

# Preparing to Exit: Art, Interventionism and the 1990s

Part of Preparing to Exit: Art, Interventionism and the 1990s

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This collection of essays, interviews and images results from L'Internationale's current focus on the 1990s and, in particular, our wish to identify actions and alliances from that era that form constellations with our own. Most optimistic claims made during that period were hubristic – not least the promise that technology and post-Cold-War politics would turn the world into a super-connected 'global village', and that the ensuing spread of civic society and liberal democracy would usher in 'the end of history'. Cultural institutions – including the museums and galleries that compose the L'Internationale confederation today – were charged with the task of extending civic society and delivering an image of a common and inclusive future. Indeed, confederation members Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, and Salt in Istanbul were created in the late 1990s and early 2000s to bolster civic life – a project that is ongoing. At the same time, many conflicts of the current era can be traced back to this period of considerable social and cultural turmoil. The after-effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 reverberate with Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, as we write these words.

However, another less well-known version of the 1990s also exists, from which alternative, often highly local expressions of cultural politics and political activism emerged, and which may yet inspire other futures. This version was shaped by interventions by artists and activists, who acted collectively and in partnership with their communities, in seemingly 'marginal' settings, and without the kind of support available in the centres of the 1990s turbo-capitalist boom. Much of their work seemed unfathomable and was dismissed as peripheral by commentators at the time, particularly when it travelled from its place of origin to elsewhere. Yet this output now seems vital and urgent, in harmony with the loud, contemporary calls for decolonisation and self-determination: the rights of peoples to their land, to shape their cultures, to determine the economic and political systems in which their lives are lived – put plainly, the right to a future.

Our title, 'Preparing to Exit', is borrowed from Alessandra Pomarico's contribution, in which she elaborates the inspiring example of Zapatismo, and how it has informed the work and approach of the artistic collective Chto Delat. The moving force of insurgency in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1994, resonated, in the author's words,

across the Atlantic, between the Italian leftist, antifascist, anarchist legacy, and the tradition of *autonomía* (autonomy) – linking wor(l)ds of resistance, while offering another necessary perspective; a language full of poetic metaphors, inclusive of many relations beyond those of living human beings.

Via the prism of Chto Delat's films, puppet shows and drawings, Pomarico looks to Zapatismo as a paradigm of the possibility for 'preparing to exit' colonialist-capitalist state structures through the principles of *compañerismo* (comradeship) and *comunalidad* (communality). Across the six case studies of this issue, diverse motivations, forms and strategies appear that chime with the need to prepare an escape route from market, state and institutional structures. On the border between artistic practice and activism, and sometimes operating as para-institutional organisations, the case studies detailed here present provisional models for ways of beginning to lay the ground for imagining, and then enacting, different forms of exit. Pomarico's calling upon the idea of preparation also speaks to the improvised modes of practice that emerge throughout the case studies. An insistence on trying things out and an acceptance of failure as part of sincere preparatory work imbues these examples with a minor, rather than a declarative, register. Instead, preparation is held as a form of practice, of rehearsing, of getting ready.

Exiting or operating outside institutions permeates the recounts of these contributions; sometimes this is born out of choice, other times, out of necessity, such as when artists are working within the context of war. So, too, does 'preparing to exit' from the market-driven logic and attention economy of the art system, which each case study variously rejects or departs from. Asja Mandić, in her essay, draws on Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics in his 1980 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In short, tactics are the responsive and impromptu actions of those without power, while strategies infer command and control, and align with the operations of institutions and other organisational power structures. This relationship can, however, be inverted: the creation of an institution (or at least, the parodic appearance of one) can itself be a tactic, as a number of our contributors show.

The focus of Mandić's 'Emerging Innovative Artistic Practices as a Response to the State of the Siege' is on the effects of the war in Bosnia in the first half of the 1990s on creative activities. She examines what she describes as 'artist-led actions and curatorial practices, site-oriented or site-referenced interventions in the urban fabric that moved beyond the confines of the art world'. Turning to a number of street interventions and non-institutional practices in the context of the siege of Sarajevo (1992–96), Mandić's contribution considers the ways in which artists mobilised public space as an expression and reality of resistance. Artists, such as Ante Jurić and Zoran Bogdanović, worked collaboratively, physically dragging the remnants of destroyed buildings like the iconic Central Post Office into the besieged street. 'Disruptions to the panoptic mechanisms of power', such actions were a means to 'generate relations that opposed strategies of surveillance and control'. Across Mandić's artistic examples, it is the use of found objects – often the debris of war, set in a public space itself under siege – that perhaps most powerfully shows the necessity and possibilities of exiting the architecture and formats of the art system.

