

Artistic research, thought and education

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Autumn 2011  
Number 2**



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Detail of Gordon Matta-Clark  
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**Biannual Journal  
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**Editorial**

Issues and terms that drive another logic and new thought from and about art.

**Zoom**

How is it possible to put together another narrative of art? 'Zoom' is a space for new intellectual and bibliographic points of reference.

**Display**

How are exhibitions brought about? What does their research involve? This section attempts to make visible the processes by which exhibitions are conceived and defined.

**Mediterraneans**

A space for dialogue on the Near East, Europe and North Africa. Different voices offer new formulations regarding culture, art, religion, education and the common future of the societies in the Mediterranean region.

**Artistic Research**

Why and how do I do what I do? Artists talk about their projects in the first person.

# STRATEGIES OF OPENNESS: THE ABSURD

Xavier Antich

Director of MACBA's Independent Studies Programme (PEI). A Doctor of Philosophy, he is a writer and professor of art theory at the Universitat de Girona, where he directs the Master's Programme in Communication and Art Criticism.

In recent decades, critical thought has allocated some of its effort to attempting to dismantle in all spheres those elements that continue to uphold any trace of domination. With uneven means of operating and differing results, this tendency has had an impact on universes as seemingly distant as theoretical philosophy and political activism; artistic practice and reflection on language; thought on the body and the city, and gender theories. In some cases, efforts have been concentrated on the search for non-totalitarian or counter-hegemonic devices capable of shaping an *other* rationality that can operate in a different way than technological, instrumental or bio-political rationality while unflinchingly attempting to reconstruct a powerful alternative to the rationality that, as a form of power, runs through the entire system of the actual. In other cases, however, the search for a viable way out of the strategies of domination characteristic of hegemonic rationality have opted for a weakening of rationality itself, for tentative attempts at other sorts of thought, and for the exploration of possibilities for dialogue based on the revulsives to emerge with the affirmation of otherness, to mention just a few of the preferred and most successful of these efforts.

In this context, the revulsive and deconstructive potential of the absurd, which played such a crucial role in existentialism and Adornian aesthetics, seems to remain largely unexplored. It does not seem inoffensive, purely speculative or digressive in this final phase of

Gordon Matta-Clark  
*Conical Intersect 3*  
(Documentation of the action *Conical Intersect* carried out in Paris, France, in 1975), 1977  
Vintage silver-salt photograph,  
25.3 × 20.3 cm, detail.  
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MACBA has one of the largest collections of works by Gordon Matta-Clark (New York, 1943–78) of any European museum thanks to a donation from Harold Berg of forty-six works to the Museum in 2011, which joined those already in the MACBA Collection. The images document Matta-Clark's celebrated *building cuts* (cuts and temporary removals of segments of buildings), interventions with which the artist changed the meaning of sculpture. In 2012, MACBA will present works by Matta-Clark.







Gordon Matta-Clark  
*Conical Intersect 1* (Documentation of the action  
*Conical Intersect* carried out in Paris, France, in 1975), 1977  
 Vintage silver-salt photograph, 20.3 × 25.3 cm  
 MACBA Collection. Fundació Museu d'Art Contemporani  
 de Barcelona. Harold Berg long-term loan.

critical modernism to uphold the rhetorics of the absurd as a highly negativist and prepositional possibility. Christoph Menke in *Die Souveränität der Kunst* (1991) has explored kindred possibilities in the prismatic confluence of Adorno and Derrida.

When Adorno wrote in *Minima Moralia* (1951) that 'the task of art today is to bring chaos into the order', he called on art and theory to play an active part in resistance. That meant not only confronting the dominant totalitarian rationality, protesting against an inhuman and oppressive world, but also, and above all, subversively producing an *other* logic whose enigmatic nature would contain the model for what he called a *negative* aesthetic. Thus, in one of the celebrated phrases that articulated much of his thinking, 'dissonance, the trademark of modernism', Adorno not only attempted to characterise our times by the force of the negative, but

also to indicate the resistance exercised by any form of dissonance that cannot be reduced to an integrating or harmonising whole. The dissonant appears, then, as an element essentially resistant to any integration that would be effected by dominant reason, which is by definition violent and totalitarian. As Adorno says in his *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970), 'Art must take up the cause of what is proscribed as *ugly*, though no longer in order to integrate or mitigate it or to reconcile it with its own existence through humour that is more offensive than anything repulsive. Rather, in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and reproduces the ugly in its own image.'

Thus, Adorno's emphasis on the logic of decomposition, in which he saw a way – perhaps the most powerful way – to negate the systematic closure enacted by everything that, always the same unto itself, affirms its totalitarian-ness

by driving out of the system any difference, divergence or otherness. In opposition to the violence of synthesis with which conceptual thought and its logics operate, Adorno proposes the non-coercive synthesis of the multiple in the work of art. To uphold the absurd in the framework of this impugnation of totalitarian rationality is to endorse other, essentially dissolutive formulas capable of inhabiting the gaps in the system and, on the basis of the minutest form of resistance or sabotage, to imagine and shape other possible scenarios.

The absurd, and the logics and rhetoric derived therefrom, has nothing to do with a nihilistic renouncement of thought, language or action. Just the opposite. It entails, rather, placing a stake on the dissolution of forms that serve to close off meaning and all the structures of domination that govern technological and instrumental rationality in the realms of theory, practice and action. The absurd entails the recognition of a possible logic in non-systematised heterogeneity and unresolved contradiction. Or, to put it in aesthetic and political terms, an alternative to dissent and antagonism. In a certain way, the absurd constitutes, then, the best antidote to the totalitarian and reductive temptation of any dialectic that yearns to overcome all contradictions in a greater synthesis. Because the absurd is not the mere absence of meaning, but rather its questioning. Samuel Beckett's plays, for instance, are not absurd because they lack meaning, but because they formulate a perhaps digressive debate on meaning.

'At the end of my play, all that remains is dust: the nameable,' writes Beckett, for whom all textual exercise is the ongoing history of a process of dispossession, negation, demolition. To write is to refuse to remain all alone in one's own world. As Alain Badiou said, it is a question of 'breaking with Cartesian terrorism'. Indeed, he said, 'It was important that the subject be opened up to an alterity and cease being folded upon itself in an interminable and torturous speech. Whence the growing importance... of the event. ... and the voice of the other (which interrupts solipsism).' That is the lesson of the absurd in Beckett's last text: the progressive decay of textual materials to render the logic of possession unviable. Freed from the 'self' that organises it, the text can rejoin the flow of things and follow its own rhythm as the only possible order: disorder, confusion, the logic of the absurd.

'To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now,' Beckett went on. '[To] introduce chaos into order, rather than the reverse' is the intention of art for Adorno as well. To demolish the rationality of the logic that sets out to institute itself as the only legitimate guarantee of meaning through the dissolute logic of the absurd as a way to explore logics that have yet to be conceived. Either Beckett or Adorno could have said: 'Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indignant and distorted...' Return to the concrete, buried beneath the slab

of vacuous generalisations, the exploration of constellatory relations, rather than causal processes; an insistence on fragmentation and parataxis. The absurd does not close off a thing; it does not close off meaning in emptiness or silence. Just the opposite.

A series of books provide an in-depth analysis of the concept of 'the absurd' and its importance in contemporary art:

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970. English edition: *Aesthetic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- . *Minima moralia. Reflexionem aus dem beschädigten Leben*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951. English edition: *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: New Left Books, 1974 (new edition, New York: Verso, 2006).
- Beckett, Samuel. *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London: Faber & Faber, 2006.
- Birnbaum, Daniel, and Isabelle Graw (eds.). *The Power of Judgement. A Debate on Aesthetic Critique*. Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2010.
- Brater, Enoch, and Ruby Cohn (eds.). *Around the Absurd. Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2004.
- Bouchindhomme, Christian, and Rainer Rochlitz (eds.). *L'Art sans compas. Redéfinitions de l'esthétique*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1992.
- Cornwell, Neil. *The Absurd in Literature*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.
- Gómez, Vicente. *El pensamiento estético de Theodor W. Adorno*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1998.
- Menke, Christoph. *Die Souveränität der Kunst. Ästhetische Erfahrung nach Adorno und Derrida*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991. English edition: *The Sovereignty of art: Adorno and Derrida Aesthetic Experience*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998.
- O'Connor, Brian. *Adorno's Negative Dialectic. Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005.
- Wellmer, Albrecht, and Vicente Gómez. *Teoría crítica y estética: dos interpretaciones de Th. W. Adorno*. Valencia: Universitat de València, 1994.



# SPECULATIVE VIBRATIONS

Daniel Heller-Roazen

Full professor of Comparative Literature at Princeton University, where he teaches classical and medieval literature, aesthetics and the philosophy of art. He is the author of many essays, translations and books, including *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (2005), *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (2007) and *The Enemy of All: Piracy and the Law of Nations* (2009), all of them published by Zone Books.

