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A Letter on intentions, people, projects and enchanted things

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Dear Mike,
You asked me to write you a letter instead of drafting an essay for this book. There are many things I would like to tell you and ask you, but there may not be enough time left to do so.

What makes a person want to be an artist today, I would like to ask you? And what kind of an activity is that of the artist? Artists tend to have many mirror neurons. They are often able to put themselves in other people's shoes and feel the world from the perspective of the people and places with whom they engage, and of the materials they use (what does the stone, the toy, the sculpture or the tree *feel*?). Artists frequently train this skill of empathy or *einfühlung*, becoming ever more one with their subject matter.

We live in a world that is characterised by disembodied digital experiences; by an increasing amount of time spent communicating on small hand-held cell phones; by an exponential divide between a small number of extremely affluent people and a growing number of poor and wretched ones, living on an ever more dirty and ecologically unsound planet; by wars, necropolitics and forced migrations, as well as by the loss of material and immaterial cultural heritage and of so many crafts. In the 1960s or 1970s, many people would have gone into active politics to try to change the world. Over the last thirty years, some, like you, have instead joined the forces of art with a practical goal of bettering a situation, of achieving a result in terms of social change. (That means that in many ways we return both to the sense of urgency of the avant-garde art, as well as to a pre-art period of civilisation when the decorative, the useful and the aesthetic were one and the same, when sculpture was attached to a church or temple that sheltered you from the rain and a pot was a vessel reminiscent of the womb but also a container with which to share food.)

Art is defined as much by what it is, as by what it is not; by what it does, or can do, as by what it does not, or cannot do; it is defined even by what it fails to achieve. Art has played a major role in social processes of healing and recovery throughout history, and imagination has been a crucial force in those processes. Sometimes it fails. But the beauty and core of its existence lies also in that Quixotic attempt.

You wonder sometimes what makes good art, and whether your art is good art. You do things pragmatically, and yet you doubt constantly. You care for people, their material and spiritual lives, and the spaces and shelters you build together with them. But you wonder whether good intentions are enough – you want to protect, save and repair, but ask whether the connections you make are interesting enough, whether your storytelling is engaging enough, or poetic enough. Your doubts are deep-rooted as you repair and mend without wanting to hide and forget the social, historical,

psychological and physical wounds that move you to make art and do the mending. This self-doubt is what keeps the process open, and fragile and uncertain enough for the entire process to be humble and not humbling, ethical and not self-righteous. So all is fine, and there is nothing to worry about.

The last volume of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, written between 1906 and 1922, called *Le temps retrouvé*, ends with a note by Proust that states that if only he had the time to finish his work, which he did not have, he would write about the fact that although we live in a compressed, small space, if we were able to understand that we are made of simultaneously distant times touching each other, then we could see that we are immersed in an infinite place.

I imagine you as a little boy being taken to museums to learn about past civilisations through the traces of their material cultures, while the peoples of those past worlds have long since turned to dust.

Yours is a post-museum art.

In your oeuvre, 'things'—the *generic* stuff of the world—become 'objects', the *specific* stuff of the world.[1] In other words, 'things' become 'objects' when they are embedded with meanings projected onto them by people; they become heirlooms resonant with memories, enchanted things,[2] thanks to which we direct our lives symbolically as well as experientially. They are often damaged, broken, stolen or burnt goods; and sometimes, they are objects at risk. Your goal seems to be to find ways by which their embedded meaningfulness may emerge and flourish again, and your proposition is that this can happen only if we work together with others. Animistically, objects have agency, and they speak to us, like mirrors of our souls, but they do so ritualistically, and in a nexus of people, never in a solitary fashion.

Crafts, and the objects they produce, are embedded with stories and are able to become active agents of transformation in people's lives. Full of magic, they have a transformative potential.

Through our associations with these objects, we see patterns emerge, and in these patterns some solace is found in the shape of an imagined cosmic order. With humour, this order is at times far-fetched, and implausible connections are created through leaps of the imagination in time and space – linking together, just to cite a few examples, the Art Nouveau of Istanbul made by Armenian craftspeople during the Ottoman empire, and the bones of stray dogs who were exterminated on Sivriada island in the Bosphoros during an ominous pre-figuration of the Armenian genocide, along with the exuberant Chicago architecture of Louis Sullivan (Boston, 1856 – Chicago, 1924); or the utopian revolutionary vision of Vladimir Tatlin (Kharkov, 1885 – Moscow, 1953) and the an-architectural principles of Gordon Matta-Clark (New York, 1943–1978), as well as the tearing down of a dilapidated house in Sydney, Australia.

