

# DEVIATION AND DRIFT: CRITICAL, ARTISTIC AND CURATORIAL PRACTICES IN URBAN CONTEXTS

Sandra Vieira Jürgens

## Part I

With regard to the first point, I am mostly interested in highlighting artistic practices that develop a relational experience — instead of one of autonomy — with the city, intervening in it, crossing it, moving within public spaces, presenting themselves critically in the face of the marked characteristics of the experience and the urban landscape of the twenty-first century.

The first example I would like to refer to is that of Jordi Colomer's project *Anarchitekton*, in which the artist critiques the architecture and urbanism in contemporary cities. It is a project that was developed between 2002 and 2004 in four major cities: Barcelona, Bucharest, Brasília and Osaka. In each of them, a lonely character roams the cities, carrying scale models of important and iconic buildings of those cities as if these were banners or elements of a scenography. In this simple way, the artist focuses on a formal and monumental architecture within an anarchic urban landscape, disconnected from the relationship with human beings — in terms of scale, proportion — and from the context. The title references the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, as well as the work of the urbanists and architects responsible for the architectural and urban planning of the cities.

The critique of the functionalism and planning of cities is also an approach very much present in the work of Francis Alÿs. Since the 1990s and despite his higher education in architecture, Francis Alÿs has dedicated himself to projects specifically related to artistic practice. Born in Belgium, Alÿs has lived in Mexico City since the mid-1980s and that is where he has been exploring, in many of his interventions, the different dynamics and forms of existence in the great Mexican capital, particularly in its historic centre.

In 1994, Alÿs created *Turista*, a work about the informal economy in the city, portraying himself as a gringo along with a group of casual workers, representative of the local trade

activities in the centre of the capital. Amongst electricians, plumbers and painters, all lined up and each holding a cardboard sign advertising their services and waiting to be employed, the artist portrays the part of the tourist in a group photograph alongside them. It is important to highlight that this work was created after the government authorities initiated a process of gentrification, requalification and revitalization of the central and historic part of the city, aiming to make it attractive to cultural tourism, and the creation of urban sub-centres for administrative, economic and financial activities.

Distant from that condition of the European cosmopolite tourist, Alÿs focused his attention on urban situations that to some degree resisted the re-development of the city centre, and on the then anachronic experiences of the residents who continued to make an informal and non-institutional use of the urban space. He had encountered the practices and ways of life of the street vendors who persisted in transporting goods by pushing all kinds of handcarts along the city streets, and the homeless people and the animals who slept on the roads and pavements (*Dormientes*, 1999), surviving and resisting modernization because of their daily dynamic and the resulting mental transformations. Those that gradually “normalize” the processes of gentrifications and of economic and cultural globalization, as well as the resulting urban requalification policies, supported by planning that instils the idea of order and civic control of public areas within contemporary urban spaces.

The way Alÿs photographs those people is very intelligent, always choosing a point of view close to the ground that does not contradict the formal and hierarchical relationship that is present when observing people in the street. In fact, when Alÿs exhibits those works in museums and galleries, he does so respecting that same line of perception of reality, placing the photographic works and the video screenings at that same level. At the same time, the artist also developed numerous activities based on situationist walks, detours and drifts in the city’s streets and squares, in actions that contradict the fixed routes, the accessibility and the routines, promoting discovery and encouraging, in its encompassing sense, the sensorial living and experiencing of the city’s spaces.

In a way, Alÿs recovers the idea of the “construction of situations”, originally applied to situationist urban thinking. Contrary to modern urbanism, situationists thought it was society’s role to change the cities and they advocated a true collective construction of the urban space through the contribution and participation of its residents who should transform and experience their own spaces. Therefore, according to situationist thinking, any construction would depend of the mobilization of the citizens, and that, from their point of view, would only be possible by way of a true revolution in daily life. Along with the “construction of situations”, situationist urban thinking also developed other processes that can be associated with Francis Alÿs’s artistic practices: psychogeography, a term by which they designated the systematic observation of the effects produced by the different urban environments over people’s state of mind; and drift, a technique of accelerated passage through different environments with the



goal of immersing people in places and encounters, or, in other words, in the participation in city life.

