

THE POROUS STONE



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A car slows down and pulls up by us. We will have to wait for a few slightly uncomfortable seconds longer as the window is wound down. The driver leans his body with difficulty over the passenger seat, wanting to get a good look at us. Finally he says, “*Kaixo*, what are you doing?” The question is not intended to be hostile – it seems to come from a genuine curiosity, although the two occupants of the car are smiling securely, a bit like players with a good hand of cards. We will soon find out they’re the owners of the land on which stands the object we are tampering with.

At the point when the car pulls up, the object is completely covered with a sticky green paste. That, of course, is why they’ve stopped. Why are we on their land? What is that green stuff? It is all part of an art work I am realising in collaboration with my art partner, Klaas van Gorkum. If all goes well, once it’s dry we should be able to detach it from the original object and be left with a silicon mould with which we can make an exact replica of it.

The occupants of the car have been wanting to get rid of this object for a long time. They consider our position. Why would we want to make a copy of something they can’t stand the sight of? Do we blame them in some way for having left it out there to deteriorate? They seem satisfied by our explanations, and start to tell us all kinds of stories.

The thing in question is a monolith, and is part of the remnants of a monument in Urbina (Álava), dedicated to three German soldiers, and known to locals as the “Alemanen kanposantue”, the German Graveyard. Erected around eighty years ago, during or shortly after the Civil War, it must have stood over a small garden of about ten square metres surrounded by a wall.

There’s nothing left now apart from this stone block, and very little can be perceived of its original function as a memorial. Some months ago, the names of the soldiers carved onto its surface were still visible. But someone has chiselled away the letters. All you can see now is a peculiar patchwork of bright scratches produced by a sharp tool on the limestone, against a background with traces of red paint.

We’re interested in how the stone absorbs what happens around it from the moment it was placed here until the day it disappears; as if its apparently indecipherable surface were an exact record of the events it has presided.

I will return to this object many times in this text. I will be dissecting the different layers that recent history has deposited onto its surface, and, most of all, I intend to use it as an anchor for some of the theoretical coordinates of our practice as artists. The monolith is thus the object of this study. But I will approach it with none of the scientific rigour of, say, an archaeologist. In historical terms, this account will be unreliable. I wish this text to be seen as part of a performative exercise of appropriating the object.

I am writing this during the production of our current project, which is a work in progress. The text can therefore not function as a description of something already finished. Nor is it a declaration of intentions prior to giving shape to an idea. It is, strictly speaking, situated halfway through the translation of the object into my terrain, which is contemporary art.

The agency of the object

Let us then go back to the monolith. For a start, it is made of stone. We could say that this is an undeniable fact. And yet it has also been crafted into a memorial. It is the bearer of intentionality, intangible but socially recognisable. That is to say, it was intended to be recognised as a memorial, when the stone was placed at this particular site.

As a sign, the stone thus shifts between the matter it is made of, and what it is made to carry symbolically. This duality is the reason why this particular object might be defined by the French philosopher Bruno Latour’s term, the *actant*. Unlike an actor, who takes action, an actant sets something off, marking a difference in the course of action (Latour 2008, 84).

In order to clarify this term, “actant”, I will draw a parallel between the monument to the German soldiers and a separate one, in this case also a monolith, from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) by Stanley Kubrick.

The film begins by showing the range of difficulties faced by a troupe of primates in order to survive in prehistoric times before tools were invented, until all of a sudden a mysterious monolith appears standing at the entrance of the place where they have sheltered for the night. The monolith is a rectangular prism, too small to be a building, but big enough to be an imposing presence. It is simple, basic but also majestic, made out of a highly polished black mineral. It is radically new, and artificial to its context both in form and in the technology used to make it.

In the next scene, the object is no longer visible, but it is still present. One of the apes is holding a bone, and starts striking at the remains of an animal. The encounter with the indecipherable, utterly useless monolith paradoxically leads to the creation of something useful. A weapon has just been invented – the troupe's first functional tool. Creativity and technology are born hand in hand with violence and power. The innovative ape assumes leadership of the group, whose troupe now becomes a tribe. From then on they will have tools to procure their food and dominate their rivals. The evolution of knowledge has been set in motion, which will inevitably lead to the invention of the spaceship and artificial intelligence.