Artist Fernanda Laguna gives an account of *Belleza y Felicidad* (Beauty and Happiness), an independent artists' space and educational project that she co-founded with writer, poet and translator Cecilia Pavón in Buenos Aires in March 1999. *Belleza y Felicidad*, as Laguna tells us, is rooted in feminist principles and situated as a space – both physically and propositionally – which strives for 'everything we cannot (yet) imagine'. Working across pedagogy, literature and artistic practice, the project has unfolded as a series of ongoing experiments and self-conscious failures, which provide a counter-model to the market-driven trends of the Argentinian art world at the turn of the millennium. The sister space on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, *Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito*, meanwhile shows how experimental forms of pedagogy and practice can reframe and de-hierarchise teacher-pupil relations. The collective learning processes experienced by the hundreds of school children and adults in the space(s) enact a compelling argument for escaping the limits of both formal education and enterprise.

Alessandra Pomarico's aforementioned essay, 'Echoes of Zapatismo outside Chiapas', details the transformative impact of Chto Delat's visit to the Caracoles (the autonomously governed territories of the Zapatista) in 2016, along with the Zapatistas' historic visit to Europe in 2021, in order to illuminate how the movement both 'warn[s] and nourish[es] the political thinking of those of us who have started to understand their project of sustained revolution.' Pomarico asks what it means to be in resonance with the Zapatista project, and throughout this issue's pieces, the will to be in dialogue, in relation, with those 'suffering from various forms of oppression' echoes, ever amplified by the role of art in these struggles.

In conversation with Nick Aikens, curator and writer Clémentine Deliss offers a fascinating reflection on her involvement with the Tenq artists' workshops and Laboratoire Agit'Art collective in Senegal in the 1990s. Describing Laboratoire Agit'Art as a 'parapolitical aesthetic infrastructure' or a kind of 'micro-government', Deliss highlights the invisible channels of the collective's work (working at night, refusing to archive their work) at a time of increasing emphasis on visibility in the art world. Deliss's comparisons with contemporary examples of what she terms 'artistic interventionism', through practices such as those of Ibrahim Mahama or Theaster Gates, as well as the recent case of documenta fifteen, cast light on contrasting relationships between the art market, institutions, and collective forms of interventionism. Underpinning Deliss's account is a thoughtful reflection on what is at stake when artists and collectives attempt to found their own independent institutions. We are left to contemplate a pressing provocation: What are the explicit and implicit relations between the art market and questions of reputational economy and visibility; and how much, against this backdrop, is the mainstream art system really prepared to support alternative models?

Founded in 1990 by Dragan Protić and Đorđe Balmazović, the Škart collective (meaning scrap or leftover) poses a second case of interventionist art practice emerging out of the reality of war. Working between Belgrade and Ljubljana amid the break-up of Yugoslavia, Škart's 'abstract and poetic' street interventions arose out of necessity and the impossibility of speaking within conventional, codified institutional settings. The piece – an excerpt from the author Seda Yıldız's interview with the two Škart founders, from her researched and edited archival book on the

collective – details their direct and absurdist strategies, including flyposting a weekly radio programme Škart News across Belgrade, and the use of mail art as a mode of communication and dissemination beyond narrow institutional frameworks of exhibition and mediation. The group's practice often alludes to these institutions – such as in the poster 'Škart is in the museum', displayed in their first exhibition in the small gallery of their village – so that while born out of urgent conditions, when transplanted to Graz, Austria, or to New York towards the end of the decade, it became a lens through which to view the alienating effects of the market.

The final contribution, tellingly, is the sole example of an interventionism that takes place within (though is not limited to) the context of a museum. Chronicling 'two decades of art and social activism', Leónidas Martín takes readers on a journey that begins among the anti-globalisation movements of 1999 and continues through to the financial crisis of 2008, the housing crisis in Spain and the mobilisation of mass social movements. With a first-hand account of the landmark project Las Agencias at MACBA in 2000, Martín closes the issue by detailing a limit case for how institutions might seek to work beyond their protocols. Working with various social actors and political campaigns in the wake of what is now known as 'The Battle of Seattle', Las Agencias was an attempt to circumvent the diapositives of an institution – the space of the museum and the format of the exhibition or public programme. Martín's lively account of the experience of Las Agencias, and the subsequent narrative of activism breaking past the walls of the museum, raises the demand of how institutions could genuinely engage with a far wider range of social agents.

Drawing attention to artistic interventionism in the 1990s, the texts gathered here are neither conclusive analyses of past events nor an attempt to define a single category of action. Their authors, rather, seek to report on poorly recorded activities and fugitive happenings. Many take the form of testimony. Their accompanying illustrations and photographs are sometimes 'poor images' too; snapshots and photocopies indexing the improvised or reduced circumstances of their production. And of course, the minor histories of these pieces occurred before the wholesale occupation of the world by the internet. What emerges across the six contributions is evidence of kinds of critical practice that operate despite the shortcomings, or even in the complete absence, of institutional structures. Whether grounded in public space or the formation of tactical, collective organisational forms, these case studies document how interventionism is necessary in order to construct spaces and practices for imagining other worlds. As such, they are much more than archeologies of the recent past. Not only do many of the featured actors continue their practices today, but the matters that initially motivated them remain far from resolved.

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