

Apparitions Theatre

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Going into the bend I can feel my arms getting heavier. What did you expect?, I ask myself, since in Jordi Colomer's works something always comes up: a race, a bonfire, a party. Or it might be people jumping into the water, walking against the wind, planting a flag in the middle of nothing and then sharing paella. If a text is ever mentioned, it tends to be programmatic, and here's where Charles Fourier, Yonna Friedman, or the Situationists come in. I like it when they do this sideways, and it's like an invitation to act or like the sort of recipe others will adapt and make their own by using what's available in their pantries. This same impulse led me to devise the following parade, made up of different moments, and written in the midst of a film shooting where I ended up hugging a fake building, as an extra. These are situations based on real facts and actual spaces that crept into my head, at times in the form of a conversation. At other times they were like warnings, flashes, possibilities, or the kind of settings I'd like—but haven't yet managed—to reach. They also came to me as riddles—and here I'm thinking of a town that spontaneously forms each year, made up of snowbirds fleeing the all-too-harsh winters.

I. A stone in your shoe

The said town is in Quartzsite, Arizona. I bet life over there is quite different from life in New York, Chicago, or San Francisco, where people easily fall into debt and may even think about Europe—that continent where you're served coffee with a mean attitude and universities are under-appreciated. During the low season, Quartzsite has about 3,000 inhabitants, but beginning in October, something extraordinary occurs. People from all over come in their RVs. At first it was the climate that attracted them, as well as the inexpensive campgrounds in BLM land, but then over time that spot in the middle of the desert became a prime tourist enclave, and today it's one of the ten most densely populated areas in the US—just for a few months each year. In March this townscape begins to melt away as people migrate back to wherever they came from, saying goodbye till next year.

What brings more than 1,5 million people each year—of their own free will—to Quartzsite’s RV parks? I find it impossible not to ask this question, since the town’s two main attractions are a gravesite monument topped with a camel—a reminder of an unsuccessful attempt to import camels into the region during the US-Mexican War—and a gem and mineral show where you can get stones of all shapes and sizes, generally of little value, but offering an excuse for interactions, information exchange, and bonding between people—much in the same way we as kids used to gather anxiously at street corners to exchange trading cards. The whole point was actually to make friends.

One evening, a disciple of Gurdjieff with only four surviving teeth placed one such stone inside his shoe. “Don’t be stubborn and do as I do”, he suggested to his neighbor Miss Newsom who, being so knowledgeable in ornithology and able to play the piano since the age of 5, was feeling quite vexed for having lost the ability to write songs. She dreaded being a victim of her own virtuosity. “I’d like to forget everything, but I get lost in symphonies”, she confessed to him, “and being constantly on tour doesn’t help much”. The disciple insisted: “The little stone. With each step it will make you think of your own body and focus on the present.” And then he added: “There’s no relief without pain.” A similar idea had led this same man to practice writing with his opposite hand for a period of time, “for the brain is a muscle and it’s good to exercise it”. Upon hearing this Miss Newsom lowered her head, less in amazement at this stranger’s words than at his eyes, so dazzling, they looked like sores. Not very far away, some boys were refining their marksmanship by aiming larger stones at empty cans, while their sisters, who were practicing magic tricks, accepted them as payment for admission to their show.

II. Cathedral cars

Other apparitions come to mind, though—since not everything must come from North America. I’m thinking of the villages submerged under the waters of reservoirs during Franco’s regime in Spain, or the hotel in Transylvania where scares are included in the price of a room. Or the clock at the British Bar in Lisbon, whose numbers run backwards, mysteriously; or the traffic jams generated by cars that slow down upon reaching the border. Stevedores in Marseilles call these automobiles *voitures cathédrales*, because their bodywork is barely visible—nor are the seats for that matter. On their rooftops, piles of mattresses, chairs, basins, and even carpets and bikes are secured with ropes. They are nothing like RVs and yet these singular monuments might also be regarded somehow as “mobile homes” (Miss Newsom, with or without a stone in her shoe, would agree). Should there be neck-ties in the boot of the car, they must be fewer than eight, unless you want to declare them at customs. Personal computers and home appliances are also exempt, provided they are second-hand or have some sort of defect. Most of these items belong to migrants who travel back from France to the North of Africa to see their families every year in June, carrying with them half their lives’ possessions. They try to avoid bumps in the roads that would damage their vehicles’ shock-absorbers, overstressed by excess luggage. They may listen to the radio along the way. On France Culture, an “expert” states: “In abstract—yet at the same time very specific and material—terms, I believe we should rethink politics not so much as an endeavor

to educate others and explain things to them, but as the art of facilitating encounters, of building alternative synchronicities and orchestrations for rhythms as well as multitudes, of finding new practices and embodiments. After all, we are not resigned to capitalism because we are convinced by hyper-consistent, persuasive ideological constructions, but out of sheer inertia”. That sounds nice, but how to alter that inertia?

