier hormiguero, que habría que revalorar para que deje de considerarse un recurso de usar y tirar, a explotar y luego olvidar, como tantas otras islas similares. Dotarla de la continuidad que ha ido perdiendo: atender a sus apenas doce ancianos habitantes; fortalecer los lazos entre ellos y quienes los visitan organizando eventos; rehabilitar un edificio vacío para crear un centro comunitario; limpiar los huertos de naranjos, los muelles y astilleros abandonados en los que antes se trabajaba.

Finalmente, en Momoshima55 en la actualidad Yanagi ejerce de director de un centro de arte que recibe financiación pública, y que ocupa un instituto abandonado de los muchos que hay en esas regiones japonesas en las que ya casi no quedan jóvenes, o niños. El artista atrae allí a sus estudiantes de la universidad de Hiroshima y a otros artistas internacionales, a los que anima a crear en colaboración con el entorno y el resto de la comunidad.

[fig. 18] Vista aérea de la fábrica recuperada por Yukinori Yanagi y sus colaboradores en la isla de Inujima. Cortesía del artista.

52 Benesse (del latín ben y esse, que la compañía traduce como bienestar) es una multinacional japonesa educativa que ha financiado otras islas artísticas, como el Benesse Art Site Naoshima, lugar que también se nutre de connotaciones utópicas.


54 <http://www.kosagi.jp/enter.html>

55 <http://artbasemomoshima.jp/index_e.html>
Art Base Momoshima se habría convertido en una sede y núcleo neurálgico de exposiciones, actividades y propuestas que desde allí irradiarían su vitalidad hacia toda la isla, y hacia el resto de la región.
Poco antes de terminar este artículo, me encontré 
or re-encontré con las palabras que traduzco a continuación. 
Como breve explicación de lo que fue la exposición colectiva 
inaugural de Art Base Momoshima, el texto resulta 
una conclusión apropiada y una confirmación de los frutos 
-materializados en estos proyectos-isla - que habrían 
dado esas confluencias y coordenadas que he ido hilando 
entre Yanagi, sus obras mirmecológicas, las propias 
hormigas y lo utópico: 
La exposición inaugural titulada “UTOPIA – Un Lugar Anónimo” 
se organizará en ART BASE MOMOSHIMA y otras localizaciones 
del área circundante. El término “utopía” fue acuñado originalmente 
por el pensador inglés Sir Thomas More como el nombre 
de una nación imaginaria, ideal. Tras su acuñación, el término 
fue usado de modos diversos – convirtiéndose en la base 
de ideas críticas sobre la sociedad, refiriéndose a literatura situada 
en sociedades imaginarias, y llegando a ser más ampliamente 
usado para indicar una visión optimista de un mundo ideal. 
Esta exposición equipara el término original griego “outopos” 
(“ou”- no, “topos” - lugar), que significa “un lugar anónimo,” 
con el entorno único de Momoshima – una isla aislada en el mar 
interior de Seto, y a un mundo entero de las grandes ciudades. 
Mediante el hecho de compartir lo que es más básico 
de los entornos de vida y de crear obras de arte específicas 
para el sight [sic, posible confusión de sight por visión en lugar 
de site, por sitio o lugar], cada artista ofrece su visión de una utopía 
contemporánea a través de su trabajo

Con estas líneas el círculo se cierra, pero abriéndose a la multiplicidad 
de iniciativas colectivas de las que Momoshima se habría convertido 
en un semillero, a través de exposiciones como la inaugural, 
o posteriores como 100 Ideas on Tomorrow’s Island: What Art Can Do 
for a Better Society (otoño 2013), además de todas las que siguieron. 
Quizás las hormigas no estén ya presentes dentro de las obras 
de arte, aunque tanto las series mirmecológicas de Yanagi 
cómo las reflexiones que engendraron siguen presidiendo muchas 
de estas exposiciones, y los túneles y las líneas que en su día trazaron 
los diminutos insectos sirven como recordatorio de que algunas 
de estas criaturas no están muy lejos. Probablemente, excavando 
la tierra del exterior, o incluso recorriendo las paredes y los rincones 
de los edificios que se van recuperando, o de los que continúan 
abandonados – aunque no por ellas. 

Sin haber estado la isla, la sensación es de que en ese no-lugar 
apartado y anónimo que sería Momoshima están pasando cosas, 
muchas más de la que se cuentan y registran, como tratan 
de transmitir algunos de los que la visitan. Debido a ello, 
en cierto modo este final es en realidad un principio.


57. Favell. Islands for life.


"柳幸典：「六本木クロッシング2013展」アーティストインタビュー（9）". *Mori Art Museum* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtGJaQmK3eY>


The term *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) has no generally accepted definition. Since the mid-20th century in particular its use has become increasingly arbitrary and is nowadays often used for any multimedia phenomenon. Consequently, today, everything up to Lady Gaga could be labelled as a total work of art. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, the use of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* was much more restricted. It was Richard Wagner (1813–1883) who made the concept popular around 1850 and who gave distinction to its wider meaning. Uniting music, lyric and dance Wagner imagined the total work of art as an opera-like stage performance. He aimed for an overall creation that would educate, reform all political and artistic conditions and finally lead to an ideal future society. The total work of art was supposed to realise a utopia.

These ideas inspired many intellectuals and artists. They tried to transfer Wagner’s concept from the performing to the visual arts. Together with the opera, an architectural interpretation proved to be the most suitable medium for the total work of art. Here, two different developments can be observed: on the one hand, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* could be limited to a unification of the fine arts to create an aesthetic interior design. This was also called *Raumkunst*, meaning a room designed as an artwork. In these examples all socio-political or utopian demands were relinquished. Other artists stayed as true as possible to the Wagnerian theory and simply changed the media. Particularly during the First World War and shortly afterwards they longed for a new hope, a utopia just as described by Wagner. The artists started various projects to install architectural total works of art, yet many of their ideas never made it past the drawing board for financial, political or personal reasons. However, the few projects that were realised were often designed artists’ houses.

They belong to the finest and most complete representatives of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* tradition, as the private home offered the artist a place of maximum freedom and self-determination. All other total artwork conceptions—whether theatrical or architectural—were directly influenced by further artists, actors, musicians or the director, by patrons or by socio-political factors. Only at home was the artist able to implement his individual total...
work of art unhindered. Likewise, a second aspect makes the designed artist’s home a unique Gesamtkunstwerk: Whereas other total works of art were often spatially and temporarily limited, the artist’s home covered a much wider reality. To turn one’s entire private sphere into a Gesamtkunstwerk and to live inside that created utopia for years or even until one dies requires an incomparably strong conviction. In the following, three artists shall be presented who felt that passion for the total work of art and its utopia. They designed their private homes to the limit and intended to provide an example of a future way of life.

The first and most extensive total work of art to be introduced, is the property of the Swiss-born artist Johann Michael Bossard (1874–1950) in the Lüneburg Heath, near Jesteburg. At the age of 20 Bossard moved to Germany to study sculpting and painting in Munich and Berlin. After some years as freelance artist he was appointed as Professor of Sculpture at the School of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg in 1907, where he taught until his retirement in 1944. Longing for a rural place of recreation he bought a three hectare estate in the Lüneburg Heath in 1911, 40 km away from his place of work. Supported by the architect Wilhelm Tell, he designed his Residential and Studio House that was built between 1912 and 1914. [FIG. 1]
Its low roof, the gable with the timber cladding, the bricks and the colour scheme of red, white and green are reminiscent of the traditional architecture in the region and remind us of a typical farmhouse in Lower Saxony, while the large, north facing windows, the architectural sculptures and the wasters –the deformed bricks he incorporated into the façade– reveal the artist’s home.4

Although Bossard’s oeuvre documents an early interest in the total work of art it was probably not until 1921 that he decided to transform his weekend home into a Gesamtkunstwerk.5 After the horrors of the First World War and the lack of various goods in the post-war period, he seemed to have given up waiting for patrons or the opportunity to create a collective total work of art together with his colleagues from the Hamburg School of Arts and Crafts. Instead, he decided to pursue his utopia on his own private estate with the limited financial resources that were available to him.6

He began his all-embracing interior design in the Music Room where he painted a cycle of genesis and demise on the wood-panelled walls and ceiling and a Gallery of Great Minds, including a portrait of Wagner. For the windows he used painted or coloured glass panes, while the furniture, the piano, the jute carpets, the covering of the radiator and the door were incorporated by using abstract ornaments. In this way Bossard decorated one room after another: the Hall of Eros, the Blue Landing, the glazed balcony, the living room and the two guestrooms.

From 1926, he was supported by his much younger wife Jutta Bossard (1903–1996), née Krull, who was a trained sculptor and one of his former students. She was responsible for most of the carvings and—as was typical at the time– concentrated on various household objects that she made of wood, clay or textiles. In the year they were married, Johann Bossard started to erect an expressionist Temple of Fine Arts next to his Residential and Studio House. By the end of 1925 he had already developed a concept for this temple in a 23-page typescript.7 Here, Bossard gave merely a rough idea of his architectural plans but focused on his vision of an ideal future society. Bossard imagined his temple to be merely a model for further temples that would then be erected by volunteers all over the Lüneburg heath. These temples were to become ‘cells of renewal’ in a two-fold way: during the construction period the volunteers from all social classes would live together in a temple colony for a year. In these colonies the future society would be practised and exemplified. On the other hand, Bossard expected the later visitors of the temples to experience a deeper understanding of their being and the world with the help of the surrounding arts. Thus, both the volunteers and the visitors, were supposed to become New Men, to function as propagators of the ideal future and to become the founding fathers of the utopia.
The role of the artist as he does pioneering work remained crucial to this concept. He gains understanding before ‘ordinary’ people and is to use his art to support the changes in civilization. This is precisely the position in which Bossard would have seen himself. So obviously, with his Gesamtkunstwerk he aimed for political and social reform as fundamental as that which Wagner dreamed of. Although these large-scale changes remained fiction, Bossard was at least able to realise the transformation of his estate into a private total work of art and to erect his Temple of Fine Arts. [FIG. 3]

Until the early 1930s he decorated his expressionist brick temple as extensively as his home with several hundred architectural sculptures in the façade, three interchangeable painting cycles, an altar-like polyptych, painted glass ceiling and windows, carved cement columns, a mosaic floor and doors with copper reliefs. To visually complete the court between his house and the temple he grew a hedge and placed a gallery of his sculptures on brick pedestals in front of it. Another garden arrangement was developed as natural counterpart to the expressionist temple. For his so-called Temple of Trees Bossard planted spruces in a square that formed dense green ‘walls’ while huge stones marked the atrium. The artist’s bid for a close relationship between architecture, art and nature becomes apparent. [FIG. 4]

Between 1932 and 1935 Bossard decorated the last room in his house: his studio. He transformed it into the so-called Hall of Nordic Myths, continuing to develop his utopia of the Gesamtkunstwerk. [FIG. 4]

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Thematically the room programme is based on Norse mythology as told by the Edda and interpreted by Wagner. Bossard had developed an early interest in this mythology because he felt a special connection with Odin, the Allfather of the Eddic gods, who was blind on one eye just as Bossard was since his childhood. The Edda tells the story of Odin, who sacrificed his eye to drink from the Well of Wisdom in order to gain knowledge of the past, present and future. Without doubt, Bossard identified with Odin as he thought himself to be someone who ‘knew’ more than the general populace with his utopian vision of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The walls in Bossard’s Hall of Nordic Myths are completely covered with mythological scenes: in the lower half in the form of wooden reliefs and in the upper area as canvas glued to the bricking painted with tempera and oil paint. Although these paintings are divided either into horizontal or vertical bands there is no continuous progression in the stories depicted. Instead, Bossard split the narrations into single pictures that he spread incoherently over different walls across various artistic genres. One of the most elaborate depictions is of the story of Baldr’s death and the punishment of his murderer in paintings on the west wall as well as the carvings of the southern wall and the gallery. In the Edda the death of Baldr, the god of light, marks the beginning of a chain of events that will finally lead to the destruction of the godly kingdom at Ragnarök. In further scenes Bossard painted—amongst others—the three destiny defining Norns, the warriors training for the last battle, and Heimdallr sounding his horn to announce Ragnarök. All of these episodes point to the expected destruction of the existing world and the accompanying triumph over evil. According to Eddic mythology, a new world will rise from the water after this *tabula rasa*. This essential turning point and the symbolized hope of a utopian future is depicted by Bossard in a minor scene on the west wall in the form of a Venus-like female stepping out from a sea shell. [FIG. 5]