Since we are discussing itinerant projects and reflexive artistic practices, I must refer to Santiago Sierra, who in *NO, Global Tour* chose the word “No” (NO) in the form of a monumental sculpture to design a Global Tour throughout many cities. Through it, the expression of denial and refusal was thus transported in the platform of a truck, gaining and changing sense according to each city it passed through — Lucca, Milan, Berlin, Rotterdam, Brussels, London, New York, Miami, Madrid, etc. — and according to the different contexts in which the work was presented — commercial, industrial, financial or entertainment contexts in Europe, the United States and Canada.

The journey began in Lucca and continued to Berlin, where it travelled through residential, industrial and mining areas in the former German Democratic Republic. From there, the sculpture passed through several emblematic buildings in Dortmund, Rotterdam, Maastricht, Brussels and London, among other cities. Afterwards, it was transported by sea to New York where it integrated the Performa 09 festival and where it visited Wall Street, the United Nations building, Rockefeller Center and other tourist destinations. Finally, the work travelled to Miami where it was presented at the Art Basel arts fair, being later exhibited in Washington. Throughout all of these cities, it said “No” to many of the buildings it visited.

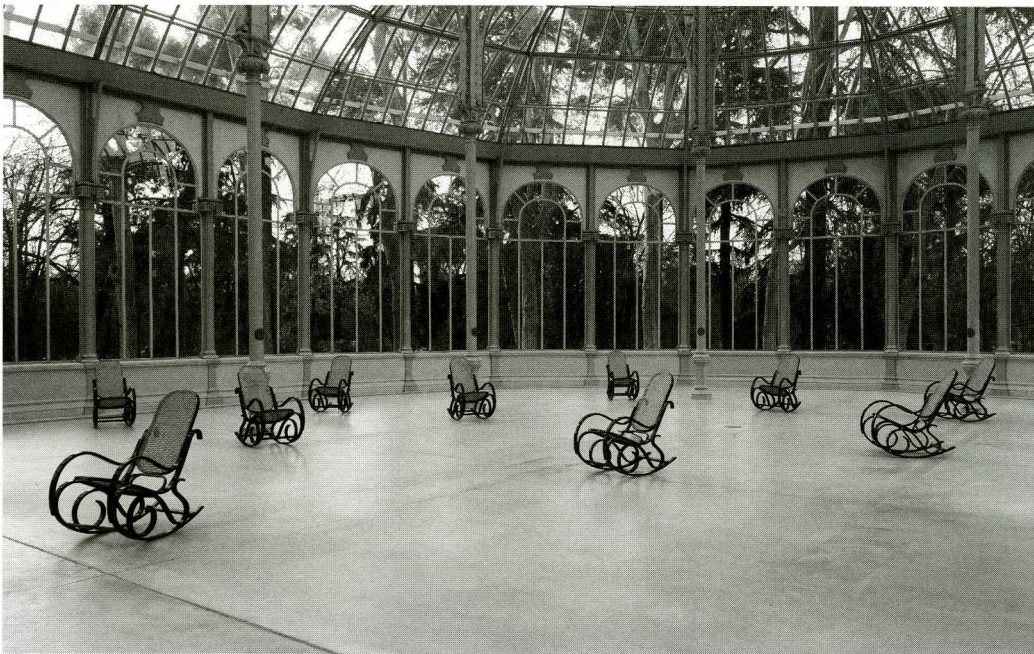
A second *NO* was built in Toronto and started its journey towards the United States where it visited the cities of Hamilton, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, always crossing industrial areas and workers’ neighbourhoods. A third *NO* was built in Lucca in 2010 and travelled to Livorno where it was presented at the funeral of a group of migrants. It also travelled to Genoa and then to Monte Carlo, where it was shown in front of the Palace of the Prince of Monaco and the Casino. Later, it travelled through Marseille where it visited oil refineries and a military arms factory, next it went to Montpellier and Lourdes, and it finally arrived in Madrid, during the ARCO fair.