In 1585, the distinguished Venetian mathematician and scientist Giovanni Battista Benedetti published one *Book of Diverse Mathematical and Physical Speculations* (*Diversarum speculationum mathematicarum et physicorum liber*).<sup>1</sup> Among the materials contained in this work are two undated letters addressed to the composer Cipriano de Rore, who appears to have turned to Benedetti for clarification concerning the nature and properties of sounding instruments. Benedetti, himself also a musician and composer, was particularly qualified to respond to the various questions posed to him. Today, it is clear that his letters constituted far more than a divulgation of findings familiar to scientists of his time. In the second of the two epistles, in particular, Benedetti proposed an account of harmonic consonances, which, in hindsight, can be said to have announced the nascent field of the mathematical study of sound, or ‘acoustics’. Benedetti set aside what had been the ancient and medieval practice in the study of musical sound: the measurement of the string lengths necessary for producing consonant intervals and the derivations from their extensions of the ‘reasons’ for musical consonances. Benedetti proposed a method that allowed sounds to be quantified by unprecedented means. Perhaps for the first time in the history of the study of sounding bodies, Benedetti related musical sounds not to the lengths of strings, but to their rate of vibration. A new age in the transcription of nature by number now began.

In his second letter, Benedetti stated three closely related physical principles. The first had its root in a fact of which ‘everyone’, as Benedetti noted, was well aware, namely, that ‘the longer the string, the more slowly it is moved’.<sup>2</sup> Hence the rule that Benedetti now expressly affirmed: the magnitudes

of string lengths and vibrations are inversely proportional, or, to put matters in more modern terms, ‘the ratio of the frequencies of two strings varies inversely with their lengths, the tension being equal’.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, Benedetti established that the consonances of harmonic intervals derive from coincidences in the termination of vibratory cycles. In other words, if two strings cease to move at the same moment, then their sounds will be concordant; inversely, if the two sounds of two bodies are harmonious, it is because their vibration has ceased simultaneously. One may take the octave as an example. If two strings of unequal length sound this interval, it is because their movements come to a standstill in moments that are coincident. Each time the longer string ceases to vibrate, the shorter one will be motionless, and every other time the shorter string ceases to move, the longer one, too, will be immobile. Benedetti had intuited that all harmonies derive from one periodic event in the time of sounding bodies: the simultaneous endings of movement.

Finally, Benedetti suggested that such findings furnish elements with which one may define degrees of consonance, stretching from unison to all the other intervals. An index of harmonic sounds may then be obtained. To reach its terms, two steps are necessary. One must consider the number of vibratory motions made by two strings in a given moment; then, one must multiply the two numbers. Two strings will sound in unison if they vibrate the same number of times, ceasing their motions simultaneously. One may therefore assign to the sound of unison the value of one times one ( $1 \times 1$ ), or one (1). Two strings will sound the octave if, for every vibration of the first string, the second string vibrates twice. One may therefore attribute to this consonance the value of two, produced by one times two ( $1 \times 2 = 2$ ). In his second letter to Cipriano de Rore, Benedetti shows that each of the consonances of traditional musical theory may be subjected to such a representation. The old ratios of string lengths may, then, be rewritten as ratios of string vibrations. Just as the sound of the octave can be derived from the relation of two vibratory cycles to one, so the fifth may be tied to the relation of three vibratory cycles to two. And just as one may assign to unison the number ‘one’, so one may attribute to the interval of the fifth the number that results from the product of two and three, that is, ‘six’; similarly, one may represent the fourth as four times three, or ‘twelve’. Gradually, an arithmetical scale of musical concordance in vibration will emerge. Simple consonances may be correlated with single numbers, and numbers, Benedetti notes, will in turn ‘correspond to each other in a wondrous proportion’.

Benedetti lent particular weight to the index of concordance he established. He dwelt little on the first and second principles he so clearly affirmed and, although he may well be taken to be the first thinker to have defined consonance by vibration, he offered no demonstration of the necessary relation of sounds to cycles of motion.



A generation later, Galileo Galilei, who knew Benedetti's works on mechanics and acoustics, also maintained that musical ratios were reducible to ratios of vibration. In a passage of the *Discorsi*, which he published in 1638, Galileo not only affirmed that consonances could be derived from the coincidence of pulsations but also sought to prove this fact.<sup>4</sup> Today most historians, however, attribute the first rigorous demonstration of the correlation of quantities of sound and quantities of vibration to the Dutch scientist Isaac Beeckman (1588–1637). A journal entry dated 1615 contains a simple, yet decisive geometrical proof that the frequency with which a string vibrates stands in direct proportion to the acuity of its sound. Being himself an atomist, Beeckman held tones, like all other things, to consist in small and indivisible beings 'at diverse distances from each other, that is, at intermediate empty spaces', set in movement by vibration and carried, with varying force, from the place of their first motion to the faculties of human hearing.<sup>5</sup> His contemporaries might well refuse such an atomistic physics; they might hold theories, for example, in which sounds resulted from the motions not of discrete 'corpuscles' but waves. But the principle Beeckman demonstrated would remain, and gradually it would be accepted that sounds could be defined by those ratios of vibrations (or beats or pulsations) to time, today called 'frequencies'.

The consequences of such physical findings were in time to be immense. Initially, of course, the discoveries announced by Benedetti and proven by Beeckman may have appeared to pertain to music alone. Perhaps it seemed that it was only the intervals of motets and madrigals that were, in truth, vibrations. But soon the law of frequency would be brought to bear on other phenomena. Benedetti, in a sense, had already foreseen this much, for with his method, he implicitly allowed that all sounds – concordant or discordant – might be identifiable with a number of modulations effected in any given single instant. Yet one could go still further. Later thinkers would demonstrate that not only sound but also light could be measured by many discrete, albeit rapid, motions. From there, it was but a step to decipherments of subtler, yet far more fundamental rates of frequency in nature. Matter itself, the most elementary of bodies, would one day be resolved into certain periodic rates of pulsation. A new world harmony would, then, be notated: that of the universe of modern science. Yet how could one know that its cycles of motion truly formed a 'harmony'? How, in

such a universe, might one define a rule for consonance and dissonance? One thing, in any case, was certain: such a rule, if there were one, could not emerge from any new physics or mathematics, let alone a musical acoustics. What was needed was nothing less than a metaphysics and cosmology suited to a universe of ubiquitous vibrations. The book that would contain those 'diverse speculations', however, would not be written for some time.

1 Giovanni Battista Benedetti, *Diversarum speculationum mathematicarum et physicorum liber*. Torino: apud Haeredem Nicolai Bevilacqua, 1585.

2 Ibid.

3 Claude V. Palisca, 'Scientific Empiricism in Musical Thought', Hedley Howell Rhys (ed.), *Seventeenth Century Science and the Arts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 91–137, pp. 107–09.

4 For a summary, see H. F. Cohen, *Quantifying Music: The Science of Music at the First Stage of the Scientific Revolution, 1580–1650*. Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster: D. Reidel, 1984, pp. 88–90. For a more sustained study discussion, see François Baskevitch, 'L'élaboration de la notion de vibration sonore: Galilée dans les *Discorsi*', *Revue d'histoire des sciences*, no. 60–62, 2007, pp. 387–418.

5 See H. F. Cohen, *Quantifying Music*, op. cit., pp. 120–23.



Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Fifth Hammer. Pythagoras and the Disharmony of the World*. New York: Zone Books, Cloth/September, November 2011.

Since antiquity, 'harmony' has been a name for more than a theory of musical sounds; it has offered a paradigm for the scientific understanding of the natural world. Nature, through harmony, has been transcribed in the ideal signs of mathematics. But, time and again, the transcription has run up against one fundamental limit: something in nature resists being written down, transcribed in a stable set of ideal elements.

In eight chapters, linked together as are the tones of a single scale, *The Fifth Hammer* explores the sounds and echoes of that troubling percussion as they make themselves felt on the most varied of attempts to understand and represent the natural world. From music to metaphysics, aesthetics to astronomy, and from Plato and Boethius to Kepler, Leibniz, and Kant, this book explores the ways in which the ordering of the sensible world has continued to suggest a reality that no notes or letters can fully transcribe.

# THE NETWORK ON DISPLAY: *PROSPECTIVA'74*

Cristina Freire

Associate Professor and Vice-Director of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo. She is also a curator and writer. She was co-curator of the 27th Biennale of São Paulo and has published among others the books *Poéticas do Processo. Arte Conceitual no Museu* (1999), *Arte Conceitual* (2006) and *Paulo Bruscky, arte, arquivo e utopia* (2007).

In the last decades, the canonical history of art focused on individual artists and autonomous artworks has been challenged by an examination of the particular conditions of distribution, circulation and display of art in the public sphere, that is, art exhibitions.

The mail network as a privileged channel for the distribution of artistic information reveals a strategic principle for the organisation of exhibitions, particularly relevant in Latin American countries in the sixties and seventies. The exhibition *Prospectiva'74* is an example of an active programme of international exchange promoted by the public and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP) in Brazil. Conceived by Walter Zanini, together with Julio Plaza, a Spanish artist living in São Paulo, it took place for one month in 1974 (16 August to 16 September) at the MAC de São Paulo.

View of one of the galleries to the *Prospectiva'74* exhibition, which took place at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo in August and September 1974.







Cover and pages from the catalogue to the *Prospectiva* '74 exhibition

Important changes in the circulation channels and also in the profiles of institutions such as the museum in its task of preserving, storing and exhibiting artworks occurred through exhibitions like this. From the point of view of the collections resulting from these networks, another as yet untold narrative of Conceptual practices emerges. It belongs to a completely different context, far removed from Rio de Janeiro's Neo-concrete art panorama so divulged in Hélio Oiticica's and Lygia Clark's contemporaneous hegemonic presence. It has been rarely discussed that, in the beginning of the seventies, the axis of the Conceptual practices in Brazil moved to the city of São Paulo and from this shift other issues must be considered. In this sense, the history of exhibitions held at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo under the direction of Walter Zanini stands as a privileged point for observation. The art historian and scholar Walter Zanini was appointed the first director of this then recently created museum. Under his direction (1963–78) the Museum's programmes included young artists' exhibitions and such international shows as *Prospectiva*'74. As a result, the Museum occupied a lively place for local artistic practice and international artistic exchanges, as it was able to bring artists to work inside its walls, as well as connecting non-official art practices to institutional settings in its programme of exhibitions, despite the censorship of those difficult decades.

