BARCELONA CONTEMPORANEA

Artist Focus:

JORDI COLOMER

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In Barcelona, artists such as Nuria Guell, Daniela Ortiz, Jordi Colomer, Adrian Melis, and Avelino Sala are examples of artists who want to make their ethics pretty explicit. They are very well positioned in the local scene and, little by little, in the international scene. Their projects are complex and carried out as if by researchers who have in their hands a project rather than artists making an artwork. They address their projects from various perspectives: anthropological, historical, philosophical... And they *are* projects. Not closed works.

These projects are expressed in different formats, and the technique for some ceases to be important. For some. Conversely, Jordi Colomer is very scrupulous also in the aesthetic part.[1]

1. Jaume Reus, interviewed by Carolina Lio, unpublished, 2015
2. Jordi Colomer, private conversation with Carolina Lio, unpublished, 2015

I first got acquainted with Jordi Colomer's work through one of his most known series, *Anarchitekton* (2002 - 2004) comprising some videos filmed in the cities of Barcelona, Bucharest, Brasília and Osaka in which a recurrent character (performed by artist Idroj Sanicne) brandishes precarious, small-scale, cardboard-made models of iconic buildings in comparison with the real ones. In the case of Barcelona, he had chosen, for instance, some of the buildings from the '60s in the areas of Bellvitge and Santa Coloma, besides the emblematic Agbar Tower / Torre Glòries, a 38-story skyscraper near Plaça de les Glòries Catalanes.

The video actually consists of a succession of stills which gives the action a certain slowness and stiffness, visually helping to underline the statement of the project: the new architecture plans in many contemporary cities are artificial and scenic rather than functional and consistent.

From the start, the idea was to work with very simple technical material and to avoid a filming setup that could have made people aware that we were making a film. Thus, the performance took more space than taking photos and videos. This is important to highlight because when one knows that there is a film being shot, it is clear to everyone that whatever happens is a world apart, and that it doesn't intervene in the reality of the road. And indeed if a film is being shot usually the road is closed and people are not allowed to enter the scene. *Anarkitekton*, instead, was done on the street and integrated with the reaction and interaction of people passing by.

There is also another point. This character runs across all these cities bringing models and performing physical actions that many times relate to physical comedy, where the actors tumble, rise and fall. As in the films of Buster Keaton, in which almost always there is an individual who faces the city, the macropolis that overcomes him. Obviously, they are exaggerations, but they yet make sense because the public recognises itself in those characters and their fight against the elements. Like most of the silent cinema, the character of *Anarkitecton* has an evident critical component; it's a way to look at some elements from another point of view, sharpen your perception, do not assume that everything is as it should be.[2]

Jordi Colomer
Anarchitekton (still from video)
2002 - 2004
four channel video
(c) Jordi Colomer and MACBA

The use of architectural references and scenographic tools is a constant in Jordi Colomer's work, whose education spanned between architecture and art and who often refers to his practice as situations befitting a sort of "expanding theatre".

One of the implications of this is a reflection on the scale of things: since the '90s, in projects as *Some Stars* (1997

- 1999), *A, B, C, Etc.* (1997 - 1999) and *El lloc i les coses* (1996), he put objectified and miniaturised cityscapes on tables, while in the video *Simo* (1997) actress Pilar Rebollar compulsively acts in a room composed of boxes containing objects. The fact that the viewing room is a cuboid structure in which the audience has to enter through an equally staged corridor, together with the fact that the actress is a dwarf, put in crisis the Western ideal of harmonic proportion and the stereotypical scale of production of objects and buildings. However, the project's impact would be incomplete without reading this passage by Colomer himself referring to an episode occurred 10 years earlier:

> Each of the 8 floors of the aparthotel Urbis, in Valencia, has three apartments that are exactly alike. A total of 24 identical apartments, identical green carpeting, identical kitchenette, identical beige bathtub. The elevator stops in each floor and the 24 actors and actresses that play "La Marquesa Rosalinda" in the nearby Teatro Rialto, every evening, bid each other good night. In the elevator, I run into Pilar Rebollar, the minute actress that wonderfully plays the role of "menina". Pilar presses the button for the 6th floor with the tip of her unfolding umbrella. During the elevator trip, she tells me of her daily adventure in her apartment: opening the drawers of the closet to use them as steps to hung her coat; climbing on a stool to reach the mirror and take off her make up; climbing on the couch to open the window. Her apartment is identical to the others, but for her, it undergoes an alteration of scale.[3]

A second implication of Colomer's practice in between theatre, architecture and art is a reflection about fiction. A couple of years after *Simo*, Jordi Colomer collaborated with Catalan conceptual artist Carlos Pazos - who also acted in several films and directed several theatre plays - in another *mise-en-scene*. Pazos plays then the role of Pianito, a fictional pianist playing fragments from Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* in a piano entirely made of cardboard and surrounded by clouds of smoke and dust.

Cardboard surely is one of the main media used by Colomer, both for its versatility and for its symbolising that something is fictitious, a mere prototype which somehow reveals <<the fictional weight of reality>>.[4] It is also used, for instance, in the project *Prototipos 1* and *Prototipos 2* (2004), in which cardboard models of cars are lined up. In *Prototipos 1* we see battle tanks designed by the anarchist federation at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. In *Prototipos 2* we have five iconic cars: the Popemobile first used by Pope John-Paul II, the Lincoln Continental in which Kennedy was shot, the Soviet bloc's Trabant, the Batmobile, and the hippies' Volkswagen van. An additional example is the video *The Cities* (2002) in which a girl in pyjamas is hanging outside a window over a background in which cardboard buildings constitute an in motion, rapidly changing cityscape.

> The cardboard models are ephemeral objects, a sort of scenography, that is objects that serve in a determined time, for a determined action, and that afterwards lose their value. This is also what interests me in the theatrical world: being something ephemeral that has a settled lifespan, which also means a special intensity.[5]

The third and last of what I am here calling 'implications' in Colomer's practice is participation, especially developed in the form of ideal community. Real people, members of the audience more or less aware of their role into

3. Jordi Colomer, *Simo*, in jordicolomer.com
4. Jordi Colomer, *Prototipos 2*, in jordicolomer.com
5. Jordi Colomer, Ibid. 2

Jordi Colomer
Simo (still from video)
1997
video (12 min) in loop and projection room
(c) Jordi Colomer and MACBA

the project, start to appear consistently in Colomer's work in the *Anarchitekton* project, in which the reactions of the people who bumped into the performer are surely a flavoury addition to the videos.

Similarly, in 2005, the Popemobile used in *Prototipos 2* was left standing in the road in a rapidly developing neighbourhood in Barcelona. Rather than the positioning of the sculpture in public place, the work is consisting in the reaction of the pedestrians, some walking past without even noticing it, someone looking with curiosity, someone else stopping to pose for a photograph.

In *Crier sul les toits* (Shout from the rooftops, 2011) the audience is more actively involved and invited to proclaim whatever is going on in their heads from the roofs of Rennes, in France.

> [...] in all the cities I go to, I visit rooftops, private spaces which one cannot usually access. Very privileged spots to watch the city – as a physical place. This gives rise to many questions in the history of modern architecture, but also in the use which citizens can make of the public space.[6]

Colomer is interested in the idea of rooftops as a public space to regain, and quotes Le Corbusier, who tried to propose a model in which terraced roofings become an ideal place for meetings and communal activities.[7] Although in Le Corbusier's building the idea did not work, and we still see rooftops as spaces that can be accessed just for technical reasons, in other cultures, especially in the Arab cultures and in the Middle East, the housetops are actually large terraces where people meet their neighbours as it were a social arena.

