ARTMARGINS [online]

The Artist as Mediator: An Interview with Marjetica Potrč

Written by Janeil Engelstad
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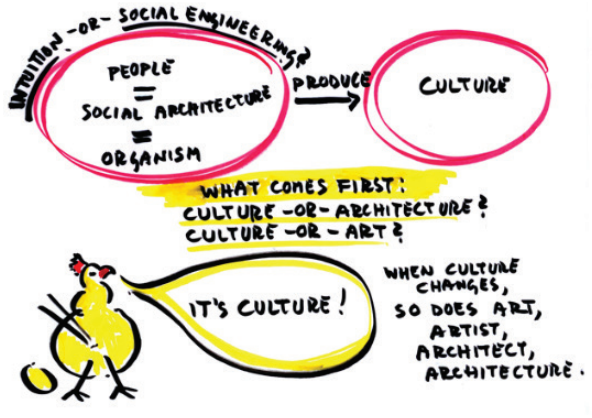
Based in Ljubljana and Berlin, Marjetica Potrč deals with issues of social space and contemporary architectural practices, sustainability, and new solutions for communities. Her practice is strongly informed by her interdisciplinary collaborations in research-based, on-site projects, such as Théâtre Evolutif (Bordeaux, 2011), The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour (Stedelijk Goes West, Amsterdam, 2009), and Dry Toilet (Caracas, 2003). She translates these investigations into text-based drawings and large-scale architectural installations ("case studies"). Her work has been featured in exhibitions throughout Europe and the Americas, including the São Paulo (1996, 2006) and Venice biennials (1993, 2003, 2009). She has received numerous grants and awards, including the Hugo Boss Prize (2000) and the Vera List Center for Arts and Politics Fellowship at The New School in New York (2007). Since 2011, she has been a professor at the University of Fine Arts/HFBK in Hamburg. potrc.org

"I have three different practices in my life. One is on-site participatory projects, which I do in collaboration with other professionals and with my students. The second is architectural studies, and the third is drawing narratives." - Potrč

Janeil Engelstad: Could you talk about the role of collaboration in your work? How do you see collaborative and interdisciplinary practices and research contributing solutions to critical problems, such as issues connected to climate change?

Marjetica Potrč: For several years, I have been focused on participatory projects with my students in Hamburg.(1) We do projects using participatory practices in places around the world. In fall 2013, we did a project in Belgrade where we worked with residents of the Savamala neighborhood in the tradition of learning by doing. The students became acquainted with a number of crafts practiced in the neighborhood and learned about the social and economic systems that support the crafts. The goal was to create an open-source manual, an analysis of present-day ways of working and living in Savamala. But we managed to do much more than that. We set up two spaces that the community can now use: Studio KM8, a space for sharing knowledge and skills, and Župa, an old boat docked by the riverbank that is being transformed into a community center.

There are four steps to doing participatory projects: The first step is to listen and talk with the residents where you are working; the second step is to involve the community in the decision making; the third step is to involve the community in the construction process; and the fourth step is co-create with the community a project that they can continue after you leave the site.



Marjetica Potrč, "Notes on Participatory Design, no. 6," 2011, ink on paper, 8.2 x 11.6 in.
Image courtesy of the artist.

JE: Creating a project that is sustainable over the long term.

MP: Sustainability is a word that has been overused, and it doesn't really mean very much anymore. But yes, if you want to engage the power of citizens in shaping the cities they live in, then this is exactly what sustainable development should be about. We try to be on location for two months at a time. This gives the students a chance to understand the site and the people who live there, their challenges and expectations. It also allows them how to change their own perspectives and share knowledge and practices. And then, a magical moment comes when they are able to construct something new in collaboration with the residents.

I am not talking about a new architectural structure; I am talking about social architecture, which for me is very important. We are interested in people. In Savamala, we worked with the residents for two months so they could then start constructing their own spaces. I am talking about place making, not public space. Any group that wants to be recognized in society needs to have a physical space—a place. People often talk about some abstract notion of public space that is good for everyone and so on. But when you talk about place making, you understand that having a space is something down to earth. People need it to ground themselves, their ideas and desires. It is a chance for people to build a community from the ground up; their group identity becomes strong when they can actually build a truly shared space. These bottom-up initiatives are a potential force for democracy.

JE: As you work across countries and the old "East-West" divide, how do you see public space functioning across society today? What differences, if any, do you perceive in the use and role of public space? How do you see the culture, history and/or politics influencing our ideas around the use of public space?

MP: I have never understood the term "public space," because for me public space has been corrupted. The so-called "public space" is not free and shared by all. My public art projects always happen in a private space or in a community space. In this way, the project becomes a tool for rebuilding the notion of shared space and the idea of what "public" means. What is happening in European cities, both East and West, is that you have this amazing push for community gardens.

The important thing about community gardens is not only the cultivation of a city's green spaces and growing vegetables, but also the fact that they are actual political schoolrooms where you can reclaim your community, reclaim your neighborhood, and reclaim your city. It is a simple process that originates in people engaging with the community garden. Community gardens have become relational objects: they are tools for changing the culture of living.(2)

JE: And in that place, is the artwork the change? It is the result of your actions, rather than the action itself, which can come from project-based work?