More than a hundred and fifty artists from different countries participated in the *Prospectiva*'74, sending works by mail to the Museum. Within the broad scope of nationalities, the massive international presence was also a response to the organiser's request that each participant propose a further artist for inclusion in the show. The original list of names and addresses was brought to São Paulo by Julio Plaza, who had organised a similar collective international exhibition using the mail-art network in Porto Rico

in 1971, where he was then living. Among many others, the exhibition included works by Jaroslaw Kozłowski, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, Luigi Ontani, Antoni Miralda, Muntadas, Yutaka Matsuzawa, Horacio Zabala, Edgardo Antonio Vigo, Anna Bella Geiger, Clemente Padín, Artur Barrio and Regina Silveira.

The catalogue, also designed by Plaza, is very modest and austere. Printed in black and white, the first page is a list of names of all the participants in alphabetical order and indicating their country of origin. The amount of space allotted within the catalogue to artists and the reproduction of their work is scrupulously equal. 'No juries, no fees, no prizes, no return of the work and a catalogue to document participation' were the shared and consensual principles of these exhibitions organised at that time using mail as a partner.

It is well known that in this network of artistic exchanges, alien to the market, there existed Conceptually-based artistic practices through circulated texts, cards, projects of site-specific installations and actions, manifestoes, photos of performances, visual poetry and different kinds of artists' publications including books, magazines, newspapers, etc., and the invitation letter for *Prospectiva*'74 welcomed these sorts of Conceptual practices.

A special session for films and slide projections was included in the programme. The method of display and the exhibition space were both very simple; almost precarious if compared to conventional modernist, white-cube standards.

The artworks were installed directly on the walls, unframed so as not to create a sense of aura or divergence from the original intention of simply conveying information. The documental character of the Conceptual work of the period was noted by Walter Zanini in his claim for a different sort of museum, where among its traditional functions would



View of the *Prospectiva'74* exhibition

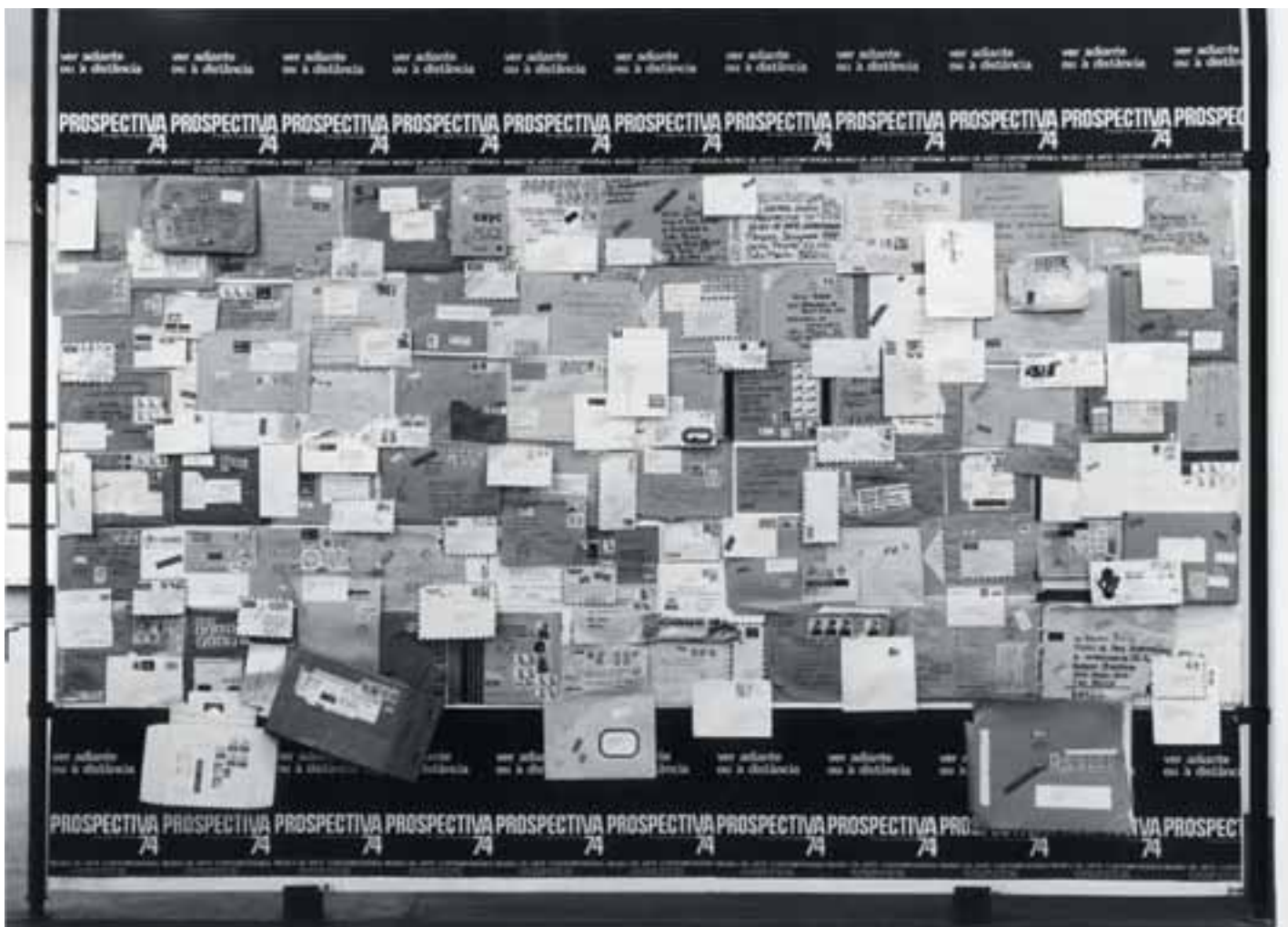
be the development of collections of artworks with a hybrid documentary character such as texts, words, maps and artists publications of different kinds. To this day, the documentary character of these works constitutes a source by which the Museum activates itself as an archive, that is, an operational centre for experimental research in various fields.

Short catalogue texts by Walter Zanini and Julio Plaza provided the introductory note. Julio Plaza stated that *Prospectiva'74* was only made possible due to the communication among artists from many countries who had shown their cooperation and initiative, a situation that in itself was only possible because of the idea of information and not the idea of merchandise.

In a very informal tone, Zanini noted, as if he was speaking directly to the participants, that the main challenge of the show in that dictatorial period (the boycott of the São Paulo Biennial had continued since 1969) was to

enhance international dialogue: 'The international repercussion of *Prospectiva'74*, demonstrated by the presence of artists from many countries, from my point of view opens an important direction that, in many aspects, seems closed in our country in recent years. A profound dialogue may be started with Brazilian artists. The Museum has tried to facilitate this contact all over the world, as is shown by this exhibition and activities abroad...'<sup>1</sup> In addition, he also recognised the exhibition as an opportunity to stimulate a dialogue among the Conceptual tendencies from different parts of the world in a more open and democratic setting. As a consequence, the exhibition turned out to be a privileged space for the visibility of those subterranean networks operating beyond censorship and completely beyond commercial interests. It provided us with tools for understanding its context and dynamic as it reached beyond individual well-known artists and encompassed more complex social and political forces. All the artworks sent to *Prospectiva'74*





More than one hundred and fifty artists participated in the *Prospectiva '74* exhibition by sending work via post to the Museum.

were kept by the Museum and now provide Brazil with a representative collection of Conceptual international practices that would be unaffordable today when the notion of art has become increasingly synonymous with the art market.

1 Walter Zanini, *Prospectiva '74*. São Paulo: Museu de Arte Contemporânea da USP, August/September 1974, p. 5 [exh. cat].

For an overview of the history of exhibitions beyond the Latin American context, see:

- Altshuler, Bruce. *The Avant-garde in Exhibition. New Art in the 20th century*. New York: Abrams, 1994.
- . *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History* (vol. 1: 1863–1959). London, New York: Phaidon, 2008.
- Greenberg, Clement, et al.. *Thinking about Exhibitions*. London, New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Kluser, Bernd, and Katharina Hegewisch. *L'art de l'exposition*. Paris: Éditions du regards, 1998.
- Stanizewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display. A history of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

For the history of exhibitions at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP), see:

- Freire, Cristina. *Poéticas do processo. Arte Conceitual no Museu*. São Paulo: Editorial Iluminuras, 1999.

# OCCUPYING THE REALM OF IMAGINATION: A CONVERSATION

Yto Barrada and Marie Muracciole

Yto Barrada is the artistic director and co-founder of the Cinémathèque de Tanger in Morocco; she is also an artist and photographer. Born in Paris and currently living and working in Tangier, she studied at the Université Paris-Sorbonne and at the International Centre of Photography in New York, and has won several international photography awards.