It is debatable to which extent the monolith determined the fate of the apes. After all, it does not seem as indispensable to the outcome of events as the bone/weapon. Wouldn't the weapon, strictly speaking, be the object possessed of agency? Even with this seeming incongruence, I will take the liberty of comparing the monolith in Urbina to Kubrick's slab. I think both could be seen as possessing a productive capacity in that both monoliths organise certain movements by the bodies around them, in the way that a speed hump will slow down the driver of a car.

Consider our monolith: it has produced the community of subjects who have in some way interfered with it. The stone could be used to map an entire network made up of the military personnel who erected it, the family who owns the terrain, the activists who tried to destroy it, the archaeologists who researched it, as well as us, the artists, with our intervention. All whose movements have been slowed down by its presence have been produced as a subject by it.

The context

If an object is able to produce something in its surroundings, we can infer that to drop something in the middle of an inhabited space may also have a negative effect and turn it into a bittersweet kind of presence.

Like the white elephants that were bestowed on political rivals by the monarchs of South East Asia. In spite of the great honour implied by the gift of this sacred animal, keeping it alive was so costly that receiving it was more akin to a curse. The monarchs thus prevented their rivals from investing their fortunes in conspiring against them.

Let's place ourselves in front of the monument to the Germans in Urbina and look around us. How is the

monolith inscribed in that particular territory, and how does it act upon it?

Urbina is a small hamlet with a population of just over a hundred which lies in the municipality of Legutiano (Álava). It could be seen as one of many somewhat unremarkable rural villages. And yet here is this monolith, as the materialisation of a daunting chain of dramatic events that is at odds with the tiny size of the place. Were we to apply a military perspective to the map of the surroundings, we would realise that geology has been a determining physical aspect of its history: it is a natural front, and a strategic point between different provinces.

Urbina is 10 kilometres away from Vitoria-Gasteiz, towards Bilbao, right on the edge of the Llanada Alavesa (Alavan Plain). Towards the north is the mountain range that separates Álava from the Atlantic valleys of Guipúzcoa and Vizcaya (Biscay). It is also a linguistic frontier. In 1863 it was shown on Louis-Lucien Bonaparte's map of Basque dialects as one of the limits of the area where Basque, and the Vizcayan dialect in particular, is spoken.

The area's geological characteristics have made it a focal point for armed conflicts. After the military uprising that sparked the Civil War, all of Álava fell into the hands of the forces leading the coup, with the exception of the area a few kilometres to the north of Urbina. Vitoria-Gasteiz, the Basque capital, soon became an important centre of power for the Fascist side. The Salburua airfield, for example, was chosen as the headquarters for the Condor Legion, sent by the Third Reich in support of the military insurgency, and responsible for the bombing of Gernika in April 1937.

The entire province was overrun by soldiers at that time, and Urbina was no exception. A German artillery unit was installed there, and by the end of the war they left the memorial behind as a reminder of their presence.

Just as the mysterious monolith had appeared overnight in front of the shelter of Kubrick's apes, after those months of violence the people of Urbina found themselves saddled with a monument in honour of three Nazi soldiers. There it was, planted next to a vegetable patch by the side of the road that leads out of Urbina to Bilbao. It consisted of a kind of walled terrace of about *ten square metres*, with two flights of steps and four crosses at the corners, dominated by a limestone monolith.

Nobody knows exactly what happened, nor how the three German soldiers of the monument died. We have,

however, managed to reconstruct the text that was carved into it:

Hier fielen im Kampf um ein nationales Spanien
EMIL CREUTZ
28.8.1914 ZU HÜFFLER – PFALZ.
4.4.1937 IM LAZ. VITORIA
JOHANN FISCHER
4.11.1914 ZU HANDZELL – OBB.
20.4.1937 IM LAZ. VITORIA
KARL RETTENMAIER
15.7.1910 ZU HÜTTLINGEN – WTTBG.
2.4.1937 IM LAZ. VITORIA

The text could be translated as: “Here fell in the battle for a National Spain: Emil Creutz, born 28.8.1914 in Hüffler, Palatinate, died 4.4.1937 in Military Hospital, Vitoria; Johann Fischer, born 4.11.1914 in Handzell, Upper Bavaria, died 20.4.1937 in Military Hospital, Vitoria; Karl Rettenmaier, born 15.7.1910 in Hüttlingen, Württemberg, died 2.4.1937 in Military Hospital, Vitoria.”