On one of the wooden portals with copper reliefs dedicated to the mythological figure Wayland the Smith, the idea of this future world becomes more focused and shows a direct reference to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The skilful Wayland was captured by a king who paralysed him in order to force him into his service. Secretly, Wayland experimented with wings he made himself that finally enabled him to escape his prison. In 1849 Wagner referred to this Edda poem at the end of his essay *The Artwork of the Future*. For him, Wayland symbolised the German people. Wayland was able to leave the tyranny behind and to set out for a better world with nothing more than the help of his strong mind and his craftsmanship. In the same way, the Germans should rise up against the political situation and start a new society through the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

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It is surely no coincidence that Bossard took up Wagner’s utopia in the 1930s. Even though his fascination with Norse mythology and the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk went back for three decades or more, National Socialism seemed to fulfil the long awaited change sought in Germany at this time. In 1933 Bossard discussed with close friends if he should attract the attention of the new government and ask for support to realise his artistic and socio-political visions. Fortunately, he decided not to do so. Otherwise his expressionist style would have probably been classified as degenerate and his Gesamtkunstwerk may have been destroyed. In the following years Bossard began to understand that the assumed parallels between his utopia and the National Socialist upheaval were misleading. Whereas the Nazis aimed for total conformity and allegiance, Bossard dreamed of a liberal society of individuals. Disillusioned, Bossard seemed to give up his plans for a Gesamtkunstwerk related to society as a whole and withdrew to his private total work of art. Only at home did he and his wife continue to live inside their personal utopia until their deaths. They were granted special permission to inter their urns on their private estate under an erratic block at the end of the Alley of Monoliths. Thereby they were completely absorbed within their Gesamtkunstwerk. As a symbol of eternity a simple circle engraved in the erratic block marks this site as the burial place of Bossard and his wife. Here, the artist’s intended unification of life, art and religion found its ultimate completion.


The second total work of art to be introduced is the house of Wenzel Hablik (1881–1934) in Itzehoe, 90 km north of Bossard’s estate. Hablik, born in Brüx/Bohemia, moved to Germany in 1907 and settled in Itzehoe where he worked primarily as painter and designer for cloth patterns, cutlery, containers, furniture, jewellery and interior design. His wife, Elisabeth Hablik-Lindemann (1879–1960), ran a successful weaving mill that produced many of Hablik’s patterns. In 1916 the couple bought an old Wilhelminian style villa in 14 Talstraße that Hablik enthusiastically started to redesign. During their first few years in the house, they used their living rooms on the ground floor and the stairwell as show and salesrooms for their craft products and Hablik’s paintings. Here they gave their middle-class customers an authentic sample of tasteful interior design. In March 1925 the weaving mill moved to a new address where the showrooms could be located so that the shared use of their private living quarters was no longer necessary.12.

During their early years in the house historic decorative elements from the Gründerzeit were still present. Dark wallpaper with small, floral ornaments adorned Hablik’s private rooms even though he was already a member of the functional-orientated Werkbund since 1916.13. After his first modernistic and colourful interior designs were made for private and commercial clients, Hablik redecorated his own dining room in 1923. Aided by an experienced local painter he covered the walls, the ceiling and the door with a vivid pattern of colour bands of diverse length and width. In a strictly right-angled composition these bands of fourteen different colours run through the whole room, crossing each other in a transparent or opaque way, transitioning seamlessly from the walls to the ceiling and over the door leaf. Whereas his earlier contract designs followed a certain rhythm, Hablik relinquished here—for the first time—any hint of perceptible order or repetition. Yet, at some points the asymmetrical bands of colour follow the outline of the furniture as can be seen on a historical photograph where the solid Gründerzeit cupboard is framed by a wide black stripe. [FIG. 6]

At other places the colour bands form representational shapes. For example, the bands can be squeezed to smaller lines and forms that remind us of an abstract painting hanging on the wall, just like the area next to the cupboard, underneath the rectangular lamp where lines are compressed together. Another example is the large red shape that rises from behind the stove he designed to the ceiling. It can be interpreted as the visualization of the heat produced here. In this way the representational shapes seem to link the wall painting to the objects in the room.14 [FIG. 7]

Similarly, the furniture, textiles and handcrafted objects mirror the abstract wall patterns as another historical photograph from about

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1923 shows. Here the meandering design of the sofa and the cushion, the bowl with the curved ornaments on the small cupboard on the left, as well as the striped carpet echo the geometrical colour bands that decorate the walls. Also interesting in this context is Hablik’s oil-painting *Große bunte utopische Bauten* (Huge Colourful Utopian Buildings) from 1922. It was placed above the sofa to cover the door-opening into the front showrooms. At the same time, it fitted in perfectly with the new wall design because of its meandering, linear composition and the colourful architectural structures. The stars in this painted cosmos are connected with the interior through Hablik’s brass box in the form of Saturn on the right-hand side of the sofa. The real room seems to spill over into the painted world and a great spatial depth is created. Simultaneously the utopian vision becomes part of the reality and daily life.\(^{15}\)

Hablik used his oil paintings and printing cycles to develop his idea of a fantastic futuristic architecture which, according to his writings, was supposed to function as basis for a new religion and ideology. In his artwork he created utopias of flying cities or gigantic crystal domes in the mountains as he was convinced that all technical and financial problems could easily be solved if only the ‘consciousness of the world’ (*Weltbewusstsein*) were prepared.


Like Bossard he imagined that groups of volunteers would help to build this new, perfect world.\(^\text{16}\) In the intervening period, Hablik planned a cubic and colour intensive interim architecture that would blaze the way to the utopian future.\(^\text{17}\)

Evidently, Hablik claimed to be more than just an artist or a designer. For example, by using motives from Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) *Zarathustra* in his etching cycle, he presented himself as a person with a messianic sense of mission and as a creator of a utopian world. He aimed for the architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the unity of all fine arts and crafts and an ideal future society.\(^\text{18}\)

As has already been demonstrated, the best opportunity for Hablik to begin to fulfil his utopia arose in the redesigning of his private house in Itzehoe. With the help of his wife’s weaving mill and his workshops for metalwork and cutting gemstones in the cellar of their villa, he was able to directly produce many of his craft designs. Thereby Hablik could create a close unity between his artistic works and his craft goods. Besides the new decorated dining room, which is probably the most consistently realised example of his conceived interim architecture, Hablik designed several further rooms in their villa, including his and his wife’s bedrooms, the library and his studio. But while Bossard’s estate is decorated in a stylistic coherent manner, Hablik’s rooms testified to his changing stylistic taste during the almost seventeen years he lived inside the house. As a result no homogeneous overall impression—like the one to be found by Bossard—was created here. Instead, the interior design of some rooms was even modernised from time to time.

From 1925, the compact, functional *Bauhaus* style had an increasingly influential effect on Hablik’s interior and furniture design. It gradually substituted his cosmic and crystalline motives. Furthermore, Hablik came to acknowledge the importance of industrial production and believed that social reform could only be achieved by a reduction of form, function and material.\(^\text{19}\)

For this reason, he once again made significant changes to the general design of the house. The interior was cleared of all outdated elements, several rooms were redecorated with monochrome colours, furniture from *Bauhaus* designers were incorporated, and the garden was rearranged to create a more modern impression. Hablik even replaced the *Gründerzeit* façade of his villa with its arched windows with a progressive, linear front in the summer of 1933. At the same time he covered the expressionist colour scheme in the dining room with wallpaper.\(^\text{20}\)

1934 his early death abruptly ended his utopian vision of an ideal future.

The almost totally artistic decorated homes of Hablik and Bossard are two great models of artists’ houses designed as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* intended to provide a glimpse of their personal utopia. In both cases

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\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., pp. 253, 291-292.

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., pp. 293-294.

the artists added different individual, yet co-ordinated artworks and crafts in a variety of techniques which created an artistic whole. Their obvious influence, inter alia, through the Arts and Crafts Movement cannot be denied.

The so called Merzbau, Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) house in 5 Waldhausenstraße in Hanover, showed a rather different approach to the total design and is the third residence to be introduced here. Since it is probably the best known example it shall be analysed only briefly. Its overall design was not based on solitary pieces of art. Instead, Schwitters turned parts of his parental house into just one single piece of art with the help of the collage technique Merz that he developed in 1919. Amid the ruins left after the First World War, Schwitters searched for a new entirety and combined various found objects in his Merz art giving the fragmented world a new structure. The differences between the art genres were evened out and every material and found object was declared worthy to be regarded as art.21. “Merz was first of all a struggle against ‘dispersion,’ [...] Thus, even if Schwitters desires to extract these signs of the tragic [= the fragments] from their negative states in order to situate them in the controlled ‘totality’ of the work of art, he nonetheless does not erase the destruction that is an inherent part of what is uncontrollable about the world.”22. Schwitters used his Merz technique for all kinds of art: he made Merz collages and sculptures as well as Merz poetry. He imagined Merz photography, Merz film and Merz city planning and dreamed of transforming the whole world into a work of art. He proclaimed the Merz stage to be a Gesamtkunstwerk but as its realisation proved to be impossible he later focussed on Merz architecture. In the end he even called himself Merz. And so the line between the artwork and the artist was finally erased and he himself became the Gesamtkunstwerk.23. In his pamphlets, the references to Wagner’s concept are revealed by his use of the same key words, such as “das rein Menschliche”24., or by stressing the Merz stage as the real total work of art.

Still, it was the Merzbau itself that afforded the best opportunity for exploring Schwitters Gesamtkunstwerk as it absorbed the spectator within it, just like other artists’ houses that are designed as total works of art.25. Schwitters initially used his studio as a showroom presenting various Merz objects. Around 1923 he started to expand the Merz art from paintings, collages and sculptures to the surrounding room. Single artworks were integrated into an architectural Merz design. A few years later the entire studio was transformed and the Merzbau spread to other rooms in his and his parents’ apartments.26.

After 1930 the appearance of the Merzbau changed fundamentally. Inspired by Constructivism he painted over everything with a harmonising white and set only a few coloured highlights. Later,

Schwitters used mainly wood and plaster for further extensions. The found objects that had previously been gradually added became no longer distinguishable from one another and the fragmented character was overcome in favour of a merging wholeness.

In January 1937, Schwitters was forced to emigrate to Norway leaving his Merzbau behind. During a bomb strike in 1943, Schwitters parental home with the Merzbau finally burned down. The Merz architectures that Schwitters began in his exile in Norway and England met similar fates, so that today only photographs, reconstructions and relics give an impression of these attempted total works of art. The most extensive of these architectures was the Hanoverian Merzbau that, according to the artist’s statement, ultimately comprised eight rooms in the house. It extended from two basement rooms through several floors up to the attic and, in the shape of a column, even through the skylight. Compared with the houses of Bossard and Hablik the designed Merz rooms seemed to have been almost uninhabitable. Their functional use was mentioned only for two of them: one as Schwitters’ studio with library, the other one as his joined study and bedroom. The artist’s family had apparently lived in the undesigned rest of the house. Summing up, Schwitters’ Merz concept offered an ideal opportunity to unite various artforms and everyday fragments but as a fusion of art and life it proved to be rather less suitable than Bossard’s and Hablik’s approach to the Gesamtkunstwerk.