Colomer recall these non-Western traditions in *The Istanbul Map* (2010) in which performer Anita Tocopilla is confronting the panoramic vision of Istanbul from a roof with a map of the city, and in two videos constituting the project *Medina Parkour* (2014), in which Jordi Colomer himself goes through the rooftops of Tétouan, Morocco, jumping over walls and blurring the boundaries between public and private.

> When I arrived in Tétouan, it seemed clear to me that there were two parallel worlds: a world at the street level, where intimacy and domestic privacy have their own rules, and another one on top, on the roofs, with different laws. On top of the city children and cats play at jumping over the walls that below so zealously separate one house from the other. Up there, people gather to talk, smoke, and eat, you can exchange glances, observe, and send greetings to people who are relatively far away, sharing that same moment. This is a semi-invisible activity, but everyone knows that the roofs are very lively.[8]

In general, while the modern landscape of big cities as the ones in *Anarchikecton* is seen under a dystopian perspective, Colomer opposes to it the non-urbanised or semi-desertic space, not yet riched by an architectonical and cultural stereotyping. For example, in 2005, during a stay in Yemen - a country he wanted to visit for a long time due to the fascination he had with the mud skyscrapers in the desert - Colomer involves Yemenite citizens in the film *Arabian Stars*. In it, every character is holding in front of the camera cardboard posters on which are handwritten in Arabic the names of famous international characters - true or fictitious (e.g. Michael Jackson, Pikachu, James Bond). Instead of talking of the imagination of the mass culture, though, the project alludes more to how little it belongs to the territory of Yemen, a country not reached by Western pop culture.

6. Jordi Colomer, *On rooftops, stretching beyond sight,* interview by Andrea Cinel, 2011, in jordicolomer.com

7. This is especially the case of the Unité d'Habitation (Housing Unit) in Marseille (1945-1952), which has a theatre, a playroom for children, etc.

8. Jordi Colomer, 'Jumping Over Walls: A Conversation Between Francesco Careri and Jordi Colomer', in Jordi Colomer, *¡Unete! Join Us!,* La Fábrica, 2018

Jordi Colomer
Papamovil (print from project)
2005
video and prints
(c) Jordi Colomer

What can one think of a healthy-looking young man walking out along an unsurfaced road, disappearing over the horizon into the desert, while he carries a placard that bears in Arabic script the name of Tony Manero, a character played by John Travolta in a film made in 1977? Nothing at all. Everything in this strange and fascinating work has been chosen with the deliberate intention of eluding metaphors.[9]

Colomer also sees the desert as a constructive blank scenario for social experimentation. In *En la Pampa* (2008), he asks two people, who are not actors and don't know each other, to live certain situations in the Atacama Desert, in the north of Chile. They were asked to improvise dialogues and forget the existence of the camera during set- yet unsettling - actions, like to wash a car near an abandoned cemetery.
In 2011, Colomer works then on a peninsula in the Ebro delta to the south of Barcelona for the large-scale project *L'Avenir* (The Future), based on philosopher and socialist Charles Fourier's utopian plan for a building - the *phalanstère* - constructed on the base of an utopian community of 500-2000 people working and living together for mutual benefit. In the three videos that compose the project, his protagonists carry elements from a model of this ideal building and recompose them on the sandy beach of the Ebro.[10]

The imagined utopian space, which doesn't exist but could be created, takes form in *X-Ville* (2015), produced in collaboration with a group of students and citizens of Annecy interpreting the texts *Utopies Réalisables* and *Où commence la ville* (Where the City Begins) by Yona Friedman. In these texts, it's stated that utopia is a collective response to many individual dissatisfactions which share a solution. Reflecting on this concept, the project was realised through a two-week workshop consisting of reading groups followed by the building of a set and the film shooting. Most importantly, the decisions behind the project were shared among the participants, discussing Friedman's ideas and how to represent them, how to create the set of boxes and vegetables, how to practically shape X-Ville, leaving ample space also to improvisation.