III. The milky chase

We might perhaps learn something from popular festivals and celebrations, though the one example I’m thinking of right now may not be the most sophisticated. It’s an annual event that happens in Britain.

The Cooper’s Hill Cheese-Rolling and Wake is a tradition of unknown origin mentioned in documents dating back to the 1800s. The event involves rolling a round of Gloucester cheese from the top of a hill and racing after it down very steep slopes. Mud, grass, and the steep incline make it very hard for most competitors to stay on their feet. They become veritable croquettes as they chase after a cheese that always reaches the finish line ahead of them! Contestants may wear masks, panda bear costumes, or national flags wrapped around their bodies. If they reach breakneck speeds, they may let themselves be intercepted by the *catchers*—strong blokes who try to stop the runners at the bottom of the hill, to ensure they do not injure themselves by running into people or trees. However, this does not suffice to prevent a steady number of injuries each year, from bruises to sprains and splinters... I wonder if it’s some sort of ancestral impulse that drives these people to run after the cheese. On the sides, the public cheers and applauds and takes videos that soon go viral.

Comments aside, I suppose festivals basically serve the same purpose as rites of all kinds: they create an extension of reality. They provide a space for self-purging, through consensually pre-arranged excesses that we internalize as something vital and necessary.



PARPA WER: But WTF is this?

TROGLODITA: Hahaha. Now I understand Brexxxit.

MR. SAILOR: All for a cheese. Testosterone unbound!

X-LOS-PELOS: Pay attention at 00.23... R.I.P?

NOSOYCHANDLER: ... I thought it was the Yankees that were assholes.

AIXA78: As if people in Spain didn't throw live goats from church bell towers.

IV. Vandalizing interlude

Worthy of separate mention are people who act alone, in a fit of rage, and here I'm thinking of young Ciara P. from Rome, Italy, who had been feeling disappointed in her country for a number of years, particularly since she had started losing sleep over it. That's why one night, in the wee hours of the morning, fed up with not being able to catch any sleep on account of the noise from the streets, she decided to go ride her motorbike up and down the famous Spanish Steps at the Piazza di Spagna. Up and down the steps she went several times, vandalizing the already rather age-worn, poorly preserved steps. Upon being asked what was her motivation, she explained: "I did it so now tourists don't need to do it anymore! This way they will all leave us alone for a while!". She lost her driving license, but gained a whole night's sleep, just for once.

Further damage: A Russian tourist hurls a cup at the Gioconda in August. In Tarragona, Spain, out of sheer boredom, a youngster graffitied *Visca el Barça* ("Long live FC Barcelona") onto a Neolithic dolmen and then took a selfie. These instances of vicious savagery against the past, whether motivated by ignorance or revolt, must also feature in our Apparitions Theatre. Neglect though is a less visceral, undetected kind of violence that may also alter our environment—which brings me to forsaken spaces that fell out of use and we now try to salvage.

V. The initiates' park

In 2010 the Berlin City Council launched an Open Call for Ideas to find new uses for Tempelhof Airport, which, owing to its central location within the German capital, could not be expanded and was therefore no longer profitable. Proposals included ideas such as:

1. Using the area for relocating the film studios in Babelsberg.
2. Building a healthcare centre with emergency air ambulances
3. Setting up an open, safe, zone for legalized prostitution.
4. Erecting a 1,000 metre high mount by piling up rubble, allowing for magnificent views.

On Facebook, the proponent of option 3 admitted it was merely a provocation in the face of the absolute lack of imagination exhibited by most other projects which—save for the above mentioned proposals—did indeed contemplate nothing beyond housing, office buildings and facilities of different kinds.

Fortunately, all such development plans were forestalled by the referendum which an ecologically-inspired citizen action group managed to initiate, after gathering the required number of signatures in less than a week. Their goal was to maintain Tempelhof as it was, as a completely open and undeveloped park space for the enjoyment of all citizens. "The government were never very keen on this park. They built nothing in it, thinking that would discourage people from coming and eventually everyone would forget about it. It worked the other way round: what the two million people coming to this park each year are looking for is precisely that: nothing built here, and that's

how we want it to remain", declared an activist in an interview, unaware of all those other sites that also shed their meaning and became self-remade, through their own dereliction.

In the 1970s, for instance, rubble from the construction of the freeway network around Buenos Aires was dumped onto the River Plate, forming an artificial island destined to be the centre of yet another speculative development. The project never got started, however, and over time weed covered the landfill; then trees began to grow and birds and other fauna reclaimed the island. People began to see the place as an ecological reserve until eventually it officially became one, which renders it inviolable to this day.

