



Beneath the Bureaucracy, the Beach

a conversation between

Fernando García Dory
and Chris Fite-Wassilak



When is an artist not an artist? Socially engaged artists constantly run the risk of being labeled as “just” activists or social workers. Spanish artist Fernando García Dory’s paths follow tracks faintly parallel to the expanded, city-based social interventions practice of WochenKlausur or Superflex’s consumer critiques, while they instead run out of the cities and into the hills. Like a mountain-roaming Stephen Willats, García Dory works with shepherds, nomads, and the uneasy relationship of rural and urban spaces, placing social and organizational structures themselves as aesthetic objects. Negotiating and tracing these invisible lines, he asserts the role of the artist as a cultural free agent, moving between official agencies and more informal, nebulous arrangements to offer ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory, solutions. García Dory alternates between Madrid, the capital of Spain’s governmental and official art world, and the farm he inherited from his family in the mountainous Asturias to the north. He is involved in the Art and Culture Commission of *Plataforma Rural*, an alliance including Spanish farmers’ unions, consumers’ associations, development NGOs and environmental organizations, as well as the Spanish Shepherds Federation and the Spanish Artisan Cheesemakers’ Association. He is also a trustee of the World Alliance of Nomadic and Transhumant Pastoralists, an organization resulting from a meeting of nomadic shepherds he instigated in 2007. Drawn to his ephemeral and largely optimistic work through a mutual appreciation of ecology and cheesemaking, I met him in Madrid at the conference *Campo Adentro*—*Inland: Art, Agriculture & Countryside*, a weekend that he conceived of as a starting point for the discussion of a so-called “ruralist artist discourse.” Perhaps appropriately, this conversation took place in fragments, both in Madrid and over email between London and the countryside of Mallorca.

Chris Fite-Wassilak: You describe yourself as a “neo-pastoralist and agro-ecologist,” but readily acknowledge the contradictions inherent in working as an artist among these issues. Would you agree that art’s dominant ideologies are urban? If so, is that something you are seeking to undermine?

Fernando García Dory: If I have to define my work, I will say that it’s about contradiction. Take, for example, the Shepherds School started in 2004. It’s about the impossibility of the ideal. Simultaneously, it’s premised on the fact that this unfulfilled ideal is operative, that it still has an impact. I’m constantly moving between the modern and post-modern—I understand the postmodern as an era when inaction or critical examination of actions makes you question purpose and means, while being simultaneously shaped by a need, an urgency. For my intervention at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome (FAO), for example, I gained access as an official delegate. I sat in as a delegate of one country—I think it was Tuvalu—and started to use the internal messaging service to send other delegates written notes. Their communication system is still very analog, with women carrying pieces of paper to their intended destination, which you indicate by saying “Send this to Trinidad and Tobago or Russia please.” I wrote, “Nothing is real for us but hunger.” We can elaborate discursively, but at some point we have to keep in mind the other ways to perceive life. With shepherds and cheesemakers, I also feel the contingency and the urgency of the disappearance of their way of life.

In 1999, I started the cooperative “Bajo el Asfalto está la Huerta” [Under the Asphalt Lies the Garden], a community-based agricultural system of production and distribution that is still running. That was the first time I realized that such an endeavor was a work of art in itself. I always find amazing the ways in which humans arrange time



and space with activity to sort out things, the interconnection of different agencies towards a goal. I arrived at the feeling that systems themselves have an ethic, and aesthetic value.

In Spain, with a kind of new-rich provincialism, we have an art system that only looks to the city as fertile ground for inspiration, intervention, and circulation. This is based in ignorance, if not disdain, of other environmental configurations, including the rural. Yet, the rural is actually a low-density urban realm where nature breathes a bit more through the interstices. The exploration of these interstices gives us the possibility to experience another way of life, which has been embodied by indigenous and peasant cultures. These inherently autonomous cultures, though, have been a clear target of the Western-industrial model of development, as “awkward classes” to be exterminated. These cultures, now more than ever, have to be reconsidered or reinvented. As such, if I try to undermine anything, it is the brutal shortsightedness of the urban lifestyle and the way it looks down on the rural. This includes the current neopastoral narratives of ecofashion and the attempts to put to rest the countryside’s conflicted reality in idyllic postcards.

CFW: So, you work in a context where the relationship of art to pastoral ideology is uneasy, if not branded largely as naïve idealism. You also seem quite wary of the strength of nostalgia as threat in the discourses you are exploring and creating.