> Generally, when we talk about utopia we think of something unrealisable, something that is out of reality. Instead, for me, it implicitly means thinking of how we can work together to realise this vision. What I work on, however, is not directly the idea of utopia, but the idea of a reality, which develops in a limited time, a kind of model, the organisation of a group, of a micro-community - ephemeral and accidental - which allows this fortuitous meeting. It's also very important to say that it is far from being a purely ideological organisation, quite the opposite: it has a lot to do with what you can do with your own hands.[11]

The participative theatre of *X-Ville*, basically constituted of buildings silhouettes on cardboard boxes and few natural elements, is somewhat continued and expanded in *¡Únete! Join us!* (2017) with which Colomer represented Spain in the 57th Venice Biennale. A set of precarious sculptures in the pavilion transform it into a stage: the main object is a cumbersome piece halfway between a mobile pavilion and a caravan; next to it, are piled up a number of scale models, prototypes, and reproductions of architectures evoking marginal spatialities, such as parking lots and housing blocks. Around the installation, terraced seats suggest the idea of a space in between theatre and political gathering, a sort of fragmented and spread agora.

9. Eduardo Mendoza, 'Falling Stars', in *Jordi Colomer: Arabian Stars*, Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain; Salvador Dali Museum, Saint-Petersburg, Florida, USA, 2005
10. It's important to underline that Colomer knows that the potentiality of the desert can lead also to a very different outcome. In the projet *Prohibido cantar / No Singing* (2012), for example, Colomer recalls Las Vegas and the planned, but never built, Gran Escala that should have hosted 32 casinos in the desert near Zaragoza. He confronts these city models with Bertolt Brecht's fictitious city of Mahagonny, created by a a group of outlaws tailed by the police and whose truck broke down in the middle of the desert; there they founded a golden city in which the worst crime was not to have any money.
11. Jordi Colomer, Ibid. 2

Jordi Colomer
Arabian Stars (still from video)
2005
video (38') and projection room
(c) Jordi Colomer and Centre George Pompidou, Paris

Colomer sought references in utopian theatre projects, most of them never actualised, such as Archizoom's theatre of ideological encounter, Ilya Golosov's Great Synthetic Theatre Sverdlovsk, El Lissitzky's Meyerhold Theatre of 1929, and The Theatre Number 6 by Bel Geddes of 1915 -1926.

> All of them propose overcoming the plan of the proscenium theatre, which delineates a clear
> division between actors and spectators. It is important to overcome this, because this plan is
> reproduced in our spaces of everyday life, the organisation of schools and universities, places
> of worship, parliaments ... In every case all these attempts to burst the cavea have in common
> the idea that the place of "the public" must be recognised.[12]

An array of videos taking place in different geographical locations is disseminated across the installations. In one of the videos, actress Laura Weissmahr is riding a donkey alongside a group of people on different vehicles on wheels. Being the protagonist on a donkey confers her a sort of <<mythical authority>> as if she was a sort of <<migrant Virgin Mary>>.[13] Laura addresses the public in German, Spanish, Catalan, Chinese, English, Italian, and French, while recounting the story of the engineers working on the construction of the Tower of Babel in Kafka's *Das Stadtwappen* (The City Coat of Arms) and the construction of the city around the tower. The scenes, shoot in Catalonia, cross lands in which screen-printed walls and monumental cardboard façades propped onto wheeled scaffoldings and moved about by assistants, thus becoming mobile auto-buildings.
The project was influenced by the 'ville spatiale' by Yona Friedman and Constant Nieuwenhuys's *New Babylon*, both describing through models, drawings, texts and collages the idea of mobile-architecture and places whose inhabitants are nomads, changing the space and building cities.

