

Space participation art

interview with Adina Secretan, Mil M2 & Anna Rispoli

Although they unfold in distinct sociocultural contexts, Adina Secretan, Mil M2 and Anna Rispoli's approaches show areas of common interest which we decided to address from three different perspectives, space, participation and art.

This interview was conducted by email in May 2017.



Anna Rispoli, *Les marches de la Bourse (The steps of the Bourse)*, Brussels, 2015

Through your respective approaches, you relate to space in different ways, whether by focusing on urban development, occupying a place or creating in the public domain or in situ. Describing the context in which you work, what can you tell us about these issues?

Adina Secretan: One of lowest common denominators in my approach (which includes dance, theatre and installations) is the relationship between bodies and places. Although they are quite different one from the other, Section Lopez's productions (editor's note: the name of the artist's company) all begin with an interest in a particular environment, a given place and its specific qualities. A place to listen, occupy and reclaim... This approach actually alters my perspective on daily life: How do I move around and fit in the urban space? What about others around me? Where can I go and not go? How do we live? I try to combine a rather poetic approach (even romantic) to the city as a permanent playground with a more critical approach, where the city becomes a very concrete map that reveals a multitude of power relationships. Switzerland, where I live, is very densely built up, and generally heavily regulated: There is quite a lot that can be observed and experimented with in that sense.

Mil M2: Our work has always implied a spatial practice, either by developing a user-supported community center in Santiago de Chile (the city where we live), by running a site-specific gallery or by intervening in public spaces through participatory performances. In this sense, space has become a primary tool to engage with one another, both as a space for gathering, and as a context to visually intervene with text like *Horizon* that we present at far festival. These spatial practices also differ in their durations - from 3 hours to 36 months - leading to the development of different tools to do research about people, culture and history of

COULD IT BE THAT PERFORMING ARTS MAY BE SUMMONED OR CONSIDERED NOT ONLY AS A POSSIBLE PERIPHERAL RESOURCE, BUT TRULY AS A FOCAL POINT FOR SPATIAL EMANCIPATION EFFORTS ?

Adina Secretan, *Mais, poétiquement, habite l'homme sur cette terre*, Master Thesis, HETSR, 2014 (excerpt)

these spaces in order to imagine their future. Thus, space – and the time we spend in it – has defined the means of working on the production of content for each intervention. These particular temporalities have allowed for the creation of a common present, a shared space of time in which to concentrate collective efforts. Efforts related to both specific spaces and specific communities.

Anna Rispoli: The public domain is both a physical and mental concept: Sometimes, you occupy it, other times you create it virtually as it is absent. At least, that was my impression in Abu Dhabi where, with *Five attempts to speak with an alien*, we proposed a more critical reading of the alienation of society and its morbid relationship with monumental architecture. In other situations, the physical space of a city bears witness to dying practices, such as demonstrating in the street. *Les marches de la Bourse* thus criticised the authorities' agenda to normalise the centre of Brussels (where I live). This project pointed to the transformation of an iconic place, which hosted countless demonstrations in the past and which today is being assimilated by our cities' commercial and touristic monoculture as well as by the dictates of city branding. With the eradication of public spaces that promote diversity—where conflict is a part of the experience of togetherness as much as cooperation—our society is becoming dangerously docile. And social networks such as Facebook participate fully in this turnaround. Indeed, the use of filters and algorithms on these platforms results in a fragmentation into groups of friends and affinities and contributes to the standardisation of society. These types of virtual public spaces, designed to mitigate the lack of real public spaces, are in fact an illusion.



Mil M2, *Proyecto Pregunta* ('What would you ask your government?'), Punta Arenas, 2016

The dimension of participation is present to varying degrees in your creations, whether it stands at the centre or on the margins of your work. How do you relate to this dimension, what are your intentions with it?

Adina Secretan: Participation is a strange word... It implies that someone has invited you to act, but within a context that often pre-defines this capacity to act. Yet, where does the inviter stand in the participation effort? Participatory planning is often a matter of demagogic domestication of the living skills people have. When you organise a sort of ritual consultation, relationships are often pre-established. Most of the time, the most you get is no more than a gloss of good conscience. The paradox is that what I do as a stage director is kind of similar! I pre-define a context in which I invite people, while trying to exert maximum control over the ins and outs of the invitation.