MP: I made two drawings titled Notes on Participatory Design that illustrate the relationships between art and culture. Art is a tool to change culture, and when culture changes, it follows that the artist, art, and architecture also change.

JE: In 2006, you participated in The Lost Highway Expedition (LHE), where over 300 artists traveled through nine cities in the Western Balkans and engaged in cultural production. You created both drawing narratives and architectural case studies in response to this research trip; much of it in response to the famous, highly decorated houses in Tirana and Prishtina. Could you talk about this project, the work that emerged and how you see the houses functioning in society? Do these colorful expressions merely reflect people's creativity and individualism, or do they collectively hold people together in a way that builds and strengthens community in the post-socialist era?

MP: When we traveled in the Western Balkans it was after the war and the political changes. People were still talking about the war, but no one was talking about the society that was being built after the war, or the values of the society that was building the new cities. In many places, there was a lack of engagement by the state, and this created a need for self-organization by people on the ground and for the reconstruction of the society. The crazy, decorated houses we saw were proud houses. By constructing their homes in personalized styles—pseudo-Byz-

Marjetica Potrč, "Prishtina House," 2007. Source photograph (left). Photo by Fred Dott. Image courtesy of Marjetica Potrč. Artist's work (right). "This Place is my Place - Begehrte Orte," Kunstverein, Hamburg, Germany. Private Collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm. DESCRIPTION: Prishtina House is a case study of a house in the Peyton Place neighborhood of Prishtina. After the collapse of modernism, the citizens of Prishtina began building their houses in a wide range of styles, each expressing the taste of the owner. In Prishtina, the citizens have become the smallest state.

antine, pseudo-Oriental, and so on—the residents were celebrating the new society they were co-creating. These were architectural archetypes that alluded to the distant past. This was definitely not about modernism. It was about individualism, but not the individualism of the modernist state of mind that celebrated equality. On the Lost Highway Exhibition we saw a new citizenship being born on the ruins of the socialist state. And we asked ourselves whether citizens in the European Union could learn anything from the reconstruction of the Balkans. As we are talking now, I remember the inaugural speech by the new king of the Netherlands a few months ago. He said that the welfare state of the twentieth century is over. In its place there is an emerging "participation society," where people must take responsibility for their own future while the role of the state diminishes.(3) This sounds a lot like what we saw on the LHE in 2006.

The crucial experience for me was when we entered Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo. At the time there were three layers of government: the United Nations government, the Serbian government, and the Kosovo government. What this meant, in short, was that no one really ruled and, basically, the individual became the smallest state. Each person who lived there, who was constructing his life, his house and his territory—he was the smallest state. I reflected on this in a drawing that is part of my Struggle for Spatial Justice series (2005-2007). The text in the drawing is taken from a speech by Winston Churchill where he talks about the defense of the city. The illustration is a family house with a business out front—a gas station. It is fenced off and at the edge there is a flag that marks the territory. The house celebrates the existence of its builder, but it also celebrates the fragmentation of the socialist state. On the LHE, we encountered fragmentation again and again. One example is the fragmentation of territories: think of how Yugoslavia became seven new states—small-scale territories. Another example we saw was the shrinking of residential communities. In Socialist Yugoslavia you had apartment-block neighborhoods where 10,000 people lived together; by 2006, you had ten or fifteen families living together in clusters called urban villas. While these apartment blocks still exist, the trend was towards smaller micro-communities living in smaller housing developments. But is it possible that fragmentation is another way of saying "de-growth," a word we use when we talk about sustainable communities?

JE: Many artists doing project-based work aim to create new ways of making the future civil society. In your three different levels of engagement—on-site participatory projects, architectural case studies and drawing narratives—what is your position as an artist? Does it shift from medium to medium, from project to project?

MP: In all of my on-site work, I consider myself a mediator. That's quite easy. The architectural case studies and drawings supplement it. Contemporary art is a living language. It changes when the culture changes. And when the culture changes, the role of the artist changes as well.

This interview took place via Skype in January 2014.

NORDENHAKE

Marjetica Potrč, "In a New Land"

Opening, Friday October 21, 2011Berlin, October 22nd - January 21st, 2012

Ramot Polin Unit with Sukkah, 2011, building material and water-supply infrastructure

Galerie Nordenhake is pleased to present "In a New Land", Marjetica Potrč's 4th solo exhibition at the Berlin gallery. The Slovenian artist and architect is internationally renowned for her on-site projects in which her multi-disciplinary approach merges art, architecture and social science. Employing an architectural case study from Israel, the artist investigates the socio-political consequences of the implosion of a previously pre-ordained, modernist space.

In the gallery, Potrč combines the dodecahedral unit designed by Israeli architect Zvi Hecker in Ramot Polin (Jerusalem) with a sukkah, a temporary shelter used during the religious festival of Sukkot. In addition to the architectural structure, the artist presents three series of drawings that explore issues deriving from the Jewish colonization of Palestine, in particular, the original communal utopianism of the kibbutz movement and its betrayal ("In a New Land"), the need for self-protection ("From Walls to Islands"), and the rise of consumerism ("The World of Things"). Ultimately, she finds hope in a new urban model based on the kibbutz ideals of openness, sharing, and coexistence.