Nevertheless, all three houses were extraordinary designs for a total building. With different means each artist created an all-embracing medial unification and an idealistic social microcosm in a way that could hardly be surpassed by any other attempted total work of art. Bossard, Hablik and Schwitters devoted not only their artistic production but also their living to the utopia of a better future. Their total works of art were intended to create an alternative reality. There the utopia of a new society became probably more concrete and vivid than ever before (or afterwards).
REFERENCES


Whatever we do, it could be different. The painting of a picture is never finished; the writing of a book is never completed. The conclusion of what we have just printed out could still be changed. And if it came to that, then the effort would start from the beginning.¹

The introductory quote is taken from Ernst Bloch’s short essay on the humanist and political writings of Berthold Brecht. “Brecht wants to change the audience itself through his products, so the changed audience [...] also has retroactive effect on the products”.² This would be the ideal effect of an artwork engaging in real social life and actively transforming it. The desire to change the world into a better, freer, and balanced place is not just the driving force of critical and socially engaged actions but also an immanent feature of utopian thought. However, this ideal and accomplished social whole (as imagined by the historical avant-gardes) is evasive and not yet to be attained. It is non-existent or out-topic on the map of reality. Whenever the promise (of utopian realisation) tried to take on an actual social form, it failed—as manifested in the political projects of the 20th century and their horrific consequences—and ended retrospectively in distorting the utopian dream into a dystopian reality. So Bloch’s introduction refers to utopia (or rather different types of utopia) as a symbolic space, always consisting of lack that originates from the gaps in the process of fulfilment. Therefore, the concept of utopia is an open and undefined topos⁴ always relating to specific and alternating sociohistorical contexts. Utopia is hence enjoying radical redefinition, because, as stated by Stephen Duncombe, “there is no consensus on what a ‘good’ Utopia will look like or on how to determine when we have actually imagined or created one”.⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that the content of utopia changes according to existing social conditions, there is a common ground, accurately defined by Ernst Bloch as yearning and hope,⁶ and their motivation is precisely what the existing situation lacks. Due to lack, both Adorno and Bloch, recognise the essential function of utopia in the critique of the existent.⁷ Utopian vision does not only refer to the distant, forthcoming and (yet) unattainable, but is always projected from the presence, deriving from the confrontation between the envisioned and the not yet fulfilled. The utopian fantasy is an afterimage that arises from looking into the real world, from where

² Ibid
⁴ Utopia as an expression is ambiguous in itself. Utopia by Thomas More is a real place, topographically defined, measured, and described in detail. On the other hand, it is a made-up word composed by More from the Greek word (ou)topos, literally meaning no-place. According to Stephen Duncombe in his introductory essay to Thomas More’s Utopia, it is some-place and no-place, real and fictitious at the same time. Utopia can be an ideal place promising a better life or a phantasmagorical setting, an apparition, working through a “dialectical operation between fact and fiction”. Particularly “this curious state of being and not being, a place that is also no-place”, as Duncombe claims, is what makes Utopia an open concept, stimulating our imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace might be and figure out new possibilities. In: Thomas More, Open/Utopia. Edited and with an introduction by Stephen Duncombe. Duncombe, S. (ed.) (2012). Open Utopia. Wivenhoe/New York/Port Watson: Minor Compositions, Introduction, pp. xxxii–xlv.
⁵ Ibid., Postscripts, liv.
⁶ Bloch, E. (1986). The
utopia derives. The topography of utopia as a no-place is paradoxically defined by the frames and boundaries of our empirical, lived world that the utopian vision wishes to surpass.

Despite the fact that utopian visions derive from uneasiness in the presence, Stephen Duncombe, above all, ascribes the critical motive mainly to their antipode—dystopia that operates by revealing the hidden logic of what already exists, for dystopias conjure up a world in which no one wants to believe.⁸ The ideological structure of uniform and universal utopia that tried to equate “essence with existence”⁹, both in humanistically motivated avant-garde projects (suprematism, constructivism, De Stijl) and totalitarian political plans (fascism, Stalinism) turned out to be infeasible. The imposed law of the static order, purest reason, and authority of the Benefactor, as illustrated by the One State in Zamyatin’s anti-utopian novel We, announces the end of belief in the absolute social totality, suitable for all, that could eliminate division. Referring to another historical context—the time of rising Nazism—let us remember the melody of the song “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” from the film Cabaret. The optimistic voice of a young Aryan man, echoing the unshakable belief in future, is gradually joined by all the other voices. But as viewers, having a retrospective insight into the future, we can recognise the horrible yield of the reverse utopian vision. Looking backwards, every collective social ideology turned out to be a priori dystopic. Yet the fact that a utopian motive is concurrently bound to its opposite must not be overlooked, as it holds a position which Adorno illustrated in his finding: “[I]nsofar as we do not know what the correct thing would be, we know exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is.”⁰ So utopia, unlike warning dystopias, describes hope, but lack guaranties, concrete scenarios, and foremost, supposedly there is always a category of risk to it, which can turn out as disappointment.¹¹

So what is left for utopia and what kind of images does it have in contemporary art? Art can be attributed an immanent utopian dimension from the philosophical perspective. In The Principle of Hope, Bloch writes that the entire art is focused on creating images that would become symbols of perfection.¹² Adorno advocates the autonomy of art, as it enables art to open a field of imagined freedom and alterity that is in opposition with the present and warns against its lack.¹³ In the presently fragmented and dynamic world, utopia transforming the whole (in the sense of operating and organising a system of human togetherness) can no longer be imagined. In an era marked as post-utopian and post-historical, utopia is gradually being replaced by different concepts. Foucault opposes utopias as “unreal spaces” to real spaces of heterotopia that refer to real or mythic places within a society, including rest homes, psychiatric hospitals, prisons, museums, brothels, colonies, etc. Difference and alterity, which do not conform to the norm and are distinctly heterogeneous, can be

⁸ Dystopian imaginaries, while positing a scenario set in the future, always return to the present with a critical impulse—suggesting what must be curtailed if the world is not to end up the way it is portrayed.” Cf: Duncombe, S. (2012). Open Utopia, [op. cit.] p. xix.
¹¹ See also Bloch. Ibid., pp. 16, 17.
established in the hinterland of these enclaves. Foucault illustrates a heterotopian site par excellence with a ship or a boat, representing spatial ambiguity between something that occupies space and is yet a no-place—for him it is “a floating piece of space, a place without a place”. The ship is also a known romantic metaphor for uncertainty and being at the mercy of fate, exemplifying human life as a journey to the unknown driven by the longing for being in harmony with the world and in peace with oneself.

The dimension of this metaphor in art is probably most memorable in a project that went down in history by the death of its author. The Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader attempted to sail across the Atlantic in 1975 in his small boat Ocean Wave from Cape Code (Massachusetts) to the English coast. The art project that was supposed to end with an exhibition in a Dutch museum, after Ader’s debark, was called In Search of the Miraculous. The question of which miracle was Bas Jan Ader hoping for—the miracle of transformation, epiphany, or just the happy end of a highly hazardous project—remains open. Nearly a year later, the vessel was found floating along the Irish coast. Ader’s project is based on the realisation of a personal phantasm, becoming a symbolic gesture through which the idea is fulfilled as an act. With the very conversion into the symbolic, as the artist’s sea travel, commented Alexander Dumbadze, a part of life became a part of art.

Despite a number of utopian strategies, Richard Noble in his preliminary essay The Utopian Impulse in Contemporary Art defines certain forms that tend to recur in utopian art, such as the use of the architectural models, the use of the manifesto, references to design and technology as well as small and large scale collaborative actions. According to Noble, utopian art is not so much defined with a common aesthetic form as it is with an attempt to model in some way the tension between an immanent critique of the present and the future, but above all most utopian art postulates models of other ways of being.

Topics which either way rehabilitate the utopian (or frequently dystopian) vision have become a significant reference in art during the last decades. As indicated in the anthology Utopias, edited by Richard Noble, the conception of the utopian, both in terms of content and its various manifestations, entails a broad spectre.

We can talk about different types of utopia, but what all have generally in common is the dissent with the existent and the search for alternative forms of social activities. This kind of projects approached as utopian are mostly experimental models of solving concrete situations and problems that either offer a concrete solution (e.g. the Danish art collective Superflex who worked with engineers and a sustainable agricultural organisation in Tanzania to develop an affordable biogas generator that turns human and animal waste into a gas fuel which were then set in African villages) or create a thought framework for a potential realisation of the solution.
in future (e.g. Wheatfield by American artist Agnes Denes, who in 1982 planted a wheat field in downtown Manhattan as a symbolic act of “an intrusion into the citadel and a confrontation of High Civilization”,21. or Ilya Kabakov’s 1988 installation The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment.

Often these same strategies have been also interpreted in the context of politically engaged art, with a tendency to social and political change. Utopia and political change are explicitly understood as a unitary entity by the situationists Guy Debord and Pierre Canjuers in their unique manifesto Culture and Revolutionary Politics (1960), which sees the meaning of utopian practices exclusively in connection with a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist order.22. The romantic revolutionary perception of art as proposed by Beuys’s concept of social organism as a work of art whose major goal is a transformation of social, economic, legal, and cultural forms represented a similar referential model for artists.23. At the beginning of the 1990’s, utopian visions occupied the so-called ‘microtopias’, opposite to utopian visions of the avant-gardes as they did not focus on the whole, global social transformation but on the “processing of the possible” within microtopias and local problems.24.

The phenomenon of participation as an important strategy of relational art may be seen as one of the forms of contemporary utopian engagement inside a specific community which on the micro level of the laboratory space of art creates the impression of a common goal, a political effect, and, in general, a resistance to organised passivity. The core of modern utopias is such that they do not envision one sole alternative for the future. In the light of evidence that there is no consensus about (one and unified) utopia, Duncombe as well envisaged a concept of open utopia in the construction of which anyone can participate and create a part of the utopian vision based on his or her own imagination.

While the main part of discussion on utopia and the utopian in art is dedicated to the critical side of utopias and the political dimensions of the utopian, the present discussion focuses on strategies that create spaces through art form in which utopian imagination, not programmaticca or actually “motivated” but as a metaphor for the principle of utopia, is actualised. We speak of images as the embodiment of utopian imagination, in which typical notions of utopia are linked on trans-historical and trans-temporal levels: aspiration, imagination, and the possibility of transformation. Such utopian potential will be substantiated along with the projects by James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, and Antony Gormley.

The utopian in these cases is actually conceived through understanding the phenomenological space, building a mental space for utopian projection. These spaces are conceptualised differently from classic utopian projects and contemporary micro-utopian

23. Nicolas Bourriaud assesses that today’s utopian heritage points towards two main streams: the neighbours and the ephemera. As he claims in Relational Aesthetics, art today no longer seeks to represent utopias universal in scope, but its role is to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing world. In: Bourriaud, N. (2002). Relational Aesthetics. Paris: Les Presses du réel, pp. 5, 21.
strategies as they do not suggest alternative forms of being or a concrete impact on and materialisation of utopian visions respectively, deriving from discomfort in a particular social and political situation. Here, the utopian field is conceived on an abstract level through which the utopian becomes present or imaginable as an open possibility.

Utopia is not imagined as an external, transcendental sphere with no practically imaginable place (leaving aside the religious images of paradise), which—pending the miraculous—we might aspire in the utmost point of cognition. The utopian perspective does not derive from the imaginary exterior but from the concrete present. Examples of art to be considered as bearing the function of the utopian are not so much utopian representations as they are pre-images, enabling the occupation of utopia. In this regard, they are starting points for envisioning utopia: they have no programming effect and no plan of collective social transformation; on the contrary, they function as incubators for establishing utopian thought. Here, the utopian vision does not relate to the collective changing of the societal body but assumes that the collective transformation can only transact from the individual outwards and result from the configuration of multitudes and differences with a common denominator in producing “collective” feelings and experiences that are (on the level of a work of art at its best) sensed both individually and universally (e.g. hope, freedom, happiness, death, etc.). The individual envisions the world and pronounces upon it from his own perspective, therefore the utopian in this sense can be imagined in a space of personal experience. In this space of utopian imagination there is no place for pre-”designed demos” and an optimal social project that suits all, since freedom, as (fairly non-utopian) stated by Emil Cioran, can only be conceived for ourselves. With this assumption, the works of art focus on the constitution of the subject that is able to imagine alterity based on a concrete experiential situation and multi-sensory engagement in a customised space of art—not only from the point of social, economic, political, and ideological but also phenomenological anchoring. It is not about a retreat from reality in the sense of romantic escapism or about resorting to the inner world because of being incapable of accepting societal facts, it is about drawing attention to the own thinking and sensing of existence based on focused sensorial construction of our relation to the world, which is not only an individual relationship but also a generic one.

The utopian moment derives from this very fine-tuned focus that can cause shifts in feeling and thinking and thus interfere with the routine-like and instrumentalised perception. The imagination to search for something new can only come from this kind of interruption and change.

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25. As Duncombe writes: “Utopians too often consider people as organic material to be shaped, not as wilful agents who do the shaping; the role of the populace is, at best, to conform to a plan of a world already delivered complete. [...] In Utopia, the demos is designed, not consulted.” Duncombe, S. (2012). *Open Utopia*, [op. cit.] pp. xii–xiii.

