

Maidier Lopez

Why aren't we bursting into laughter in Maidier Lopez's projects although most of them are in the border of absurd and intensely humorous: people from the diverse walks of life gathering at the Aralar mountain to create a traffic jam or teaming up to play football at the Ottoland polder where is an impossible site for football as it is crisscrossed with water channels, or trying to swim in a pool in Rennes with other 85 swimmers in an unbroken line?

Instead of guffaws, as in the films of French director Jacques Tati, we enjoy participating to Lopez's projects with a smile on the corner of our cheeks and in a discreet joyous mood in line with her quiet style of humor. She makes us experience the state of things when their orders are slightly shifted, altered or displaced. Through the tiny details of everyday life, the spaces we are surrounded or the trivial ordinary relations between the people, we develop an insight into the structure and order of things and are surprised by the fact that how they are fragile and can be simply otherwise.

'Self-organization creates collective ways'¹: Models of Sociability

Lopez's work often involves with, and even structured around, the active participation of the audiences, triggering people from diverse layers of society to create unusual, contrasting and mostly impossible situations. Proposing specific models of sociability, she achieves to inspire people to do things; i.e. to use red color towels on the beach at Zumaia or coming together to extend (simulate) the architecture of Guggenheim Bilbao temporarily or cover the Chain Bridge in Budapest with the umbrellas in the same color of the Danube below to make the bridge disappear.

"So that, each person came to the traffic jam, for different reasons, and that's what I am interested in. Normally, you go to a demonstration if you agree with an idea or ideology" Lopez states in an interview² responding a question on the "Ataskoa" (Traffic Jam) project that she realized in 2005 at the Aralar mountain in the Basque Country. The project brought together diverse individuals, groups, communities networks, classes, ages and genders all over the country including Intza, the little village at the mountain, and even the contrasting ones: both car lovers / collectors who enjoy showing off their antique cars and environmentalists who take this event as an opportunity to react against the automobile culture and the pollution it causes. Although in this project, there appears an evident political cause for the environmentalist group, actually, she is not tempted by creating projects bordering between art and activism. She is more interested in the micro social models in which she foresees and builds up possibilities for unexpected, intimate, even unique encounters for people.

"All works of art produce a model of sociability, which transposes reality or might be conveyed in it. So there is a question we are entitled to ask in front of any aesthetic production: 'Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist,

and how, in the space it defines?"³ Nicolas Bourriaud puts forth the co-existence criterion while defining the art of the 1990s as "relational art", which he delineates as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."⁴

The "relationality" of the artwork with its physical environment, urban, social, political, economic and historical contexts and its engagement with the publics/audiences is also focal point in Lopez's practice. From this aspect, her work can be considered in the frame of "relational aesthetics". However, although her projects are mostly based on mediating human relations, visibility and form is a significant part of her projects, embodying the relational aesthetics with form. She initiates festive gatherings or event-based projects that allow micro socializations, in which there are always a strong visual component and spatial formal organization that makes each project a singular and unique work of art.

Articulating the politics of everyday life, in each case, she tailors specific strategies and plans to research and test how and in which conditions individuals from the different layers of society can come together to act together, especially during such precarious times that we are living in. However, Lopez's practice goes beyond cultivating human relations or empowering the publics to bring out their capacity to change. She creates temporary situations to cultivate the singularities/subjectivities, while creating a common platform gathering them to act collectively.

The co-existence and hybridity underlies her work as in the "Football Field" project that she developed in the context of the 9th Sharjah Biennial, 2007. Having converted an existing square into a football field in which all the other functions continued to co-exist and the street furniture like the benches or the lamp posts and passers-by interfered with the game, she developed a situation where both the players and usual frequenters of the square not only adapted to the situation, but also exercised an unusual experience of the urban public space that anticipates unique interactions and communications. Challenging the top-down design and determined functions of the architecture and urban public spaces, with slight shifts and interventions, she endeavors to reinvent the public spaces through the actions, use and daily routines of the diverse publics.

Lopez starts her projects either from the spatial context and site-specific content of a place / geography such as the Aralar Mountains, the polders in Netherlands or the bridge over the Danube river and builds up the event on such givens, or by spotting and highlighting the existing public spaces that have the capacity for such temporary micro social confrontations and hybrid interactions to happen. In the "In Situ" (2012) for instance she spotted 9 public spaces in Urdaibai where short moments of encounter is possible: the water fountain where people go to fill the bottles, the level crossing, where people wait while the barriers are down when the train is passing, or the two benches at the entrance to the Bermeo Town Hall that invite unusual encounters.

