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Dialogical devices and political possibilities of art: Occupy, Inhabit, Resist

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Dialogical devices and political possibilities of art: Occupy, inhabit, resist

Sandra Calvo
Interdisciplinary artist

in conversation with

Ana Vilenica
DIST, Polytechnic and Univeristy of Turin,
Radical Housing Journal and FAC research

Abstract

Sandra Calvo is a visual artist based in Mexico. **Ana Vilenica** is a member of the Beyon Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research). **Contact:** vilenica.ana@gmail.com

This Conversation with Sandra Calvo, an interdisciplinary artist based in Mexico, explores the intersection of art and struggles for home and territory. Sandra Calvo elucidates her dialogical approach in accompanying communities in struggle, employing dialogical devices that foster conversations and potential spaces for expression and re-signification in conflict scenarios. In this conversation Sandra talks about her work in Colombia and Mexico underlying the importance of listening and dialogue to denounce and confront extractivist and dispossession projects.

Keywords

Dialogical art, art and housing, politics of housing, displacement, migration, architecture

I first became aware of Sandra's work through a *compañera* from the Los Angeles Tenants Union during my visit to Los Angeles in November 2022. Sandra and I initially met online, where I learned a great deal about her engagement with people involved in occupations in Mexico City, as well as her work in the state of Morelos, collaborating with locals to build an 'agora' for assemblies (called *Zihuatlajtocan*). Our first in-person meeting occurred in December 2023 at a local café in Tepoztlán, where we delved into her work with people

from Mexico in the US. We discussed their living conditions, their roles in service industries, often in affluent households, and their connections with their home country. This conversation was conducted online. Sandra's responses are presented as insightful essays, offering a deep dive into her artistic approach and her commitment to the struggle for home.

Ana: In your artistic work you have developed a specific dialogical approach. What are dialogic devices that you work with and how do they operate in your work?

Sandra: The logic of dialogue is central to my work, both as a conversation between two or more parties, and in a broader sense, as a dialectical process that seeks to open a new possibility, a third space of expression and resignification of the voices and knowledge that participate in the dialogue. My artistic projects intervene in situations of conflict, often situations in which a community confronts the state, the market, or other forms of hegemonic power, to defend their right to conceive and inhabit a house or a territory. My artistic intervention could be characterized as the opening of a favourable space in which the agonistic dialogue between the community and the hegemonic structures can be heard. This third space seeks to destabilize and 'de-anesthetize' those parts of the discourse of the subjects in conflict that operate without question, without a reflection that makes them explicit and exposes them to be discussed and even altered; it is a space of political imagination opened in, from and for the specific place where the conflict appears.

Even the device that gives material form to this space—which almost always takes the form of a sculpture—emerges from deep listening as an imaginative and co-participative act; it is not merely a physical structure erected according to my plans or my personal artistic vision, but rather, the culmination of a complex negotiation process that involves the participating group in the decision-making process. In that sense, the sculpture is not planned, but rather it becomes. In my work, these devices make possible the resignification of marginalized or devalued processes and knowledge; they are homage-spaces erected to make visible and revalue other ways of building, inhabiting and defending a territory. The dialogic device is also, therefore, a poetic catalyst to enter into dialogue with other languages.
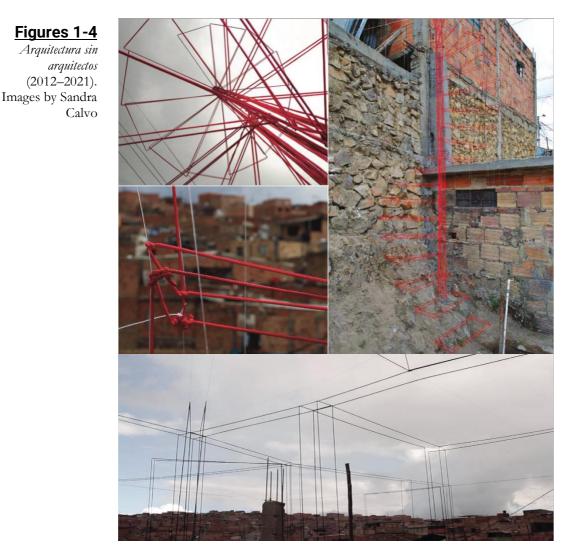
The dialogic device as an open generating space during a situation of conflict and struggle allows me to position myself as an artist who also knows that I am a political subject, that is to say, it allows me to enter the scene in a critical and at the same time proactive way. This act of entering the scene, this taking of a position, produces an alteration in the internal and external processes of the community insofar as it makes them visible, it makes them explicit, first, before the community itself and secondly, before the public. It is common to find artistic projects centered on some form of collaboration with 'aggrieved' communities in which this part of the process, this moment of confrontation of the community with its own mechanisms of consensus and dissent, which are far from being free of contradiction, is ignored, thus artificially and deceitfully polishing the sharp ridges and edges that are a constitutive part of a community in conflict. The result in such cases

