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**Review of the doctoral dissertation by mgr Diego Gutierrez Valladares,
written at Wrocław's Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design,
Faculty of Graphics and Media Art**

Diego Gutierrez Valladares was born in San Jose, Costa Rica, in 1981. He obtained a bachelor's degree at the University of Costa Rica in 2009. In 2012, he completed a master's degree at Universidad Politecnica de Valencia, where he studied artistic production, arts and technology. In 2014, he took up doctoral studies at Wrocław's Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design. Mr Valladares also participated in numerous supplementary workshops and seminars, including a workshop by graphic master Juan Lara in Madrid (2011), a video workshop by Ursula Biemann, as well as Alvin Curran's sound installations workshop at UdK Berlin (2015). In 2020, he took part in Prof. Achile Mbembe's *Life futures* seminar at the European Graduate School, studied at the Saas-Fee Summer Institute of Art in Berlin, and participated in the *New approaches to curating* workshop at Berlin's NODE Center. As an artist active on the international arts circuit, he has taken part in numerous exhibitions, including the 14th International Print Biennale at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2010; Millennial Wind: World Plate and Print Exhibition in Hapcheongun, South Korea; Kraków's Print Triennial, 2012; *Circulation* exhibition at Dublin's Flood Gallery; International Printmaking Biennial Douro in Portugal, 2018; International Print Triennial in Kraków, 2018; *Zeniths* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Wrocław, 2019; *Maps and Territory* exhibition at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, 2019; *Borders* exhibition at the Omsk Museum of Art; and *Satellite Images* at the Typa Gallery in Estonia, 2020. His works are part of the collections at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts and the Guanlan Print Base. In his artistic work, Valladares uses primarily various graphic media, drawing, installation, but also workshop and performative forms.

Analysis of the doctoral dissertation

Diego Gutierrez Valladares's doctoral dissertation, entitled "Making Milpa: Towards cooperation, nurturing and porosity", is a record of his collaborative artistic activity, research and experiments aimed at building relationship networks which create conditions conducive to social cooperation, creation and involvement at the intersection of artistic practices and alternative forms of pedagogy. The key concepts used by the author are cooperation, care, socially engaged art, relationality and porosity. While the majority of these concepts are firmly rooted in the recognised artistic discourse of recent years, the concept of "porosity" constitutes a promise of opening up to new interpretative possibilities. Another key thing for Vallardes is *milpa*, the Aztec form of agriculture featuring in the title of his dissertation, which, as the artist observes, is based on cooperation, sustainable development and respect for diversity. *Milpa* is a shared cultivation, practised to this day by the Tzeltal tribe of the ancient Maya. The Indians sow corn on milpas, whose literal meaning is "cornfield", although this is something completely different from vast corn plains stretching to the horizon. A milpa is an area covered with numerous plants growing together. Although corn is the dominant plant, beans and pumpkins are equally significant. Corn stalks support the growth of beans; beans bind nitrogen from the air, fertilising the soil. The broad pumpkin leaves cover the soil, reducing evaporation and hindering the growth of weeds. On the plate, corn, pumpkin and beans also complement each other. Corn lacks lysine and tryptophan, which are needed to produce protein; these amino acids are found in beans, which lack cysteine and methionine, which in turn are provided by corn. Pumpkin is a source of vitamins. On milpas, in addition to these basic species, people also grow avocados (which provide valuable fat) and other plants: melons, tomatoes, chilli, sweet potatoes and amaranth. The idea of shared cultivation is currently being rediscovered by those gardeners who cultivate their gardens following the principles of permaculture. A *milpa* becomes a metaphor and a model of the cooperation networks, as well as the artistic, political and educational practices discussed in the

dissertation. It shows a map of the interdependence of various species, a multi-layer network of connections and cooperation of symbiotic organisms.

