



Elena Bajo
Architectures of Disorder

Text by Luca Cerizza

Mo (nu) ments

Elena Bajo's Ephemeral Interventions

It was more than fifty years ago; it was December 1956, when the Dutch painter and architect Constant Nieuwenhuys, visited a gypsy camp in the countryside outside Alba, in Piedmont, Northern Italy. With him was another painter, Pinot Gallizio, who had given the gypsies a piece of land near a river, after the municipality forced them to leave the town. This piece of land was not exactly the reincarnation of a new Arcadia but an uneven, irregular and muddy surface. But it had been enough for that community- used to mobility and improvisation- to create a space between the caravans, with boards and gas tanks, and build almost a fence, a real gypsy city.

That day, Constant, struck by the poor living conditions of the Roma community, as he recalled a few years later¹, he conceived the scheme for a permanent settlement for the gypsies of Alba. The project was the origin of the series of models for the *New Babylon*, the visionary hypothesis of a city thought for a new recreational society. In Constant's idea, New Babylon was supposed to be a mobile grid, an ever-changing landscape in which a new man, imagined as freed from the burden of work and utilitarianism, would create and recreate his own habitat. A space that could be a gymnasium for a game, a place for adventure and experimentation: a way of living by reinventing oneself.

One year later, in Coscio D'Arroscia, still in Piedmont, the Situationist International was born. Together with Gallizio and Constant, there was Asger Jorn, a Danish neo-expressionist painter and in particular, Guy Debord, a French intellectual keen on cinema as well as town planning. He wanted to set free the creative and imaginary faculties of the man-citizen, somewhat imprisoned in a rationalist urban and architectural planning. Along with other unsatisfied architects such as Yona Friedman, who wrote in 1958 his manifesto on a mobile architecture that imagined new living strategies implemented by a self-governed citizen-user; Situationism, traced the new characteristics of the living contexts emerging from town plans of the years post World War II. Through *dérive* (the practice of getting lost in the urban context), and *détournement* (the deviation from an objective), employing irrational schemes, gestures only apparently unproductive and gratuitous, the Situationists traced new maps for geographies of renewal. They studied new models of intervention, fast, unpredictable, ephemeral:

sudden twists from the logic and the levelling order imposed by the modernist model. In the post war city, where architectonic strata, potential to the reconstruction, are added to broken spaces; topography becomes psychological, in a non-linear way of proceeding, which only later would be described by Deleuze and Guattari as „*rhizomatic*“. The new signs of the spectacle and of advertisement can be found in the urban arena, dis-functional maps are employed which, along with one's abandonment to derive, lead to new forms of consciousness: nomadism versus sedentarism, flexibility versus monumentality. Gypsy communities were the models, perhaps a naive and romantic one, of this society of the non-work and of the continuous movement that never set roots.

Still in Italy, half a century has gone by, we are dealing with recent history. The campaign of Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedoms)² for the 2008 elections contributed to increase the generalized rise of fear, already present in Italy as in other countries of the wealthy West, on themes such as security and immigration. The new government led by Silvio Berlusconi among its first actions, decides to introduce some serious limitations to the citizenship and circulation of nomads. For instance the case of the fingerprinting of Roma children is deeply opposed by the European Parliament. Half a century has elapsed and the kind of nomadism often considered by contemporary architects and planners is that of the category of the „hypernomads“, in Jacques Attali's definition, a group of privileged individuals spending their lives travelling around the planet, as if living in a continuous performance³. An expanding caste, the „hyper nomads“ don't have the wretched profile of the gypsy communities, but the safe confidence of someone who knows, or wishes to know the world as a house's courtyard.

In Como, in the summer of 2008, Elena Bajo prepares her contribution to Fondazione Ratti's Corso Aperto⁴, choosing the area once belonging to the dyeing factory of Ticoso. What is left of that huge factory are nowadays only some traces on the ground and, it is said, some asbestos residues. The space that was occupying, next to a motorway, is now a wasteland, a concrete sprawl where weeds appear once in a while, together with bits of bricks and graffiti. Part of the site is a parking lot. Here, almost hidden on the grey surface, there is a tiny rectangular building-box, slightly crumbling and covered in graffiti, inhabited by a Roma family. In one of her site

visits, Elena approaches this family proposing to paint their house in a shiny color. The family agrees enthusiastically. Not caring about the fact that their *occupancy* of the building, most probably illegal, could become a visible target for the police, the nomads on the other hand seem to be asking for a more decent housing, at least on the exterior. They reclaim their presence on the territory.