James Turrell is known for his light works in which the common perception of space, defined by orientation and the relationship between bodies and objects, is converted. His spaces are conceived as light volumes that cannot be determined with any borders, margins, depth, or width, which gives the viewer a feeling of complete lostness in space and time. Time in these works is opposite to the contemporary sense of time based on speed and dynamic exchange of work and place. Time and space are perceived as independent categories, far more extensive than local alternations; the viewer reflects his position inside those ambiences as a component of a much larger space than the one he currently occupies.

Turrell joined the research programme *Art & Technology* of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1969 where, together with his colleagues, he researched human perception in spaces of sensory deprivation and isolation. The *Ganzfeld* project, where the viewer is in a closed light-emanating chamber, became an important starting point for his later researches in art, especially in his light ambiences that enable the viewer to physically enter the light spaces. *Ganzfeld* creates a field of vision offering nothing tangible for the eye, while a static point and a very limited space produce a feeling of infinite volume. The sensory deprivation from everyday noises and external stimuli enables total absorption of the senses and focus on one single phenomenon—on the current perception which turns from the exterior light phenomenon to the sphere of the virtual. This borderline perceptive experience causes an ambivalent perception of space. As a consequence of highly sharpened senses, which in a coordinate free space have no direction, no focus, and no common orientational organisation, the space seems domestic on one side but foreign and unnatural on the other. Suddenly that what is in front of us and close becomes perceptively unavailable and unfamiliar. It seems as if we are entering a field of constituting our own perception which in day-to-day experience is estranged, or as Turrell explains: “I wanted a visual confrontation between physical seeing and spaces that created an experience of seeing, familiar to us beyond our conscious-awake state, only we had never experienced it that way.”

Therefore, experiencing Turrell’s light ambiences is comparable with dreams. In dreams, however concrete they might reappear in the mind, we cannot precisely determine the space and the time of the dreaming event and even though we are experiencing intensely, as if it is real, we will never be able to consistently reconstruct the dream, since in the dream world the perception of space and time is different from the waking state. The real space and its unconscious, imaginary transposition inseparably intertwine in dreams;

27. According to Jonathan Crary “non-stop life-world of 21st century capitalism” is characterised by incessant activity, “duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning, against which the fragility of human life as well as rotation of earth are increasingly irrelevant (inadequate). In an environment (indifferent to natural rhythm), in which natural rhythm is denied, humans have to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems, and life is completely aligned with models of machinic performance. In: Crary, J. (2013). *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso, pp. 8–9.

28. Turrell worked on this project with artist Robert Irwin and Dr Edward Wortz, a specialist in perceptual physiology and psychology.

at the same time, some traces of memory reinforce and material elements transform. Some of Turrell’s projects are conceptualised as a reconstruction of lucid dreams in which the dreamer typically perceives dreams as a real world. During lucid dreaming, parts of our brain become active, which are usually active during the waking state and not connected to ordinary states of dreaming. In this state, the person is aware of being dreaming and can thus control the course of events during dreaming. In dreams as well as in daydreams, rules and norms do not apply anymore, there is total freedom and everything is possible; one can imagine and realise one’s visions and a world according to one’s own needs. The space of dreams can therefore be a springboard for utopia that imagines a transformation of social frames and a subversion of internalised rules and rituals. The dangerous power of dreams is also discussed within the internalised dread at the thought of dreaming in the anti-utopian world of Zamyatin’s One State. Here, dreams are a “serious psychic disease”\(^{30}\) that jeopardises the mathematical balance in the operation of the rational societal machine.

Turrell’s utopian dimension comes from the relation between the substantiality of the experience and the virtuality of the image, between the phenomenological fact and the imaginative, the fictional that produces it. Here, the material space is the one creating the virtual space of utopia, into which we project ourselves. Turrell’s light volumes are places without a place—defined by depth which is not described by metrical units but by shifting between the material and the imaginative, the real and the virtual, whereas looking is analogue to the travelling of the self through different states of consciousness. The unpredictability of the depth and the inability of defining its dimensions create a space of anticipation. The visitor is placed in an area which by its „open“ volume can produce a symbolic analogy of the utopian space and its open possibilities. The artist described the work Meeting (1986)\(^{31}\) from the Skyscapes series as an encounter of two spaces: a space where the visitor is located and a space in close contact with the sky, thus two separate and distant spaces that closely interact in the artwork. The fragmentary sections from the Skyscapes series optically draw the sky down towards the floor, just above the viewer, where it no longer functions as a sky, defined by the horizons the utmost point of view in relation to the Earth, but as an infinite space of abstract blue, into which the notion of incomprehensible distance and magnitude is projected. In such way we can imagine the sky Baudelaire described as making one dream of eternity.\(^{32}\) However, the impression of spatial and temporal infinity implicated by the light apertures is placed into perceptive availability and haptic presence in Turrell’s work. Here is the distant, the not (yet) achieved already on the horizon of the tangible and set out by the coordinates of our bodies.

\(^{30}\) "Clearly I must be ill. I have never dreamed before. They say that with the ancients dreaming was a perfectly ordinary, normal occurrence. [...] We, however, know that dreams are a serious psychic disease. And I know that until this moment my brain has been a chronometrically exact gleaming mechanism without a single speck of dust. But now...". In: Zamyatin, Y. (1972). We [1924]. Mirra Ginsburg (trans.). New York: Avon Books, p. 32.

\(^{31}\) The permanent light installation from 1986 at MoMA PS1 consists of a square room with a rectangular aperture for an unobstructed view of the sky. The carefully modulated lighting programme casts stark yellow tones on the white walls and gradually contrasts the sky in transition. In a specially designed ambience for enhancing perceptive attentiveness, the visitor can observe light alternations throughout the day to the setting of the sun.

Turrell’s spaces are concrete realms of our senses, perceptions, movements, and contemplations, and yet they appear unreal and delusional as they elude any kind of tangibility. The codes of perceptive orientation the works are based on no longer have an impact on them. We are placed into the basic lack of our physique; however, due to this lack we can reassemble our own position and again feel solid ground underneath our feet.

In describing the antagonism of this situation, let us recall the last sequence from the film *Gravity*, which shows the feeling of helplessness in controlling the own body, after it experienced a transformation in the weightless space. The sequence portrays how the lead character happily returns from space to the Earth, but as she tries to get up, she is not able to walk: the most natural operation becomes an unfamiliar and tedious task. However, in touching the firmness of the sand, which in the effort of finding balance runs through her hands, and in the mud that softens underneath her feet, the physiological memory rehabilitates and the assurance of existence returns as a foundation of the physical experience, which through suspended gravity indeed has undergone transformation but remains the biological and material reality of our bodies.

Gravity is only one of the realities, but for us, it is a place based on which we define and imagine other places. We cannot yet occupy spacelessness and, perhaps, this is the adequate spatial metaphor for utopia, which exists as a concept but is (yet) unachievable as a space of existence. The utopian impulse has rebound effect, since its projection returns to the initial point from which it is envisioned and conceived. Turrell’s works, inter alia, also refer to the way of showing the phenomenological dimension of perception anchored in the boundaries of our senses. The near and the far are here projected from the same point. Therefore, in these spaces we can recognise the *images* of utopian consciousness as defined by Ernst Bloch: „Utopian consciousness wants to look far into the distance, but ultimately only in order to penetrate the darkness so near it of the just lived moment […]. We need the most powerful telescope, that of polished utopian consciousness, in order to penetrate precisely the nearest nearness.“

An environment in which the nearest closeness —on the phenomenological level—is perceived as an undefined depth has also been created in the light installation *Your Blind Passenger* (2010) by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. On the way through approximately 90-metre-long tunnel, environments coloured by different types of light (from bright daylight, cold blue, golden sunset orange to deep darkness) follow each other in order to reconstruct light, alternating during the day, in an isolated art space. The visual and sensory experience is completely redefined in this installation, as it demands from the viewer full attention.

to and diligent monitoring of changes in relation to perception and light that we would otherwise miss in the everyday context. Entering the tunnel, the visitor is surrounded by thick fog, which provides visibility at only 1.5 metres.

Similarly to Turrell, the feeling of space as a place of concrete and measurable dimension disintegrates and time becomes irrelevant. Despite the fact that the visitor walks through the environment with open eyes, he has the impression of walking with closed eyes, since sight is of no help in his orientation in space. The effect of accumulated light is paradoxical, as full visibility is turned to its opposite—dazzle from light which prevents seeing. With “blindlooking”, Eliasson thematises Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological problem of the invisible coming from the visible and the visible disappearing in the invisible as the process of mutual interaction is realised in the installation. Moving through the environment of the installation is unpredictable, visitors do not know what to expect in front of them, the sense of balance is disappearing because of the absence of factual coordinates. Due to the foggy scattered light, it is impossible to see one’s own body: the outstretched arm suddenly seems as an apparition, the body is not felt as a coherent whole but as a sensorially dismantled yet intensively functioning device. The fogbound visibility empowers other senses, especially the hearing, which helps evaluate spatial information and one’s positioning in relation to other visitors. The intensely experienced present is a characteristic feature of all Eliasson’s works. The participant is placed in an unpredictable situation whose only reality is the reflection of one’s own perception of perceiving—experiencing the momentary presence, its changing feelings and conditions. Eliasson leads the visitor to the utmost efficiency of sensory potential, or, like Madeleine Grynsztejn suggests, Eliasson with his works encourages “a critical attitude toward normative processes of perception while at the same time offering viewers opportunities to expand their ability to envision.”34

With Eliasson, there is also an element of utopian projection, in which space is considered an open category for manifesting the possible but always conceived by the here and now of the physical experience. In the space of the installation Your Blind Passenger, the visitor is embedded in the process of changeability. Eliasson believes that utopia emerges from the presence and “is linked to the now, the moment between one second and the next”.

As he explains, “Utopia constitutes a possibility that is actualized and converted into reality, an opening where concepts like subject and object, inside and outside, proximity and distance are tossed into the air and redefined. Our sense of orientation is challenged and the coordinates of our spaces, collective and personal, have to be renegotiated. Changeability and mobility are at the core of utopia.”35

The place of the installation Your Blind Passenger may be defined

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by the body and a physical environment, but it is, similar as with Turrell, designed to stay imaginatively open and unpredictable as a field of experience. The concreteness of perception produced by the exposure of the body to reduced and de-contextualised stimuli redirects the attention to sensory experience and thus enables experiential transformation.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposed a conception of space, which can also be applied to Eliasson’s construction of spatial experience. As Merleau-Ponty observes, “space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected.” In the space of Eliasson’s installation, the obscurity of the event is a means that encourages the articulation of consciousness and triggers a mental projection with which we occupy the arena of absent conceptions. The interaction of sensory and cognitive elements in the perception of space causes the exterior (in this case the art installation) to turn to the interior of the mental space and its conceptions.

While Eliasson and Turrell construct phenomenological environments as potential arenas of utopian vision, the works by British sculptor Antony Gormley address the possibility of transformation taking place in images of the human being. The portrayal of lonely and motionless human figures, usually gazing into the distance, as if they would halt in contemplating the present, is characteristic for Gormley’s work. The artist often places his figures in natural ambiences, in front of a vast sea or wide landscape panoramas (e.g. in works like Land, Sea, and Air II [1982] or Post [1993]) to where their imaginative gaze extends. Gormley explains that in his works he tries to negotiate a relationship between the body as a thing and the body as a place, while the image of the body always includes a space “that can’t be occupied physically but can be occupied imaginatively” and where the world, caught in the mould of the body, extends beyond the proportions of its frame. Hence, the viewer, while observing his figures, always has the feeling that their reflective, meditating states project from the inside to the outside world and occupy it with the vision of their own future. It must not be overlooked that the eyes of these figures are often closed or shrouded and thus rather turned inwards than outwards. The expectation emanating from these figures on the one hand, and the absorption of the momentary or the impression of being indrawn on the other, in these statures derive from the same point of view.