Marie Muracciole is a Paris-based art critic, she has co-curated Yto Barrada's *Riffs* exhibition at the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin. She has written an essay in the book on this artist, which is due to be published shortly by JRP-Ringier. Currently, she is working on the French edition of Allan Sekula's writings.

The Cinémathèque de Tanger<sup>1</sup> began in 2003, when a group of artists and film professionals led by Yto Barrada formed a non-profit association to take over the lease of the failing 1938 Cinema Rif, on the main Grand Socco plaza of Tangier.

After two years of fundraising and two more of construction, the Cinémathèque de Tanger opened in 2007 as North Africa's first artist-run cinema/cultural centre, and began showing an ambitious programme of contemporary and classic film. Subsequently, they launched a high-profile series of workshops and master classes, which put world-renowned presenters in touch with local audiences, including children, women's groups, student filmmakers and non-profit organisations. The Cinémathèque has welcomed an audience of tens of thousands from all walks of life, screening some three hundred films from more than twenty countries, and thus realising its primary goal: to bring the people of Tangier back to the movies. At the heart of any cinema/cultural centre is a film archive, and the Cinémathèque has presented selections from its archive of documentaries, Arab cinema and related films from home and abroad.

Foyer of the  
Cinémathèque de  
Tanger, opened in 2007.







**Marie Muracciole:** The Cinémathèque project takes up a considerable amount of space and time in your work as an artist, and ultimately it can't be separated from it. Putting the Tangier cinema, its history and its operation first is now both an artistic and political choice because it's not a humanitarian endeavour, unlike other situations that could be classified as such. What I mean is that the cinema isn't essential, unlike Darna<sup>2</sup> for example, the association run by your mother, with whom you've collaborated. Darna is a project that deals with problems of survival. The Cinémathèque is rather more symbolic in its scope, which constructs a situation in the long term.

**Yto Barrada:** First of all, the Cinémathèque sometimes does take priority over my work, but that's something that can't be helped. Between my work as an artist, which describes and criticises the changes we are experiencing, and the constant supervision and concessions necessary for the survival of the Cinémathèque, there is an occasional contradiction. Secondly, Darna was founded on the basis of a model, whereas the Cinémathèque is a group project that has developed out of the recent situation: a different generation actually. To transform life in Tangier, we felt that people needed to be transformed. What's more, urban Morocco has lost its theatres, its storytellers. Cinema is a unifying medium: it carries people away, both literally and metaphorically; it's a tool for reflection; it's an instrument of collective hypnosis... Cinema is illusionist and fusional: it promotes ways of seeing things and encourages people to dream; at first sight, it isn't an instrument of rationalisation. It's an instrument for colonising the realms of the imagination and desire, which manages to reach out to a considerable number of people.

**MM:** Personal emancipation and projecting oneself in a living, breathing world begins with access to the realm of imagination and its critical articulation with community life. If the realms of imagination, which have been and will continue to be colonised – because the realm of imagination is simply crying out to be 'invaded' in both the positive and negative senses of the term – are not cultivated and confronted by a certain degree of diversity, by forms of complexity, their emancipation is very improbable.

**YB:** Tangier is a city where people are stuck; they can't leave; the border of Europe is closed to them. The inaccessible West becomes an idealised universe. Movie, TV and pirate DVD images also invade that space. Creating a cinema/cultural centre, that is to say, a place for collective projection linked to the history of cinema, is therefore a notion of history; it's about giving viewers the chance to simultaneously manifest and put into perspective the way they project themselves, to put things simply. To a large extent, we are still colonised; we are living with models from the past such as Lyautey,<sup>3</sup> whose name is still given to schools. It is good to take that into account instead of shrugging it off: our desire is still occupied by those models too.

**MM:** Desire is a true force; it produces something shared and representations. The strategic point is the intersec-

tion between desire and need, a point where capitalism, for example, has led to considerable confusion. By untangling the strands of that confusion, we are able to change the imposed models and, by doing so, change ways of day-to-day living.

**YB:** At this moment in time, it is indeed about being open to collective and subjective relationships, something that has become apparent in Arab countries in recent months. The Cinémathèque is not essential, but it allows people to revisit and access sources of culture as it is today, to make it their own, to try and have it freely available to them. There are these archives, pieces from the past made by others, which we watch from the perspective of the present day. They situate us and tell us where we come from – mostly. In them we find the shape of the city and we can observe the speed of the changes it has undergone: is this the modernity we expected, the one we want now? The documentaries that we propose and have made in the workshops, all of those we regularly show, allow things to settle on the territory, on the stratifications of recent history.

**MM:** The question that arises now is: What economic model? The world is governed by the economy and not by politics. You try to seek grant aid, which essentially goes back to the French model. The latter has been marked in recent years by the association between culture and tools such as communication, human management and design, openly aimed at defusing conflicts of meaning, of authority, of functional conflicts (and at controlling the roles played by each individual). Aren't you afraid of the effects that these tools might have? They often give rise to short-lived events, a considerable number of economic propaganda operations and, all in all, everyone spends their time trying to find money... Why, then, conform to a model when it is on its last legs?

**YB:** But we are already there! We have to use these tools and they take up a lot of our time: evaluation, 'feasibility' conditions... things like this that have to appear in the drafting of grant applications. Work is a scenario of violence and power; it's a context of conflicting interests, so everyone tries to smooth over these differences and focus on 'good results'. The scale of our work is huge. Fortunately, there's a constant presence of people, audiences, their requests and their reactions, and that's what makes us take our time over the content, for true periods of experimentation. The driving force of the Cinémathèque is the people that come to it. But we're weighed down by the sheer volume of proposals that we can't respond to due to a lack of time and resources. We have a very small team and need to pay people. The Cinémathèque project – and the day-to-day life that it has managed to create around it, like tens of other places around the world – is still a fragile pilot initiative. All I ask myself is why, like so many other of the region's indispensable organisations, is it so hard to do what we do? We are trying to find a balance between the French-style welfare state – now nowhere to be seen – and the realm of American private sponsorship,



The Cinémathèque has become a cultural centre for the city of Tangier. View of the café.



where associations are legions that have their own culture of marketing and ways of attracting the public and sponsors. Here, and in other Arab cities, we're trying to come up with new ideas and to interest our own sponsors because we have to take the aftereffect of 11 September into account. Very fortunately, we have enjoyed ten years of a certain vague interest (often it was to understand the enemy, to civilise...) and grants, which are going to run out (China, Latin America and Eastern European countries are on the waiting list and all of them have very dynamic art scenes). But we're now thinking about other ways to survive.

**MM:** Returning to the economic issue, the general tendency of globalisation is to make savings on salaries and to automate actions. The industrialisation of culture might mean, for example, that a project should be able to be replicated, as you said.

**YB:** Replication is an important evaluation criterion for those in charge of allocating European funds. The language of Euro-Mediterranean grant applications is a very interesting genre worth studying because of the active distortion that it fosters: a very good application may get a bad score and be rejected (relevance to the target audience: OK; interest of the project: OK; replication: no). A very bad application may be effective if it gets the jargon right. Associations are increasingly using the services of professionals specialising in putting together applications of this type. We spend too much time on pandering to the strategies of administrative management: impersonality and mechanisation and, above all, red tape and paternalism. Professionalisation may be the answer. For example, The Arab Image Foundation<sup>4</sup> was created by artists to unearth and protect heritage whose existence was suspected, and to draw on it; but when you're also a practising artist, the growth of a project like that one becomes very arduous. One day, the Cinémathèque will need to find a rational mode of operation that is minimally reliant on grant aid, welcoming experimental projects and endorsing their oddity and ability to change things.

**MM:** Do the artists' projects have a specific focus?

**YB:** Artists start projects such as the Arab Image Foundation and the Cinémathèque to fill a local gap. These projects could almost be considered personal since they aren't just alternatives to state or corporate initiatives. Instead of competing with offerings that already exist, we thought about what was missing or lacking. We had to fill a gap and today we are

sizing up the extent of it. There are thousands of things to do and we really hope that initiatives other than our own will get off the ground. That is where the difficulty of establishing the form they should take lies, and paradoxically that is a good sign: our work is never done; we still need to come up with new ideas.

1 The Cinémathèque de Tanger ([www.cinemathequedetanger.com](http://www.cinemathequedetanger.com)) is supported by Prince Claus Fund, Agence pour la Promotion et le Développement du Nord (APDN), Fonds de Dotation de la Fondation Agnès b., Foundation for the Future, Anna Lindh Foundation, Fondation Tamaas and Luma Foundation.

2 A Tangier-based association dedicated to children and women at risk ([www.darnamaroc.org](http://www.darnamaroc.org)).

3 Marshal Lyautey was the first Resident-General of the French protectorate over Morocco in 1912, and as such has left a long-lasting legacy in the country's organisations.

4 The Arab Image Foundation (AIF: [www.fai.org.lb](http://www.fai.org.lb)) is a non-profit organisation established in Beirut in 1997. The Foundation's mission is to collect, preserve and study photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora.

Yto Barrada, Omar Berrada (eds.), *Album. The Cinémathèque de Tanger*. Barcelona: La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Tangier: Librairie des Colonnes, (foreseen for 2011).

*Album* is a short illustrated history of film in Tangier, and of Tangier on film, told through the archives and stories of the Cinémathèque de Tanger. With texts by Philippe Azoury, Yto Barrada, Omar Berrada, Ahmed Boughaba, Edgardo Cozarinsky, Carles Guerra, Bouchra Khalili and Luc Sante. The book will be published in Spanish, Catalan, Arabic, French and English.