is a tendency towards either 'goodism' (welfarism) or predation (imposition, vampirism, colonialist parasitism). In contrast, then, I seek disruptive sculptural acts that open, through honesty and critical spirit, a space for an affective and propositional approach that allows expression and revalues other ways of thinking.

I believe that with this initial reflection it is clear that although my artistic work may have connections with other disciplinary practices such as anthropological research (I can see my work as a kind of creative ethnography capable of generating possibilities), in reality, my position and that of the communities with which I engage is completely different from that of the researcher and his subject; nor do I share the anthropological discipline's goal of portraying or describing without intervening; on the contrary, what interests me is precisely to incite the irruption of a critical incident to address the conflict and to bring the actors involved into action in new ways, different from those existing prior to our collaboration.

Ana: Most of your projects extend over lengthy periods, diverging from the rapid pace typical in contemporary art production. These projects concentrate on the fight for housing across various countries, constructing a unique history of home-struggle in Abya Yala. Could you share more details about this?

Sandra: Perhaps this explanation will be most effective with a description of these devices as they have emerged in three of my most recent projects: Architecture Without Architects (ASA, 2012-2021), Occupy, Inhabit, Resist (OHR, 2016-2020), and Stone, Water, Forest, Wind, Fire (PABVF, 2020-ongoing). The process of conception and construction in each case is unique; each of the devices I have created for recent projects is infused and in dialogue with other human practices and knowledges. Each process finds its formal definition as a material, animistic and singular solution to an interaction between the community and me, whose conclusion we cannot calculate a priori; we know neither its weight, material, colour, plasticity, texture, duration, and much less its harmonic and erratic aspects.

Although formalizing means much more than a material/objectual becoming or the 'last act' of a process, I will attempt to briefly outline that leap, poetic turn, or transformation with the description of the processes from which dialogic devices have emerged in the recent projects mentioned above. *Arquitectura sin arquitectos* (Architecture without architects) was a project of almost a decade in which I became involved, together with a family and their community in Ciudad Bolivar, Colombia, in a non-linear process of planning, self-construction and resistance that demonstrates the vital and agonistic character of the practice of defence and construction of 'informal housing'. The modus operandi of this community, as of so many others living in similar situations, could well be described as, 'I inhabit while I build, while I plan, while I resist, while I am evicted'. Ciudad Bolivar is part of the urban periphery, where most of the land is of relative ownership, or disputed land that changes hands over time. These lots are always susceptible to dispossession and fragmentation depending on political and economic interests in the area. There is an abundance of plots with legitimate owners but without deeds, and land abandoned by the State which, after acquiring added value, are taken from

Figures 1-4
Arquitectura sin arquitectos
(2012–2021).
Images by Sandra Calvo

those who inhabit them 'illegally' to make way for urban development projects of erosion and plundering of the landscape. Paradoxically or naturally, it is these spaces where self-learning and self-organization flourish.

