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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

FROM TOILETS IN CARACAS TO NEW MEDIA IN NEW DELHI, CARLOS BASUALDO AND REINALDO LADDAGA SURVEY FIVE RECENT ART PROJECTS DEDICATED TO SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH THE CREATION OF EXPERIMENTAL COMMUNITIES.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

IT IS PERHAPS IRONIC THAT A DISCUSSION OF WHAT MIGHT BE TERMED A NEW culture in the arts should begin with that old modernist saw, the toilet. However, the toilet in question is very different from the one that Marcel Duchamp presented almost a century ago at the Society of Independent Artists. In 2003, the Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč, in collaboration with the La Vega neighborhood association and the Israeli architect Liyat Esakov, proposed the installation of two dry toilets in Caracas and its outlying areas. Potrč began her work as a research project involving several “barrios,” or shanties, of Caracas without a specific goal in mind other than a general desire to understand the life conditions in such an extreme urban environment. She writes, “I was personally drawn to the fact that the barrios are not planned; they are self-upgrading structures. Liyat and I realized that the infrastructure provided by the city has failed the barrios; electricity is generally stolen and water is provided only twice per week.” After an initial research period of three months, which included many discussions with local community members, Potrč and Esakov decided to focus on the sewage contamination and scarcity of water in the “informal city,” as the shanties are technically called. They designed a prototype toilet that could be built and used by the neighborhood residents, and they implemented a six-month trial period, after which point the toilets may be permanently adopted. The project represents the climax of a long period in Potrč’s work devoted to the search for solutions to a variety of concrete cases of extreme need.

Potrč’s work is characteristic of a growing number of artists whose projects demand the mobilization of complex artistic strategies that combine techniques traditionally related to the arts with technology and the mass media. These artists eschew making stable, self-sufficient objects that are removed from the particular physical or social contexts in which they appear. They do not produce specific events or performances

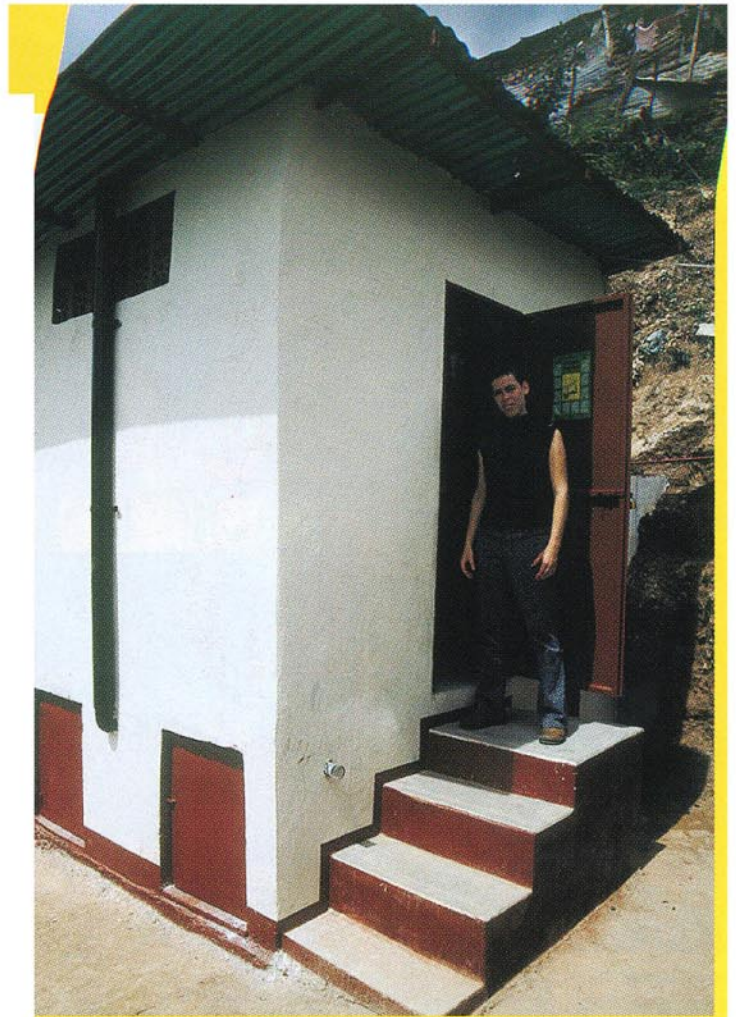
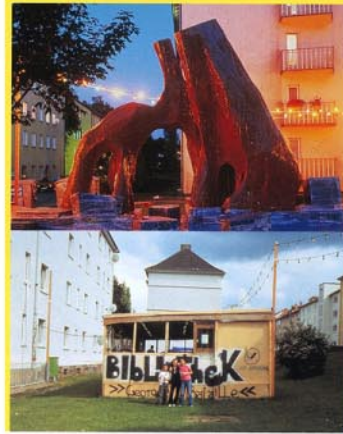
confined to a particular place or time, but rather, they propose open-ended projects aimed at fostering experimental communities: temporary but durable associations composed of artists and nonartists united in their mutual endeavor.