The author of the dissertation indicates that the starting point for his activities and research is his observation of the global situation of our planet's ecosystem, which urgently requires that we should remodel our relationship with the environment, the way we inhabit our planet and use its resources, and that we should break with the economy of unsustainable development, as well as with cognitive, psychological, social and environmental violence. To this end, we need to redefine our attitude to concepts such as the individual or the human. In consequence, this prompts us to ask ethical questions about the consequences and dimensions of our activity in the field of culture, to seek new models of cooperation and creation which would be more relevant to the challenges posed by a rapidly changing environment, and to more strongly link artistic activity with ethical issues. One of these imperatives, fulfilled by socially engaged art which builds broader multi-level relations with participants, is to question the artist's position as the sole, privileged author of the work, to abandon the modernist paradigms that determine the reception of art. The starting point for the dissertation – perfectly recognised and described in the books by Donna Haraway or Bruno Latour featuring in the bibliography – lies within the spaces created by such concepts as posthumanism and Anthropocene. However, the author of the thesis is clearly inclined to focus on the social and humanistic aspects of the issue, and to marginalise the post-humanist one, which points to the necessity of redefining man's position towards a greater appreciation of non-human factors and actors.

The dissertation consists of three chapters, each describing the author's artistic research and presenting its theoretical context. Chapter One, titled "Mapping as a relational practice", discusses Fernand Deligny's concept of network and a network's ability to develop its own tools, but also presents the SPAM project, dedicated to mapping and thinking by means of maps. Inspired by Deligny's educational practice, the author rejects the instrumental functions of a map in favour of creating temporal spatial records which are associated with a gesture, drawing, line or body that constitutes threads of moving relationships. They give rise

to the idea of a network that creates itself and calls into question the instrumental concepts of structure building. The SPAM project proposed by Mr Valladares started as an internet project. It appeared as the Map/Territory exhibition at Wrocław's Academy of Design and Art, and at the Casa 49 exhibition in San Jose, Costa Rica. The project is an internet archive used by its participants by downloading and modifying its content. Subsequently, by returning the transformed image to the resources, they expand the archive's content and make it available to as many people as possible. A collective palimpsest is thus created, which grows uncontrollably and is subject to constant modifications. This naturally brings to mind a surreal play called *cadavre exquis*. However, it is a pity that, in the context of the pioneer concepts of network, the author makes no reference to the NET manifesto by Andrzej Kostolowski and Jarosław Kozłowski, who, in 1971, created one of the world's first self-developing global networks of artistic exchange and cooperation, a network that was devoid of a centre and beyond any control. The NET manifesto, which still inspires and fascinates us with its uncompromising simplicity and effectiveness, promotes a free, selfless and direct exchange of artistic ideas between interested people and places. The NET put forward a new concept of art distribution, whose assumptions and ideas in later years turned out to be the foundations of the twenty-first century's open culture.

The title of Chapter Two, as the author states in the introduction, is "Am I not entitled to the tree of life?", although within the thesis the title is formulated differently ("How a class can act as a work of art") and the one originally given is an attached motto. The chapter analyses the development of cognitive practices in the face of "the end of man" and an evident exhaustion of many traditionally proven concepts. It highlights the importance of unlearning, ignorance and intuitive cognition as alternative forms of building cognitive relationships with the environment and of creating new streams of consciousness. In this chapter, the author makes references, among other things, to Felix Guattari's concept of ecosophy, to non-hegemonic forms of discourse based on ecologies of knowledge, to bridges created between various forms of thinking, and to Bonaventura Sousa Santos's "epistemology of the south".

The author lays emphasis on opposing universalism as a sole worldview which can describe the world, because it inevitably produces divisions and absence.

Mr Valladares also refers to the activity of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil. The theatre questioned the divisions between the performers and the audience in favour of collectively reproducing trauma- and violence-related experiences. The chapter features a description of a nine-day performance and of a site-specific exhibition entitled "Kamikaze", held at the Glass Gallery of Wrocław's Academy of Art and Design on 18-29 November 2019. Targeted primarily at lecturers and students of the Academy of Arts and Design in Wrocław, the project was intended to create a space of community and collective participation, as well as to focus on constructing an exhibition as a community rather than a collection of objects. The exhibition-performance took the form of a nine-day series of meetings, conversations and interactions held while brewing and drinking herbal tea. The report is a day-by-day description of the events held in the exhibition space. The majority of the records concern patience, mindfulness and perception, as well as the behaviour of visitors who found it hard to stop and get out of the rut of the busy and overloaded everyday life. The exhibition was accompanied by a simultaneous workshop for children. The author poses questions about the definition of participation, about the randomness and unpredictability of interaction processes, and about the necessity of inventing new forms of communication.