It seems clear that this text constitutes the most evident expression of ideology on the monolith. However, this is due not so much to what it says, as to its form – it was written in German, to start with, and carved, moreover, in a typeface known as Fraktur, which Hitler banned in 1941 after claiming it had Jewish origins. Fraktur was then replaced by other, more simple, more intelligible typefaces, particularly in order to make German documents easier to read in the occupied territories (Martínez de Guereño, Santamarina, Urrutxua 2016).

There is very little, then, that the text would communicate to the inhabitants of Urbina. They do not speak the language, and the characters it was written in are hard to decipher. The stone, however, goes far beyond materialising the memory of three dead Nazis. As in Kubrick’s film, it is more like an absolute presence. In this particular case, it is the sign of a radically foreign and hostile community, and forms part of a bloody phase in history that was instigated by an authority still in power.

So it is not hard to see why the memorial would serve as a surface for contention. By the time we found it, the text had already become illegible. There were several layers of graffiti on its face and traces of what appeared to be attempts to demolish the monument. However, in spite of the abstract image it had been turned into, the object was still not entirely unreadable – each one of the layers on it could be read as a symptom of a particular social moment which had permeated the stone.

For instance, Andoni Cabello, a resident of Urbina, in his book *La Plaza de Urbina* (2004), tells of how he and his friend Iñaki Ormaetxea tried to “smash [it] to pieces”. This was in 1985, halfway through the years of political violence in the Basque Country. They were seventeen and nineteen years old at the time. Cabello’s friend was the youngest son of the Ormaetxea family, which owned the land where the monument was erected. The two boys were militants in Jarrai, a pro-independence leftist group. They made use of the group’s theory of direct action, but adapted it to the rural world, where the issues and demands were different to those from the urban context the theory had originated in. Such as, for example, striking at symbols commemorating the coup’s victory, like the monument to the German soldiers.

We also know that the monument had stood over a sort of terrace with a low wall and two flights of steps. At some point, this particular *mise-en-scène* had been changed to make space for the vegetable garden. This is recorded in the diary of Mariano González Mangada, nicknamed *Cartagena* in the village. González Mangada was a member of a national Catholic organisation’s commission to support the families of Basque prisoners. Cartagena would travel to the village every summer to help out Iñaki Ormaetxea’s mother – the owner of the land the monument stood on.

His diary was written in 1994. By then, Iñaki, the youngest son, had died. A few months after attempting to destroy the German stone, he had left Jarrai and gone underground as a member of ETA. Nothing was heard from him until he was shot down years later in San Sebastián, after a four hour gunfire exchange with the Guardia Civil.

The front of the stone had also been defaced by graffiti. *Arriba España* could just be made out from its traces, together with a Celtic cross, a Neo-Nazi emblem. The paint was red – exactly the same colour as the spray paint used in the raid on the Ormaetxea home in the year 2013. After Iñaki’s death the family had renamed their home in the middle of the village as *Iñakienea*, and had fastened a plaque onto the front wall with a text in memory of their son.

By then, ETA had already announced their ceasefire. However, just a couple of years earlier, in 2008, they had parked a car bomb in front of the Legutiano police barracks, at five kilometres from the German monolith, leaving the building in ruins and killing the Guardia Civil who was standing guard. With this attack in mind, someone anonymously posted a message on the Spanish

Army internet forum, denouncing the sign on the facade of the Ormaetxeas. “A can of black spray paint and I’d decorate that plaque with a nice Picasso” (Susir600 2010). Just a few months later, the board was defaced and a Spanish flag left beside it. Perhaps the perpetrators also stopped their car in front of the stone on their way out of the village, in order to finish their leftover paint.

In 2017, another graffiti was painted over the red neo-Nazi text on the monolith, with the word “*Independentzia*” and a white star. A plaque was glued to its base, signed by Ernai, a Basque leftist youth organisation. This time, the vandalism was recorded in detail on video, and shared on social networks as a call for a demonstration in support of the Catalan independence movement.

By this stage the chances of encountering first hand accounts of the causes and circumstances under which the monument was built had been reduced to a minimum. But there it stood, patiently awaiting the arrival of the next actors in the wheel of history: the archaeologists.