Gormley’s works, similarly like Turrell’s and Eliasson’s, activate the viewer’s participation by pushing him into an isolated space of personal responses and senses where perception and reflection
on an otherwise daily experience become intensified. His sculptures include the viewer emotionally on the level of recognising his own vulnerability and fragility, striving for a new coexistence between the individual and the world, achievable through the return to basic humanistic values. Gormley’s works create a specific and latent relationship between the individual and the crowd, a relationship constituent of every utopian “programme” that envisages implementation through the ideal balance between the interest of the individual and the interest of the community. In spite of the fact that the sculptures carry traces of subjective experience, literally being impressions cast from the artist’s own body, they are exonerated from any portrait features and redesigned in order to perceive them as types, anonymous individuals, “standard bodies”,40 as described by E. H. Gombrich. This standardised body represents what Gormley calls “a collective subjective”,41 enabling a transfer between the distinctly subjective and the universal (collective) experience. As he says himself, his works carry the potential to transfer their subjective experience to the viewer, acting equally intense. The series of terracotta works entitled Field and created for different locations thematises transfer and interaction between the individual and the crowd. On the one hand, the project was conceived as a collaborative action in which the artist asked the participants to make figures and encouraged them to treat the clay as an extension of their own bodies.42 On the other hand, Field is conceptualised as a landscape of bodies in which the voice of the individual reverberates in hundreds of figures and is simultaneously collectively centralised in him or her. Richard Noble interpreted Field as a “work which gives form to the possible future in which equality of contribution is respected and space is given for collective self-awareness, which neither subsumes nor destroys individual identity”.43 Collectively, on a symbolic level the individual sphere expands to the outside, to the collective space which in the sight of the viewer reflects a metaphor of the inside. The collective challenges the potential of humanity’s transformative power that begins in the individual and is realised in collaboration.

In the sculpture series A Case for an Angel the spread arms of Gormley’s sculptures are transformed into aeroplane wings, thus alluding to and enhancing the symbolic human desire to fly skywards. The Angel is a celestial resident, a mediator between the terrestrial and the heavenly, between one and the other level of existence, which in Gormley’s work occupies the human body designed as an “uncomfortable mixture between aeronautics and anatomy”.44

The human and technological body implies a suggestion of the liberating power of technology which in the present is one of the central references of utopian imagination. In this sense, it is vital to mention an important reference, Klee’s drawing named

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40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., pp. 18, 19.
42. Ibid., p. 9.
Angelus Novus, whose owner Walter Benjamin described it as follows: [The painting] shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.45

Perhaps the effect of this progress, reaching its peak in the modern society of global capitalism, is mirrored in the prevailing melancholic expressions of Gormley’s figures. Neither is their back turned to the future nor is their vision building the future on the wreckage of the past but derives from its present position: the figures stare in front of them the same way as they stare into themselves, while asking themselves about the meaning of existence and the uncertainty of what follows. Their position is ambiguous, similar to the mysterious and indefinable “machine angel” by Klee, in which Adorno has recognised an ambiguous image, announcing either the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it.46

Then again, Gormley’s angel optimistically spreads his wings to fly but is simultaneously motionless and numb under the weight he carries.47 It seems as if his stature announces a paralysed utopian impulse determined by a conflict between the terms given by our existence and the idea about how to improve and exceed them. The angel is a parable of yearning for the future, for the potentials of a different existence in which physical being and spiritual vision are aligned—but this is only possible through resolving the dilemmas of the present.

Utopia is a way of thinking about the future, determined by coordinates of the present, of the empirical, social, and phenomenological body. Phenomenologically, the body is of central meaning in the perception of and the reaction to the surrounding world. The physical body informs the human subjectivity, or as expressed by Olafur Eliasson, senses are experiential guides, by which we receive, evaluate and produce reality and only through sensorium—feelings, memories, convictions, values, thoughts, uncertainties—we get in relation to the collective.48

The suggested art projects included in the context of the utopian are based on the sensibilisation of the individual who can transfer himself to the collective level—the attitude and behaviour of the people—only through personal transformation. In times


47. Gormley explains that A Case for an Angel is a declaration of inspiration [...] but “on the other hand it is also an image of somebody who is fatally handicapped, who cannot pass through any door and is desperately burdened [...].” Gormley, A. (1993). Interview with Declan McGonagle. Antony Gormley. London: Tate Gallery Publications, p. 136.

of technological hegemony and late capitalism, which in terms of its structure does not allow exteriority, the focus on the here and now obstructs our view and that makes us unable to picture or incorporate our fragmentary existence into a broader scheme. Also the need for a vision of an alternative world has faded in this regard, while the imagination in which a different reality could be envisioned is benumbed. It is not about lacking something, neither about how to define the lack; it is about how to overcome it. In the discussed works of art, utopian imagination resides in experiential situations that suggest a reconstruction of our physical, emotional, and spiritual presence, only through which it is possible to invent new alternatives of life. The presented cases do not relate to a concrete utopian project but to the principle of utopian thought and the impulses that produce it. It is quite imaginable that today’s utopian vision, paradoxically, draws from the rehabilitation of what has been pushed to the margins of reflection and consciousness and from there outlines the alternatives of the future.
Este artículo tiene el objetivo de situar el vídeo ensayo como una práctica subjetiva en la que subyace un deseo utópico y una intención transformadora de la realidad, y defiende que las representaciones autorreferenciales desde la subjetividad, al imaginar situaciones nuevas, ponen en tensión las prácticas políticas neoliberales. Ya Ernst Bloch ofrece en *Experimentum mundi* una visión del ‘mundo en proceso’ a partir de la tendencia a su humanización, reivindicando por un lado a Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel por lo que respecta al ‘factor subjetivo’ en el proceso del mundo, al tiempo que llama a revisar el concepto de ciudadano en el marxismo. En los años setenta, en un estadio temprano de globalización, reflexiona sobre las capacidades humanas para generar nuevas realidades, haciendo hincapié en la dimensión subjetiva de la experiencia para el potencial utópico y la contribución de la experiencia cotidiana a ese proceso. Sus aportaciones establecen que no puede hablarse ya de utopía sin la participación del sujeto. Autores como Michael Hard y Antonio Negri, insisten más recientemente en que la globalización del ‘sistema mundo’ y de los medios de comunicación, al tiempo que coarta la subjetividad, genera una condición para la liberación de la multitud, entendida ésta como multiplicidad de subjetividades. También desde la perspectiva de las transformaciones globales, Homi Bhabha se refiere a la toma de conciencia de las posiciones del sujeto como un resultado de la pérdida de vigencia de la categoría de clase. Desde su punto de vista, la revisión de las narraciones de subjetividades originarias ya no es tampoco posible desde los paradigmas ideológicos modernos como el marxismo. La emergencia de nuevas identidades requiere pues de nuevos espacios, que se traducen en la producción de sociedades nuevas, utópicas. Esas nuevas realidades se producen en los espacios liminales que Homi Bhabha llama «intersticiales», ya que tienen la capacidad de ofrecer un ámbito para elaborar las estrategias del yo-singular o común- y para iniciar nuevos signos de identidad, de colaboración y de contestación en el acto mismo de definir la idea de sociedad.
Con ello, Homi Bhabha aborda la necesidad de concebir una contra espacialidad, para evitar ser expulsados del lugar o, en todo caso, generar lugar.

Para enfocar el problema desde la subjetividad del artista y su acción generadora de nuevas realidades posibles, acudo a dos autores que revisan la deriva del sujeto en un contexto dominado por el desplazamiento del espacio y el tiempo. Los planteamientos de Peter Sloterdijk y Boris Groys se basan en el potencial del sujeto y, aunque siendo deudores de ellas, trascienden de manera imaginativa las ideologías modernas. Peter Sloterdijk emprende una comprensión especulativa del espacio que le permite repolitizarlo, en un momento en el que el espacio está sujeto a una extrema violencia en las fronteras nacionales –civilizacionales, podría argüirse–, cuanto más cuando supone no solo un pensar intelectual sino que puede traducirse en una resistencia a las políticas dominantes del espacio. Entonces, el espacio no sería ya entendido como entidad, sino como exterioridad de objetos en relación fenomenológica y una cantidad infinita de posibilidades de relación, y por lo tanto como un espacio capaz de crear subjetividad. Esta filosofía post-humana (entiéndase aquí post-política) se basa en la consubjetividad y la coexistencia, es decir, en relaciones dialógicas. El orden de utopías que propone no se basa en el esquema de negación/superación sino en nuevos imaginarios. Para que se dé esta situación, ha sido necesaria la previa dislocación temporal del presente histórico, que ha permitido a su vez tratar temáticamente en el mismo registro la memoria, la historia y la actualidad. En esta coyuntura, el término contemporáneo implica la experiencia de este tiempo, el contemporáneo, y su proyección en un futuro especulativo e incluso de ficción irrealizable o utopía, una aproximación que Boris Groys practica a su vez desde la teoría del archivo. Así pues, las disyunciones espaciales y temporales que proponen Peter Sloterdijk y Boris Groys, permiten abordar la práctica del vídeo ensayo desde lo que Ramón Grosfoguel llama un perspectiva “geopolítica”, según la cual “el punto central es el locus de la enunciación, es decir, la ubicación geopolítica y corporeal del sujeto que habla”, desde dónde el sujeto que habla decide hablar mostrando su ubicación, no ocultándola. Porque cuando el que habla se oculta, encubre su ubicación epistémica geopolítica y corporeal en las estructuras del poder/conocimiento coloniales desde las que habla, facilitando así la credulidad del espectador y volviéndole vulnerable. Esta estética de la subjetividad posicionada, que fortalece la agencia del espectador, autores como Timothy Corrigan o Laura Rascaroli la asocian a los nuevos modos ensayísticos. Timothy Corrigan, por ejemplo, hace énfasis en la relación entre la expresividad misma y la experiencia, que avanzaba Ernst Bloch, siendo el ensayo, a su entender, un lugar físico para el yo provisional y sus pensamientos, libres de cualquier autoridad.

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Es precisamente en esos intersticios de libertad, en los que Peter Sloterdijk analiza los espacios de la decadencia, del no ser, del desaliento, desde la teoría de las esferas, inspirada en el halo de vida y en las condiciones atmosféricas, una mirada repleta de posibilidades para nuevas estructuras de comunidad solidarias surgidas desde la individualización. Por su parte Boris Groys analiza la conformación de identidad en las transformaciones radicales de las formas artísticas como un acto de resistencia a la globalidad homogeneizante. En estos momentos de crisis y de transformación del modelo productivo en especulativo, arte y vida se asocian creando espumas que se transforman con las rupturas y uniones potenciales de burbujas. En esa metáfora tomada de Peter Sloterdijk, la subjetividad trasciende el giro performativo para devenir un ‘ser-en-la-isla’, que para el filósofo ahora significa: “...poder hacer uso de la posibilidad de transferir situaciones interiores. Transferencias de ese tipo son realizables cuando se alcanza en el exterior una situación real que pueda servir de envoltura o receptáculo para la repetición de interioridad en otro lugar”11.

Desde la perspectiva de la creación de espumas, pues, la subjetividad en el arte genera sus propios espacios para respirar y establece asociaciones, nuevas espumas a partir de las cuales crecer en nuevas burbujas más grandes, desvanecerse como pompas de jabón que son, o simplemente fluir en nuevas cavidades respirables, posibilitadoras de existencia. De hecho, Peter Sloterdijk se acerca al sistema de pensamiento de la ecología de los saberes que articula con posterioridad Boaventura de Sousa Santos12, al conectar el aliento vital con las representaciones tempranas de la magia y sus vínculos con el pensamiento místico así como su traducción en sistemas de pensamiento en las ciencias y, otra vez, sus renovados lazos con la naturaleza. Aunque en este caso, su revisión se ciñe básicamente al universo occidental, al cual, de hecho, pertenece el concepto de utopía, que “fue la forma mental, literaria y retórica de un cierto colonialismo occidental imaginario”13. Así pues, Boaventura de Sousa Santos insta a deshacerse de la falsa descripción del mundo que legó el pensamiento moderno para ser capaces de una refundación que incluya a todo ser del planeta en una nueva constitución14. Precisamente para este menester, Peter Sloterdijk escribe la trilogía de las esferas, para ofrecer un espacio de imaginación desde el cual generar un futuro posible en una etapa posnacional, posthistórica15 y, en consecuencia, post-ideológica.