In this mixed and simultaneous process, in which the inhabiting of the house occurs at the same time as the planning of a second floor and the resistance to eviction—because the house was built on land of irregular or non-formalized tenure—the family's conflict with the authorities represented only the external context for another series of challenges within the family unit, relevant to the planning of the construction of the extension of the house. It was here, in this internal space of dispute, that a dialogue device emerged. With the collaboration of the family, we built a 'house of threads': a sort of weightless, habitable sculpture made of construction threads that represented, on a 1:1 scale, the walls and spaces that were to be built, differentiating, according to their black or red color, the spaces that had already been agreed upon versus those that were still in dispute. The threads draw lines that float and vibrate in the air, forming an ethereal structure that projects the house into the future, using an antagonistic language in which consensus and discord coexist, thus questioning the hegemonic binary logic that contrasts terms such as yours-mine, formal-informal, public-private, legitimate-illegal, or natural-social. This

device constituted a space for dialogue which, through its tangible form, allowed the family to contemplate the consensual and disputed decisions from the outside, but also from the inside, intimately, walking through them to assess them, having acquired a new perspective that could not have been achieved through mere discussion. For me, and through the documentation of the process in an expanded documentary film and a book, also for the public, this subtle sculpture also represents a method of material, non-exploitative approach to the expression of the desires and drives, the agreements and conflicts of a family involved, like more than 60% of the population of Latin America, in self-construction as a method of defending the right to housing.

With this device, I found a full sense of Tim Ingold's idea, who reminds us in the introduction to 'Lines: A Brief History' that the English word 'thing' has an etymological origin meaning a gathering of people and the place where they resolve their disputes; from this it follows that, according to Ingold, 'everything is a parliament of lines.' The house of threads is literally and figuratively a parliament of lines that, from the perspective of the 'micro', shows us a symptom: its struggles, its processes, its challenges, its strategies and its organizational power.

 'Occupy, Inhabit, Resist' continues the exploration of several points already present in ASA and others that arise from this project for which I participated, together with 70 indigenous families, in the reclaiming and defence of the right to inhabit an 'abandoned' (intestate, destroyed) property in the center of Mexico City. This small urban community has suffered, over the years, several attempts of violent eviction, so they have had to seek legal protection to defend their right to the expropriation of that property, which is in a state of idle land. In the meantime, they live in houses self-built with waste materials while at the same time, they wish to generate a social and sustainable housing model that responds to their needs. As an example, the residents, in collaboration with me, developed a comprehensive design for the housing unit, including an organic vegetable garden for self-consumption, a community cinema and commercial spaces that serve as a source of income for the community, as well as other common areas.

They have also implemented strategies of adaptation, defence and resistance, such as the fortification of the property through a system of gates, which is intended to stop and/or delay the entry of public forces or riot squads attempting to evict them. This system of gates is also an example of fortification and shows the almost claustrophobic state to which they have had to resort in order to protect themselves. Other strategies they have implemented are night patrols to avoid being taken by surprise by the riot squads or *granaderos,* the digging of tunnels and the installation of false walls to protect themselves, as well as the development of a 'collaborative manual against eviction' that includes strategies, notes, and instructions on how to occupy a property and how to resist eviction, along with a glossary of relevant terms and concepts.

In this case, self-construction, although it also has an essential place in the process of conditioning the space to be able to inhabit it, takes a back seat and the strategies to face and capture the social and political antagonism between the community and the authorities take centre stage. The community's needs and, therefore, the methods used to

meet them are different from those used in ASA, as were the dialogic devices derived from OHR: on the one hand, a docufiction that included the re-enactment of a violent eviction attempt, and on the other, a collaborative manifesto or manual that summarized the resistance tactics learned in the process of defending the land. The first device, the documentary recreation, operated as a moment of reflection and elucidation within the community, since the recreation of the events of the night in which the authorities tried to evict the site served to re-experience them with control, with more space for reflection, and in this way to metabolize and dialectically integrate the weight and meaning of the violence of the eviction attempt. The re-enactment functions as the writing of a historical passage absent in the official history; it consists of a reconstruction of a real but hitherto invisible moment, which is recounted and rehearsed by its actual protagonists, and which

Figures 5-17
Ocupar Habitar Resistir (2016 – 2020).
Images by Sandra Calvo.

functions as a performative element in which the dramatization of a violent event acquires a political character.