April 2016 was the anniversary of the start of the Civil War. This led not only to a great many memorial acts, but also to scientific investigation at universities all over Spain. Within this social and academic context, the archaeologist Josu Santamarina wrote an article on the German stele at Urbina for the blog *Arqueología de la Guerra Civil Española* (Archaeology of the Spanish Civil War, Santamarina 2016b). Soon after his text was published, the carved names of the German soldiers were chiselled off. Santamarina’s article had caused a stir, which settled as a new layer onto the stone, this time as a jumble of indecipherable scratches. The monument was becoming more and more abstract.

And this is when we as artists came in.

Formal transformation and ontological accumulation

As I mentioned at the start, what we find interesting about the stone is the way its surface records events that the object has been both a catalyst and a witness to. However, our aim is not so much to provide a recreation of past events. What we want to explore is the relationship between the object’s ontology and the material changes it has undergone. This exercise is a way to equip ourselves as artists for our eventual intervention in the process of the object’s transformation.

So what is this object before us?

If its definition depends on its use-value, we might actually say that the monument has disappeared – little is left of its original memorial function. For a long time, after the letters were chiselled off it, not even the names of the people it intended to imprint on local memory remained.

Yet if we look beyond the function of a monument, it also happens to be an intangible collective construction. In order for a monument to function as such, it must first be recognised as a material substitute for an event or person. It could therefore be said that although the stone was vandalised in a desire to dismantle the ideological structure it represents, the act of vandalism reactivates it again through the formal language of destruction and ruin.

A monument is thus a paradoxical object. In appearance it only seeks to perpetuate a memory of the past. But such an interpretation falls short of its real function because it ignores the context in which it is placed: a monument in public space is more akin to a territorial marker, a manner of taking possession of a space (Santamarina 2016a), and as such it is a belligerent presence which risks being replicated. Its future is to become part of a process of ideological appropriation and re-appropriation, particularly in a context of political conflict. In this way it will absorb the social atmosphere around it and be transformed along with its environment. A third value could be added to the monument’s historical and cultural value: discord (Muñoz-Rojas 2016). Only as long as this discord does not formally alter the monument can it continue to manifest the original ideological architecture behind its construction.

Although the monument still exists as an object, its memorial function has been eroded by its successive transformations. Layer by layer, it has been *demonumentalised* by an excess of meanings. At the present moment, the object is no longer a sign of the three German soldiers – it is a symptom of the political and social climate after the war, and of the historical mechanisms that set archaeologists and artists in motion.

Yet the stone has not ceased to be an *actant* object; it continues to actively produce subjects and to be reproduced in other forms such as, for instance, this text. With each formal mutation, however, the object also moves, literally and metaphorically, into other spaces. It presents itself differently according to the place or hands holding it: in public space it becomes a feature of collective representation; in a rubbish tip, a piece of junk; at a trial, a piece of evidence. It eventually becomes all

of these simultaneously, because this is not a process of substitution, but rather one of conservation. Each time it is *moved*, the singular language of the particular space in which it finds itself is superimposed onto the object. We can consider this an ontological accumulation.

What destiny could we imagine for this undesired thing? In public space, the monument imposes a self-image onto a community that, rather than uniting it, is constantly called into question. On the other hand, it is also a material document of that community's relationship to the past, however dark it may be. So it might be better to ask how this object can be made part of cultural heritage while de-activating it ideologically.

The act of moving from one point to another

The answer to this question might be a matter of moving the object into the space of art. In other words, an act of translation, since a translation is also a change of place. Indeed, even the Latin origin of the word *translation* means to literally move "from one point to another" (Cano 2017, 84), or to "carry over".

Let us begin, then, by analysing the way an object communicates, and then go on to develop the idea of carrying over or translating into the space of contemporary art.

To borrow from Walter Benjamin's text "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man": everything we give names to also possesses a language of its own. A language, for instance, not only expresses what can be expressed *through* it, but is also the direct expression of everything that is communicated *in* the language itself (Benjamin 1996a). We can also apply this principle to objects. The artist Hito Steyerl illustrates it as follows: "As well as the language communicated via the telephone, there is also the language of the telephone itself" (Steyerl 2006). The language of things would be a mute language, and its medium would be material form.

To take the example of the telephone, let's imagine we call up the relevant institutions to enquire about the monument. Any exchange of information would take place in the language of humans. But in the language of the telephone, what the object expresses in its form is the distance between the people making the call.