The settlement of Ramot Polin was built in the '70s as a social housing project; it was part of the expansion of Jerusalem into the territories Israel occupied after the Six-Day War (1967). This symbolic architecture with its cell-like structure (popularly called "the housing project for honeybees") was meant to suggest the collective spirit and openness of the Jewish society – despite its location on occupied territory. Forty years on, the Orthodox Jewish residents of Ramot Polin have built rectangular extensions on to the facades. Many of these are sukkahs, and they have substantially transformed the formal coherence of the architecture, thus making visible the failure of the modernist ideology that informed Hecker's original project.

GALERIE NORDENHAKE, October 2011

Perched on the pentagonal facades, the sukkahs convey a dual message that aptly illustrates the internal divide in Israeli society between the secular and the religious. On the one hand, by "balkanizing" the modernist architecture, they are an implied critique of the modern lifestyle; on the other, as intentionally temporary shelters they reaffirm the nomadic spirit – an architectural reminder of the ancient Israelites' wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. Thus, the sukkahs of Ramot Polin articulate an unstable balance between the nomadic and the settled way of life as a basic human condition. In this paradoxical architectural case study, Potrč again deals with counter-concepts to the modernist utopia of the "functioning city". Taken together with the three drawing series, Potr 's work proposes viable solutions based on lived experience, where security is achieved not through barrier walls, possessions and ownership claims but through the principles of sharing and coexistence.
The exhibition is kindly supported by JCVA, The Jerusalem Center for the Visual Arts and Heradesign Ceiling Systems.

Marjetica Potrč is an artist and architect based in Ljubljana and Berlin. Her work has been featured in exhibitions throughout Europe and the Americas, including the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil (1996 and 2006), the Venice Biennial (1993, 2003, and 2009) and Skulptur Projekte Münster (1997); and she has had solo shows at the Barbican Art Gallery in London (2007), Kunsthalle Fridericianum Kassel (2004) and the Guggenheim Museum in New York (2001). Her many on-site installations include: Between the Waters: The Emscher Community Garden for "Emscher Kunst" (2010), The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour (Stedelijk Goes West, Amsterdam, 2009), and Dry Toilet (Caracas, 2003). She is currently a professor at the University of Fine Arts (HfBK) in Hamburg and has taught at several other universities in Europe and North America as well, including MIT (2005) and IUAV University in Venice (2008, 2010). She has published a number of essays on contemporary urban architecture. She is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, most notably the Hugo Boss Prize (2000) and the Vera List Center for Arts and Politics Fellowship at The New School in New York (2007). She is currently engaged on the on-site project Théâtre Evolutif for "Evento 2011" in Bordeaux.

In a New Land, installation view

GALERIE NORDENHAKE, October 2011

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Marjetica Potrč

New Territories in Acre and Why They Matter

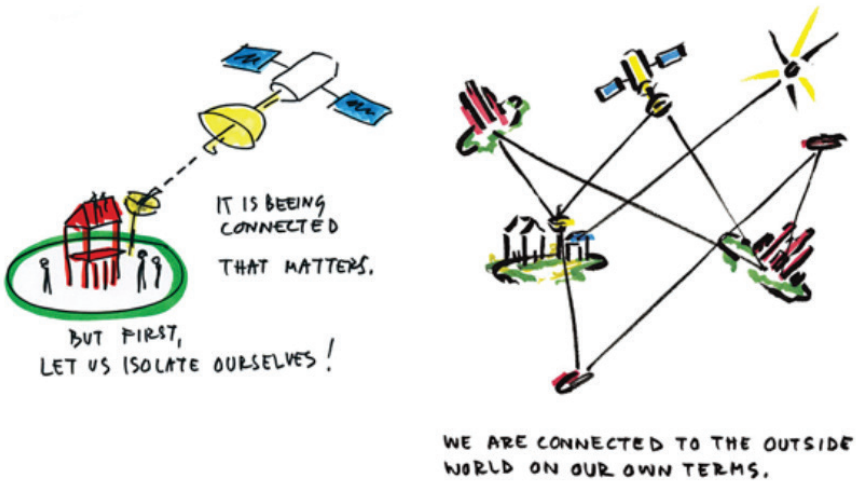
The Croa River community consists of approximately four hundred families spread out across eighty thousand hectares of Amazonian forest. They aspire to see the land they inhabit become an extraction reserve, and in fact, it is in the process of becoming precisely this: one of the new territories in Acre. As such, it is a good example of the current trend toward territorialization in the Brazilian state. It is also a good example of what territories stand for: self-organization, sustainable growth, and local knowledge.

Territorialization of Acre State (1988, 1999, 2006), Courtesy the artist

The Croa community's land is located a few hours' drive and a short boat ride from Cruzeiro do Sul. A small city, Cruzeiro do Sul is a major center for the western part of Acre and the region around the Jurua River. There are daily flights from Rio Branco, and the town is accessible by road from Rio Branco six months of the year and by the Jurua River throughout the year. From Cruzeiro do Sul it takes two to three weeks to travel by boat to Manaus. In short, the Croa community is nestled in the western corner of Brazil's Amazonian forest and, from the perspective of São Paulo, seems a remote and isolated place—something that, in our world of excessive connectivity, is considered a negative. But from the perspective of the people who live there, relative isolation can be a bonus. The communities I saw, including the Croa community, draw strength from their cultural identity and a sustainable economy. Not all these communities are strong, but they understand clearly that both these conditions are necessary if they are to thrive. The communities are well connected among themselves and, beyond Acre, with the world—strangely enough, many of the things that concern them are, in fact, more closely related to world issues than to specifically Brazilian ones.