If the re-enactment of the eviction worked as a device that triggered an increase in awareness within the community—an esoteric dialogic device—the manifesto or collaborative manual operates outside the specific community of these 70 families—an exoteric dialogic device—as it seeks to extend the learning acquired throughout the process of struggle, already metabolized and summarized, so that it can be used by other communities with similar needs. In this case, the dialogue which this device invites remains open; it is an invitation launched to a collective interlocutor who is summoned through this gesture of solidarity.

Finally, in my current project, 'Stone, Water, Forest, Wind, Fire', the dispute over territory takes a broader form, as it documents and intervenes in the struggle for the preservation of communal lands and the forms of life and knowledge that these lands have made possible for several Nahua peoples of central Mexico, specifically in the state of Morelos, where I also live. The central antagonism in this case is between the neoliberal system of plunder and impoverishment, on the one hand, and on the other, the ways in which Nahua communities resist and defend the territory and the life it engenders, including cognitive processes which combine science, history, fables, empirical local knowledge, and an ontological vision that jointly envisions the life of the territory and that of the humans who inhabit it.

We decided, together with the villagers, to erect a sculpture under the *tequio* modality, which would represent the protection and safeguarding of an important aquifer replenishment zone of the biological corridor of the Chichinautzin Volcanic Field, with rivers and waterfalls that supply the surrounding towns, and whose large amount of vegetation and mountains, make it one of the most important lungs of the region. This enclave, like so many others, is a territory in conflict between different actors seeking possession of the land: owners of hotel chains and golf clubs, urban developers, mining companies, logging companies, community members who are corrupt, among others. The dialogic device of this project was conceptually conceived as a point in the landscape dedicated to habitat preservation, as a symbol of communal resistance in defence of protected natural areas; specifically, it is a circular sculpture—a concave plate made of local volcanic stones—built by community members, artisans and villagers and that serves as an agora for assemblies in which members of these communities meet to discuss and plan strategies of resistance and preservation of their knowledge, resources, and history. With this sculpture-assembly that creates a punctual locus for dialogue among different members of the community, a series of empirical knowledge and community rituals that defend the sacredness and integrity of the land against legal and illegal modifications of the territory are valued. Some of these forces against which these communities must defend themselves include the permanent deterioration of soil fertility as a result of the excessive exploitation of mines (*texcales*) and quarries; the scarcity of water due to the continuous draining and piping of wells, rivers and springs; the deforestation caused by real estate developers who, in a disjointed and predatory manner, build housing units in

protected natural areas; the construction of highways on communal lands; the destruction of mountains, hills, archaeological vestiges and sacred sites; the loss of food sovereignty due to the destruction of the land; the loss of the community's natural resources and its cultural and natural heritage; the loss of food sovereignty due to the increase of monoculture and the depreciation of the value of the land; the contamination of the soil, air and land; respiratory and skin diseases; some dynamics that are part of the uses and customs, which should not be considered static and immovable, since sometimes there are excluding and oppressive forms; the attacks on intangible assets such as language, rituals and ancestral knowledge of the peoples, as well as the threat of disappearance that looms over their cosmogony, their cultural practices, and their agricultural and construction techniques.