As regards Tempelhof, some Berliners have taken to calling it "the initiates' park", as it has become the place where people learn to ride a bike, to drive a car, to kiss... Every now and then people who have become regular park-goers engage in conversation, overjoyed by the fact that—just for once—collective will prevailed over private interests and the city government literally did nothing. Everything was copacetic until one day, as one of the regulars was unfolding a lounge in one of the disused runways, the guy next to her remarked:

— "This place only has one drawback: too much wind." Then he took a thermos flask from a basket.

— "Absolutely! It'd be so easy to plant a few trees", replied the patron lying on the lounge, as he rubbed her hands. "Or to build a fountain."

A third park-goer joined in:

— "What baffles me is that, with so many people coming here, not one public convenience has been built. You work all your life, and this is what you get? These wretched grounds where the wind blows away your bags, and you've got to bring your own bike. And on top of that everyone parks wherever they fancy."

— "You're right! One of these days we should establish a parking area."

A fourth person intervened:

— "If it comes to that, why not build a small stage for concerts?"

— "I vote for a mini-golf course", a fifth one added.

And thus they inadvertently planned a whole city, which was precisely what they had campaigned against barely two years before—and that reminds me of the title of a story I haven't even read: *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*.

VI. The golden dream

As I write these lines I'm on my way to Sitges where Jordi Colomer awaits alongside his shooting team, several extras, and two stewardesses. We shall be meeting at an old racetrack that was built in 300 days—at a time when even the dumbest people used to look smart in photographs; so I go from a disused runway to a no less disused speedway. This racecourse surrounds a 16th-century farmhouse and at some points is sloped with cambers of up to 90%. I'm told it was formally opened by King Alfonso XIII and Primo de Rivera in the 1920s, but was soon largely abandoned after the inaugural season. It never really became successfully operational, even despite racer Edgard Morawitz's initiative some years later, when he announced an unprecedented competition between a Bugatti sports car and a light aircraft. Ever since then, quite a few things have befallen the place. I know that the stands, which once upon a time were covered with a corrugated iron roof, served as barracks for the army of the Spanish Republic during the Civil War. Later the place became a poultry farm, and was used for live nativity scenes and film shootings on several occasions. Traces of this can still be seen on the ground. There's also plenty of weeds, and random droppings from sheep grazing nearby.

"I have a hole in my trouser's pocket", I tell the technician who's adjusting my mike, which is stuck to my body... The thing is I don't know why instead of taking notes I've become part of another flock. I'm amazed that the people coming along with pieces of cardboard ask so few questions. It's as though being exposed to this last stretch they allowed themselves to be infected by it, and were open to anything, even a race between fake façades.

"Now you lot are slaves carrying pieces of buildings, trying to get there as soon as possible. At some point it would be a good idea if you exchanged those fragments amongst yourselves, without stopping. Keep running, always facing forward."

We count to twenty after the van from which we're being filmed starts moving, and then we set off. This time I'm part of the scene, which makes my account of it different from all the other cases.

The good thing about leading the race and ending last-but-one is the views: all the cardboard panels simulate façades from 1970s style beach hotels, and I allow them to overtake me. It's almost like traveling in time. To Benidorm, to Ibiza... At any rate, I would have loved to cheat, as in old movies. As a kid I loved *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*. The plot was just a string of gags. Life and speed.

At the end of this lap, which is taking us a while, I'll be able to see the same façades as they're turned around, once they are mounted on their scaffoldings, and I'll be able to see around the sides. They weigh several kilos each, but dance around gracefully, assisted by extras acting as stagehands, and it's so beautiful we don't foresee the danger. Suddenly two scaffoldings get stuck between telephone and high voltage cables. Cut! The electrician comes.

Shortly afterwards the shooting resumes again. "Talk about what you did last weekend", Jordi instructs a couple of stewardesses from the van. They walk with fluorescent tutus at ankle height. "Talk about how you see yourselves in a few years time. Talk about the future". And in the last lap: "Talk about what Spain is like".

Several façades fall behind. Who can be sure that, without being the European dream's best incarnation, Ibiza, Benidorm, or even Sitges are not its most stable version? Those places where retired people from abroad have been mingling with the locals for years, and people from the countryside come to the mega-cities every weekend, seduced by tri-lingual menus, karaokes, and huge shop windows. As a dream, its materiality is rather shabby but in such cases energizing desires may be seen to complement whatever is not provided by architecture, jointly building up to something. In other words: It's one's eagerness to get a tan that makes the dream golden.

I wonder if Jordi Colomer might not be doing the same thing in his own way: with amazing economy, he sets up a world using just cardboard and fans. He probably trusts the rest will be supplied by people themselves as we meet, whether it be in the middle of the desert to exchange stones, at a jam where cars go by another name, running wild down a hillside, at a disused runway in need of a narrative, or in the tracks at a racecourse as darkness falls, while a camera operator laughs at the clouds and asks if they're real. Who knows...