# FIVE YEARS

## José Antonio Vega Macotela

A Mexican artist, he has undertaken multidisciplinary projects and interventions in public spaces involving the experience of and speculation on time. From 2006 to 2010, he worked on the project *Time Divisa*, for which he received a grant from the Bancomer-macg Programme. He participated in the *Medios múltiples* (Multiple Media) project with *Time Divisa* and is currently participating in an artist's residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.

Be advised that these lines are entirely lacking in theoretical rigour. They are, rather, a soliloquy, an attempt to put something into words. A conversation that has been taking shape in my mind for several years. This is nothing new for theorists versed in economics or philosophy. It is just an attempt to externalise this bit of intimacy, this personal monologue largely spurred by my interest in the study of systems for the alignment of time in life, an interest that has given rise to, among other things, the *Time Divisa* project, which was carried out from 2006 to 2010 in the Santa Martha Acatitla prison in Mexico City.

For several years, Baltasar Gracián's phrase 'We have nothing of our own except time, which even the homeless can experience' has been on my mind. I don't remember exactly what part of the *The Criticón* (1651–57) it comes from. In fact, I know it from *La Société du spectacle* (1967) (*The Society of the Spectacle*, 1995) by Guy Debord, in which it is quoted. It is hard for me to separate the Gracián quote from the context of Debord, very likely because of the affinity I feel with the Situationalist stance and the romantic image of that French writer. But also – and this is the most important thing – because of the similarity that I see between the alignment of spectacle formulated by Debord and the alignment of time. Indeed, 'We have nothing of our own except time'.

Time is, after all, the sustenance of life, its stuff and nourishment. But, when it is appropriated, alienated or exploited, it is also the generator of surplus value; it is an exhaustible resource that exhausts us. Time appropriated, clustered and broken down into exchangeable units gets lost in a system of abstraction, representation, exchange and accumulation. Money.

As an artist, I am interested in the workings of the economy as a system of symbolic abstraction and in art as a tool for intervening on that system. I am equally concerned that the works I make operate on two levels: first, as a system of social intervention with real repercussions in a community, and second as a metaphor constructed on the basis of that first level. Thus, I am interested in finding models of a situation in which it is possible to intervene, but also in having those models operate as metaphors in and of themselves.

Prison is, in my view, a model of the economic and social functioning of the culture to which it belongs. As a model, though, it does not operate on a proportional scale (like a mock-up). The prison model, rather, maintains only certain proportions of what it models – that is, the society in which it is placed –, while others are caricature-esque.<sup>1</sup> Though they might bear a certain relation to what is modelled, the proportions in prison are exaggerated, diminished or inverted, like images seen in a concave or convex mirror. House of mirrors, house of horrors. In view of what is not proportional or evident and what is inverted in prisons, I am interested in the experience of time in prison, in how that experience is a metaphor for the alienation of time in 'free' society, in the society 'on the outside'.

In prison, the experience and value of time are diametrical to what they are on the outside. In prison, as opposed to outside prison, there is no alienated labour; instead, free time stretches out slowly and painfully. A precise number of years, months and days that are counted down emphasises the fact that life is just that: a sum of amounts. Objectified time is a sentence. Nonetheless – and paradoxically – within prison there is a system of apparent 'freedoms' that are granted in exchange for submission. The more submissive

the individual and the more his time in life is voluntarily enmeshed in the prison structures, the more privileges he has. At the same time, the more time the prisoner spends in prison, the more these structures expand; they begin with the external, the institutional and, gradually but relentlessly, they are interjected into the depths of the prisoner's being. As time goes by, the inmate becomes punisher and punished, disciplined and discipliner. In the most affable cases, when the sentence is short and the crime not serious, obeying the rules of the institution (whether official or unofficial) can reduce the prisoner's sentence and bring him closer to 'freedom'. In more difficult cases, when the sentence is longer and cannot be reduced, an extended submission to the punishment system changes the prisoner, eventually convincing him that the length of his stay gives him power over others and makes him the *ruling voice*, to use Mexican prison jargon. He becomes a predator of others without understanding himself to be prey, protecting and serving the very system that has condemned him.

In prison, the degree of submission is proportional to the degree of institutional freedom: submitting confers 'benefits', from a shorter sentence to forming part of the power structure within the prison. On the outside, in my opinion, the system of submission, though inverted, operates quite similarly. In free society, the economic system, not the prison system, is the organ of submission and of the management of time and freedoms. Rewards are obtained only by unquestioningly accepting and assimilating the rules on which the system is based: Long live exploitation! Long live accumulation! As if it were the reduction of a sentence, the individual submits to a system of production, accumulation and consumption in which he exchanges his time in life for the inequitable representation of the life he has given over. Money. (Under this system, it is clear that not everyone's time has the same value.) The more time you give, the more money you get – whether it is a worker's poorly paid overtime, the five extra minutes a street person spends flagging down a cab for someone at the entrance to a supermarket or the years some spend amassing fortunes. The power system has devised an almost behaviourist relation whereby the more time in life you obediently give over – whether in prison or in the economic system – the greater your 'reward': the reduction of a sentence, the procurement of privileges or of power, or 'buying whatever you want'.

I had much of this in mind when, in 2006, I went into the Santa Martha Acatitla federal prison, located to the east of Mexico City. With the excuse of doing a performance, I proposed a deal to the inmates whereby I would exchange my time for theirs. 'I am offering you some of my time in exchange for your time. . . I will do whatever you want to do, an everyday activity that you cannot carry out in here, in exchange for which you, at the same time, will do my work as an artist.' That was the beginning of the *Time Divisa* project.

This project was born as the metaphorical attempt to replace money as the system for the representation of

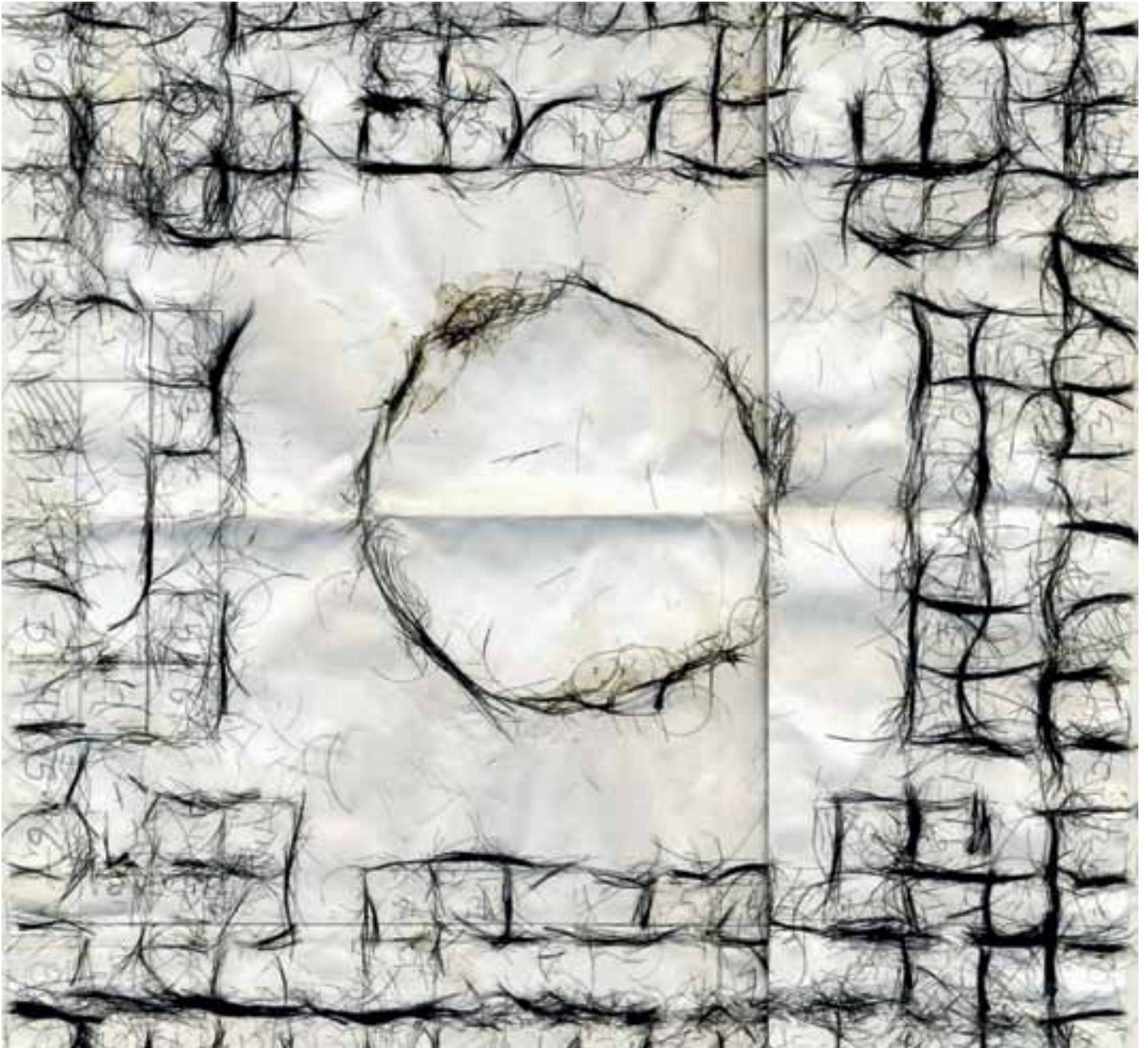
time in life with a poetic barter of actions. In the end, 365 exchanges of time took place, the period it takes the earth to revolve around the sun, the basic cycle of almost all cultures. The prisoners and I did what the other requested of us simultaneously, and the currency we exchanged as 'payment' was the register of our actions (mine were in electronic format, and the inmates' in drawings and objects). These registers were designed to be representations of a subjective time, an unquantifiable time different from the sets of hours that make up a salary or the days of delay on a payment that yield interest. According to this vision, time goes by differently for each person and in each situation; it moves faster or slower depending on whether we are in love or anxious, bored or enraged, old or young. Nonetheless, and despite these multiple subjectivities, time is the same for everyone: as subjects, all of our lives have the same value. We have nothing of our own except time.