**UN SISTEMA DE TRANSFERENCIAS Y ECOS**

Peter Sloterdijk propone un sistema de transferencias a través de la pompa de jabón como *médium* de la expansión anímica16, que se realiza a través de lo que él llama la fuerza compenetradora, la
solidaridad, que también describe como un fenómeno de transferencia\(^{17}\). Es pues la generación de espacio interior lo que impulsa nuevas individuaciones\(^{18}\), con agencia para fundirse con otras o estallar. Sin embargo, cualquier cambio humano de lugar, siempre comienza como un cambio hacia dentro, de modo que la intimidad es en el fondo una inmersión abismal en lo más cercano\(^{19}\). Así, en el mundo de los nuevos pensamientos, la inteligencia no es sujeto sino \textit{milieu} y círculo de resonancia, como lo son el lenguaje y la emoción\(^{20}\). De modo que los seres humanos no quieren ser sólo ‘almacenados en un container-totalidad’, en un mundo, sino tener también una experiencia interior viva: “toparse con el Gran Otro del centro opuesto, que les posibilita una complementación íntima”\(^{21}\).

**LÍMITES INTERIOR Y EXTERIOR**

Además de las parejas directrices de la estructura y el azar, y la máquina y el acontecimiento, una tercera diada, el \textit{hardware} y el código, muestra a los seres humanos su posición extática al borde de algo que los posibilita y se les escapa\(^{22}\), les define y les engulle a la vez. Boris Groys identifica en esa tercera pareja conceptual de \textit{hardware} y código un cambio drástico en las condiciones de producción, distribución y presentación del arte en la era actual\(^{23}\), como efectivamente las transformaron también las dos primeras diáadas.

En ese mundo escurridizo de posibilidades, la transparencia de los datos se ha combatido con contraseñas sofisticadas y sistemas de protección de datos, lo que para Boris Groys convierte al sujeto contemporáneo en un poseedor de un paquete de contraseñas que sólo él conoce, como un ‘guardador de un secreto’, aunque siempre con la amenaza latente de que esa protección pueda quebrarse\(^{24}\). En ese abismo desconocido del mundo virtual, sin embargo, el artista encuentra una oportunidad onológica para imaginar su propia identidad. Una identidad capaz de asociarse y desasociarse, de unirse y separarse, de otras identidades individuales y colectivas. Lo que Peter Sloterdijk describe como individuación, como separación onológica, Boris Groys lo halla en Jean-Paul Sartre\(^{25}\) y el concepto de la subjetividad humana, como un proyecto dirigido hacia el futuro, expresado como una lucha contra la identidad impuesta al sujeto por la sociedad, en una tensión en permanente desarrollo. Para Boris Groys, la posibilidad de revelar el auténtico yo requiere de un período previo de reclusión — para reaparecer en público con una nueva condición, con una nueva forma. Este estado de ausencia temporal sería constitutivo del proceso creativo\(^{26}\).

Reclusión e individuación se sitúan pues en ambos autores como generadores potenciales de identidad y cambio, espacios

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., pp. 51-52.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., pp. 88-89.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., pp. 246-247.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 578.


\(^{24}\) Groys, B. (2013). \textit{Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive}. [op. cit.], 1.


\(^{26}\) Groys, B. (2013). \textit{Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive}. [op. cit.], pp. 4-5.
de imaginación. Esos períodos generativos ocultos se producen fuera del espacio, durante lapsos indefinidos que pueden llegar a durar desde un instante a incluso toda una vida. Es un proceso (el de individuación/reclusión/subjetividad) que ‘emerge de la nada’, y presupone una desincronización del tiempo, que sólo se resincroniza de nuevo al ser vivido en el tiempo de la audiencia27. La ocultación, pues, permite al practicante sumergirse en ese abismo del propio yo y romper, ni que sea metafóricamente, con el tiempo cronológico. En el caso del vídeo ensayo, esos procesos se traducen en un giro hacia la subjetividad.

RESISTENCIA FUERA DEL ESPACIO Y FUERA DEL TIEMPO.

‘No decir’ puede ser también elocuente. De hecho, Peter Sloterdijk apunta que la opción por la cultura trivial de nuestra época no es en ella misma trivial, pues no es más que una libertad de elección entre diferentes formas de actuación de la misma decadencia, y una emancipación de los hablantes de la exigencia de tener que decir algo28. Ante la anulación del sujeto por los discursos únicos, se habían rebelado ya los artistas modernos reclamando el derecho a su propia auto-identificación. En realidad, ese fue el contexto del tiempo del deseo de la utopía, el proyecto de construir un ‘verdadero yo’ que fuera reconocido socialmente en un mundo nuevo29. Esa lucha por la identidad nominal de los sujetos se radicalizó en la postmodernidad. Su utopía era la auto-disolución del individuo en el infinito, en flujos anónimos de energía, deseo, o en el juego de significantes. Pero si el museo fue ya un fracaso para las utopías modernas, Internet ha sido también un fiasco de auto-disolución30, aunque sin embargo, ante esa desilusión emerge una nueva utopía, el sueño de una palabra clave inquebrantable que pueda proteger para siempre la subjetividad31. Ese anonimato estructural que nace en la red, permite al artista emergir a la superficie del flujo a través de identidades ficticias, disfraces o travestismos, que le permiten moldear y transformar su ‘sí-mismo’ lejos de la mirada totalizante del nuevo globalismo. Así pues, mientras el impulso utópico está relacionado con el deseo del sujeto de romper con la identidad definida históricamente, el archivo da la esperanza de sobre vivir a la propia contemporaneidad y revelar el auténtico yo –yo refractivo o yos- en el futuro. Esta promesa utópica permite al sujeto desarrollar una distancia y una actitud crítica hacia su propio tiempo y hacia su audiencia inmediata. Boris Groys afirma que los archivos, a menudo interpretados como medios para conservar el pasado, para presentar el pasado en el presente, son también máquinas para transportar el presente al futuro. Ahí el arte se diferencia de la política, aunque artistas y políticos compartan un aquí y ahora común del espacio público, y ambos quieran modelar el futuro. Por su parte, la acción política

27. Ibid., p. 5.
30. Ibid., p. 8.
tiene que producir cambios efectivos en la vida social, en un proceso de futuro en el cual acaba totalmente absorbida por sus propios resultados y consecuencias. En cambio, la obra de arte se hace permanente, y su presencia anticipada del futuro le garantiza su influencia en él, pues se mantiene haciendo preguntas y desestabilizando el pensamiento único, bombardeándolo desde infinitos lugares e identidades siempre cambiables y reactualizables. En el proceso de priorizar la disponibilidad y accesibilidad de los archivos a su historicidad, la narratividad se elimina para emerger de nuevo en la activación de los contenidos del archivo, o de sus ausencias. De modo que procedimientos de arte de archivo, como el vídeo ensayo y el uso que hace de los materiales fílmicos de archivo, despliegan una lógica centrífuga, que se antepone a la lógica centrípeta del sistema.

Pero el archivo no sólo sitúa al arte fuera del tiempo, también actúa como un desplazamiento, como una desterritorialización. Boris Groys utiliza el término de ‘iluminación profana’ como reverso al de ‘pérdida de aura’ que describe Walter Benjamin, que se produce al situar la copia en una topología de la distancia, la naturaleza de la cual transforma al espectador en un flâneur, porque en esta tesitura es él quien gestiona los espacios que se generan en la recepción/activación y los define con su paseo curioso y reflexivo. Como ocurre en las instalaciones o en el vídeo ensayo, que ofrecen un ámbito de desarrollo en el que el espectador se mueve a su antojo, se aproxima y se aleja, para determinar un lugar -aunque sea efímero- concreto.

VÍDEO ENSAYO COMO AUTORREFERENCIA Y COMO TRAVESTISMO

El vídeo ensayo se sirve de estrategias diversas que le permiten huir de las coordenadas del espacio tiempo. A través de la subjetividad, se sumerge en un espacio autorreferencial en tanto constituye una revisión de la escritura del yo desde dos perspectivas, la de interrogarse sobre uno mismo con todas sus consecuencias, y la de las condiciones de producción y grabación, a las que se podrían añadir las de preproducción cuando se trata de material fílmico de archivo. En ese nuevo contexto, el autor (en este caso autor de vídeo ensayo) “construirá a su manera la ‘fábula’ que insiere su existencia en el orden del mundo”. Esa ficción, fábula o travestismo le permite esa inserción, al tiempo que es en sí una práctica situada ideológicamente, intencionada y consciente, sea por su relación conceptual con su momento histórico y político, sea por la tecnología que tiene a su alcance; y también utópica, por su actitud crítica y transformadora, que se traduce en la especulación de futuros posibles y la creación de imaginarios nuevos.
Esa necesidad de pensar modelos alternativos de relación deviene urgente en el momento en que la globalización traslada la tensión interior/exterior a la misma zona geográfica, y ya no hay más un “fuera”, sino la necesidad de desarrollar una nueva consciencia que debería ser más abarcante e integradora, y a la que el vídeo ensayo contribuye explorando las posibilidades narrativas del lenguaje en todas sus dimensiones: textual, audiovisual y de generación de espacio, a menudo como instalación en su forma expositiva. El vídeo ensayo se convierte entonces en un instrumento tecnológico adecuado para abordar la pérdida de referencialidad histórica de lo contemporáneo, es decir, el instante de tiempo, entendido como simultaneidad; y la autorreferencia, como forma temporal del ser y base de la consciencia. Ante este bucle representacional, el vídeo sería como una ampliación del código base humano, que le brinda nuevas maneras para comunicar pensamientos e imaginarios que no requieren ser dichas o descritas, les basta con ser enunciadas. Precisamente, los autores de vídeo ensayo se sirven de ficciones, también sobre su propio yo, y con ese disfraz se desplazan al flujo. La agencia del cine subjetivo en general y del vídeo ensayo en particular se enmarca en estos procesos. Se trata de una práctica metalingüística, autobiográfica y reflexiva, con una autoría extratextual, que se basa fundamentalmente en la interpelación al espectador de un ‘enunciador encarnado’. Es por lo tanto un cine dialógico y especulativo. Por lo cual, el vídeo ensayo constituye un espacio de resistencia y de subversión. Y la lectura del espectador y su activación en un tiempo futuro son la constatación que el acto de escritura ha conseguido desafiar al tiempo. Pero no sólo para imaginar un futuro sino también para reescribir un pasado, puesto que aunque el cine de ensayo se sitúe en un tiempo presente, contiene digresiones tanto hacia el pasado como hacia el futuro.

La activación del espectador tiene mucho que ver con la liberación de subjetividades, uno de los temas centrales de los teóricos decoloniales. Precisamente Pedro Pablo Gómez y Walter D. Mignolo insisten en la necesidad de buscar nuevos paradigmas en el arte, con procesos y productos artísticos decoloniales, explorando al mismo tiempo su sentido estético. Para legitimar lo que es arte y lo que es la estética, incluso proponen un nuevo y diverso punto de referencia, utilizando criterios como el de subversión, que implícitamente suponen una desobediencia estética y epistémica, es decir, cuestionan las normas del quehacer artístico y su sentido. Estas estéticas decoloniales consideran necesario descolonizar los conceptos para liberar la subjetividad, para lo cual proponen ser conscientes de la ‘herida colonial oculta’, puesto que el arte y la estética fueron también instrumentos para la colonización de subjetividades.
En ese sentido, para Peter Sloterdijk, los procesos transformadores siempre se basan en creaciones físicas y mentales de espacio interior: “toda pared sustituye una pared, todo interior menta otro interior, toda salida de una situación interior provoca otras salidas”. En ese fluir, el autor (o artista) adopta múltiples identidades, a menudo híbridas, a través de las cuales mostrarse. Pero el desplazamiento de barreras permeables y sus transformaciones no son inocuas, Peter Sloterdijk las describe como un derrotero de estrés en cuyo transcurso se llega a neutralizar lo exterior asimilándolo al interior esférico. Los describe como estresores protopolíticos, del tipo de los enemigos y extraños; estresores psicológico-sociales, como las depresiones colectivas; y estresores mentales, como lo monstruoso y la idea de infinito. Ese estrés es de carácter postraumático, y exige la creación de un lenguaje que manifieste el trauma y al mismo tiempo lo contenga: que lleve a una estructura consciente el lenguaje repetitivo e inconsciente de la pesadilla. Esa ambivalencia es constitutiva de la autobiografía, de las expresiones del yo, aunque pueda a veces ser imposible decir lo que no puede ser dicho o tenga el yo que disfrazarse para poder decirlo. En esos virajes, surgen la lógica de las metáforas y los derroteros del yo refractado, y en ellos, el autor de vídeo ensayo se enfronta también a la contradicción de imágenes, entre su literalidad y su indicialidad, su calidad testimonial como registro, y las asociaciones que se derivan de un uso libre, de una combinación fuera de las normas y las convenciones de la narrativa visual.