## Part II

If the nineteenth-century image of the *flâneur* mostly relates to experience and to a particular understanding of the city, in the second part of my presentation I would like to apply that notion to the study of new settings and new ways of sharing artistic and curatorial practices in the museological space.

Given that the image of the nineteenth-century *flâneur* can be associated with the industrial and bourgeois era when the separation between public space and private space took place, it is important to mention some examples of artists who transport that public and urban experience to the private space of the museum.

Firstly, I would like to mention the exhibit *Hotel Splendide* by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster at the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid (2014) — an artist who, within the context of this exhibition,



**Fig. 1** - Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, *Splendide Hotel*.  
Environnement, Palacio de Cristal, Madrid, 2014.  
Photo: © Joaquín Cortés / Román Lores.  
© Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York  
and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid

declared that “art is more intense as experience than as image”<sup>1</sup>. It is about alerting to the conditions of the experience. And, in fact, in this exhibition, where she presents a scenographic work about the nineteenth century, the atmosphere and the space are much more important than the objects themselves. In it, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster visits the context of nineteenth-century construction of this building erected in 1887 in Parque del Retiro to house the exhibition of plants and flowers for the General Exhibition on the Philippine Islands. In doing so, she references the era of serial production of architectural structures, such as Cristal palaces, but also the Splendide Hotels, which were multiplied in the Western world. In this scenographic space, the artist recreates the imaginary atmosphere of a hotel based on Hotel Splendide, which opened in Lugano in 1887, but which was also the name of the hotel in Évian-les-Bains where Marcel Proust spent his family holidays. Since it is a space dominated by industrial production which results in the loss of the objects’ singularity and specificity, something present in the rocking chairs included in the exhibition which were built serially from 1880, it marks the birth

**1.** *Encounter with Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Enrique Vila-Matas*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Nouvel Building, 13 March, 2014.





**Fig. 2 and 3** - Thomas Hirschhorn, *Flamme Éternelle* (Lecture by invited contributor). Exhibition view at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2014. Photo: © Eva Houzard. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

of other ideas such as the interior monologue, and also the *flâneur*.

As is the case in other works of the artist, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster recreates the condition of the nineteenth-century *flâneur*, the urban observer who watched the world from the Parisian archways covered in glass; she also invites the audience to a series of unique and subjective experiences, suggesting routes, moments of observation and reading of the several books placed on the rocking chairs — titles which allow us to travel to numerous places and times and to know other worlds. It is both a journey into the future and into the past because, while referring mostly to the nineteenth century, the artist still places us in relation to the current world. Despite being in itself an exhibit about the exhibition model of the nineteenth century, Palacio de Cristal can be considered a precursor to our current way of life — the architecture of shopping centres, the climate controlled life, the air conditioning.

Finally, I am presenting the project that Thomas Hirschhorn developed in 2014 at the Palais de Tokyo where the artist aimed to create a public space — open, accessible and free — within the museum and, inside, developed experiences possible in the twenty-first century city. In this way, he establishes a rupture with two of the most important postulates in modern and contemporary exhibition architecture: on one hand, neutrality, based on the spatial model known as white cube; on the other hand, the autonomy of the artistic sphere. Like in other of the artist's interventions, in this installation entitled *Flamme éternelle*, he radically changed the image of the museum's interior space and he abstained from the normal mechanisms of exhibition.





Therefore:

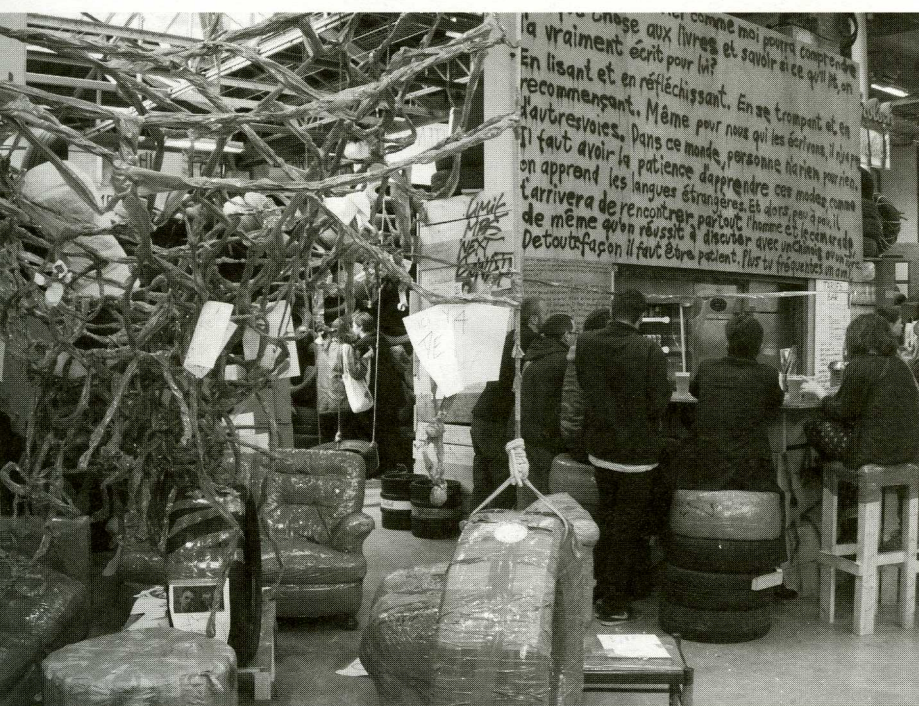
He used an installation composed of 16,500 tyres, stacked and piled up in many areas of the space, which formed temporary walls;

He developed a chaotic and overloaded occupation of the entire museum area, which favoured a sense of dissemination, expansion, diffusion and fading of all the limits between private and public space;

The result was the creation of a very informal space, with areas and daily activities that valued the urban experience and the forms of dialogue with the community.

In fact, by establishing an indirect proximity with forms of urban political and social activism, Hirschhorn created areas similar to public squares, temporary community spaces, with low cost structures, perishable materials, cardboard panels, second-hand furniture. All of which, as a whole, functioned as the perfect way to express the material culture and the economy of excess, but also the precariousness that governs Western society. He infused the presence of ephemeral architecture in the museum space and, with the placement of thousands of tyres, he undoubtedly recreated the barricades and barriers common in protests and rallies organized by activists in order to occupy squares in central areas of cities, such as Maidan Square in Kiev. Forming a big camping ground, his installation recreated certain situations and atmospheres that we commonly identify with social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States, and





**Fig. 4 and 5**  
 Thomas Hirschhorn,  
*Flamme Éternelle* (Bar).  
 Exhibition view at Palais  
 de Tokyo, Paris, 2014. Photo:  
 © Eva Houzard. Courtesy  
 of the artist and Galerie  
 Chantal Crousel, Paris



the new forms of rallying and protesting against the system at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We can also mention the protests of the Indignados in Madrid, in 2011, at Plaza del Sol, idealized by the platform ¡Democracia Real Ya!, with multiple associations, collectives and citizens united in *acampadas*, with popular meetings and assemblies or committees and work groups run by forms of participative democracy in which they expressed their demands and criticism of the political and economic system or of the formats of representative democracy. Always present in his exhibitions are also forms of popular protest and expression, signs with slogans which are evocative of the traditional Chinese *Dazibao*, posters made by hand or employing handcrafted techniques and used as a form of expressing public opinion, advocating for a cause, criticizing or protesting against something.

In order to fully understand the critical reach of Hirschhorn's project at the Palais de Tokyo, it is equally important to list the four lines of investigation that he established as a priority for his intervention in that institution, which were: free access, artist's presence, production and non programming. Based on the principle of free access, Hirschhorn established free access to the museum space, open between 12 pm and 12 am, from 24 April and 23 June 2014, thus contradicting a restrictive and elitist notion of cultural participation. Breaking away from classical and modern forms of the autonomy of the work of art, Hirschhorn ensured his daily presence in the space. Instead of presenting the artist as a "genius", he valued a presence that would not intimidate the audience, but instead engage it in situations of sharing. In doing so, he also transformed the exhibit into his own temporary studio, extinguishing the distinction between artistic production and exhibition. With the goal of producing, Hirschhorn engaging the audience in debate sessions and contributing to a more dynamic public sphere, erasing the mark of indifference, pessimism and collective apathy which he diagnoses in the social sphere. Throughout the 52 days of the exhibit, Hirschhorn had 200 collaborators working with him, who were invited to share their work in two *ágoras*, doing so without the formality of established formats and models usually employed in seminars and conferences related to cultural events. Within the space, there were other common areas, such as an area for workshops, a bar, Internet stations, a video library and a library — where the audience was invited to photocopy the works of Michel Foucault for free — as well as a room where a free newspaper was daily produced and distributed, also accessible online on the project's website.