If everyone's time is equivalent, it can be exchanged, as long as that exchange is vital and not subject to any sort of speculation or accumulation; therein lies the importance of the fact that these actions took place at the same time. Each inmate knew that while he was doing what I asked him to, I would be doing what he had asked me to do on the outside, in the street: it was reciprocal. As time went by and the trust and commitment between us grew, the models for representing the actions we exchanged varied. At the beginning, the only proof that I had done what the inmates asked me to was the video or audio recording that attested to my action. But, for a number of reasons, the use of those media gradually became less important until the only proof I gave was the spoken account of what had happened. Similarly, what the inmates gave me also underwent changes, changes connected to the representation of time in a non-monetary system. These changes emerged alongside a provocative question: in what system can I trust if I am not interested in using seconds, minutes and hours as the system for measuring time?

The body – its rhythms and repetitions – was the first thing I latched onto in an attempt to create an alternative system for the representation of the time that the inmates gave me: for each action that they asked me to perform on the outside, they gave me their breaths, heartbeats and other bodily rhythms as manifest in drawings. Touching the neck artery as each beat became a sign or concentrating on each breath rendered lines and dots was the beginning of this investigation. From there, what I asked of the inmates changed in ways very akin to the way the work of any visual artist changes while he experiments. Though my hands were not the ones doing the work, while I went around the city (and the country) doing what the inmates had asked me to, it seemed as if they were.

The research into bodily rhythms as a system for the representation of time led to the creation of cartographies and the drawing of maps of the prison's interior. 'Time is manifest in the spaces it inhabits and in the places it creates,'



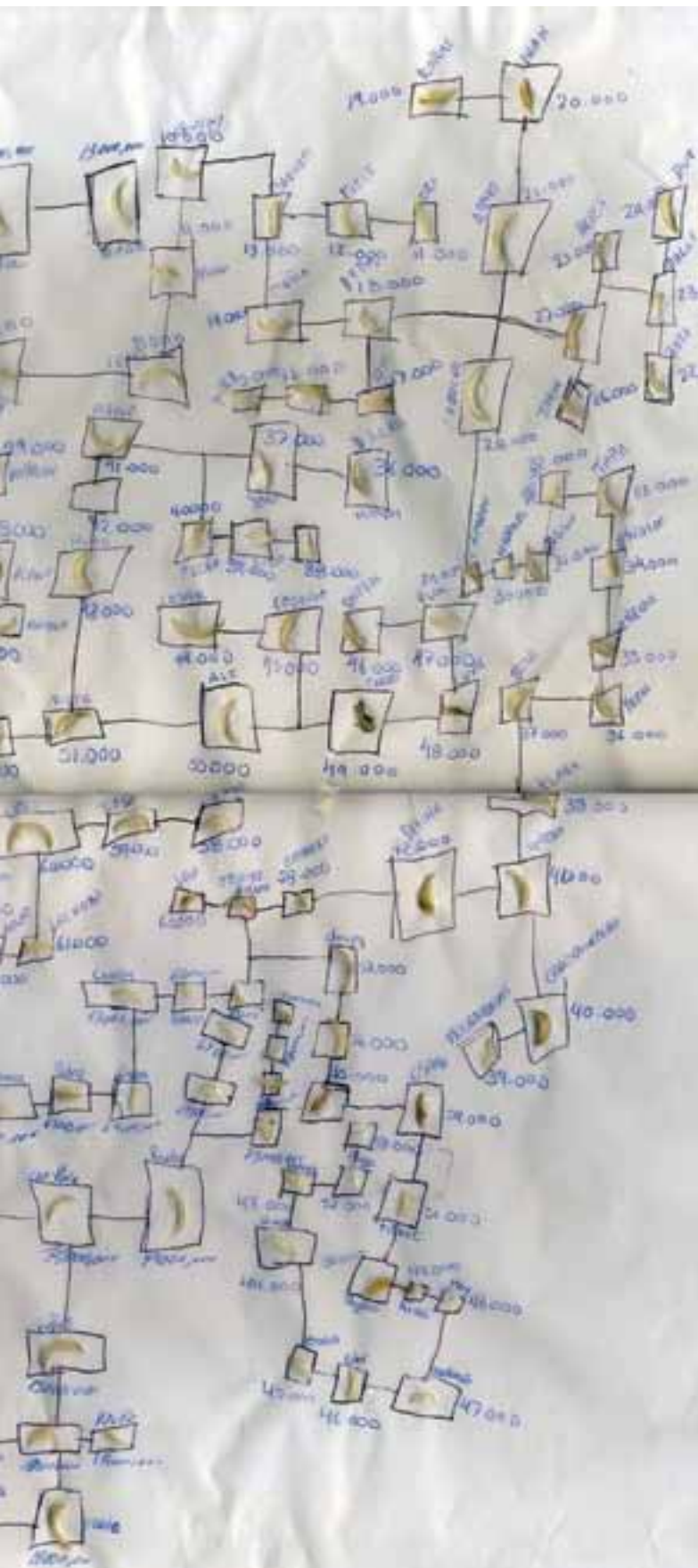


José Antonio Vega Macotella  
*Time Divisa* project, 2006–10  
*Time Exchange* 331, 2010  
42.5 × 43 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

*Spying on Eduardo's former boyfriend  
in exchange for which he would build  
me a Poleana board with his hair and  
hair from his current boyfriend's head  
(Poleana is a betting game played in  
Mexican prisons in which the board is  
a simulation of the jail).*







I thought. Wanderings, paths made with frottage, sensorial maps and reconstructions of the memory of spaces were the most common examples of the registers that the prisoners made at this phase. From there came new concerns, new requests that I made of the inmates in exchange for my time. I began to take an interest in formulating symbolic interventions inside the prison or in studies of the capital flows between intimates. I must clarify at this point that it is not my intention to describe the pieces produced in these exchanges, but rather to emphasise that these works are registers of actions in a subjective time. Because exchanged for each action that I carried out in the name of the inmates, these pieces acted (and act) as the representation of my time. That, then, is my work as an artist. These registers, it is important to point out, are the only thing that I can show in an exhibition space. That is all that belongs to me, just as the audio and video recordings that I made for the inmates belong to them alone, as does the right to exhibit or share them.

As the project progressed, the representation of time ceased to be my main concern, and the relationships that took shape between the inmates with whom I exchanged time and myself became crucial. Not as anecdote, but as a question: why did they do what I ask of them? The answer to that question seemed obvious, but, like everything obvious, entailed mystery.

Contrary to what I might have thought, in prison there is a code of honour that could be summed up as 'If you keep your word, I'll keep mine'. This is deeper than it might first appear, since it implies that the idea of collaboration goes hand in hand with trust, and trust with building ties. As the bonds between the prisoners and myself grew stronger, I felt more and more identified with them. Indeed, at a certain point I had a hard time considering myself an agent outside the prison. Though I was obviously not an inmate and did not experience the vexations that life in prison entails, I had, I must admit, become so bound to the inmates that I too felt like a prisoner. And the things I was doing for the inmates were getting more and more daring. Why not do these things, if I was a part of them? Thus, an escape attempt became necessary.

The Robert Bresson film *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* ou *Le vent souffle où il veut* (*A Man Escaped*, 1956) was a vital source of inspiration for my escape. My intention was clear: to emulate Fontaine and use techniques I had learned in prison to escape from it. Thus, I was interested in prison as a system to generate knowledge, techniques and technologies. Hence, for the final exchanges I requested as

José Antonio Vega Macotela  
*Time Divisa* project, 2006-10  
*Time Exchange 321*, 2010  
 43 × 56 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist

*Trafficking within the prison a series of goods useful for 'El Kamala' in exchange for a diagram of the distribution of 100,000 pesos within the prison, collecting a piece of fingernail from the hand of each person who touches the money.*







payment for my work that the inmates find me three specialists in prison knowledge from whom I would choose my mentor for a certain period of time.

This process took several months, and continued even after the 365 exchanges had been completed. I must say that, for me, it was like a rite of passage. This time we did not exchange time, but rather conversed and ate together. I no longer entered the prison as an artist working on a project; instead, like a family member hoping to visit a loved one, I waited in the endless lines to get in. Little by little, the symbolic ties that I had (and still have) to the prison have faded. The conclusions that I have reached are still vague; they are slowly taking shape as I write and think back on what took place over almost five years. Even now, no matter how much I write, remember and reflect, the Gracián quote keeps coming back to me: 'We have nothing of our own except time.'