As for most of Elena Bajo's works, this intervention moves amid the creases of daily life, only apparently in his more banal and shabby side. Whether it entails interventions in the public realm, on the streets, in museums or galleries, Bajo re-assembles in new formations remnants and fragments, often they are trash, both of a urban/architectonic environment and of a more personal/emotional sphere that she encounters. The works in strictly artistic contexts, are sculptures and installations composed of fragments of materials of different origins, with different hints to constructive and housing elements, to urban landscapes. They are somehow self-recycling formations, in a continuous *mise en scène* and *mise en abyme* of those materials. The outdoors interventions, on the other hand, have a more improvised, ephemeral, fragile nature to them. They are quick alterations of found situations, encountered in daily happenings, in passing the urban scenery: garbage piled in small formations (that could even be shown in a display cabinet), elements of a road construction site reassembled and rearranged in different ways (suggesting a constructive grid), sacks of sable put on top of the other in forming a barricade, a protection, an obstacle (to what?). They are temporary shapes, which alter the urban scenario: minimal gestures questioning relationships between fixed and changeable data, between stasis and change, between construction and its dissolution.

Other times Bajo literally infiltrates the interstices of the urban landscape: she builds a door in a narrow alley of a city, a gesture completely devoid of function, almost surreal: she intervenes into the gaps of a pavement walk by inserting different materials, as in making more precious and visible what are usually marginal detail; she alters the functionality of a sound barrier shield put on the side of a Madrid street, by opening a breach into that delimitation between two perceptual spaces. In a similar way, Bajo operates with natural elements or within a natural landscape: placing lawn grass rolls and leaving them in a street, waiting for a potential usage; creating small conformations of fragments in rivers or

water banks, totally ephemeral and fragile monuments; marking the rocks of a desert of silver paint, as the signals of an impossible topography. It is a discreet and responsible declination of Land Art, inherited by the most poetic of Smithson's interventions, more than from the monumental and heroic gestures of that season. Both if employed in an urban context or in a natural one, the landscape presented to us by Bajo constitutes a mirror for a constant negotiation between order and disorder, stability and entropy.

Bajo's actions, at the limit of visibility, often have a double function: they show and reveal, hide and highlight. As exemplified in the practice of erasing graffiti on the walls of some cities by simply placing monochrome paint coats; it might appear as a censoring gesture or of „*return to order*” but, if only analyzed in its pristine linguistic value, is then another form of graffiti, a sign overlapping another sign, in a similar fashion to those usually employed by graffiti writers. Moreover is a way of prepping the surface for whoever wants to use it: it is the creation of a potential space.

In the same way, the recent project for Como, draws its strength from a similar ambiguity of the gesture. By covering with a silver paint the shed of the Roma family, Bajo erased the existing graffiti, symbols of a temporary appropriation of a place, marking the space of a new tenant. With a simple gesture she offered a practical service to its inhabitants, offering them visibility and decorum: she remarked their presence on the territory, as something to remember, not to forget.

Bajo's work develops on borders, often ambiguous and slippery, between a foreground and a background, between visibility and invisibility, reality and *mise en scène*. It is a matter of relationship: of power relations, of force struggles; it is a question for our capability to read the signs of a relationship between man and his environment. Avoiding any temptation towards the spectacle, working amid the creases and the creases of the creases, with fragments and among fragments, Elena Bajo's urban interventions are like monuments to the ephemeral, the provisional, the banal. They are brackets in the indistinct flux between reality and gestures that turn that flux into a monument. They are monuments to moments.

Luca Cerizza
(Translated from Italian by Caterina Riva)

1) N. Constant, *New Babylon*, 1974, as quoted in Luigi Prestinena Puglisi, *This is Tomorrow*, Torino, 1999, pag. 95. For a reconstruction of the beginnings of the Situationist Movement: *Psychogeogram: An Artist's Utopia*, Martin van Schaik, pag. 43-44 in *Exit Utopia, Architectural provocations 1956-76*, edited by Martin van Schaik e Otakar Mäcel, Prestel, 2005.

2) The new political subject initiated by Silvio Berlusconi and his allies.