Left: Ashanika Indian, Acre. Photo by Mauro Almeida. Right: Marjetica Potrč, Drawing No.1/7: Pattern Protects, 2007, 7 drawings. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin.

When such communities reach out to others, they want to do it on their own terms. They want to interact in a positive way with others and at the same time remain separate. By reaffirming their own territories, they are actively participating in the creation of twenty-first-century models of coexistence, where the melting pot of global cities is balanced by centers where people voluntarily segregate themselves. After all, one of the most successful and sought-after models of living together today is the gated community—the small-scale residential entity. But unlike gated communities, which represent static strategies of retreat and self-enclosure, the new territories in Acre are dynamic and proactive: they reach out to others.



Isolation and Connectivity, Left: Marjetica Potrč, drawing for project The Struggle for Spatial Justice (A luta por justiça espacial) for 27a. Bienal de São Paulo. Right: Marjetica Potrč, Drawing No.5/12, Florestania, 2006, 12 drawings. Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York.

Statement #1: *The world must be pixelized! Democracy is particles!*

Over the past two decades, Acre has been pixelizing itself into new territories, such as extraction reserves and Indian territories, along with sustainable urban territories. The government supports the territorialization of the state. These new territories are the result of collaboration between the government and local communities. The communities are self-organized entities and, basically, bottom-up initiatives. Their focus is on empowering their own people (education is a primary concern); practicing the sustainable extraction of forest-based resources; and developing a small-scale economy as both a tool for their communities' survival (several communities have been successfully selling their goods on the global market) and as a counter-model to the globalized economy created by multinational companies and organizations. The Acrean communities have a particular approach to land ownership. In the new territories, the emphasis is not on the individual owning land and extracting resources from it solely for his own benefit, but on the collective ownership and sustainable management of natural resources for the benefit of the whole community. Here, the existence of an individual is understood essentially as coexistence. Being always means "being with," and "I" does not take precedence over "we."1 In short, the new territories suggest forms of living together that go beyond neoliberalism and its understanding of individualism, liberal democracy, and market capitalism.

Notice that the new territories of Acre represent a social and economic alternative to China's new territories, which are characterized by fast-growing, large-scale economies and an ideology of progress. The territories of Acre, by contrast, are grounded in a small-scale economy; the people who live there feel a personal responsibility both toward their own communities and toward the world community.

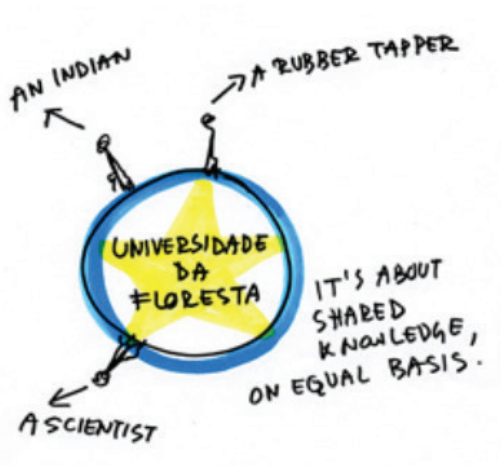
In fact, in their dynamics of deregulation and strategies of transition, Acre's new territories suggest a different comparison: with the European Union as it is today. As a geopolitical entity, Europe is constantly expanding. It is a body in flux. Within its shifting boundaries, the consequences of the gradual dissolution of the social state and the ideology of multiculturalism can be seen in territories consolidated around ethnic groups and other kinds of communities. As last year's rejection of the EU constitution by French and Dutch voters indicates, people want to live in a more localized European Union; similarly, the EU explores a paradigm in which regional entities serve as a counterbalance to the nation-state. An emphasis on the local means that more decisions are taken at the local level and bottom-up initiatives are on the increase. The state of "transition" is accepted as a working model, and there is a civil society in the making that is quite different not only from the society of twentieth-century modernism, which feared any threat to unity, but also from the present-day ideology of globalization. As regionalism and localism gain ground, new models of coexistence emerge, such as urban villages and urban villas, new typologies of residential architecture. In the heyday of the modernist national state, a residential community could mean some ten thousand people. Today, an urban village means two thousand people—a dramatic shrinkage from the earlier model. Another important distinction is that today's urban villages are, again, bottom-up initiatives,

while the modernist residential community was organized from the top down. The question is: just how far is it possible to "downscale" the world community? The territories in Acre are the result of "degrowth," the process by which society fragments and pixelizes itself down to the level of the local community, and sometimes even further, to the level of the individual.2 Age-old wisdom tells us that when individuals take responsibility for building their own lives, they also build their communities, and beyond that, the world community: "When I build my life, I build the world." As the Acrean territories show, communities see the consequences of such practices very clearly: they see "upscaling"—the scaling down of the economy and the pixelation of territories produce a new kind of connectedness: "upgrowth." In Acre, particles and group identities are forces of democracy.