1 One example of this is the division of the social classes. There are three social classes in prison: the upper class, which consists of the richest and most powerful inmates, mostly drug dealers; the increasingly vague middle class, which consists of prisoners who still receive visitors; and lastly, the lower class, on which the others rest. Called 'monsters' in prison slang, these workers do the domestic work and act as peons to the two higher classes.

José Antonio Vega Macotela  
*Time Divisa project*, 2006–10  
*Time Exchange 66*, 2010  
84 × 64.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

*Singing a serenade to Ivan's mother while he makes an acoustic map of the prison, codifying the sounds that he heard 360-degrees around him: red would indicate aggressive sounds, blue friendly sounds and black indifferent sounds.*

The following were among the points of reference in conceiving the project *Time Divisa* (2006–10):

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# THE FIRST LESSON I REMEMBER LEARNING IS THAT HUMILIATION EXISTS<sup>1</sup>

Hassan Khan

Artist, musician and writer who lives and works in Cairo. Recent solo shows include: The Queens Museum (New York, 2011), Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (St. Gallen, 2010), Le Plateau (Paris, 2007) and Gasworks (London, 2006). He has participated in international exhibitions like Manifesta 8 (Murcia, 2010), Yokohama Triennale (2008), Gwangju Biennale (2008), Sidney Biennale (2006), Seville Biennale (2006), and the Torino Triennale (2005). Khan's album *tabla dubb* is available on the 100Copies Label. His *Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El-Azma* was published by the CiC (2009), while his book *17 and in AUC* was published by Merz and Crousel (2004).

## Introduction

A question lies behind the choice of title used here – a question that hung over me as I kept trying to write, and then wrote and re-wrote, this text. Actually it is a question that I find difficult to even articulate. The question is ironically the one that may be most expected at this moment – the one that, at this point in time, critics, curators and editors will ask artists who come from Egypt. The question has, of course, to do with how an artist, operating at a historical moment, deals with an event whose proportions and form defy all expectations. The question is usually followed by enquiries about whether your practice has changed following such events, if you feel that you have a new responsibility as an artist, if your understanding of art has changed.

Cover of the book *The Mystery of the Black Bag*, adventure number 16 in the 'police adventures for boys' series published in the eighties by Dar El Maaraf in Cairo (Egypt).





Well, the answer to that in my case is quite simply 'No'. However, the fact that the question rears its head so insistently in this context is a compelling argument for some kind of explanation of why that is so.

Last year the artist Wael Shawky and I finally, after several years of toying with the idea, and after our highly politicised shared experience of serving on the jury of the 20th Youth Salon in Cairo,<sup>2</sup> decided to take active steps towards realising an exhibition together. The significance of this decision immediately became clear to us as we talked about our ideas; the conversation was very smooth. We described a series of works to each other that we imagined would be shown collectively in a twenty-metre-long vitrine. The works, very different in tone and tenor, shared something that Wael and I had found to be important. In a sense it felt as if we were, in our own ways, shovelling hard, crystalised fully formed pieces out of our memories. These pieces were not memories, though; they were transformations. They were pieces that were not figments of the imagination, but rather actual things from a collective landscape that we from our respective backgrounds were part of, belonged to and drank from.

The first lesson I remember learning, which may not be the first lesson I actually learnt, is that humiliation exists. This is something that I absorbed deeply as a child. My mother, in a way I suspect she was not fully conscious of, constantly pointed out to me this condition in the world. Last year, through working on that show that in the end did not take place, I realised in a personally involved way that I had learnt this lesson in a profound and deeply-felt fashion many years before. This was the first time that something that has always been clear was finally stated, whispered back as a secret thought.

To put it simply, that collective landscape (deeply influenced if not completely shaped by the lesson learnt all these years ago) has been the source of my work. It is also where the answers to the questions about how an artist should respond to the revolution that are being and will continue to be raised by the art community, both locally and internationally, lie. I thus thought it best to present here one of these sublimations, one of these charged aesthetic facts, as an answer that one finds less problematic and ultimately more useful than any explanation. For I believe explanations are now not necessary unless they serve the revolution in a direct and practical fashion; anything else is fetish and representation and counter-revolution.

The short story that follows this introduction has developed out of one of those transformations.

I wrote a fragment of this text in mid-2010, in a stylised accented Arabic that referred to the popular literary style of cheap paperback novels. The piece was based on my memory of reading and collecting as a child a series of pulp novellas for young boys. These novellas were roughly based on Enid Blyton's renowned *Famous Five* series. In Arabic the subtitle of the books was *Police Adventures for Boys*. I remember

hungrily reading these novellas, though I do not remember any of the details of the many adventures that I consumed. Funnily enough, the one description that keeps returning to me regularly over the years is one that reappears in many of the different novellas; it describes the five young friends, usually in a car speeding through the night. Maybe it's a police car and they are heading out in it to catch a thief whose identity they have managed to uncover. The car was described (and here I am translating quite roughly) as 'penetrating the quiet suburbs of Maadi'. For some reason those words have remained with me through the years. They must therefore mean something but I am not sure what that is exactly. To this day those words sometimes ring out in my head when, late at night, I am in a car that is smoothly speeding through the empty streets of Zamalek, or some leafy, quiet street in Maadi. I remember this sentence as if this city had lived its days under a sign that I did not know. Whenever it returns to me I have a distinct feeling that I am cutting through the streets of another city unknown to me, but that is still mine.

The idea for the exhibition piece was to write a fragment from a novel and to print it on three pages torn out of one of *The Five Adventurers* novellas I used to collect, in exactly the same font and layout. I have already produced fourteen pages in Arabic; the piece is called *Mystery*. For the purposes of the text here I have written a slightly different version in English.

### ***Mystery: A Short Story Based upon a Distant Memory with a Long Imagined Musical Interlude.***

Dr Mahmoud looked down at the cheap notebook that he had just found in one of the drawers of the second-hand desk he had bought recently. He opened the notebook slowly and let the pages fall open randomly. And as he, still standing up, began to read the first page his eyes fell upon, he noticed that the handwriting was very neat and careful. It seemed that there was a level of deliberation behind the words. This is what Dr Mahmoud read first.

### ***Thursday / Midnight / Diary entry no. 26***

*It's a really hot night and I don't want to switch on the air conditioning, I am therefore sweating heavily and I kind of like it like this. I feel like someone with an insistent fever who as much as they want it to disappear will miss it when it's gone deeply and with great longing. It might have something to do with the strange moment I experienced today while driving back home from my first meeting with Dr Seddiq. It was a difficult and heavy moment. But it was also, unexpectedly tender at the same time. I was driving my car, it was midday and the streets felt strangely empty, when I was suddenly overwhelmed*

المباشرة أثرت عليه بعمق، فكان يشعر بحزن بسيط،  
ولكنه لا يمكن أن يقول حقاً لماذا.  
لاحظ الدكتور محمود أصوات الإقذاعات  
المستترة المزروحة بالزخارف الالكترونيسكية  
لموسيقى عزت شوارح المدينة و هي تسرب من  
خلال نافذة مفتوحة ، فأحس بضيق. وكان قد أراد  
أن يهجر المدينة هذا الصيف. يضع مسافة بينه وبين  
هذا المكان القذر والغائب المكون من خليط المبان  
المردحة والشوايا الخبيثة. فهنا تمر الأيام دون فهم  
معان الأيام. ما عاد إلى قليلاً، أو هكذا لحيل. فحياة  
وبدون سابق إنذار تذكر الروايات البوليسية التي  
كان يقرأها في مساء.  
قرأ الدكتور محمود الكثير من هذه المغامرات  
وهو طفل، قرأها بشغف شديد وهو مستلقي على

٧٢

علي موارد هائلة ولا يهني بنظرات الآخرين، وأنا  
كنت وحش يتسول الاعتراف من الشخص أملي،  
أنوسل إليه بجميع الطرق أن يعترف بأنني لست من  
أمناله. كل ما كان علي الدكتور صديق القيام به  
هو أن ينظر في وجهي كما لو كنا أصدقاء ولكن  
ليس بالضبط لتتأخر جميع دفاعاتي، ابتسامته الطفيفة  
تقول لي إنه يعلم بالضبط ما يمكنني قوله. فكان قد  
كشفت جميع أوراقني.))

أزاح الدكتور محمود عينه عن صفحات  
مذكرات محسن البنا وبدء مرة أخرى ، وعميق ،  
بتفحص وجه زوجته تيفين. كانت مستغرقة بتعديل  
صفحتها علي الفيسوك. أحس الدكتور محمود  
بعدم إستقرار طفيف لكنه لم يستطيع أن يتبع  
أصبعه على السب. يبدو أن هذه الحمل البسيطة

٧١

Hassan Khan, pages 71  
and 72 from *Mystery*,  
2011. Short story writ-  
ten by the artist printed  
on fourteen pages torn  
from different books  
from the monthly series  
of pulp novellas titled  
*The Five Adventurers:  
Police Adventure for  
Boys*, 16 × 11 cm. Courtesy  
of the artist.