3) Jacques Attali, *Breve storia del futuro*, Fazi editore, 2007.

4) *Corso Aperto* is a one day exhibition that is part of the Advanced Course in Visual Arts, organized every summer by Fondazione Ratti, In Como. This years visiting professor was Yona Friedman, and the title of the workshop was *Public Improvisations*.



Elena Bajo
Born in Madrid, Spain

Education

2006 Skowhegan School of Painting
and Sculpture, Maine, USA
2005 Central Saint Martins School of
Art, London, UK MA Fine Arts
2002 ESARQ School of Architecture,
Barcelona, Spain MA Architecture

Selected Exhibitions

2009 PS 1 MOMA New York
2008 Von Jetzt bis Dann, Goldrausch,
Kunstraum Kreuzberg / Bethanien, Berlin
2008 Fondazione Antonio Ratti Milan
2008 Interfacing Practices, Galerie Magnus Muller, Berlin
2008 Wunderlust Berlin, Paul Kopeikin, Los Angeles
2007 Tulca 07, Galway City Museum, Galway, Ireland (s)
2007 Destino Futuro Arte Madrid,
Royal Botanical Garden, Madrid
2006 The Space Between, Alexandra Saheb, Berlin
2005 Leviathan, curated by JJ CharlesWorth,
Candid Arts, London
2004 Public.Exe, curated by A. Ellegood&M.
Thursz, Exit Art, New York

Grants and awards

2009 International Studio and Curatorial
Program ISCP, New York
2006 Award, Saatchi Gallery Art Competition, London
2004 Public Art Award, Madrid Abierto Arco, Madrid

Luca Cerizza is a curator and writer based in Berlin
and Milan. He is curator at Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como,
and author of *Alighiero Boetti Mappa*, published by Afterall.









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Picture Captions

Cover & No. 2, 3

I'm looking for a title, Detail, Installation view, existent urban materials and materials from previous exhibits in gallery, collaged documentation of previous interventions in the city, video-performance process, dimensions variable Klara Wallner Plus Galerie, Project Space, Berlin 2007

No. 4, 5

The Black Rose of the Desert Landscape intervention, I planted some black artificial flowers and filled with reflective material. A space between the real and the imaginary, a black mirage, a thought about the future A-Z West Andrea Zittel, Joshua Tree, California, 2007

No. 6, 7, 8, 9

Swept Around, re-arranged trash of flea market 'El Rastro' Madrid, 2007

No. 10

Open, ephemeral door built in an alley, East London, 2004

No. 11

The Beginning of the End, re-arranged pieces of plywood, New York, 2005

No. 12

Silent, in collaboration with Warren Neidich, 70m x 4m A re-constructed, existent noise-barrier usually found along highways in Madrid, which has been re-contextualized in the urban environment. Public Award Madrid Abierto, Madrid, 2004

No. 13, 14

Turf, 40 sq m of turf were placed on the side walk and later on planted on a nearby church's yard, Regents Park, Frieze, London, 2005

No. 15, 16

Dislocation, re-arranged trashed bureau, Brooklyn New York, 2007

No. 17, 18, 19

Myths, The Remains of Tomorrow, Installation view, existent urban materials and materials generated by the demolition of the Palast of the Republik, collaged documentation of previous interventions in the city, dimensions variable, Air Garten Galerie, Berlin 2007

No. 20, 21

Will I dream...?, Installation View Detail, project developed in collaboration with local potterer and the Museum Collection of Medieval artifacts, Galway City Museum, Tulca 2007, Galway, Ireland

No. 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27

Wall Tags, erased graffiti, acrylic paint over wall, LA, New York, 2005

No. 28, 29, 30

The Sheltering Tree, fake water and fake buildings hiding oil wells, Joshua Tree Park, California, 2008

No. 31, 32, 33, 34

The Garden of Dreams, Installation View, contribution of materials by the locals, Museum of the City, Murcia, 2008

No. 35, 36, 37

High Tide, Low Tide, ephemeral sculpture remains on view until the next tide comes in, and then it disappears into its surroundings. It is a recurrent earthwork, a performance in collaboration with the landscape and the moon, which provides the rhythm of the piece, the sound and the stage, Berlin, 2008

No. 38, 39, 40,

41, 42, 43, 44, 45

Ruin to Monument, urban intervention, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como, Italy