As I said in the opening to this text, our object is made of stone and is a crafted item. The fact that it is made of stone is not a coincidence. It was a formal decision by the maker based on stone's solidity and durability as a material. A new language is thus added to the material

language of the stone: intentionality. The monolith communicates simultaneously in different languages. And as Steyerl points out, translating between them could take place in different spheres: "While the language of things is full with potential, the language of humans can either try to engage in this potential or become a tool of force. And thus translation takes place in the mode of creation as well as of force." Translation, when used as an instrument of force, imposes meanings. It passes judgment on the object which fixes it in a stable category of knowledge and domesticates its potential to signify. If we apply this idea to the monolith, we might say that its language resists the monumentalising intention imposed on it, since the only stable thing over time is that it remains stone. From this point of view, the difference between translation as an instrument of force and as a magnifier of potential is above all a question of form rather than one of content.

This division might be a useful tool to understand our attempt to move the stone into the space of art – even though the dualism between the two languages as solid categories can become a little artificial, because they constantly bleed into one another. There is a long tradition of using stone for building monuments because of its resistance and permanence. But stone changes depending on where it is. It is not the same deep inside the belly of a mountain, as when it is being cut to size at the quarry, or placed somewhere to stand in for an event. It is essential to consider the fact that this stone has been moved from place to place – that is, it has been through different translations – in order to understand its productive capacity as an actant object.

Walter Benjamin claimed that the life of an original text expands posthumously through its translations. But in order to create knowledge, the highest aim of a translation cannot merely be its similarity to the original; it must update the language of the original to new circumstances. "For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change" (Benjamin 1996b, 256). Translation can thus be considered a creative act. The translator renews the form of the source for a receiver at a certain time, in certain social, cultural, spatial and linguistic conditions that differ from those of the original.

The manner in which acts of vandalism have renewed this object could be seen as a translation that is unfaithful to the original object, because it has robbed it of its content. These acts nevertheless continue to extend the

object's status as a territorial marker, by working within the logic of action and reaction.

To carry the object over into the space of archaeology, on the other hand, would be to translate it into a document. Archaeologists examine their objects as material evidence for the reconstruction of a past event. But archaeology, as is often said, is a destructive discipline. The archaeologist eliminates the most recent strata of earth to get to the stratum of the past she or he wishes to study. She/he must ignore the meaning of layers accumulated onto the object in order for it to function effectively as a document and "time capsule".

In this constellation of translations, art would be a space with a language of its own. It can provide approaches towards things which would be impossible from other fields such as law or science.

In our artistic practice we use the documentary form as a working method. We appropriate existing documents and move them into the space of art. We can again refer to Hito Steyerl to explain what this particular act of "carrying over" might consist of. In a documentary setup, she says, the artist's commitment to the language of things "has nothing to do with representation, but rather with presenting what things have to say in the present. Doing this is not a matter of realism but of relationism: the aim is to present and therefore to transform social, historical and material relationships that determine things" (Steyerl 2006).

To "move" an object in this particular way might be considered an application of artistic logic to a profane object. This particular artistic logic has nothing to do with the replacing of one sign by another (representation) – rather, it expresses something that has already been produced and given a place in culture. Through the performative act we carry out as artists, though, it is presented as singular and new. We consciously move the object to alter the affective experiences it is able to produce. We change the framework something is culturally embedded in, thus transforming its effects.

It is through representations in images and objects, after all, that we lay the foundations for how we imagine ourselves as a community. By altering the constellation and form of the objects in our collective imaginary, we can also intervene in the actual idea of the community and its projection into the future. And this is what constitutes the transformational potential of art.

That is why, claims the art critic and philosopher Boris Groys, the operation of translating an object into contemporary art can be perceived as a particular technique or way of making. While technological progress is based on a logic of improvement and replacement, artistic technique relates instead to a logic of preservation and restoration. Contemporary art is "technology that brings the remnants of the past into the present and brings things of the present into the future" (Groys 2016).

We sometimes rescue objects that act as signs of something that has already taken place. But when we exhibit them in art spaces, these objects become anachronistic, having been torn out of their place in the sequence of time perceived as a straight line. We present these objects again and again, each time they are exhibited, as if they were new, undermining the linguistic and functional foundations according to which they are classified.