To guide me through these rather fascinating ethical issues, I rely on my own experience as a 'participant'. As a spectator, I sometimes experience shows where I am supposedly free to intervene and which in the end seem to me to be biased invitations. On the contrary, other shows, which appear rigid and well-defined, nevertheless allow me to 'actively receive' them. The *Mama Helvetica* project addresses that issue precisely: What makes a 'good invitation space'?

Mil M2: Most of our projects are based on direct and spontaneous participation of whoever feels questioned by what we propose. By this means we seek to question the passive role of the spectator, inviting them to converse with our devices and through them, as well as with other people, in a very concrete way. Our take on participation proposes to work toward a sense of community, instead of working for



Anna Rispoli, *Five attempts to speak with an alien*, Abu Dhabi, 2016

the community, posing problems and trying to work around them together, without any preconceptions of what result may be.

This approach does not focus its goals in fostering participation for participation's sake. Instead it looks for ways to collectively generate new knowledge, on and for everyone that chooses to get involved. This way, we understand participation as a transformation tool, a shared and open process that allows changing both our work and those who participate. This way, our works are open to be transformed and reappropriated by the actions and reflections of those who engage in it. By proposing simple experiences – such as games, questions, and exchanges – we aim to disrupt our everyday approach to one another. This creates a brief reflective moment which enable a common discursive platform and the emergence of a collective knowledge.

Anna Rispoli: This is probably the most complex question, because even if I believe that artworks are always participatory, it is also true that cultural systems often instrumentalise the concept of participation. And suddenly, artists are now meant to focus on participation as if they had to fill a social vacuum! Yet, building is not based on a tabula rasa but rather on an ever-changing complexity of ruins and living beings. With my approach, I focus on places that trigger a multitude of often conflicting mental projections. I then like to invite people to observe, move through, inhabit and 'stage' these in their minds. Games and the art of fiction provide an incredible toolbox to 'make' a society, even if just to share a gesture that would make us aware of our neighbours. In my view, participation relates more to this awareness—sensitive, fragile, filled with wonder—a posteriori of having shared an extraordinary moment that leads to a new mutual sense of perception: Who are these people next to me who, like me, have desires and expectations of their present?



Mil M2, *Danceable Bingo*, at Mil M2's self-organized community center. Santiago de Chile 2013.

Political and social dimensions permeate your creations. In general, what role do you assign to art? How can it help thinking about our future?

Adina Secretan: I think I can get a certain idea of a historical, sociological and economic definition of art. But outside these perspectives, I still do not know what art is... and I think it is good that way. I try not to regard the word as too sacrosanct, or to believe that it only belongs to a select few. But it is true that when you let yourself blend materials and dreams, when you allow yourself to combine seemingly unconnected elements, when you do not respect the logical principle of non-contradiction, when you realise a thing can be that thing and yet something else at the same time, when you let yourself be struck and unsettled, without even being able to explain it at times, it changes you. It has changed me, just like other people. It opens onto possible worlds and gives tangible reality to the constant movements and mutations around us. It gives fear and the inexplicable a ritual role. It gives us strength to choose to say yes or no. And often, it makes us laugh too. And even if it may be personal at times, it is never private.

Mil M2: We approach art as a communicational possibility. A conversational ability that we can all trigger. Even in a short period of time, art can help us to reveal many things and become a rich surface where everything coexists. Sharing and fostering this view through artistic experiences can enable an artwork to question our preconceptions, to propose new insights and foremost, to make visible and to give a voice to counterhegemonic concerns.

In prototyping cultural spaces and devices from this framework, we have sought to enable for this polysemy and simultaneity to be shared. This could be a starting point for new ideas to be conceived by different communities. For us, art relates more with processes than with results.



Anna Rispoli, *Vorrei tanto tornare a casa (e che questo volesse anche dire tornare dove sei tu)*, Riga, 2010

Anna Rispoli: Although changeable, art can be a tool to explore iconic territories such as notions of identity and collective fears. By formulating artistic assumptions, we can imagine more inclusive environments and improvise other types of societies. Although art cannot resolve everything, it can nevertheless intensify the awareness of other people's presence and generate temporary communities. At the end of the performance *Vorrei tanto tornare a casa* (a series of light shows for apartment lights produced with the help of tenants in low-rises) in Gwangju in 2013, one of the participants expressed that potential pretty well, *'When I saw what we were capable of doing, I started laughing: It was as if we saw ourselves from the outside, us, all together in a concrete block that could finally talk!'*