Potrč, for example, uses drawing to explore a range of urban problems that attract her attention and to investigate a variety of possible solutions, both realistic and utopian. Reminiscent of Yona Friedman’s sketches from the 1970s, her drawings seem to perform a pedagogic role, informing art audiences of her activities outside traditional exhibition spaces. Potrč’s drawings combine words and images to bridge the apparent gap between her urban investigations and a more established definition of artistic practice. She usually complements these drawings with a related website and the display of various experimental prototypes and utilitarian objects. These “power tools,” as she calls them, are paradigms for—and embodiments of—a wide range of already existing “solutions” to specific social problems. The “solutions” are not instrumental in the productivist sense. They do not belong, for instance, to the progressive tendency of “formalizing” the disorganized or “informal” aspects of a particular impoverished neighborhood by integrating it into the macroeconomic urban system. Instead, Potrč adopts partial and economically sustainable “self-help” solutions, which contradict the instrumental and bureaucratic logic that subordinates individual subjectivity to supposedly objective criteria of efficiency. Potrč’s “solutions,” then, are solutions only insofar as they restore the autonomy of those who adopt them.

One of the most well-known examples of projects like Potrč’s is Thomas Hirschhorn’s installation at the most recent Documenta. The piece involved the construction of a series of precarious buildings called *Bataille Monument*, 2002, in the public spaces belonging to the Friedrich Wöhler-Complex, a group of residential buildings in the northern part of Kassel. The project included, among other elements, a sculpture of wood,



Left to right: Marjetica Potrč, *Hybrid House*; Caracas, West Bank and West Palm Beach, 2003, marker on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 1/2"; Livat Esakov with toilet designed with Marjetica Potrč, Caracas, 2003. Photo: Andre Cypriano. Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument*, 2002. Installation views, Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002. Photos: Werner Maschmann.



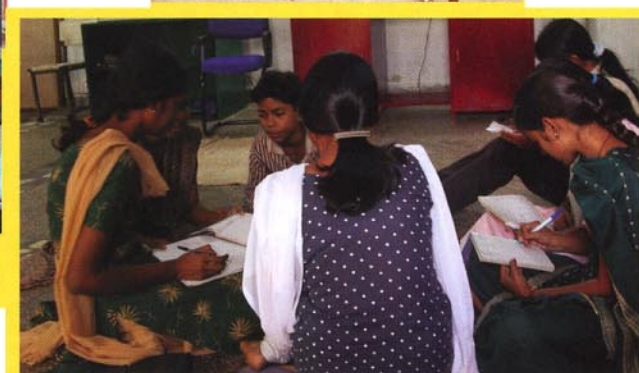
cardboard, tape, and plastic; a library of books related to Georges Bataille (a collaboration with Uwe Fleckner); an exhibition made in collaboration with Christophe Fiat featuring a three-dimensional map of Bataille's work; a television studio broadcasting daily on the Kassel public-access channel; a stand with food and drink; a shuttle service taking residents and visitors to and from Documenta; and, finally, a website with live-feed images from various parts of the *Monument*. Through these multiple components, the project opened up exchanges between the local community of mostly Turkish immigrant families and a larger context, including other communities in Kassel, the city administration, and the audience of Documenta. Even the process of constructing the piece itself constituted the invention of a possible community—a community that, while composed from certain preexisting elements, ended up incorporating people, places, and ideas that were initially foreign to it.