Chapter Three, entitled "Towards the ecology of concern for renewal", starts with a reflection inspired by an appeal issued by the eminent thinker Achille Mbembe for the universal right to breathe, a right understood in the context of social inequalities, an environmental crisis, and demand for the right of humans and non-human species to inhabit the planet. The author refers to Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis, i.e. possible forms of coupling and cooperation between various living organisms. He also invokes the concepts of care and concern as life-sustaining practices that strengthen communities and the social tissue in opposition to the practices of capitalism and patriarchy. *Milpa*, interpreted as a network of mutual relationships and interdependencies, serves here as a metaphor for collaborative


forms of artistic activity and research, pedagogy, and micropolitics. The chapter is supplemented by a report on a printing and graphic workshop titled "Making Milpa", which was held at the Mutant Letter Press studio in Wrocław. Subsequently, the workshop evolved into work on the subjects of water, hydropolitics and hydro-poetics; Additionally, an audio archive was created featuring field recordings from various parts of the world, as well as interviews with fishermen, researchers and activists.

Mr Valladares puts forward the thesis that applying the concept of *milpa* to art is an innovative phenomenon. This statement is based on the following premises: art is a relational activity that can change cognitive habits and create new forms of social organisation and articulation. The network can develop autonomous time, tools and forms of knowledge through internal interactions and activities, such as affect, cooperation and sociability. Thirdly, the art of the Anthropocene is a collective effort to repair and invent new forms of cooperation. In my personal view, this approach, social engagement, cooperation and participation does not seem as innovative as the author suggests it is. After all, such artistic, political and educational practices have been commonplace in contemporary art for many years. I would rather argue that the metaphor proposed by Mr Valladares complements, and is part of, not just the concept of relational art, but above all a trend (strongly present in artistic practice) for care, for posthumanist and ecological art, an art that is conscious of the Anthropocene context. In each of these areas, one could identify practices that are more radical and deeper than those proposed by the author. At the present moment, this is only a set of recommendations, wishes and vaguely defined concepts rather than a fully developed artistic and pedagogical practice.

Conclusion

Diego Gutierrez Valladares's doctoral dissertation is an eloquently written, theoretical thesis which refers with ease to many current discourses found in philosophy and art. As such, it supplements them with very important non-Eurocentric points of view – a fact that is of particular interest and value to us. The dissertation is also a report on an artist's teaching and

artistic activities, multidirectional experiments, studies and quests. My impression is that the theoretical aspect of the dissertation is a more "dense" work – abounding in a multitude of ideas, quotes, references and concepts – than Mr Valladares's own, somewhat dispersed in my view, activities conducted to implement the ideas presented in his thesis. The dissertation definitely demonstrates its author's considerable knowledge and ability to creatively interpret ideas, experiences and facts. Diego Gutierrez Valladares, an artist who undertakes numerous creative projects, has a rich track record in the field. He consistently carries out research and experiments in his clearly delineated aesthetic and philosophical field. The doctoral dissertation that he has submitted is an interesting, multi-level and interdisciplinary artistic project. Having thoroughly examined Mr Valladares's artistic achievements and doctoral dissertation, and despite the reservations expressed above, I have concluded that the thesis fulfills the relevant requirements set out in Art. 13.1 of the *Act on academic degrees and the academic title, and on degrees and the title in the field of the arts*, and that it constitutes an original work of art. Therefore, I hereby propose that the Degrees Council at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław should confer on mgr Diego Gutierrez Valladares a doctoral degree in the field of *the arts*, the artistic discipline: *fine arts and art conservation*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. Gutierrez', written in a cursive style.

Poznań, 15 October 2021