With the premise Non programming, the artist elected the principles of flexibility and informality in the "planning" of the several activities that took place in the space, challenging the operating formats of institutions, which establish programming protocols for public activities in the museum. The readings, debates and musical sessions were made possible by the work of many collaborators, writers, poets, philosophers and researchers who decided for themselves the moment when they would make their contribution to the community with their respective forms of cultural expression. The experience of visiting a museum was thus transformed into an experience marked by spontaneity and indetermination, which promoted discovery and reflection. Transcending the silent and guarded atmosphere of artistic spaces,





**Fig. 6** - Thomas Hirschhorn, *Flamme Éternelle* (Internet corner). Exhibition view at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2014.  
Photo: © Eva Houzard. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

the artist transformed it into an inhabitable and stimulating space for civic participation.

With his four premises for intervention at the Palais de Tokyo, Hirschhorn undoubtedly proposed situations which would capture current realities and involve participative processes with the goal of stimulating critical thinking and creativity, also assuming to himself the role of challenging and questioning the limits of the protocols of artistic management, museology, programming and curatorial practice, and finding, within the artistic institution, potential spaces open to the redefinition of its identity.

Taking into account these new concepts concerning the museological space, which are not dominated by the importance of the formal and conceptual restrictions of the architectural model, it is possible to understand the museum as a city, a space open to encounters, to paths, to passage, contemplation, reflection, experience and transformation. Regarding this particular topic, I would like to mention the words of Manuel Borja-Villel, the director of Reina Sofía Museum, when he states: “Art can be a negotiation process, it can be a discussion, a contemplation, a stroll, a ‘romantic’ stroll, in the sense given to this word by Baudelaire.”<sup>2</sup>.

2. “A arte pode ser processo de negociação, pode ser discussão, pode ser contemplação, pode ser um passeio, um passeio ‘romântico’, no sentido que Baudelaire deu a esta palavra.” - JÜRGENS, Sandra Vieira (August 2006). *Entrevista a Manuel J. Borja-Villel*. In *Artcapital*. URL: <http://www.artcapital.net/entrevista-119-manuel-j-borja-villel> (15/02/2014).



## References

- Bishop, Claire. 2012. *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London/New York: Verso
- Borja-Villel, Manuel. 2010. *Pueden los museos ser críticos?*. Carta — Revista de Pensamiento y debate del Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, n.º 1, Primavera-Verão 2010, pp. 1-2
- Borja-Villel, Manuel. 2011. *Hacia una nueva institucionalidad*. Carta — Revista de Pensamiento y de Debate del Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, n.º 2, Primavera-Verão 2011, pp. 1-2
- Dewdney, Andrew; Dibosa, David; Walsh, Victoria. 2013. *Post Critical Museology. Theory and Practice in the Art Museum*. Oxford: Routledge
- Hirschhorn, Thomas. 2015. *Une volonté de faire*. Paris: Éditions Macula
- Godfrey, Mark; Biesenbach, Klaus; & Greenberg, Kerry. 2010. *Francis Alys: A Story of Deception*. New York: Museum of Modern Art
- Gonzalez-Foerster, Dominique. 2014. *1887 — Splendide Hotel*. Paris: OneStar Press
- Lee, Lisa & Foster, Hal. 2013. *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press
- Möntmann, Nina (ed.). 2006. *Art and its Institutions: Current conflicts, critique and collaborations*. London: Black Dog Publishing