This is how the space of contemporary art changes the historical mission that is attributed to the object outside the institution. It is condemned to perpetually rewrite our very notion of the present, which as we know is an unstable category. For art is a discipline which is in a perpetual state of definition itself. Unlike instances where something is translated or moved into other spaces such as law or science, art is a space which asks us to examine the status of an object from a position we already collectively have presumed is speculative. Interrogating the object's status – Is this art? – is a question that arises again and again. Apart from an apparent lack of consideration towards the artist's work, what the question conceals is the intrinsic paradox the art object contains – whether it is actually able to manifest the present time, and whether or not it therefore merits a singular status and a place in the future. Contemporary art is more akin to a condition than a definition – even though the art object is seen as permanently unresolved, it will continue to transcend time.

We might then say that an art object is by definition a contested one. Contemporary art is a space which, unlike, for instance, public space, or an archaeology museum, questions the nature of the objects it holds. The art object might be said to incorporate its own contradiction. A contested object will continue to be contested once it is moved into an art space, but in a new way, from different parameters which relate to a questioning stance towards the mechanisms that administer material culture, independently of whether the object is able to represent us or not.

The question of authorship

Going back to what I was saying: every time an object is exhibited activates it as an art object. Every exhibition is a translation which actualises the object's artistic status. Doing so prolongs the object's survival and renews the historical mission we attribute to it in the present. An exhibition thus plays a decisive role in shifting the object's ontological status. A thing does not become "art" by decision of the artist, but because it has been chosen to be exhibited as a singular item. To quote Boris Groys once again, "The object that is not exhibited is not an artwork but merely an object that has the potential to be exhibited as an artwork" (Groys 2008, 94).

This is taken into account by us as artists even in the course of producing our work. As Groys points out, the difference between a set of dinosaur bones and a contemporary art object is that the dinosaur could never have been aware that its bones would end up on display. The art object, on the other hand, is produced with the idea already in mind that this is a possible future scenario. This might appear to be a question of commercial agility for developing a niche within the appropriate institutional mechanisms. However, it is precisely by contemplating the potential exhibition of the object that we can also transform or at least question the normalised order of things.

Dinosaur remains are valued by society as an indisputable part of its heritage. We take for granted that they should transcend as a valuable part of the past of a certain territory. An artwork, by contrast, is an irregular insertion of an object in the evolution of a shared material heritage – irregular because it is inserted without seeking a social consensus for the operation; it takes place against public taste, according to Boris Groys (Groys 2016). Because of the unique nature of this process, turning an object into an artistic artefact runs the risk of being trivialised. But let's say that, at least in its ideal form, it acts as a counterpoint to social and academic mechanisms of validation. It escapes the machinery that confers value to the object outside of the institution of art, to call into question the value-conferring apparatus itself. Consequently, we can see it as an intervention in the idea of common heritage and the ways in which it is constructed.

Patrimony is the legacy of artefacts from the past that we select to preserve as representations of a group. The art object, in contrast, presents itself as something ambiguous, something that puts to the test the apparatus with which collective representations are constructed. But for this to occur, and for the art object to alter the

social order of objects themselves, it must be inserted within a structure socially recognised for this purpose, in order to somehow turn into a public matter.

This means that as artists, we expect our work to be exhibited. The process of exhibiting does not just consist in selecting an object for public view. It must also be given singular status – that is, it is also a question of how the work is displayed. It is not the same, for example, to exhibit the Nazi monument behind glass and on a pedestal, as it is to display it upside down on the ground. To quote Groys once again, contemporary art can principally be understood as a practice of exhibiting. "There is no longer an 'ontological' difference between making art and displaying art" (Groys 2009).

There is, of course, always the possibility that the object will never be exhibited and that it will sink forever into the black hole of our studio or someone's collection. Somebody once said that the best way to hide a book is not to burn it but to leave it on a library shelf. An exhibition is a possibility, not a certainty, and as artists we largely depend on the art institution to complete our work. By art institution I mean not only a physical space, but a whole ecosystem made up of other people *authorized* to register, time after time, our work as art. It is the entire set of mechanisms that make up the institution, not only its physical spaces, that allow an object to be presented every single time as something singular and actualized.

Let us take a closer look at the term "authorisation", which I think is a useful one for exploring the way we work as artists.

It is, to begin with, no coincidence that we work as a team of two, which is the number from which one can start to speak of us as a collective. We have an ongoing interest in working with other people, whether they are artists or not. Moreover, to seek complicity seems fundamental to us in the work of art. But there are many ways of doing this. One is to see it as a way of detaching yourself from the world, where accomplices only serve to reassert the exclusive nature of shared affinities. But this would only contribute to making the art world smaller and smaller. What we aspire to is a different way of working, in which the art work should allow for its re-appropriation by an ever-wider circle of accomplices (Van Gorkum & Jaio 2012).