In the space, each stone can be seen as a symbolic representation of members of these communities, and they fit together to form a unit: only as a whole do they have strength and form. The carved stone sculpture functions as an organic slate, on which, when marked with ephemeral materials such as chalk—which disappears with the rain—fleeting, fluctuating, and passing images are conjured up, constituting a sort of subtle 'geological writing' that is the testimony of each plenary assembly. If, in the words of Yásnaya Aguilar, 'the discourses of hate are precisely discursive monoliths that [...] close off the possibilities of constructing themselves in dialogue, [and that] have always served to crush other people when used with sufficient power', the dialogic devices in these projects operate in a diametrically opposed manner by providing a 'common floor of assumptions' that serve as a basic context for a more agonistic dialogue.

To the neoliberal strategy of plunder, this agora responds with an anti-archaeological logic, whereby instead of excavating and extracting, it contributes and adds to the landscape, the stone agora is an anti-monument that is continually resignified, as it changes to the rhythm of the rest of the landscape; it serves as a marker space where the protected natural area begins, fills with vegetation at times, and even with offerings, until it is cleared once again in preparation for the assemblies—the highest form of negotiation, political fire and decision-making in these communities. The agora is also a response to the need for creating a place of representation from which to combat state neglect and abuse, which has become an increasingly worrisome situation, resulting in the persecution, criminalization and even murder of community members and activists. For this reason, listening and dialogue meetings are of vital importance to discuss ways to denounce and confront extractivist and dispossession projects.

Ana: You have been using art to accompany communities in their struggles for home and to amplify their methods, tactics and strategies that help them protect themselves from the external threat. What can you tell us more about this approach?

Sandra: The importance and difficulty of making space for the discourse of contending communities should not be underestimated. The whole project of the communal creation of dialogic devices would lose its raison d'être if it were not clear what these spaces are trying to achieve concerning the discourse of the communities that are the protagonists

Figures 18-22
Piedra Agua Bosque Viento Fuego (2020- ongoing).
Dialogue Device (sculpture made of volcanic rock with the community)
Images by Sandra Calvo.

of the struggles that my work accompanies. So far I have spoken mainly of the exercise of deep listening and exchange that occurs as part of the process of emergence of the devices, but there is another level at which we must consider the discourse of the communities: that of the political significance of the position of an agonistic community and the particularities of its discourse in itself, and in relation to the hegemonic discourse of power that seeks to subordinate it.

A line of political antagonism runs through the three long-term projects discussed so far: the line established by the authority to declare the inoperability of the communities' rights (in Ciudad Bolivar, in Mexico City, and in the state of Morelos) to housing and territory, under threat of legal sanctions, persecution, and even assassination. Faced with this pattern of criminalization of such strategies as communal ownership and governance of territories, self-construction, reclaiming properties under the figure of idle land, etc., the

communities respond with a variety of tactics and methods, which produce a corresponding discourse of resistance. We find ourselves, obviously, in the terrain of ideological struggle between the dominant and hegemonic class on the one hand, and on the other, at a clear material disadvantage, the dispossessed class in which the great social contradictions of the neo-feudal capitalist system are most clearly expressed.

Rather than explaining the content of the discourse of the communities with which I have collaborated, I will speak instead of the way in which this discourse is understood in my projects, that is, always taking into account the complexity of their position in their confrontation with the authorities and figures of power with whom they have a clearly asymmetrical relationship. Given this unequal distribution of resources, I am very interested in considering the variety of tactics and methods of defence that the communities in conflict create—some more oblique and others more confrontational— to achieve their general strategy of defending their right to housing and territory.

In the OHR project, the struggle in the urban context shows us, perhaps more acutely than other cases, the contradictions and violence that the struggling communities face the closer they come to threatening the interests of the ruling class and the state that represents and defends it. I have already spoken of the situation of constant attack that the inhabitants of the reclaimed land have faced for years, and their methods of defence are more clearly understandable if we think of them under two categories: hard tactics and soft tactics. Finally, it must be said that although the concrete examples that follow correspond to OHR, the more general classification is relevant to any instance of resistance struggle.