Statement #2: *We must grow up strong together!*

A precondition for communities in the new territories to thrive is that they draw strength from a sustainable economy, local experience—a loose notion that embraces the importance of cultural identity—and education. The communities believe that territories which are strong in these areas have the best chance to prosper. Although the emphasis is clearly on the local (they see rural communities as guaranteeing greater dignity, in contrast to the kind of life migrants to urban centers experience), they do not romanticize localness. They see themselves as players in the contemporary world: they had to overcome both the colonial past and the dominant globalizing pressures of the present. Theirs is a post-colonial, post-neoliberal practice. From where they stand, they see the future as their present.

Universidade da Floresta (University of the Forest), Acre. Left: video still by Garret Linn, in Marjetica Potrč, Florestania: A New Citizenship, video, 2006. Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Right: Marjetica Potrč, drawing for project The Struggle for Spatial Justice (A



luta por justiça espacial) for 27a. Bienal de São Paulo.

Practice #1: *We are growing up together strong; we are connected! But first, let's isolate ourselves. Only then we will be able to connect on our own terms.*

The new territories of Acre are, indeed, strong and well aware of the benefits that come from being connected. Clearly, local emphasis, self-esteem, and connectedness make a perfect match, not a contradiction. I am thinking in particular of an ongoing initiative by Indian tribes to connect their remote areas via satellite through solar-powered communication centers. Representatives from the tribes are traveling all the time—at least this was the impression I received from encountering them on the streets of Rio Branco and at airports, or, for that matter, not seeing them because they were in São Paulo while I was in Rio Branco, or in Rio Branco when I was in Cruzeiro do Sul. Indeed, I had the feeling that they traveled more than Paulistas. An Acrean can with justice say to a Paulista: "I know you, but you don't know me." The general feeling one gets in São Paulo is that Acre is very far away, an unknown, isolated region, not well connected at all. This perspective of the center toward the periphery is overturned in Acre, where territories are understood as centers that want to connect on their own terms. Acreans don't see themselves as being too isolated. They like their degree of isolation. They draw on the wisdom of the forest: the "center" is a place in the forest where the "game"—the chance to make a good life for oneself thanks to the proximity of natural resources and community infrastructure—is strong and multiple connections to the outside world are not necessarily a bonus; the "periphery," meanwhile, is along the river, where a person may be more connected to the world outside but the "game" is not so strong. As always—and as common wisdom tells us—the center is what's most important.

School Bus, Croa Community, Acre. Left: video still by Garret Linn, in Marjetica Potrč, Florestania: A New Citizenship, video, 2006. Courtesy the artist and Max Protetch Gallery, New York. Right: Marjetica Potrč, drawing for project The Struggle for Spatial Justice (A luta por justiça espacial) for 27a. Bienal de São Paulo.

Practice #2: *We marry local experience with hi-tech knowledge!*

The new territories of Acre are strong "centers" with rich local experience; they balance connectedness and isolation well. In a way, these territories are perfect islands: you can reach anyone from here but not everyone can reach you. The next most important thing is their practice of self-sustainable management—the result of blending local experience and hi-tech knowledge. Hi-tech sustainable solutions help them upgrade their living conditions, and allow them to communicate and trade

from remote locations with little or no energy infrastructure. Advanced technology (such as solar-powered satellite dishes) means that at last, in the twenty-first century, the remote territories of Acre can themselves become centers, no less than other places, by using self-generated energy, which in turn gives them greater freedom in communicating. Without a doubt, the combination of local experience (from the territories) with hi-tech knowledge (from Brazil) is potentially a geopolitical advantage. But can it really work without the support of the state?

Practice #3: *Happiness is: growing in small steps! Ours is a dignified life! We are accountable for ourselves and to others!*

Those who manage the sustainable extraction of forest-based resources see the small-scale economy both as a tool for their own survival as well as a new economic model that is necessary for the survival of the planet and society at large. In Acre, clichés acquire real meaning: "The survival of the rain forest is the survival of the earth; the rain forest is the final frontier; the world is one community." It feels as if Acre's government and its people are on a mission. Does the future of the world depend on locally managed territories and small-scale economies providing a balance to the globalizing forces of multinational companies and organizations? The people I spoke with in Acre are convinced of this. But there's a Catch-22, an obvious contradiction that resides in the very notion of sustainability. While any nonsustainable extraction of forest resources would have dire consequences not only to these communities but also to the entire world, efforts to achieve self-sustainable management of the forest through a small-scale economy present important challenges. Can the territories really survive and even thrive on this? Apart from natural resources, how well does local knowledge trade on the global market?