FGD: I think it’s a wise suspicion. The pastoral ideology was also a tool of oppression for rural cultures that found themselves represented by cultural and power elites. We could trace a parallel with the postcolonial analyses of center-periphery relations, and see orientalism and exoticism in the time of the imperial expansions as not so different from the creation of pastoral genres.



CFW: But can it be cast as just a dichotomy? While they are different ways of life, they are not necessarily opposing. People and produce from the countryside come to the city; a mutual exchange is already going on. Are we not setting up false oppositions when in fact we have contrast rather than dialectic?

FGD: As in postcolonial readings, multiple drives converge in a complex process of relation with that “other.” As we increasingly venture into the unpredictable flow of events in this late-capitalist era, we grow to yearn for the stability and safe “home” that is often represented by the rural. Here, the rural is a set of immutable traditions that we want to preserve, a conservative attachment to something we value more, like a folk scene with traditional clothes. It’s an unachievable goal, which leads to grotesque re-enactments and the Disneyfication of the countryside, if not the more dangerous, exclusionary “Blut und Boden” ideologies. I work with cheesemakers’ and shepherds’ unions. Every day I see people having to quit because political and legal systems don’t allow them to keep their jobs. It’s not about saying everyone should go to the countryside; but we should allow people who want to stay or get there to do so. Of course, I am worried about nostalgia as a main engine for actions. But nostalgia is not reserved for the countryside. We can also be nostalgic about other things: I’m currently working on a project about endangered occupations, to put an ironic perspective on nostalgia. I’m working with Madrid’s last “Hand Car Wash” station. My project seeks to maintain it, playing with the futility of fixation on past forms under the guise of the added-value concept of “tradition.” It might be silly to defend the hand washing of cars. However, when you move the same

argument and action to another subject, you then realize that they may be pointless or useless. If you can defend shepherds, why not defend car washers? Who has assigned the difference and why?

CFW: Recently, you wrote about your *Shepherds School* project as “ostensibly an opportunity to get back to the land and manage the resources directly as tools of social change and to subvert prevalent cultural values; instead it highlights the weakness inherent in such a simplistic approach.”

FGD: *Microkingdom of Utopia: A Shepherds School* has been giving young people the opportunity to become shepherds for the last five years. It entails a course and a five-month trial or internship period. Many of the initially-willing participants decide not to go on. In fact, only one has become a shepherd. There are diverse reasons for this. When I wrote those lines, I was a bit sensitive about the reality: each year, the applicants who showed the most promise, that is, those who demonstrated their desire to live and work in the mountains, ended up becoming the most reluctant. Even if the strategy is still valid, the conditions are not yet favorable.

CFW: Part of the project involved appropriating a structure from Rirkrit Tiravanija’s reproduction of his house in Thailand, *The House the Cat Built*, 2009, and using it as a meeting point in a gallery for the shepherds. Walead Beshty remarked that Tiravanija’s work and the communal ideal of relational aesthetics “run the risk of transforming the communal into the estranged, but more importantly, they naturalize



social repressions, locating them as the ur-text of experience.”¹ What did you find in your re-enacted model? Do you think your work runs the same risk of, say, preaching to the converted?

FGD: The installation *Museum's Pastoral: A Meeting of the Federation of Shepherds* was a kind of *tableau vivant*, a micro-scale attempt to build a social movement in the LABoral Center in Gijón in 2009. After the establishment of the Spanish Shepherds Federation—FEP in Spanish—linking sixteen associations from different corners of the country, I used the museum's commission to organize that meeting. I collected articles from the shepherds to make the first issue of the FEP bulletin, as communication tool to reach both shepherds in remote rural areas and urban audiences. *The Assemblies Module* built from wood reclaimed from Tiravanija's work was the meeting place for the FEP members. The shepherds initially found the space a bit cold. They knew that museum visitors could be looking at them and listening. It was a great experience for them to be able to talk about their lives and the problems they face. In turn, visitors seemed to empathize with this model school of citizenship and horizontal politics. I was very aware that this could be seen as a form of social art pornography. Here, however, as the work of the Federation goes outside and beyond the museum, I regarded the collaboration with the art institution as symbiosis rather than parasitism. The Shepherds Federation is a bluff, much like in poker. While this is a small group of shepherds, this cultural strategy has had a real impact: we now have a position on the advisory board of the Ministry of Farming. It might be quixotic theoretically and practically, but it also creates a potentially long-term focus point for consideration and debate.