At first, Potrč's and Hirschhorn's activities might seem familiar as forms of state-sponsored community art or art education. However, these traditional strategies of engagement are essentially conservative insofar as they conceive of artistic production as a compensatory activity while, at the same time, they generally imply a static notion of communities that are themselves dynamic. Breaking with the sacrificial figure of altruism, artists like Hirschhorn and Potrč, by contrast, are careful to avoid the temptation to identify and merge with a community understood as authentic and organically defined. Their projects take place in contexts where the very existence of the participants' fixed identity cannot be assumed. Indeed, the premise of works like *Bataille Monument* is that all identities—even the most putatively stable ones—are inexorably volatile. Such projects set out to increase the complexity of certain urban and social situations through the incorporation of heterogeneous elements from their surroundings. The work thereby adjusts itself to its milieu and creates a space in which

the knowledge and actions that arise from its making can circulate and be recorded. This involves a particular type of learning that consists of figuring out not only how to execute a certain project but also how to clearly articulate its goals and the identity of the collectivity concerned. These projects thus attempt to explore the possibility that aesthetic pleasure might be derived from the collective acquisition of knowledge.

This type of learning process was central to Jeanne van Heeswijk's *Face Your World*, a 2002 collaboration between the Wexner Center for the Arts, the Central Ohio Transit Authority, and the Greater Columbus Arts Council's Children of the Future program. The project allowed a group of children aged six to twelve to produce images of their urban surroundings by using computer software (installed inside a bus), which was developed by the artist in collaboration with the poet and philosopher Maaik Engelen and the Rotterdam software designers V2 Organisation, Institute for the Unstable Media. The resulting collection of personalized images of imaginary public spaces was displayed on three "bus stops," which were in fact slightly anthropomorphic public sculptures designed by another van Heeswijk collaborator, Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout and his Atelier van Lieshout. *Face Your World* was intended not to reconstruct the actual city but rather to imagine the very possibility of doing so. Above all, it created the potential for collective invention and community building.

Van Heeswijk's project, like Potrč's and Hirschhorn's, began with an affirmation of the primacy of collaborative production processes over individual ones. When a large number of individuals with access to different types of knowledge converge, a degree of complexity emerges that is unavailable to individual artists. This condition allows for the creation of a radical constructivism, a practical conception of the social whereby a community group takes form through extensive research and conversation. Such a



Above and above right: **Jeanne van Heeswijk, *Face Your World*, 2002.** Children at bus workstations. Bus stop designed by Joep van Lieshout, Sawyer Recreation Center, Columbus, OH, 2002. Right: **Sarai, *Cybermoballa*, 2001–.** Project participants at Dakshinpuri Lab, New Delhi, 2003.

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process occurs in *Cybermoballa*, an ongoing project in New Delhi begun in 2001 by Sarai: The New Media Initiative of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. *Cybermoballa* comprises a group of Indian artists, filmmakers, and computer specialists who work in collaboration with Ankur, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to experimental forms of education. The project sets up meeting places for young people and assists them in carrying out collaborative activities that usually take the form of interviews and annotations in hypertextual diaries, later submitted for public discussion. Shuddhabreta Sengupta, a member of Sarai, writes: "Diaries have the potential to evolve newer languages that further displace dominant discourses because they are situated and personal, outside of the domain of the 'expert,' and the technocratic language that 'expertise' entails." The interviews, stories, photographs, software animation, and audio recordings that make up the diaries have been made public via books, postcards, CDs, stickers, monthly magazines, and a multimedia installation evocatively titled *Before coming here, had you thought of a place like this?*

Similarly, beginning in 1993 in the Saint Pauli district of Hamburg, another hybrid

project brought together a series of exhibitions, ongoing conversations, and celebrations in a mutually reinforcing circuit. That year, an alliance of neighborhood residents, musicians from the local Pudel Club, and squatters started a protest to keep the city government from giving private developers a vacant lot that was an important meeting place for different local populations. When some artists, including Christoph Schäffer, Cathy Skene, and later Margit Czenki, joined the effort, they formalized the complex multidisciplinary venture under the name "Park Fiction"—a phrase that referred to a famous Hamburg rave of the early '90s and that stressed the importance of imagination in effecting social change. Together they proposed an urban plan to the Hamburg city government, as well as a series of activities to be carried out jointly by the neighbors and the members of the group. These endeavors were aimed at giving form to the desires and collective knowledge of the Saint Pauli neighborhood while contributing to the creation of a community that depended on otherwise unlikely alliances. Some of the activities were topical, such as the workshops, tours, film screenings, and lectures that the group called "infotainment." Others were ongoing



and took place daily at the vacant lot in a specially modified shipping container that housed the group's archives and communications media. A third initiative involved a touring exhibition, which appeared at the Vienna Kunstverein in 1999 and at Documenta 11 and will open at the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo in Seville this May. There, documentation related to Park Fiction is shown in an installation designed by architect Günther Greis that evokes the Constructivist language of the Soviet avant-garde. When the first phase of the park was finally built in September 2003, artist groups including Sarai and Argentina's Ala Plastica visited Hamburg for "Unlikely Encounters in Urban Space," a series of presentations that took place over several days and ended in a collective celebration.