On the other hand, in the “Making Ways” (2013) that she realized for the 13th Istanbul Biennial, she excavates spontaneous collective movements of the Istanbulites at the pedestrian crossing^[SEP] in Karaköy, a major central^[SEP] transportation hub where^[SEP] traffic and pedestrians^[SEP] coexist side by side. She^[SEP] filmed this crossing from^[SEP] an aerial perspective to make a film, and from which she extracted and highlighted the collective routes that pedestrians took randomly for 2 minutes 15 seconds between 06:03 pm and 06:05 pm on August 2, 2013. Having revealed the latent potential in the daily practices of Istanbulites, the practice of self-organization through simple daily actions, she created a ‘user’s manual’ providing possible instructions on how to cross the roads, and perhaps more: ‘Taking action is easier when a group is generated’, or ‘Self-organization creates collective ways’.

“The wall is our assumptions”⁵: Representational Regimes

Most of us are convinced by the necessity of the social, spatial and constitutional contracts that regulate common living practices. Moreover, we believe in the rationality and strict rules underlying them; architecture, cities (built environment) and societies we live in. From minor details to the significant configurations, we aren’t inclined to question but try our best to appropriate them. Taking such convictions as a departure point, Lopez’s projects do not simply devise diverse places and situations to open up a genuine experience of space but make “us conscious of what we agree what to see, i.e. take for granted.”⁶

Regardless of their content and context, Lopez’s projects exclusively focus on people and spaces, exactly how they relate to each other. Her practice is marked by spatial interventions that subtly unfold this relationship that determines our perception, articulating the question of representational regimes with the experience of audiences. When we visit galleries or museums, our appreciation or comments on the exhibition are almost always confined with the works exhibited and usually less than what we actually perceive: art works and architecture. We usually perceive works on the walls of the “white cube” that are physically abstracted and isolated from any possible connotations that can interfere with the form and content of the works, thus, we tend to disregard the architecture and spatial organization of the exhibition venue, taking them for granted as something facilitates the “pure” perception of the works. Furthermore, we inclined to think that perception is unmediated and pure, too. In his iconic book on the ideology of gallery space Brian O’Doherty states: “The spotless gallery wall, though a fragile evolutionary product of a highly specialized nature, is impure. It subsumes commerce and esthetics, artist and audience, ethics and expediency... The wall is our assumptions.”⁷

Through spatial interventions, Lopez enjoys interrupting our assumptions and expectations, interfering with the relationship between the audience, artwork and space. She created instable moving floors, influencing the initial experience of the audiences who stepped in to the Italian pavilion at the 51st Venice Biennial in 2005, made extra walls occupying the whole exhibition stand leaving almost no room for the audiences for the Project Room at the ARCO Art Fair in 2007 as an allegory of art

fairs, or obstructed the exhibition space with 110 columns in Caixa Forum in 2006. Likewise, in her most recent project “Displacement” (2015) that she realizes in the exhibition hall at Koldo Mitxelena Kulturunea the basement of Bibliotheca in San Sebastian, the unusually thick walls of the exhibition space are duplicated with a slight frontal shift of 140cm and 190cm lateral displacement. By doing this, she interferes with the perception of the audience altering the relationship of the space as the container and the artwork that which is contained: The architecture becomes the artwork itself. As the height of the walls is 50cm, they turn into abstract sculptural objects that can be viewed from above exposing the very size and scale of the walls in regards the plan of the exhibition hall.

Her inquiries into the semiotics of space have cultivated in a number of projects that she created for museums. Reading the entirety of gallery space as our visual arena, for instance, she pointed out to the very existence of technical apparatuses such as the ones for acclimatization or security and the signs that we agreed to take for granted. In the Marco Museum in Vigo in 2008, multiplying the already existing safety cameras, she created an installation mimicking fungus type of organisms that contagiously expand throughout the museum space. By attaching signs for signs in Christchurch Art Gallery in the frame of 5th Scape Biennial in 2008, she pointed out to the “user friendly” policies of the museums that sometimes go beyond the limits of their purposes.

Lopez interferes not only with the physicality of the spaces to alter our perception of them but also directly with our perception through delicate shifts in perspective. In the “Off_Sight” (2008) project, through an open call she invited the residents of Christchurch to come together in the main open-air shopping center of the city on the 4th of September 2008 to conceal the street advertisements of the shops and companies. She choreographed the positions and postures of the people with ordinary daily objects such as an umbrella, flowerpot, birthday cake, guitar, luggage or balloons in their hands in accordance with a certain viewpoint, from which all the advertisements were disappeared. The project does not only aim at bringing people together in a social mood to cover the signs in public domain, but in her own words, it intends to “create an awareness of the capacity that people have to transform urban spaces and construct the city.”⁸

Although the resulting scene -with people in strange poses with diverse objects in their hands stretching, sitting, reading, walking or standing on top of a stopper to cover the commercial signs- visualizes an extremely improbable, even an absurd situation to happen on the streets, it still signifies a possibility to transform our environment through our actions even though they may look pointless at the first sight.