Hard tactics

Sandra: These are organized around artifacts and tools of resistance that allow communities to protect themselves from external physical threats. In the case of OHR, they include the construction of a system of security gates to prevent the entry of riot squads and law enforcement, and the ways in which groups organize themselves for physical struggle and confrontation against forces who are materially better equipped than they are. In more general terms, we can say that hard tactics respond mainly to the priority of safeguarding the integrity of the group and its living space; they constitute the sine qua non condition for the development of any other soft, or more politically ambitious, tactics.

This type of resistance is not represented in contemporary public discourse, or it only appears as the object of a vilification and criminalization which can barely conceal the reactionary and classist subtext from which it emerges. These harsh strategies are not considered valid or legitimate, for example, in the liberal discourse that condemns all use of violence or active resistance in the hands of any group other than the one that holds power, and therefore holds the monopoly of violent tactics. It can be said that these 'indocile' tactics are part of a hidden discourse, not because they are oblique or indirect, but rather because they do not circulate in the collective hegemonic imaginary and are almost exclusively the province of groups in struggle. The dialogic devices in my work

include a space for expression and reflection on these tactics and want to reorient our understanding of them to consider them expressions of other ways of understanding and inhabiting a territory. The re-creation of the night of the eviction in OHR's docufiction is a good example of the exercise of reflection on the violence implicit in the attack of the shock forces, but also on the strength and effectiveness of the occupants' hard tactics of physical resistance. While in PAVBF, the hard tactics are clandestine actions to recover stolen land, night watch brigades, 'putting their bodies' - as the women do - to protect the trees by tying themselves to them so as to prevent them from being cut down, or an armed uprising with axes, machetes, tools and work vehicles to block the accesses to the towns.

Soft tactics

Sandra: While hard tactics are marked by a sense of urgency and more immediate pressures, soft tactics are more expansive, both temporally and politically. In general terms we can think of soft tactics as the tools that communities use to represent themselves in front of themselves and their neighbors - and ultimately the public - as political subjects representative of a majority, whose issues are of concern to us all, and thus making us question our political role, be it as participants in the processes of plunder that have produced their material conditions, or as members of other groups facing struggles connected to their own.

In the case of OHR, soft tactics aim to dignify and visualize the community as productive, honest and hardworking neighbors through a documentary record, the construction of a social and sustainable housing model, a community cinema and an urban garden that provides them with food for self-consumption and local sale, as well as the collaborative elaboration of a manual that incorporates tactics, methodologies and legal advice to prevent eviction. Marches - another soft tactic - serve to make their presence visible in the urban space, like any other social group with a political demand who takes to the streets to claim it. The 'collaborative manual against eviction' represents a dialogic device that summarizes the lessons learned and that the occupants offer to other communities in similar conditions to their own, as a tactic to constitute themselves as supportive and conscientious political subjects. In PAVBF, soft tactics are the set of codes, declarations, laws, forms of organization, rituals and incantations that govern habitat policies and land use, as well as community assemblies (parliaments) and manifestos, where public dialogue takes place and politics emerge.

Ana: With communities in struggle, you have built a glossary of work and lessons learned. What are the most important notions that emerged in this process?

Sandra: As a distilled result of the extended time that has made collaboration with others possible, I have learned diverse ways of understanding the conflicts I approach. These lessons come from collaboration with others and the exercise of attentive listening. From among several concepts that I have gradually incorporated into my artistic practice I would like to highlight three, as they seem to me to be the most generative: *anarchitecture,*

metis, and *tequio*. These are key concepts that are part of the vocabulary of the different projects, and therefore, the definitions presented here do not correspond to those of an official dictionary, but rather are the result of meanings gestated and emerging in the course of the research. They are the result of conversations, anecdotes, observations, and experiences, and are part of an archive in process that grows and transforms as reflections and the work continue to develop.