La autobiografía tiene, pues, el potencial de acercar la realidad a través de microlecturas o visiones alternativas a los hechos, singulares, subjetivas, pero no menos reales, al contrario, absolutamente reales, en tanto que son vividas desde la experiencia y la emoción, aunque puedan ser expresadas en la ficción. De modo que las prácticas subjetivas permiten a sus autores viajar por el mundo exterior y por el interior sin hallar contradicción alguna en ello.

**CANJE DE IDENTIDADES EN LAS LÍNEAS TEMPORALES EN EL VÍDEO ENSAYO**

Los trabajos que siguen tienen puntos de contacto entre ellos, en tanto que sus autores intentan dar forma a una identidad que anhelan, persiguiendo sus trazas en el pasado para poder proyectarse en el futuro. Tal vez este deseo sea una respuesta para agarrar posiciones de resistencia al engullimiento global ante la pérdida del lugar y el ‘sí-mismo’.

Adela Jušić (Sarajevo, Bòsnia Herzegovina, 1982) parte del trauma de la guerra de los Balcanes para abordar una introspección situada en Snajperist (El francotirador, 2007) vídeo a través del cual trata
de aproximarse a la figura de su padre como una manera de recuperar un fragmento de una historia (personal y colectiva) que no abasta a comprender. En el video, el padre de Adela Jušić aparece en una fotografia sobre la cual la artista dibuja un círculo rojo. Lo sitúa, lo marca, lo define como objetivo, al tiempo que indaga sobre él, sobre su experiencia como soldado, una parte de su identidad totalmente desconocida para ella. Su padre formaba parte del ejército bosnio desde que estalló la guerra en 1992, y fue uno de los defensores de la ciudad del sitio serbio, que utilizó francotiradores para aterrorizar a la población civil. Él mismo fue también francotirador, para contrarrestar el cerco serbio, y anotaba las bajas que causaba en un dietario hasta que él mismo cayó víctima de un francotirador enemigo, abatido por un disparo en el ojo.

En el video, Adela Jušić lee en voz alta las anotaciones de su padre mientras insiste trazando un círculo sobre su imagen, como si quisiera ir más allá de ella y encontrar su propio lugar en relación con la violencia de los hechos, abriendo una brecha en la idea que tenía de sí misma hasta el momento y preguntándose implícitamente sobre su propia identidad.

Esa misma insistencia la encontramos en Kad ja umrem, radite šta hoćete (Cuando muera, puedes hacer lo que te plazca, 2011). En este video, la artista – cuya cabeza queda fuera de la pantalla – tiñe el cabello a su abuela, el rostro de la cual ocupa el centro de la escena. Adela Jušić susurra en bosnio historias de su vida, de la guerra. Las muecas de las estiradas del cabello hacen aflorar los rastros del sufrimiento marcados en la cara de la anciana. Adela Jušić plantea el video en dos tiempos de creación, la acción del tinte, íntima y personal, y la posterior post-edición una vez su abuela falleció, en la que añade la narración de los recuerdos que le solía contar sobre su vida53. En el vaivén entre los recuerdos de las dos mujeres, sus personalidades se confunden en un contexto marcado por los saltos y las discontinuidades. Las temporalidades de los hechos históricos se colapsan en el instante de una vida contada, al tiempo que abren la posibilidad de especular sobre el futuro.

En el caso de Marina Gržinić (Rijeka, 1958), la artista cuestiona el impacto del capitalismo y sus derivaciones sociales y de pensamiento, así como las formas de poder que ostenta, para especular como ofrecerles resistencia. Así que en su producción, tanto teórica como artística, sugiere una repolitización de las prácticas, también las artísticas. En O muhah s tržnice (Las moscas de la plaza del mercado, 1999), un vídeo de siete minutos, Marina Gržinić y Aina Šmid se ocupan de la idea del espacio europeo, dividido y sacrificado, a partir de un conjunto de imágenes aparentemente inconexas que forman parte del imaginario cultural continental, con una variedad de referencias históricas, filosóficas y artísticas,
a través de las cuales la Europa del Este aparece como un reducto indivisible, escenario de innumerables atrocidades, y síntoma de los errores políticos y culturales del siglo XX\(^{54}\). El recurso utilizado para ahondar en el tema es la comparación entre dos estéticas cinematográficas, la de Ingmar Bergman y la de Jean-Luc Godard. Lemmy Caution, el protagonista del film *Alphaville – the adventures of Lemmy Caution* (1965), de Jean-Luc Godard, es extraído del film y resituado en el contexto de la reconstrucción de la famosa escena del juego de ajedrez de la película *Det sjunde inseglet* (*El séptimo sello*, 1956), de Ingmar Bergman, en la cual la muerte intenta ganar la partida. Con este desplazamiento, la artista conecta las recreaciones medievalistas de Ingmar Bergman, inspiradas en el libro de la Apocalipsis, que tiene como tema central el silencio de Dios, con el film de Jean-Luc Godard, estrechamente vinculado por su parte a las novelas distópicas de ciencia ficción, que prefiguran una sociedad futura totalitaria en la que el bien común está por encima de la libertad individual. Ambos extremos configuran espacios sin Dios. Pero las alusiones a otros films no terminan aquí, en la escena de la partida de ajedrez, aunque se respetan la posición de las figuras, la escenografía y los ángulos de la cámara, se introduce un cambio de identidad en los jugadores, encarnados esta vez en la Giulietta Masina de *La strada* (1954), de Federico Fellini, y el *Mefisto* (1981), del director húngaro István Szabó, basado en el personaje del libro de Klaus Mann del mismo título. También aparecen la Mia Farow de *Rosemary’s baby*, mafiosos o el boxeador Jack Dempsey.

El título alude al texto de Friedrich Nietzsche “De las moscas del mercado”, en *Así habló Zaratustra*, una reflexión sobre el asedio moral en la cual Friedrich Nietzsche habla de huir a la soledad, pues donde ésta acaba empieza el mercado, el ruido de los grandes comediantes y el zumbar de las moscas venenosas. Marina Gržinić describe esas citas en el film como una elipsis de alucinación, esquizofrenia, apatía sexual y frustración, que cierra con la escena de los cadáveres de la película *Missing* (1982), de Costa Gavras\(^{55}\).

Es su respuesta situada al sistema neoliberal global, el cual genera su propio imaginario para proteger los intereses del capital, ante el cual la artista se pregunta a qué historias tenemos que dar, ceder o delegar nuestra representación política, atendiendo a que la autoorganización y la autorreferencialidad no nacen en el espacio vacío\(^{56}\). Así pues, con esos desplazamientos invita a revisar los iconos y, con ellos, el imaginario sobre el cual se construyen las identidades y se proyecta el futuro.

Por su parte, el británico John Akomfrah (Acra, Ghana, 1957), a través de imágenes icónicas, así como documentos e imágenes de nueva generación, explora las dimensiones del panafricanismo como una proyección de futuro capaz de superar el análisis

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de la africanidad histórica fijado por la modernidad, para ofrecer una nueva mirada al concepto de negritud.

The last angel of history (1995), es una producción de 45 minutos en la que los iconos del pasado se dan cita en el ciberespacio, un recurso por cierto muy explotado en las historias de ciencia-ficción. John Akomfrah propone una precipitación de imágenes que fluyen sin cesar, un archivo de la diáspora africana a través de personajes y conceptos, de citas literarias y de reflexiones filosóficas. El film no solo migra en el espacio planetario e histórico, sino que traspasa los límites terráqueos para situarse en un universo virtual de un futuro imaginado, en el cual la negritud intenta todavía explicarse como un todo, como una reminiscencia de un pasado mítico y como proyecto común. Las técnicas del vídeo ensayo y la estética de la ciencia-ficción le sirven para hacer converger todas las épocas y lugares a través de los metadatos.

Su comprensión de la negritud o el panafricanismo anticipa la transición de una episteme nacional a una de transnacional que se está produciendo en este principio de siglo en los estudios afroamericanos57- para intentar dar respuesta a la realidad diaspórica que opta por hacerse extensiva a otras realidades identitarias, susceptibles de ser superpuestas y convivir con ellas. Esa perspectiva migrante implica diferentes historias, deseos y necesidades que transgreden los contextos de todas las lecturas oficiales de la negritud58. En este sentido, el film de John Akomfrah proyecta toda una amalgama y diversidad de la negritud –contenida en un inmenso archivo- y explora la posibilidad de construir un futuro en el que las diferentes prácticas negras estén conectadas. John Akomfrah, en definitiva, expresa en este film la sensibilidad transnacional de que habla posteriormente Rinaldo Walcott, a veces efímera, pero siempre politizada, que reconoce que la negritud se vive y se expresa de diferentes maneras en diferentes lugares y contextos59.

The last angel of history (1995) retoma el ángel de la historia que Walter Benjamin desarrolló en las Tesis de la Filosofía de la Historia. Un ángel que mira al pasado, a los acontecimientos de la historia, que a sus ojos no conforman más que una enorme destrucción, no pudiendo el ángel ir al rescate de la humanidad en el pasado porque un huracán lo impulsa hacia el futuro, hacia al que avanza por entre un paisaje en ruinas. Del mismo modo, el ladrón de datos de John Akomfrah se desplaza también entre los rastros de la historia: bustos parlantes, fotografías y archivos de video... pero su mirada se proyecta al futuro, su misión es la construcción de futuro. Los primeros diez minutos se centran en figuras clave como Sun Ra, George Clinton y Lee “Scratch” Perry, que equiparan su peso representacional. La música le sirve como un territorio común de reconocimiento cultural en la diáspora africana, pero además de músicos aparecen escritores

58 Ibid., p. 118.
de ciencia-ficción, como Samuel R. Delaney y Octavia Butler, el astronauta Bernard A. Harris Jr., y otros personajes públicos y de la cultura. John Akomfrah explora el panafricanismo como tal en un momento en que ser africano ya no es una cuestión territorial, ni tampoco de oposición, ya no es un tema de diferencia ‘en relación a’ sino un tema de singularidad. John Akomfrah lo centra en un pasado diverso el tronco del cual se pierde en el tiempo, un pasado atemporal y fragmentario en el que indaga para saber si es un concepto con futuro o si en realidad la diáspora panafricana ha entrado en un proceso de alienación cultural que no le permite ya mirar hacia atrás sino solamente hacia adelante, para hallar alguna clave para su redefinición en la negociación con el otro cultural. Porque el archivo no es ya sobre el pasado, ni sobre la memoria histórica, sino que tiene un perfil sincrónico y es en sí un poder generador, así que prefigura un futuro en el que el énfasis cultural está más en la transferencia de datos que en su acopio, puesto que el almacenaje ha implosionado en el flujo de datos60.

Así, el ladrón de datos de John Akomfrah, surfea en el archivo para imaginar futuros posibles.

En contraste al bombardeo de imágenes que usa John Akomfrah en este film, la fragilidad compositiva de la estructura de Lettres de Panduranga (Cartas desde Panduranga, 2015), un vídeo monocanal de 35 minutos, es lo que permite a Nguyen Trinh (Hanói, 1973) divagar y recomponer escenas de temporalidades cruzadas, en las que afloran intersticios a través de los cuales se despliega el potencial del pensamiento cinemático que contiene el film.

La estructura epistolar entre un hombre y una mujer, facilita a su autora abordar esta cuestión compleja y desplazarse por diferentes registros, desde la historia de los colonialismos a emociones o sentimientos íntimos. Son voces emitidas desde diferentes lugares. La mujer trabaja la tierra en Champa y el hombre atraviesa la ruta del Ho Chi Minh, una serie de caminos y senderos que conectan Vietnam del Norte con diferentes puntos de Vietnam del Sur, incluyendo Laos y Camboya. Se trata de la Carretera de Hanói a la Victoria, una ruta que abrió el gobierno de Hanói para enviar suministros a las fuerzas que tenía en el sur y a la guerrilla del Viet Cong durante la Guerra del Vietnam. Así, la mujer representa la persistencia, la continuidad, el nexo; y el hombre la resistencia, la transformación, la tensión; el pasado y el futuro. Ambas voces, sin embargo, son anónimas61, y aunque pertenezcan al presente, son un eco del tiempo.