This means that we often find the notion of authorship too restricted, and consider it more accurate to speak of multiple authorship (Groys 2008). The process by which

an object becomes art is carried out by an elastic group of people to which we include ourselves as artists. Together with all these people we share in the interpellation of the object and consider ourselves authorized to appropriate and actualize it. This act of appropriation is performative and subject to a specific temporality. It might be seen as taking a provisional responsibility with regards to the object – a sort of borrowing.

This is also where the agency of the object lies. It is the object which produces the subjects who make up the community surrounding it – the artists, curators, viewers, maintenance staff and institution. This search for accomplices, for temporary appropriations, is of course not just restricted to the institutional arena. Our project with the monument might serve as an example of this. The authorship of the work is shared with everyone who made their mark on the stone before us: the Germans who built the monument; the anonymous people who tried to destroy it; the archaeologist who studied it; the family who rearranged the site, etc. Perhaps they were involuntary accomplices, but we all have a certain involvement with the language of the object in common. And as I mentioned previously, this is a cumulative process in which every appropriation of the object remains inseparably registered in it. That is to say, once exhibited it will be a work of art, but also simultaneously a Nazi monument, an archaeological document, a contested surface, or a stone built into a wall.

Bearing in mind the crucial role played by the exhibition in the production of art, one might ask if a museum could, for instance, exhibit an object as art without intervention by the figure of the artist. We will look at this question using a specific example.

In October 2016, we made a work which consisted in submitting a loan application for the ostraka of Iruña-Veleia, in order to exhibit them at Artium, the Contemporary Art Museum in Álava. These pieces consist of hundreds of shards of Roman pottery, inscribed with drawings of everyday activities and texts in Latin, and also phrases in what appeared to be an early version of the Basque language. In spite of the spectacular nature of these archaeological artefacts, they had been sealed away in boxes for ten years at the Provincial Museum of Archaeology. Nobody had had access to them since a commission of experts questioned their authenticity amidst controversy, and set in motion a legal process against the archaeologists who had allegedly discovered them.

What we proposed was to move the pieces a distance of 400 metres, precisely the distance separating the two

museums.¹ We saw this as a conceptual movement, as a carrying over which could provisionally change the status of the pieces from archaeological artefacts to art objects. We thought this shift might untangle the knot of the dispute and carry it into a terrain in which the binary perception of false/authentic no longer held. That terrain was the Contemporary Art Museum, which, unlike the Archaeological Museum, is not obliged to determine the historical status of its pieces, and could thus leave it up to the public to form an aesthetic judgment. In this way, we were also vindicating the Contemporary Art Museum as the quintessential site for questioning and re-examining the indefinite status of objects. In essence, we were reclaiming the art institution as an open and radically inclusive space in order to speculate on this uncomfortable heritage.

Our request was a simple one, but it met with a negative response from the Basque Government. By the date set for the event not a single one of the 900 pieces we had asked for had been loaned to us for exhibiting. Nevertheless, the project cannot be said to have failed. We had contemplated the possibility of refusal from the start. We had imagined that our dialogue with the authorities would help us to grasp the underlying politics of visibility and invisibility in the construction of what we consider to be our heritage. As our accomplice in the project, the sociologist Iñaki Martínez de Albéniz, formulated it: “Michel Foucault already warned us when he said that modernity is a battle of visibilities: the invisibility of something, in this case the ostraka, triggers or activates other visibilities. The denial of the loan request and the refusal to displace the object is, in this case, the very condition which enables a necessary shift to other frequencies of thought. So much so that as the project develops, *The Loan Application* can paradoxically demand that everything from this point on is done in absence of the fetish: ‘don’t lend us the ostraca’ could be the next request submitted by the artists to the already bewildered authorities.” (Martínez de Albéniz, 72).

We organised a seminar and invited a group of accomplices to analyse the pieces’ absence and the impossibility of setting up an exhibition with them. These reflections were eventually gathered in a publication which could be considered a manual for carrying out the exhibition should the Government ever decide to change its mind.

1. We realised *La Solicitud de Préstamo (The Loan Application)* in 2016 as part of the eighth edition of Proklama, a programme of workshops and encounters organized by Azala Kreaizio Espazioa in collaboration with Artium, the Álava Contemporary Art Museum.