Practice #4: *We protect what belongs to us! Cupuaçu is ours!*

The new territories of Acre are strong centers and well connected; they practice self-sustainability and self-protection. The protection of the new territories is a must, not only because of the long history of their cultures being abused—which means self-protection comes naturally to those who live here—but also because of the ongoing threat of bio-piracy. The unlawful theft of natural resources in a region whose greatest wealth is biodiversity ranges from famous incidents involving the theft of rubber tree seeds (which led to the collapse of the region's rubber extraction economy), to recent cases of a Japanese company, among others, attempting to patent the indigenous fruit known as cupuaçu (the Japanese patent has recently been revoked). So it's no surprise, really, that Acre's efforts to protect the territories from outsiders may seem excessive. The remoteness of their location does not guarantee sufficient protection for the Indian territories. If visitors to an extraction reserve are viewed with healthy suspicion because of fears that they might be involved with bio-piracy, a visit to an Indian tribe is extremely difficult to arrange. The main reason for this is to shield indigenous cultures. In theory, all would-be visitors to an Indian tribe must state their reasons for wanting to travel there, and visits must

then be approved by the community. In this way, the territories remind us of the fortified city-states of Renaissance Italy or today's contested territories in the West Bank. Indeed, the Acrean practice of planting trees as border protection in defense of one's territory mirrors practices by Palestinians and Jewish settlers before the erection of the Israeli Barrier Wall halted negotiations between the two communities. A major difference, however, is that, while the Acrean territories may recall walled cities, they are not closed off. Today, the borders of these fragile and contested territories are porous. They permit and even welcome negotiations. And as for any precise demarcation of these territories' borders, this remains in flux for the simple reason that rivers change their course and villages relocate themselves in the search for natural resources. And here is a contradiction: these strong territories are in fact fragile territories. To be able to exist and prosper, they need to be constantly communicating with the world and negotiating with their neighbors.

Practice #5: *We are not objects of study! We want to share our knowledge on equal terms! In a horizontal world, education must be horizontal! To each group, their own education! We are unique!*

Education—learning and sharing knowledge—is a crucial issue for the new territories, but the same may be said for the whole of Brazil and beyond. We have learned that the riches of education, though seemingly immaterial, are what guarantee the material wealth of nations. Today, the richest countries are those with the strongest educational systems. This awareness is even more important in the context of Brazil, ranked first in the world in the gap between rich and poor—which also means there is an immense gap where education is concerned. The new territories of Acre, although wealthy in both natural and intellectual resources, cannot hope to provide the kind of high-quality education the rich world demands. But being so inventive, the people of Acre organize things differently. The goal is to customize education for particular groups in the community. Established hierarchies are put in question, and education is organized in a way that makes sense for the community. Schools and local knowledge are cherished and protected—just as the territories themselves are. It struck me that the demands that shape education are, in a way, similar to those that shape the territories. Both exist for their people and both are necessary for people's prosperity and aspirations, framing the life of the community.
Two collaborations are under way in Acre that I find especially inspiring. One involves the building of schools in remote areas for primary education; this is a collaboration between the local communities and the government. A typical school of this sort is equipped with extensive solar paneling and a satellite dish—in other words, an energy supply and a means of communication with the world. The second collaboration concerns higher education. This is the University of the Forest, whose goal is to bring together the knowledge of rubber-tappers, Indians, academics, and scientists so as to marry local experience with Western science. This makes sense. Brazil, after all, is a hi-tech country where the knowledge of those who live in the forest is not taught in the classroom but experienced directly. Indians and rubber-tappers, the caretakers of the forest, don't want to be objects of research. They want to con-

tribute to our shared knowledge on an equal basis. They want to trade their knowledge as they see fit. I see the University of the Forest as a new and important model for higher education.

Statement #3: *The people of the '60s were thinkers; we are doers!*

My aim in writing this was to make sense of what I experienced during my stay in Acre in March and April 2006. I know that my assessment of the situation is far from thorough, but so be it. For me, it all comes down to the question: "What does it mean to live a dignified and responsible life today?" I realize that the community structures in Acre are not intended as models for other communities. The things I have mentioned here are simply their practice—the practice of sustainable existence. For me, their strategies recall other twenty-first-century experiences, such as the new states of the Western Balkans, which were formed when the region collapsed in the wars in the 1990s; like Acre, this region, too, has become pixelized into small territories—territories that are rejuvenating themselves by implementing practices and pursuing aspirations similar to those of the people of Acre. In both cases, downscaling is producing a scaling up: these particles and group identities are not static and self-enclosed, but dynamic and open to the world. I believe that faster and slower worlds can exist simultaneously in parallel realities, and the Western Balkans and Acre seem to me to be fast worlds, in some ways ahead of the rest. So it's possible for us to learn from their practices.

I loved what I saw in Acre. It would be nice to think that the proposals of Constant and Yona Friedman, as well as other thinkers of the 1960s, such as Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, who dreamed of a world community, provided inspiration for the people who are today forging Acre's new territories, but I know that the Acreans have very likely never heard of them. Still, it's beautiful to see that the doers of today are materializing the ideas of the thinkers of the '60s. I thought it was fantastic how everyone we talked with in Acre saw clearly the benefits of their practices, for both themselves and the world community, and understood how to implement them. The new Acrean territories make me hopeful for our future coexistence. Their success is evidence that humanity can function as an intelligent organism. As it reaches critical mass, the world community, combined with a free-market economy, is generating alternative approaches to today's neoliberalism, whether this means an emphasis on small-scale economies or a society based on local communities. Most importantly, those who live in the Acrean territories understand themselves as particles in, and contributors to, the world community.