“Follow someone wearing glasses until s/he arrives somewhere”⁹ : Mapping Out

The complex relationship between structure and chaos, rational and irrational, and causality and coincidence marks Lopez’s practice, highlighting the surprising

necessity of influence of coincidence and chance happening in life. What seems most improbable may actually be the most probable situation to happen, yet, their excavation requires serious patience and effort as exemplified in her “Crossing” project that she realized during a residency programme in Rotterdam in 2006.

Having noticed a juxtaposition of colors of the architectural elements with the cloths of a person passing by in front of a building, she began to think about this relationship that generates a camouflage for the person walking. In order to raise her chance, she either spotted a person wearing a cloth with a distinctive color and followed her/him till such a coincidence happened or a building front whose color seemed promising and waited for someone to walk by wearing the same color (or color combination) of the building. Although we may not be able to understand if there are any rules behind such chance happenings, or to make deductions on cultural choice of inhabitants on colors in this case, at least we can have an idea of the process of creating such a project, how the artist related herself to the city, “drifting” from one place to another following or searching one color after another. She creates her own game of wandering around the city like the Situationist’s drift (dérive) that is an unplanned tour in the city following the feelings that a specific architectural feature or urban texture of a corner, or the spatial organization of a street evokes, rather than following the official city maps that not only categorize the cities in accordance with commerce, tourism and ideological interests, but also frame our experience of them.

“Follow someone wearing glasses until s/he arrives somewhere” is one of the “instructions” on the postcards that she produced for the “Another via” project realized in Jerusalem in 2009. Through such specific instructions, but, depending on extensively common features that we can come across very easily any moment in any city, Lopez aims to unleash the boundaries of a given structure to make us free to get lost and enjoy this “planned” unplanned tour of the city. She furthers her tribute to the Situationist International in “How do you live this space?” (2010), producing a map of “psychogeography” of Huntly town in Scotland created by its inhabitants. Having asked people to place color coded stones –i.e. the red ones imply “I would like to change or improve this place” or the blue ones indicate “Something important in my life happened here” - in diverse parts of the town in accordance with their unique remembrances and experiences of these specific places, she sought to generate a collective map of the town, making the invisible subjective perceptions of the town dwellers visible.

In the “Moving Stones” (2015) project, she alludes to the invisible transformation of the landscape in Uçhisar Cappadocia, an extraordinary geography with its unusual geological formation and specific soft structure of rocks resulted from mega volcanic explosions and other natural phenomena. It is said that each year, the skin of the geography gets 2-3 cm thinner due to rain, snow and wind. In relation to this invisible yet considerable change in the landscape, she performed daily walks during which she moved stones from one location to another. Her unplanned

spontaneous itineraries were documented through the dual GPS coordinates and the photographic duos recording the original location and the place where it was moved.

“It is not any special stone” she says, “it is just a stone, it becomes special since the moment of choosing and carrying it”. The stones are not of a special valuable type nor the movement of small stones makes a substantial visible change in the landscape. Just like the transportation of for instance marble from Italy to the other parts of the world for art making and architecture, or obsidian from Anatolia for speculation and creating precious objects that are also out of our sight (so invisible to us), she moves the earth material that otherwise can stay in its place for hundreds / thousands of years until a mega natural phenomenon happens. From this perspective, she changed the nature physically, “measurably” and permanently though in a very small scale, reminding us the inevitable impact of our tiniest actions may have.

Through the tiny details, Lopez aspires us to map out and untangle the complex web of relations that structure how we live. Between useless and impossible (but never unserious nor loose), between irrational and coincidental (but never nonsensical nor unreasonable), and between the triviality of everyday life and existential metaphysical questions (but always tinted with wit), her projects unfasten the joints of the real to expose the possibilities of imaginary that can actually transform the reality.

¹ Quotation from the manuel Maider Lopez devised as a part of “Making Ways” realized in the frame of the 13th Istanbul Biennial, 2013

² Quoted from Maider Lopez’s talk at the conference held in Witte de With in 2010

³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. *Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods* (Paris: Les presses du Réel, 2002), p. 109.

⁴ Ibid. 113.

⁵ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, Chapter III “Context as Content”, Lapis Press, San Francisco, 1976, 1981, 1986. 79-80

⁶ Ibid. 66

⁷ Ibid. 79-80

⁸ Quotation from the website of the artist

⁹ Quotation from the postcard instructions for “Another via” Project that Maider Lopez realized in Jerusalem in 2009