Anarchitecture

Sandra: This term, which for me is intimately connected to the practice of self-construction that is central to my artistic work, is interesting to me because of the libertarian potential it contains. Many will think more immediately of the reference to Gordon Matta-Clark, who proposed the neologism in 1974, but from a more conceptual and less practical point of view than the one I want to assign to it in my work. While for Matta-Clark *anarchitecture* reveals new spatial dimensions through deconstructive strategies that 'do not pretend to solve any problem', I understand it as a practice of resolute self-construction profoundly free or liberated from the tyranny of grand Architecture. Considering the prefix that relates it to anarchy, *anarchitecture* would be characterized by *metis*—unsanctioned practical knowledge—and can be read as an expression of rebellion and reappropriation of the fruit of labour originally extracted as surplus value, with the added advantage of not having to follow an imposed or alien blueprint established by other than the worker's will.

We can also understand *anarchitecture* as a dystopian practice, as a limited and minimal architecture, or as 'plebeian' work, naked, stark, though also ingenious. It is a practice of creation without guarantees, in which spaces are kept in permanent openness, caught between a state of beginning and a state of abandonment. For example, in the case of ASA, we can speak of an *anarchitectonic* practice of self-construction that responds to necessity rather than to planning; thus, self-construction within the spaces of the disputed property refers us to the reality of an unregulated urban growth, not subject to the parameters of municipal planning, of a self-managed and survivalist nature. This type of construction raises an important question about traditional architecture, since self-construction is a vital exercise that has its own particular rules that are not fixed. When we begin to understand the phenomenon, it has already mutated. The apparent chaos of these constructions is simply another order, the order of the solutions adapted to their circumstances.

On the other hand, any narrative about anarchitecture and self-construction would be partial and unfair if it fails to consider the poetic drive of these constructions on a technical and creative level. Yes, *anarchitecture* is a form of non-industrialized, informal manufacturing that constitutes an 'ad-hocquist' urban response that challenges the modernist vision of the city. However, it is also a practice marked by self-apprenticeship that offers the possibility for access to housing to an important part of the population faced with the contradiction of needing housing and lacking the material means to go through formalized or hegemonic paths to obtain it—sufficient capital, mortgage credits,

participation in the real estate market, etc. In response to this situation, more than half of the houses in Latin America are the work of self-construction, and therefore, examples of *anarchitecture* which experiment with materials and design solutions that are not limited to copying or building what is 'practical' or necessary, but rather they constitute a language and aesthetics of their own.

The metis

Sandra: This is empirical knowledge—*metis* is the wisdom acquired through experience and intuition, deep thought, cunning, and practical intelligence—as opposed to *techné*: rationalized and systematized technical knowledge. I see *metis* as the inner logic and rhythm of *anarchitecture*. Drawing on *metis,* the community involved in self-construction projects shapes objects and spaces by means of a kind of reverse engineering or popular engineering, to solve their needs within the limits to which the scarcity of resources constrains them.

Metis is a distillation of local knowledge, of tacit knowledge, in which a logic of small steps subsists, open to surprise and inventiveness, reversible and revisable. This logic of a libertarian spirit anchored in practical knowledge derived from experience is what allows communities to build their own houses. ASA, for example, vindicates self-construction as a form of *metis*, a space raised step by step in an empirical and intuitive way. The thread structure is also a tribute to this *metis*, halfway between sculpture and tool.

In self-construction, the spirit of the house is not delegated to a specialist. From the beginning, and as construction progresses, it belongs to the inhabitants who intervene in the design. Metis also crystallizes in the community's ability to recycle, expand, repair, and modify that objectual universe that is usually considered waste; these resources (discarded by 'formalized' or hegemonic construction practices) make possible the rehabilitation of evicted structures or spaces, thus helping the community to respond to its expulsion from the formal housing market.

Another characteristic of *metis* and *anarchitecture* is its collectivist condition. A self-built house is one of shared ownership, as it depends on the collective to be planned, erected, and cared for. In many ways, the *metis* is a form of daily resistance, as it represents a collectivized resource that goes against the individualistic and transactional logic that the neoliberal capitalist system insists on imposing on us as the only rational and realistic way of living together.