It's at this point that the following question arose: Would it make any sense for the Contemporary Art Museum to exhibit the Iruña-Veleia ostraka without our involvement – that is to say, without the exhibition being an art project by Iratxe and Klaas?

The answer to this question could be seen as a matter of distributing roles strategically. The art museum is part of an administrative and political network that encompasses all public institutions entrusted with the politics of representation. Unlike other museums, however, contemporary art museums, at least in their ideal form, do not function as a vehicle for these politics of representation, but as a containing wall, like a shock absorber, for things to be exhibited in a framework that maintains its autonomy from those politics.

As I mentioned previously, the work of art does not represent a society's material culture because it works against public taste. Neither, however, do they represent the centre that exhibits them. There is an implicit social pact which takes for granted that what is manifested in the framework of contemporary art does not necessarily reflect an institution's official position. The institution is responsible, though, for sheltering the space of exceptionality in order for art to be able to manifest its divergence. But this can only be made possible by delegating the moral and aesthetic responsibility for the object onto the artist.

This means that art institutions must necessarily exhibit any objects to which the logic of art has been applied, through the artist. The artist is the sole figure who can protect, both conceptually and practically, the translation of an object, and maintain its autonomy from the political and administrative forces it depends on outside the institution itself.

Of course I am referring here to an ideal version of the art institution. All too often, museum administrators or politicians tend to cross the line of their own jurisdiction in order to interfere with that of the artist. The greatest scandals in the art world have arisen from this confusion between areas of jurisdiction and the erosion of the art object's space of exceptionality. In the end, our proposal seeks to *practice* the institution in its ideal form, and to expect that this intervention resonates in the real.

The copy without original

We manage to detach the silicon mould, baring the original surface of the stone. The monolith is a black hole which sucks every single one of the ideologies that have

crossed its path into it. Not only does it serve to represent the conflict that gave birth to it; the conflict is made manifest in the stone.

Yet its status is also ambiguous. It is an uncertain source of information. However abandoned, however deteriorated it might seem after all the interventions it has suffered, its latent value as an authentic original still exists. It can still potentially be turned into patrimony. Significantly, some days after the names of the German soldiers were found to have been chiselled off, Josu Santamarina posted a text denouncing institutional neglect by the authorities. "For a long time, those of us who are working on the archaeological heritage of the Civil War and Francoism have been insisting on two things: firstly, the need to study and make visible this fragile, forgotten heritage. Secondly, there needs to be an interest in 'protecting' this patrimony, or at the very least, an awareness of its existence. The issue of what to do with the symbolic landscape of Francoism (or the Landscape of Victory) is present, whether or not the Administration chooses to relegate it to commissions on historical memory, or simply... ignore it" (Santamarina, 2017).

Then, some months after making the mould, the stone of the "Alemanen kanposantue" disappeared altogether. According to a newspaper article the Legutiano Council had applied the Law on Historical Memory and gotten rid of it (Martínez Viguri, 2018).

All that was left where the monument had risen was the smooth stone that had been its pedestal. Nothing is left of it but a gap in the wall of a vegetable patch at the edge of the Alavan Plain, at the foot of a mountain range. And once this gap has been swallowed up by leafage, the monument may even disappear from memory.

The only material evidence that thus remains of the stone is the soft silicon mould in our studio. One could say that the mould is now a "symptom". Invoking the literal Greek translation of the word, it is a "phenomenon that occurs simultaneously". The object as a symptom is bound to a certain perception, and thus works parallel to reality. The mould exists autonomously from its original, and the only thing we can say of it is that it is real, it exists. But its authenticity cannot be proven, because the original has disappeared. A symptom distinguishes itself from a sign, because the former is not a verifiable fact. A symptom is more like a proto-sign, something that precedes the sign as a possibility.

The stone sits in our minds, patiently waiting, ready to absorb our intrusions. As our work moves towards its

conclusion, there are a number of formal, aesthetic and conceptual decisions to be made. I have addressed some of them here, but there are others, too, even some that would merit a text on their own: What role does the work of reconstructing the monolith by artisanal processes play in its semantic load? Or, How could our artistic appropriation be considered in terms of heritage?

The trajectory of an object as it is carried over into the space of contemporary art is incoherent and full of gaps, much like the rugged, fractured face of the stone which reflects the landscape that surrounds it, and the human histories it provided a stage for – including those that are yet to be told.

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