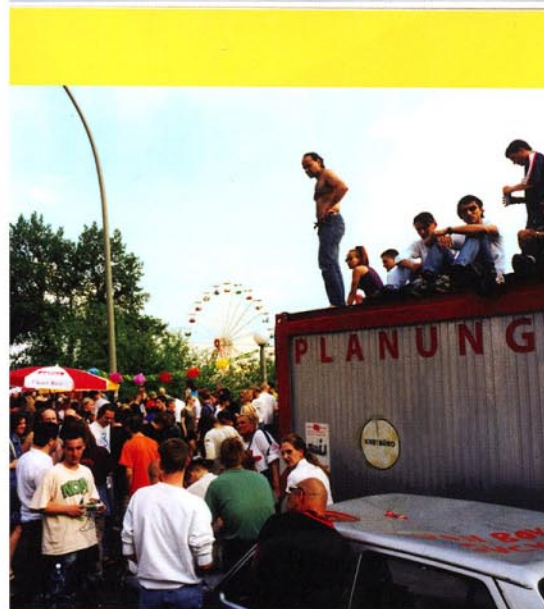
All of the artists discussed above have generated strategies that take up certain moments from the neo-avant-garde tradition and develop them in new ways. Their relationship with predecessors such as Joseph Beuys and the Situationists can be compared to that which exists between the political revolts of the 1960s and '70s and contemporary movements for global justice. While the former activists championed national or social liberation in the context of industrial capitalism and privileged a model of revolutionary transformation, the latter ones oppose the dominant neo-liberal consensus by proposing to distribute common resources in the interests of "performance and survival rather than profit," to quote historian Immanuel Wallerstein. Analogously, if many socially engaged artists previously approached their work as a manifestation of pure matter or authentic experience, which often tended toward ritualism, the artists under consideration here reject such a model in favor of nonhierarchical collaborative production. They engage a parallel tradition including Hélio Oiticica, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Robert Smithson—all of whom viewed artistic practice less as a matter of executing an a priori plan than of responding

directly to situations in the outside world beyond their immediate control.

In all these projects, as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has written, "internal criticism and debate, horizontal exchange and learning, and vertical collaborations and partnerships with more powerful persons and organizations together form a mutually sustaining cycle of processes." The concern is to facilitate the creation of exchange networks between groups of people in order to produce new representational forms and community identities. In turn, these circuits come to intervene in traditional art spaces, thereby effecting a "globalization from below." These projects thus constitute various points in a kind of universe in the making, one characterized by the vast movement and interaction between far-flung social networks. Yet in the process of forming, the organizations find themselves inexorably facing a fundamental problem: modes of organization. Art institutions offer some help in this regard, often promoting and ensuring the long-term success of particular projects and providing a network of relatively connected environments by which experimental communities can reach one another. Nevertheless, artists today demonstrate an ambivalent relationship to these institutions, which are implicitly hindered in their social efficacy by their tendency to exhibit objects more or less in isolation for more or less solitary individuals over relatively brief periods of time. How to overcome these limitations? How can very diverse local intentions be brought together on behalf of unified actions that acknowledge their diversity as well as their shared values? How are positions in a broad conversation distributed and enumerated? Is it possible for the arts to intervene effectively in the shaping of contemporary society? Suddenly, such problems have become central for artists engaging collaboratively with communities. Their work raises precisely these questions while at the same time attempting to answer them. □

Carlos Basualdo is a New York-based critic and curator.

Reinaldo Laddaga is assistant professor in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Pennsylvania.



Left: Margit Czenki filming *Park Fiction: Die Wünsche werden die Wohnung verlassen und auf die Strasse gehen* (Park Fiction: The Desires Will Leave the House and Take to the Streets), 1998. Right: Park Fiction's public planning container, Hamburg, 1998. Photos: Hinrich Schultze.