For sharing their vision and experience, I am particularly grateful to Camila Sposati, who provided me with a superb introduction to Acre and its people, to Sergio de Carvalho e Souza, who was an incredible guide for understanding the new territories, to members of the Croa community (Gean Carlos de Oliveira and Silvana Rossi), to representatives of the Indians (Luiz Waldenir Silva de Souza and Mutsa Katukina), the extraction reserves, and the government (Chico Genu and Marcus Vinicius), as well as to Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, co-author of the Enciclopédia da Floresta and a key figure in the University of the Forest, and many others besides.

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Form Follows Function

MONOGRAPH

Melding utopianism with utilitarianism, Marjetica Potrc's projects and exhibitions prompt questions about the responsibilities of artists to the greater social realm

'By most estimates, 2007 will see the world's urban population outnumber the rural population for the first time, while those living in slums will exceed a billion. The UN predicts numbers of slum-dwellers will probably double in the next 30 years, meaning the developing world slum will become the primary habitat of mankind.' -The Guardian Weekend, 1 April 2006

The best way to see a star in the night sky is not to look at it; you will see it more clearly out of the corner of your eye. Effecting social change can also demand a similar side-stepping of what might initially appear logical. Without funding or government involvement, social, economic or ecological crises are unsolvable unless imaginative leaps are taken, fuelled by what could best be described as a wild-eyed pragmatism; a desire for what is seemingly impossible and then the achieving of it. (I am reminded of the recent extraordinary photograph of a Greenpeace activist somehow clinging to the back of a thrashing, harpooned whale in the middle of a boiling sea, while being battered by water jets from Japanese sailors – a form of direct action Herman Melville might have approved of but which I doubt was ever suggested in a boardroom.)

Thinking up solutions to tricky problems – how, say, to flush a toilet without water or build a home without official permission or create sustainable architecture from locally sourced or recycled materials, or grow a hydroponic vegetable garden on a roof – is what interests Marjetica Potrc. A Slovenian artist who originally trained as an architect, she now considers herself a storyteller who builds stories with architectural materials. When asked why she shifted her career from architecture to art, she said, 'I don't like the idea of sitting in an architect's office and drawing plans, poring over the papers and thinking about a city as a body that you can control, save and operate like surgeons do.'

An inveterate optimist, Potrc produces work that is fierce in its emphasis on the workable, home-grown solutions – not failings – that characterize individuals and communities faced with seemingly insurmountable economic and social problems, most of which have been caused by the worst manifestations of capitalism, post-colonialism and globalism. Uninterested in simply pointing out the inequities she witnesses in order to generate compassion, she prefers to live with, talk to, learn from and create projects with local people directly affected by their environments. One example of this approach is Caracas: Dry Toilet (2003–4), the result of a six-month stay in a barrio (shanty-town) in Caracas in Venezuela during which Potrc, in collaboration with Israeli architect Liyat Esakov and the La Vega neighbourhood association, designed a dry, ecologically safe toilet that collects waste and turns it into fertilizer for an area with no running water.

Potrc describes the invention as an 'attempt to rethink the relationship between infrastructure and architecture in real-life urban practice in a city where about half the population receives water from municipal authorities no more than two days a week.' In 2004, on the other side of the world, Potrc was commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial to respond to the city as she saw fit. After discussions with the residents of the 14th floor of Bispham House, a run-down tower block, she designed Balcony with Wind Turbine (2004): a bay window with a wind-turbine attached to it was added to a flat to supply it with free energy and better views across the city. The artist writes 'One of the most important points I wanted to make was that tenants do not have to be resettled in order to improve their living conditions.' More recently, Potrc's ongoing project Europe Lost and Found is an international, interdisciplinary research project that the artist devised in collaboration with curator and artist Kyong Park after they had journeyed together for some months to various cities in the Balkans. Over the next three years they hope to explore, through

discussion, exhibitions, events and collaboration with a large group of architects, artists and cultural workers, the present workings and future imaginings of Europe's shifting borders and territories. At the time of writing, however, Potrc has just arrived in Acre, a remote Amazon region of Brazil, close to the Bolivian border, to study the relationship between the stilt houses known as palafitas, the regeneration of the local economy and how traditional life in Acre has adapted to 21st-century society. She will be there for two months, and in September the results of her research will be displayed, in a way that has yet to be decided, in the appropriately titled São Paulo Biennial 'How to Live Together'.