For the strong theatricality and fictionality of Jordi Colomer's projects, curator Manuel Segade claims that a recurring question shaping his practice is: <<Can we inhabit a stage set?>>[14] However, since for Colomer the stage is a much more expanded territory than that of a standard theatre and encompasses cities and potential cities arising from the desert, his question is probably more general: "Can we inhabit?" or "How can we inhabit?".

> What would life in New Babylon, in the ville spatiale, be like in detail? How would people
> gather together? What would they dance? Would they transport things? What, in what way?
> So I started to think about the seemingly contradictory idea of a "nomad city".[15]

His characters act within the city interacting with an architecture that is provisional, portable, of open-use, and that therefore many times coincide with a scenery.[16] Indeed, seen all in a sequence, it results very clear as the mobile auto-building in the video at the Biennale, the cardboard buildings that occupied the Spanish pavilion, and those constituting *X-Ville*, are a development of the *Anarchitekton* models. The architectural models assume a bigger size to become on the one hand a true architecture, on the other hand, a stage. The stage, in turn, enlarges till to become city.
This blur between the theatre and the city, the architectural space and the staged one, comes from the years, in the middle of the '80s, in which Colomer was a student in architecture with the passion for theatre. His unease in accepting the then-normal division and tension between what is architectonic and what is the realm of set design

12. Jordi Colomer, Ibid. 8

13. Manuel Segade, 'The Coming Citizenry', in Ibid.8

14. Ibid.

15. Jordi Colomer, Ibid. 8

16. Jordi Colomer, interviewed by Bea Espejo for *El Cultural*, 18 Sept 2009

Jordi Colomer
X-Ville (still from video)
2015
video (23')
(c) Jordi Colomer

was the main dilemma of his education; so the role of set designer as urban and social planner became the central idea of his artistic practice.

> The set designer should also try to give the stalls a sense of order, should rebuild the theatre building and think of the street. A set designer should then become an urban planner, testing the perception of cities with a simple cardboard box, visiting the desert and forgetting that the theatre actually exists and burn all the scenery.[17]

In *New Palermo Felicissima* (2018), commissioned by Manifesta 12, the protagonist place and stage is Porticciolo Sant' Erasmo, placed at the back side of Palermo's historical centre. Porticciolo Sant'Erasmo is a tiny harbour that has been inhabited for generations by a small community of fishermen and, although so close to the city centre, is a part of the city's coast that for many years has been ecologically neglected, unsung by public authorities and omitted in tourist guides. It comprises an amalgam of old buildings, partially abandoned historical remains, along with informal constructions, housing compounds, a small beach, infrastructures, a breakwater and a dock for small ships. In Colomer's video installation a fish boat transformed into a hybrid of a tourist ship, an observatory, and a discussion parlour is sailing through Palermo's South Coast. A constellation of boats accompanies the transformed boat, visiting a number of abandoned and shut places nevertheless described, not without humour, as alternative monuments.

An open question in these projects is as much of the work is transmissible to those who are just looking at it. How much can a participative work belong to all those who haven't participated in it? How much of this fictional shared theatrical act chasing utopia will survive in the attempt of documentation? Colomer himself arose the question during a conversation/interview we had in Barcelona, talking of a feeling between the frustration oF the lost experience and the awareness that this is the nature of it.

> The ambition is not always actualised because, in the end, out of all this reality that one lives it is asked to make a film. It could end up being disappointing to see all that eventually converted into images, pixels, videos, in a certain frame, with given aesthetic conventions that must be taken into account. But it is a fact that the process we go through to get there is not the process that images finally record. I do not even pretend to succeed in that.[18]

17. Jordi Colomer, *Living the Scenery*, 2008, in jordicolomer.com
18. Jordi Colomer, Ibid. 2

Jordi Colomer
¡Únete! Join Us! (still from video)
2017
site-specific project for the Spanish Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale
(c) Jordi Colomer

It appears intact.
-It appears intact.

Jordi Colomer
Nuova Palermo Felicissima (still from video)
2018
project for Manifesta 12, Palermo
(c) Jordi Colomer