Panduranga es el centro espiritual de la antigua cultura matriarcal de los Cham, que levantaron el reino de Champa, una de las civilizaciones más antiguas del Sud-Este asiático, anexionado en 1832 por el reino Dai Viet, el actual Vietnam. La artista conecta esa lejanía con un hecho actual que amenaza


la completa y definitiva destrucción de cualquier traza que haya podido perdurar de su existencia, material o simbólica. Ese hecho es la intención del gobierno de construir en la zona las dos primeras centrales nucleares del país. Nguyen Trinh vio en Internet que iban a levantarlas en Ninh Thuận, al Sur del territorio. De repente, pensó que si hubiera un accidente nuclear, los vestigios de esa cultura se perderían para siempre. Así que, entre 2013 y 2015, decidió efectuar una serie de visitas, en las que a menudo tuvo que afrontar problemas de accesibilidad, de representación e incluso de legitimación, en el sentido de si realmente es posible hablar en nombre de otros: “Como artistas (...) nos impulsan dos deseos contradictorios: el de involucrarnos, pero también el de desaparecer”.

El video confronta pues un territorio sin definir, sin referencias, con un potencial de carga cultural liminal, la antigüedad de costumbres y creencias, que afloran en los diálogos. Nguyen Trinh explora la espiritualidad de los Cham, que enterraban a sus antepasados en la tierra madre e indicaban el lugar con dos piedras. La cámara encuadra dos de esas piedras tras captar el paisaje abierto. El video refleja las dudas de la artista al grabar a la gente y cómo se plantea acercarse a ellas, negociar, decidir, la mirada hacia el lugar... Nguyen Trinh alterna el primer plano, en un nivel de relación íntima, casi de retrato, y abre el plano para captar el lugar en su inmensidad, ambos extremos amenazados por las centrales nucleares en proyecto. Explora diferentes aproximaciones a las personas, planos más cerrados, personajes que entran y salen del grupo -del campo, incluso-, y mantiene las tensiones que provoca en ellos la presencia de la cámara. Esos espacios intersticiales le permiten incorporar rupturas y desplazamientos. Su narrativa se sitúa a medio camino de la arqueología, la historia y el mito, como una argamasa resultado de sucesivas colonizaciones y las infinitas interpretaciones y construcciones teóricas que se han ido generando sobre el pueblo de Champa, un sistema matriarcal de raíz hindú, con más de dos mil años de antigüedad, que continúa desdibujándose.
En este tipo de trabajos, el artista y su sujeto se hallan en una inmensidad fagocitante, la de un espacio circundante que los devuelve en tanto que individuos a su aislamiento cósmico y les revela su ‘ser-desde-siempre-en-el-infierno’ que se encuentra siempre ahí, cómo más acá absoluto, inevitablemente absurdo, sin sentido. Los artistas emergen de manera táctica, interrogándose sobre sus múltiples identidades. Probablemente se trate de las estrategias de ocultación al flujo de las que habla Boris Groys, en las que el sujeto se constituía originalmente como transparente y observable.

Estrategias que en el vídeo ensayo permiten al artista utilizar los intersticios del lenguaje textual y audiovisual para ejercer una resistencia ante una globalización que no acepta alternativas y que no se justifica ante ninguna instancia crítica, sino que “ya sólo mantiene monólogos, en los que se afirma y reafirma como fuerza superior”.

Esas divagaciones fílmicas de los vídeo ensayistas, entendidas como ‘seres-en-la-espuma’, abren claros en lo impenetrable, a través de los cuales conseguimos una nueva visión del universo, que no consiste en una única pompa de jabón, sino en millones y millones de pompas de jabón estrechamente delimitadas que se cruzan e interfieren por todas partes, y que pueden describirse como agrupación de grupos, como espuma semiopaca compuesta de estructuras espaciales conformadoras de mundo, como espumas ontológicas, como espumas hablantes, como sistemas de inmunidad que sueñan más allá de sí mismos: ‘la creatividad como autodefensa’, la creatividad como alternativas posibles que, generadas desde la nada, pueden imaginar lo inimaginable desde su posición enmascarada en el flujo, que al mostrarse -enunciarse- se revela situada.

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68. Ibid., pp. 192-193.
REFERENCIAS


La serie ‘Inopias’ (2008 – 2015), es una serie de proyectos instalativos comenzados a raíz de las crisis del 2008 y que proponía una respuesta ante la fractura social provocada por la crisis del modelo económico liberal que tuvo lugar en esos años. Esta respuesta se pretendía plantear desarrollando un posicionamiento que colocaba al ciudadano en una posición de poder sobre su contexto inmediato: la ciudad. Siguiendo estas pautas trabajaba componiendo una serie de paisajes urbanos realizados de forma casual, que representaban ciudades imaginarias realizadas con objetos encontrados y materiales pobres. Estas maquetas retomaban ciertos modelos utópicos modernos –en los que se aplicaba un modelo urbanístico basado en el orden y la razón para imponer un contexto social específico– para reinterpretarlos desde una práctica lúdica, especulativa y basada en los materiales.

Una de las ideas fundamentales del proyecto consistía en reutilizar materiales desechados por el sistema para construir alternativas. La propuesta pretendía trabajar a partir de materiales reutilizados, técnicas encontradas y modelos urbanos pasados, apostando por una posición que huía de la especialización. Siempre desde esta posición amateur, se intentaba retomar cierto «impulso utópico» dirigido hacia el futuro, situando al ciudadano como protagonista de ese «ejercicio de imaginación» que supone la proyección de utopías, como sujeto que quiere expresar su deseo de participación en la construcción de modelos urbanos y sociales diferentes.

Martín Perán, en el texto de la exposición ‘Futuros abandonados. Ayer ya era la cuestión’ habla sobre cómo, en estos momentos, vivimos bajo lo que denomina una «dictadura del presente» en la que los ciudadanos no encuentran las condiciones óptimas para imaginar alternativas al modelo actual.

En el texto, Perán comenta cómo, ante tal situación, Ernst Bloch, en El principio esperanza (2004) propone «el todavía no», que supera la idea de recuperar un dato histórico o un evento para rehabilitarlo.
Pretende ir más allá y alcanzar la idea de «consciencia anticipatoria», una pulsión que nos permite fantasear con futuros diferentes. De esta manera propone rescatar modelos pasados que ya pensaban el futuro. Futuros abandonados, pero que son susceptibles de proyectarse. Perán detecta, por ejemplo, estos «futuros abandonados» en las ruinas que Robert Smithson describe en su texto sobre los restos del pasado industrial de Passaic.

Estoy convencido de que el futuro está perdido en alguna parte de los basureros del pasado no-histórico; está en los diarios de ayer, en los cándidos anuncios de películas de ciencia ficción, en el espejo falso de nuestros sueños descartados. El tiempo convierte las metáforas en cosas, y las amontona en cuartos helados, o las deja en los parques celestiales de los suburbios.

Smithson pensaba que su tarea como artista consistía en añadir nuevos significados a lo desechos del pasado, reincorporándolos al presente. Esta idea ya la mencionaba Walter Benjamin cuando remarcaba su interés por los descartes y los márgenes de la historia. Según Benjamin este detritus contiene todo lo opuesto al discurso histórico dominante y reincorporarlo provoca el choque entre aquellas ilusiones y un presente escaso de expectativas propias. Como muy bien cita Martina Deren en su texto *Los monumentos de Passaic, de Robert Smithson*: No voy a ocultar nada que valga la pena, ni apropiarme de forma espiritual alguna. Pero lo trapos, los desechos: éstos yo no quiero inventariarlos sino hacerles justicia de la única manera posible, a saber utilizándolos.

Esto es, precisamente, lo que se propone la serie ‘Inopias’. Pretende utilizar el proceso de montaje de esos paisajes urbanos para especular con posibilidades diferentes, rescatar esos «futuros abandonados» y generar –mediante el juego, la improvisación y la remezcla– ficciones posibles por encima de verdades absolutas.

De esta forma el proyecto se basa en una recopilación de materiales que el modelo socio-cultural actual descarta, que provienen de espacios abandonados o de almacenes. Por otro lado se propone rescatar modelos urbanos, posibles utopías que no resultaron o modelos errados que se convirtieron en buenos ejemplos con el paso de los años. El material documental se recopila y se muestra en forma de fanzine en cada una de las exposiciones. Esta publicación recopila, bajo el título de ‘Afinidad Visual Operatoria’ (2012), las diferentes fuentes de información que después son «remezcladas» y puesta en común con los materiales disponibles para producir las diferentes piezas.

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A continuación describiré de forma sencilla cada una de las piezas realizadas:

**P.G.O.U. (2012)** [**Fig. 1**]
Esta es la primera pieza de la serie ‘Inopias’. El proceso constructivo desarrollado juega a crear, de forma lúdica y utilizando materiales encontrados, un Plan de Ordenación Urbana desde el punto de vista del ciudadano.

**Katal-Huyuc (2012)** [**Fig. 2**]
Esta pieza juega a improvisar sobre el modelo de un antiguo asentamiento del período Neolítico ubicado al sur de la península de Anatolia. Este asentamiento no disponía de calles y el acceso a las viviendas se hacía por los techos, utilizando escaleras.

**Ciudad de vacaciones (2012)** [**Fig. 3**]
Esta instalación se basó en un artículo de Juan Freire titulado ‘El “modelo Benidorm”: un ejemplo de eficiencia’ que hablaba sobre como Benidorm, una de las ciudades producto de la burbuja inmobiliaria en España, podría ser un modelo de sostenibilidad.6

**Cristales de Calcita (2012)** [**Fig. 4**]
Esta intervención pretendía hablar de como los asentamientos se pueden expandir de forma similar a cómo cristalizan diferentes minerales. La calcita es un mineral presente en muchos de los materiales de construcción que utilizamos actualmente.

**P.O.L. Pavillion (2013)** [**Fig. 5**]
Intervención que trata de improvisar a partir del Plan de Ordenación del Litoral de Santander. También se jugó, con el título, con la idea de una feria universal ficticia en la zona con diferentes pabellones.

**Carpio (2013)** [**Fig. 6**]
Esta instalación se hizo en la ciudad homónima. El origen del nombre de la ciudad está basada en su situación sobre un saliente. La pieza se realizó con diferentes elementos aportados por los vecinos.

**Bucky C60 (2013)** [**Fig. 7**]
La pieza está basada en cierta relación entre la molécula de fullereno, una molécula compuesta por carbono que puede adoptar una forma geométrica que recuerda a una esfera, y las cúpulas geodésicas inventadas por Richard Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller. Estas cúpulas son todo un ejemplo de aplicación de la ciencia a propósitos utópicos y de solución habitacional.

**Otxarkoaga (2014) [fig. 9]**
En 1959 se inició la construcción del “Poblado dirigido de Otxarkoaga”, un proyecto impulsado por Franco para solucionar el chabolismo en esta zona de Bilbao. En este plan se ensayaron nuevas técnicas de construcción rápida, completándose en tan sólo 18 meses y entregando las viviendas incluso sin urbanizar el terreno. Este contexto errado, incompleto y experimental fue ideal para plantear la pieza.

**Mokattam (2014) [fig. 10]**
Este es el nombre de un suburbio que se encuentra en el sureste de El Cairo. Sus habitantes son los Zabbaleen, un grupo egipcio de cristianos coptos cuya ocupación principal es la recolección y reciclaje de basura. La pieza se desarrolló en el Mercado de la Ribera (Bilbao), a partir de los propios materiales que éste desecha en su actividad diaria.

**Fernweh (2014) [fig. 11]**
Esta palabra es un término alemán que no existe en español y que designa un sentimiento de nostalgia por aquello que está lejos y que anhelamos conocer. Este sentimiento es muy parecido al que establece el concepto de utopía, un lugar al que siempre se anhela llegar, pero que nunca se alcanza.

**Droppers (2015) [fig. 12]**
Esta instalación nos evoca una ciudad ficticia que intenta imaginar como hubiese evolucionado la *Drop City*, un asentamiento hippie fundado en 1965 por muchos de los alumnos de “Bucky” Fuller, en caso de haber continuado en el tiempo. Su título está basado en el nombre con el que firmaban en los fanzines sobre auto-construcción de domos geodésicos de los habitantes de este asentamiento.
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