Despite the educational aspects of her practice, Potrc's research resists neat conclusions about the relationship between architecture and art; she conflates contrasting architectural motifs in her gallery-based sculptural installations not as answers to or illustrations of a problem but as points of discussion. This can confound the viewer, who might approach her work expecting a purely anthropological take on cause and effect. Using the gallery to explore displacement of pre-existent forms as a direct form of critical engagement with the world outside its white walls, Potrc treats buildings and objects alike as rough templates of ready-mades: she does not make exact replicas of the original dwellings for her shows but builds hybrid structures in the manner of the barrio, using materials that are cheap, available and sourced in the vicinity of the gallery, juxtaposing unrelated elements from various locations. In this sense her work literally evolves: the same installation will differ from show to show. With its bright colours and unexpected leaps from country to architecture and then back to the gallery, the playfulness of Potrc's work is as much about her own inventiveness as an artist as it is about the creativity of the people she is drawing our attention to. (As Max Protetch put it, she makes 'structures that are sculptures based on architecture based on human inventiveness'.) Some examples of this approach include Caracas: House with Extended Territory (2003), that she built in Berlin's Galerie Nordenhake, and Summer House (2004), shown at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany, which comprised a rebuilding of a house designed by the early Modernist architect Paul Rudolph Walker, that Potrc installed inside a water tower. Next Stop, Kiosk Building (2003), exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, Slovenia, was a reconstruction of a Brazilian stilt house balanced on top of a group of city kiosks designed in the late 1960s as mobile dwelling units by the Ljubljana-based architect Sasa Maechtig. Similarly, Potrc's monumental sculpture Hybrid House: Caracas, West Bank, West Palm Beach, which she made for her exhibition 'Urgent Architecture' at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art (PBICA) in 2003, juxtaposes reconstructions from the temporary architecture of Caracas, the West Bank and West Palm Beach, Florida – three areas that, although culturally disparate, share concerns about public and private space, personal safety and community interaction. This enormous work was built from materials including turned wooden dowels, black plastic milk crates, corrugated red metal, grids, a water tank, concrete blocks, a satellite dish, a mobile home, a 'dry' toilet and a quantity of bright pink paint. Scrawled across the gallery wall was the slogan 'All that is temporary desires permanence'. Reflecting on this piece, Potrc wrote 'the most important thing about this exhibition was the attempt to construct an understandable language out of the apparent madness of cities in crisis.'

Potrc is not only interested in architectural solutions to urban problems. For her ongoing project Power Tools, Experimental Prototypes and Utilitarian Objects (2001– ongoing) she makes colourful, simply rendered drawings and texts inspired by various ingenious commercially produced objects she admires. These include inventions such as the Hippo Water Roller (a device created by Imvubu Projects to facilitate the individual transport of water from a well to a home in townships in South Africa), solar-powered flashlights, a clockwork mobile phone charger and a survival kit used by the Mexican government and the US Border Patrol for would-be immigrants that contains anti-diarrhoeal medicine, adhesive bandages, birth control pills and condoms. She has also done a series of photographs of wild animals living in the city ('Animal Sightings', 2001); 'like immigrants,' she said, 'they just keep coming.'

Potrc's explorations of how communities solve the tribulations any group of people living together inevitably face often take the shape of 'Case Studies', multilayered works that are manifested as texts that Potrc posts up on her website (http://www.potrc.org). For her online project Urban Independent Potrc asks 'What does India's Barefoot College have in common with the annual Burning Man gathering in the United States, the Dutch urban development project Leidsche Rijn, Jordan's East Wahdat Upgrading Program, and the Rural Studio in Alabama? While each of these settlements represents a

distinct local story, none of them have accepted established ways of envisioning community or the regulations imposed by society. Their success is founded upon the active participation of individuals in designing, building, and implementing their architecture and infrastructure systems.' For the project Potrc asked a representative from each group – either the founder or a participant – to respond to a set of questions that explore the motivations and implications of what they have achieved: 'What was the catalyst for your endeavour? Whose community is it? What models did you look at while developing this project? What problem-solving practices have been instrumental in creating locally responsive solutions? Can these be applied to other communities? And what does the future bring?'

Potrc's work is complicated and, at times, superficially contradictory. Although the focus of her attention is seemingly a long way, in every sense, from the cool environment of the conventional gallery space, she obviously regularly exhibits in major commercial galleries, museum shows and biennials. Her practice inevitably raises questions about the aptness of an art gallery as a site for the discussion of social deprivation. As Jan Verwoert has asked: 'Is it a politically legitimate gesture to appropriate architectural forms born from need and necessity and restage them in the context of an art discourse?'7 To Potrc the answer to such a question could only be 'no' if you believe that art galleries are the decadent ruins of a once potent site of discussion – something that Potrc, who talks passionately about the still untapped potential of art's educational and communicative role, doesn't believe for a second. For her, art at its best is a form of consciousness-raising and possibility, and the gallery a site for reflection and discussion.

Melding Utopianism with utilitarianism, Potrc is simultaneously a documentarian, archivist, educator, inventor and sculptor. Her approach is firmly in the tradition of socially engaged artists from around the world including Bonnie Sherk, Andrea Zittel, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Yona Friedman, Michael Rakowitz, Dan Graham and Aleksandra Mir, to name but a few, whose work springs from real-life situations that prompt discussion about the relationship and responsibility of the artist to a greater social realm – be it a children's farm, a shelter, clothing, an improvised dwelling for a homeless person or abortion rights. In many ways, though, her artistic lineage can also be traced directly back to the fascination Dada and Situationist artists and writers had with the aesthetics of everyday life, with the idea of the city as an organic moral entity, and to their shared belief in social change being integral to creativity – and vice versa. Potrc, however, never loses sight of the individual struggling to make a living at the heart of these debates. As she put it: 'One could say that the empowerment of individuals through architecture is political, and this is true – design and aesthetics, after all, have never been neutral. But this misses the main point. For it is simply a question of human dignity to be able to build your home the way you envision it.'

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