*by the desire to stop the car and rest for a moment. Like that, in the middle of the street, suddenly and without any hesitation, to stop for a second. I felt slightly unbalanced. I had to stop the car but didn't know exactly why, so I just did, suddenly, in the middle of the road. But I was immediately interrupted by the loud aggressive honking of the microbus behind me. I felt an electric surge of anger. I wanted to step out, walk back, open the door, grab the driver by the head and snap his neck, but then immediately I was gripped by a deep and ancient exhaustion. So I started the car and drove home.*

Dr Mahmoud, who had by now seated himself comfortably in his soft, expensive easy chair, raised his eyes from the pages of the notebook, closed it and turned the diary round, noticing on the top right corner the name 'Mohsen El Bana' elegantly, almost pretentiously, printed. He looked deeply into his wife Nevine's face – she seemed oblivious to his intense gaze as she flipped through a property brochure – he returned to the pages in front of him and continued reading.

#### **Sunday / 2 am / Diary entry no. 34**

*The night is quiet and I have switched off all the lights in the flat. However, the air conditioning is on and it's*

*quite comfortable. It has been an exhausting evening. I went to dinner at a new, trendy Thai place with Tarek Selim, Yehia El Nady and his girlfriend Heba El Wakil. I realised that I hadn't seen these guys for at least a couple of years, since we all hung out that summer when Basil Mortada came back from the US, before leaving again in September. I feel content but a bit worried. Something is wrong. I don't know what exactly. Throughout the evening I couldn't really focus on the chit-chat, being constantly distracted by the image of Dr Seddiq's smug half-smile. That mother-fucker always employed it with such deadly precision. Whenever I referred to a new work strategy, or even when making a joke about the colour of the new car I had just bought, whenever I started speaking in English. Dr Seddiq's shrug and smile always managed to throw me off balance. I can't understand how that ignorant bastard manages to pull this off every single time. Today as we sat in his office I began sweating heavily – me sweating like a nervous novice. I looked at Lamia at that moment, but she carefully looked the other way. I could tell she wanted to laugh at me. Well, Dr Seddiq's empire of private schools, fake academies and bus transport companies cannot hide the fact that he is an ignorant overdressed oaf. It definitely didn't stop him from dismissing my requests for a higher salary in front of everyone! Everything I had gained*

*disappeared in his simple arrogant gestures. This man only feigned respect for others for his own reasons. Doesn't he realise who he's dealing with, the quality of the person sitting in front of him? We were suddenly two uneasy monsters looking at each other across the room. He was a monster who could draw upon enormous resources and didn't care what others thought, I was a monster begging for recognition, for the person in front of me to admit that I was not of his ilk. And all he had to do was look at me as if we were friends but not exactly – a slight smug smile told me that he knew exactly what I could really afford and what I couldn't. He had called my bluff.*

Dr Mahmoud raised his eyes from the pages of the diary of Mohsen El Bana and looked again, deeply, into his wife Nevine's face. She remained oblivious and was now casually checking her Facebook page. Dr Mahmoud felt unsettled but he couldn't place his finger on the reason why exactly. It seemed that these direct simple sentences had affected him deeply. He felt slightly and in a subtle fashion sad but couldn't really tell why.

The sounds of the hysterical beats and the plastic seesaw synth of the music that had taken over the streets of the city wafted in through the open window, and he looked up with consternation. He had wanted to abandon the city this summer – to place a distance between himself and this place, this angry, dirty, crowded mishmash of buildings and intentions. For here the days passed without understanding the meaning of the days – except maybe, and here he thought to himself with a slight twinkle, very slightly. Suddenly and without warning he remembered the mystery novellas of his childhood.

As a child Dr Mahmoud read a lot of police adventures for boys, in the mid-range eighties apartment, on the faux leather couch, in the heat of the summer hungrily reading page after page, following how Takh Takh, Nousa and their friends always solved the case. Each time he found a strange excitement in the description of a car that carried the five young sleuths cutting through the calm suburbs of Maadi. The suburbs. It was strange, he thought to himself, how not a single detail remained from those tales of mystery and innocent crimes cracked by a group of seemingly free-spirited boys and girls in shorts, moving through a strangely empty, calm, harmonious city that he didn't know. Even then, even in his childhood. His mother, then young and to his eyes absolutely radical, a psychological force of nature, was studying for her high-school diploma with the daughter of the *bawwab*, the doorkeeper of the vaguely upper-middle class yet mid-range apartment building. She had taught him to recognise humiliation in the world around him – to see how it worked, how people used it and what it made of them. And maybe more importantly what it made of him. Dr Mahmoud suddenly remembered the book club that, maybe in an unconscious

attempt to emulate his seemingly class-free mother, he had begun with Nasser, the son of the *bawwab*, who lived in a tight smelly room with his mother and sister. Nasser's father, the *bawwab*, was mostly absent, caught up in the drama of, it was whispered, abandonment and second marriage. The young Dr Mahmoud, who had collected a large amount of the novellas and stored them in a big black plastic bag, would regularly carry them down the six storeys to sit with Nasser and exchange some of his for those that Nasser had collected. They discussed the latest exploits of the five adventurers they read about. As far as he remembered there was nothing especially interesting or exciting in those encounters. They were not exotic or out of the ordinary in any way – if anything, these encounters with Nasser the *bawwab*'s son were probably coloured by some sort of dumb, childish functionalism more than anything else. He also remembered the extreme reactions he faced when he told his friends at the English-language school in the quiet suburb of the busy city about his book club, about the daily comings and goings between the fifth floor and the room in the basement. His classmates' look of bewilderment and surprise surprised him – but not entirely. Things were much clearer now that he in a sense understood how things actually operated.

Dr Mahmoud suddenly realised that he had been daydreaming while staring blankly at the pages of the notebook. He continued reading.

### **Tuesday / 1 am / Diary entry no. 43**

*It's a relatively cool evening with a nice breeze, the balconies are open and there are kids playing football in the street. Today I had another upsetting meeting with Dr Seddiq at his office. He had me sitting there in front of him for half an hour to tell me about how things should be done in his system. He was careful not to tell me that I worked for him, but he never failed to point out that this was his business. And as he droned on and on I realised that I actually admired this corrupt, ignorant man, for to him at least things were clear. He knew in a way that involved no shame, in a way that broke everything that came in front of him, that this was all in the end an elaborate pretence. That we were caught in a banal game of alignments and that the words he used, the tone they were said in, the smile that came to him naturally as he told a joke or the frown on his soft face when he barked for his driver and car, the courteous way he received people he needed things from, the casual way he despised the world as he relished it, were all ultimately things that did not in any way affect how he saw himself. I suddenly felt at that moment that I wanted to shout out loud without embarrassment or hesitation. I saw myself sitting in the over-decorated chair, in my tasteful shoes and with my trimmed goatee, with my opinions that I wore like*



*an expensive jacket. I saw myself and I wanted to push myself out. I wanted to stop the people walking in the streets, to stand in front of them as they insulted each other in the most poignantly poisonous fashion. For I was also one of those who said 'Ya waty' who shouted 'Yalla'. I drank their water and ate their food. I can't remember what I was thinking when I stepped out of that office, though. What was I thinking when I got into my car and drove back to Maadi? What was I thinking then? Why am I writing this now?*

Dr Mahmoud suddenly stopped reading to find that he was completely alone in his living room. Nevine had gone to bed and he was confused.

1 An earlier, slightly different version of this text was premiered as a live lecture-performance under the title *A Short Story Based on a Distant Memory with a Long Musical Interlude* at *Objectif Exhibitions* in Antwerp on 6 May 2011. The short story included here also exists in Arabic as an art-piece called *Mystery* (2011) that was first shown at the Beirut Art Center in the group show *Image in the Aftermath*, which opened on 17 May 2011.

2 Please refer to the following links for in-depth coverage of this event and its politics:  
<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/70>  
[http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/20\\_salon\\_of\\_youth\\_cairo](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/20_salon_of_youth_cairo)

**INDEX Number 0** included contributions from Xavier Antich, Julie Ault, Johanna Burton, Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, Bartomeu Mari, Chus Martínez, Christoph Menke, Piotr Piotrowski and Natascha Sadr Haghghian.

**INDEX Number 1** included contributions from Franco Berardi, Nataša Ilić, Chus Martínez, Reza Negarestani, The Otolith Group and José Luis Pardo.



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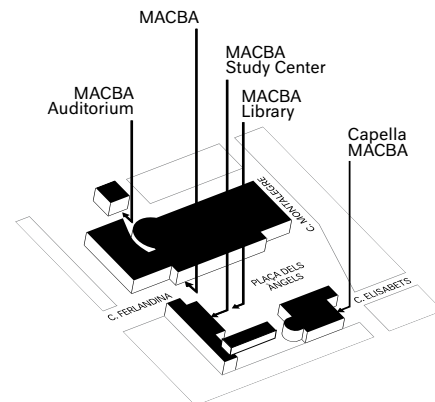
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‘To uphold the absurd in the framework of this impugnation of totalitarian rationality is to endorse other, essentially dissolutive formulas capable of inhabiting the gaps in the system and, on the basis of the minutest form of resistance or sabotage, to imagine and shape other possible scenarios.’ Xavier Antich

‘At this moment in time, it is indeed about being open to collective and subjective relationships, something that has become apparent in Arab countries in recent months. The Cinémathèque is not essential, but it allows people to revisit and access sources of culture as it is today, to make it their own, to try and have it freely available to them.’ Yto Barrada

“‘I am offering you some of my time in exchange for your time. . . I will do whatever you want to do, an everyday activity that you cannot carry out in here, in exchange for which you, at the same time, will do my work as an artist.” That was the beginning of the *Time Divisa* project.’ José Antonio Vega Macotela