The tequio

Sandra: From the Nahuatl word *tequitl*, which just means 'work or tribute', tequio refers to a pre-hispanic custom that consisted in the cooperation in kind and labour of the members of a region to build, repair and preserve their surroundings. For my work, *tequio* represents more than a separate concept, it is a daily logic and practice of mutual responsibility, which has made possible the articulation of my positioning with the

communities with which I have collaborated. Not only do each of these projects come from communities that use *tequio* within their organizational system, but I have adopted this modality to operate in conjunction with them to create the devices of dialogue. Tequio is integrated into my work as a practice of union and cooperation. Many of the tasks of care and maintenance of the territory of a community are carried out with *tequio*, for example, sweeping and burning garbage, cleaning the streets, opening, and marking lanes, *brechas* or *tecorrales* on the field, etc.

Working as an artist in collaboration with communities that are in the midst of processes of struggle and defence is a labour that is complex and infinitely generative of ideas, possibilities, proposals, ties, and responsibilities. All my projects are long term processes that generate bonds. Throughout the years [I have] dedicated to these processes, I have developed specific methods to intervene in a constructive way in the conflicts that involve the community. These methods are always different, but they all begin with the interest that the problems of a specific group awaken in me and always aim to produce a critical incident within these conflicts.

There have been many lessons learned and reflections on my own methods and those deployed by the communities in which I am involved, and a central element that has made possible the level of collaboration and closeness necessary to bring each of these projects to fruition has been time. To collaborate, you need time. Time is scarce like so many other resources; people do not have time, and it is necessary to give time, to take time to generate fragments of history together, to generate rites, local legends, to affect and be affected by the territory.

In addition, spending time with others produces a feeling of responsibility towards them. Collaboration arises from affectivity, but this affectivity is not always harmonious or consensus-building. Collaborating means getting involved, taking a position, asserting oneself, and when a position is taken there is conflict and disagreement; that is the difference between participating and taking a position; it means letting oneself be guided by an interest, but without a structure conceived a priori, and without pretending to speak from an inaccessible objectivity. This is precisely what Marina Garcés calls 'honesty with the real', and I am interested in producing an honest art that enters the scene, that gets involved and escapes from banality and the overestimation of self-importance in equal measure; I am interested in art that is confrontational, that alters reality, and that is immersed in the problems of its time.

About this Conversation's participants

Sandra Calvo is a visual artist based in Mexico. She develops long-term participatory projects framed within contexts of social and political tension in the Global South, marked by issues such as gentrification, the politics of housing, migrations, forced displacement, land tenancy, plunder, and unjustified evictions. Through diverse perspectives, methodologies and disciplines —such as anthropology, fabulation, architecture, sociology, and cinematography- her projects explore and honor strategies of resistance and survival such as

self-construction, self-mobilization and auto-production, where popular and ancestral knowledge intersect. Calvo's aesthetic interventions –resulting in hybrid cinema, collaborative sculptures and expanded documentaries– are performed in collaboration with residents of sites threatened by the situations mentioned above. She studied an MA in Liberal Arts from The New School for Social Research, NY, and holds a BA in Political Science from ITAM, Mexico City. Her work is often featured in biennials, among them: Lisbon Architecture Triennial, 2022; Venice Architecture Biennial, 2021; Havana Biennial, 2021, 2015. She has conducted art production and research residencies, mainly in Mexico, Cuba, Colombia, China and India. She has taught courses and workshops on Art and Politics, Participatory Practices, Cinema and Audiovisual Media, Informal Spaces. Since 2022 she is part of the Team of Instructors at the Soma Art School. In 2017 she became a member of the Mexican National System of Art Creators, FONCA. She has published her book "Arquitectura sin arquitectos" (Arquine, 2022) and Minor Monuments (Casa Vecina, 2010).

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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