CFW: What connects your various projects? How do you see the continuum between the very rooted, territory-bound life of the farmer and shepherd with the more ambivalent, fluid identities of nomadic peoples which you convened to a meeting in 2007? Currently, you're work-

ing on a mobile cheese making unit for Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin and at Grizedale Arts in the north of England. How does this mobility operate?

FGD: Mobility is, together with knowledge and organizational structures, a major point of interest for me. I believe that the role of the artist is negentropic, that is, that the artist should build up new and more complex compounds instead of focusing on disintegration or the inertia of entropy. A nomadic ideal is built into postindustrial capitalist societies: move around, carry almost nothing, run light, be liquid—the rich nomad as global player. This ideology erases nomadic, pastoralist, peasant, and indigenous cultures. The Grizedale project is about tailoring a cheese for Cumbria that satisfies the farmers, tourists, and the art crowd alike, based on tasting workshops that I will do with these groups. For me, a mobile cheesemaking unit is playing on those contradictions: making cheese entails changing the state of matter from liquid to solid; it is microbiological livestock management and an ancient pastoralist biotechnology. The wish to learn it fast, in one morning workshop, deals with our wish for instant gratification. The “authentic” foods we yearn for could also be accessible, self-made, and not elite gastronomic merchandise. It's a way to reconnect with food makers and the problems they face. Food is therefore more than a political tool, it has become politics in itself.

CFW: Working with organizational systems and agricultural produce, your practice seems to hover between an almost federal institutional critique and a pastoral realism. Would your role as an artist then sit comfortably alongside that of an administrator?

FGD: It's about opening a generative space in the countryside, that is, a space where culture might be produced, rather than simply vertically integrated as a place of reception and participation. This form of hori-

ABOVE: **Fernando García Dory**, *Museum's Pastoral: A Meeting of the Federation of Shepherds*, 2009 (courtesy the artist and the LABoral Center, Gijón, Spain) / OPPOSITE: **Fernando García Dory**, details of intervention at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, 2007

zontal creation and consumption is the norm in popular cultural production—think of flamenco, the dance that was developed in the nomadic gypsy communities that settled in the Southern Iberian peninsula, which relies on the free interpretation of shared codes. While the good flamenco dancer can expertly improvise, much is shared and co-generated.

Nowadays, the role of the artist is for the most part managerial. Public relations, project management and application, and various paperwork consume about eighty percent of the artist's time—curiously, this is also the case with today's farmers. This is something to be publicly acknowledged, because many still want to believe in the figure of the artist we have inherited from Romanticism, that is, someone devoted solely to creativity. Nor should we forget that, despite all the vaunted virtues of so-called collaborative, public artwork, the artist always ends up having to do most of the “dirty work” management. The artist has to cook, prepare the table, and do the dishes for a determined social subject to partake in the meal—a humble position that doesn't conform to the idea of the unique, genius artist. By pushing the managerial dimension to the limit, I seek to define the limitation of that form of art. I confront myself with that exhausting task as the opposite of creative process.

On the other hand, I firmly believe that artists who attempt to influence the world have at some point to make compromises with the current ruling structures. Quite often, past avant-gardes remained inspiring children's games because they lacked the commitment to set up efficient transformative organizations and procedures. My experience of working within national state structures or supranational bodies such as the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) or FAO has been as fascinating for me as the beekeeping that I learned from my father and neighbors. Social insects are interesting to study as a state organization; states, as a kind of corporation, have the capacity and power to convert a wish or an idea into an operative object or system. For me, that is the perfect *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total artwork dream of utopian artists. In the end, I find structured efforts of consensus and coordination within the mess of mankind and individual agency quite moving and tender.

NOTE

1. Walead Beshty, “Neo-Avantgarde and the Service Industry: Notes on the Brave New World of Relational Aesthetics,” *Texte zur Kunst* 59 (September 2005): <http://www.textezurkunst.de/59/neo-avantgarde-and-service-industry>, accessed December 10, 2010.

Chris Fite-Wassilak is a writer and curator based in London and a frequent contributor to ART PAPERS and *Frieze*. His recent curatorial project *Quiet Revolution* was toured by the Hayward Gallery. He is currently developing a project with David Beattie and Karl Burke for the Galway Arts Centre.