In addition to these linkages that construct webs of interrelated stories through objects, in most of your exhibitions we also find a plurality of objects: the many low-cost custom-built shelters for the homeless of *paraSITE* (1997–ongoing); the hundreds of papier-mâché remakes of lost artefacts wrapped in Middle-Eastern food packaging of *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–ongoing); the many stone-carved books of *What dust will rise?* (2012); the assembly of plaster casts of architectural decorations in *The flesh is yours, the bones are ours* (2015) and so on.

Since 1997, for your first project of note, the on-going *paraSITE*, you have made a series of shelters out of cheap plastic bags, custom-built according to the needs of the homeless people you individually interview before producing each tent, which, attached to the HVAC outtake vents of buildings, creates an inflatable, low-cost, nomadic home. I remember reading about these in the Metro section of *The New York Times* in 1999 and consequently inviting you to do a project at P.S.1 MoMA. You created *Climate Control* (2000–01), a new installation that temporarily introduced climate control into one of the second-floor galleries of the old building where I was working at the time, doing something useful for the contemporary art centre, and thus reversing the normal relationship between a young emerging artist and an important art institution.

For the project *The invisible enemy should not exist* that began in 2007, you have been remaking life-size versions of the 15,000 ancient artefacts that were looted from the National Museum of Iraq after the city's fall to American troops in 2003 during the Iraq war (2003–11) that brought the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Up to today, you and your collaborators have remade 900 of them out of papier-mâché Arabic-English newspapers covered in Arabic food-wrapping. You reconstructed these figures thanks to the detailed images you found on *The lost treasures of Iraq* website hosted by the Oriental Institute in Chicago that was set up to educate people about the losses incurred during the war and to help law enforcement track the lost objects.

There was also a plurality of objects on the occasion of dOCUMENTA (13) in the Fridericianum Museum in Kassel, where in 2012 you exhibited *What dust will rise?*, which included a large number of stone-carved books presented on glass tables. Carved in Northern Italy by master craftsmen into the shape of ancient books originally belonging to the collections of Kassel but that had burnt during World War II British bombings, they were made out of the Afghanistan Bamiyan Valley rock where the large Buddhas had been blown up by the Taliban in March 2001.

In *The flesh is yours, the bones are ours*, you produced an enormous number of small plaster casts from mouldings originally used by Armenian craftsmen during the Ottoman Empire to decorate the city in floral Art Nouveau style, along with new moulds of decorative patterns made in the shapes of bones (ground bones are also part of the material used in the cast).These 450 objects lay on the floor of a former Greek school, creating a link between the Armenian genocide of 1915–1923 and another community that had been eradicated from multicultural Constantinople in the 1960s in order to transform it into the more ethnically homogeneous Turkish Istanbul of today.

Although objects – their fabrication, their accumulation and their exhibition – thus form a major part of your practice, this aspect of your work is in counterpoint with an immaterial and relational component, less readily visible in your exhibitions but very substantial in your practice as an artist who makes public art. In many of your projects, a dialectic is set up between the care for and production of material heritage (objects), on the one hand, and the attention to immaterial heritage and its production, on the other. Although your art is focused on objects and object-making, these objects make sense only in so far as they are *relational* objects. There is always an original lost object from which people have been disconnected, and your enchanted objects are relational in so far as their coming into the world occurs through their reconnection in an embodied manner via a collective of real fabricators (and not over the ethereal distances of digital communication). They are *transitional* objects that mediate our relationship with the world and teach us how to love.

Donald Winnicott (Plymouth, 1896 – London, 1971) poignantly described transitional objects in 1951[3] as those things that an infant invests with special attention, the first 'not-me' possessions. They mark the transition between a symbiotic identity with the mother (a period in which the child feels one with the world – able to magically control and create the world at will, in a condition where desire finds immediate satisfaction as if the objects of desire could be created simply by evoking them) and an autonomous identity—separate from the world, yet in relation with it. A doll, or a stuffed animal, a thumb or a blanket is affectionately cuddled and must never be changed unless by the child who uses it over a period of time as something comforting to avert anxiety. For Winnicott, this 'intermediate state between a baby's inability and growing ability to recognize and accept reality' is the substance of illusion. Although hallucinogenic, the transitional object is important for its actuality, not its symbolism. It is not an 'internal object' like a mental concept – it is a possession. Yet for the child, it is not an 'external object' either: 'It is not the object that is transitional. The object represents the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate.'[4] The use of the object 'symbolises the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, at the point in time and space of the initiation of their separateness'. Existing in the space of play, neither inner psychic experience, nor external reality, the transitional object lies at the boundary of its separateness, which gives rise to a quality in our attitude when we observe such objects. Winnicott describes how the infant will damage or destroy the transitional object only to verify its survival – its continued existence – after the aggression. He explains how this condition of survival creates the possibility for an understanding of the object as a form of reality separate from the self:

> 1) Subject relates to object. 2) Object is in process of being found instead of placed by the subject in the world. 3) Subject destroys object. 4) Object survives destruction. 5) Subject can use object. The object is always being destroyed. This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object; that is, an object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control.[5]
> There is no anger in the destruction of the object to which I am referring, though there could be said to be joy at the object's survival. From this moment, or arising out of this phase, the object is in fantasy always being destroyed. This quality of 'always being destroyed' makes the reality of the surviving object felt as such, strengthens the feeling tone, and contributes to object-constancy. The object can now be used.[6]

Winnicott seemed to imagine that there could be a singular individual, or subject, connected to or disconnected from the world initially via the relationship with the mother, and then more or less on its own. More than fifty years later, in our age of global wars and forced migrations, we find helpful resources in Winnicott, as well as in Melanie Klein's (Vienna, 1882 – London, 1960) theories of art as reparation[7] (rather than in the Freudian notion of art as sublimation), yet we also need to entangle the early and mid-twentieth century concepts of Winnicott and Klein with those of a plural and choral subject, emerging and co-emerging from a web of relations, singing together right from the start and up to our death. From such a perspective, your objects never function as singular transitional objects, but rather multiply from the outset. They function as a chorus of props in what are effectively your *social sculptures*, since they mediate between many people at once and connect them in the rituals of transformation. They are able to carry us beyond earthly transactions – the fact of having been bought and sold, stolen, removed or destroyed. You reimagine them as gifts, tokens of appreciation in a utopian vision of a world without wounds and pain, a world with more justice, beauty and shared joys between people and places. In this sense, all of your oeuvre is an attempt,

perhaps also fuelled by hints of survivor syndrome (what is ontologically projected onto a US American post-Holocaust Jew from the Arab world, as a double or even triple other?) to shift the function and usage of these objects, by transforming destruction or removal into replacement and reparation.

Each of the projects described above as object-based also has a more public, collaborative, relational and performative part, which does not remain visible once your installations are set up in a museum or gallery space, but that informs all the work you create. In some ways, your installations are the remains and material residue of the encounters at the core of the collaborative performative work and social sculptures you create.

To make your *paraSITE* shelters, for instance, you have spent an enormous amount of time entering into a relationship with each homeless individual for whom you are making the tent – Joe H., Bill S., George L., or Michael M., amongst others. Some have asked for lots of pockets on the inside of the structure in order to place books in them, others have wanted a black plastic shelter, while yet more required two separate sitting rooms.

To make the papier-mâché reproductions of the lost objects in *The invisible enemy should not exist* and in its offshoot projects like *May the arrogant not prevail* (2010) and *Room N, Northwest Palace of Nimrud* (2018), you bring together large groups of people and organise workshops, as well as setting up collective food rituals, including *Enemy Kitchen* (2003–ongoing), to promote Iraqi cuisine.

To make *White man got no dreaming* (2008), you involved a large part of the Aboriginal community in Redfern, Sydney. When I try to define what activist art means, I often think back to *White man got no dreaming*, created for the 16th Biennale of Sydney. I remember when you found out from Hetti Perkins that The Block in Redfern, an important Aboriginal neighbourhood in downtown Sydney, was slated to be demolished and gentrified. In order to lodge a proposal and compete for the renewal of the neighbourhood, the applicant had to own a certain amount of property there. Over a number of years, the Aboriginal Housing Company, an association of neighbourhood inhabitants, had succeeded in quietly amassing the required amount of property, but just as they were about to lodge their own design, the City of Sydney introduced a tax that would make it impossible for them to compete. At that stage, you intervened, creating a montage of poetic and historical associations, and worked closely with the community to tear down one of the houses in advance, as a ritualistic sacrificial endeavour. At the Redfern Community Centre, the parts of demolished architecture reappeared in a new shape – under the guise of the avant-garde Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's model for *Monument to the Third International* (1919). The tower was then deconstructed and ceremoniously brought downtown and reconstructed by the architects of the Pemulwuy Project and other members of the community to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This new Tatlin Tower made of old building materials, reminiscent of Gordon Matta-Clark's early 1970s visions of anarchitecture, was able to draw attention to the urgent issue at hand concerning the future development of Redfern. Inside the tower, as in Tatlin's original plan, a broadcast repeater for Koori Radio was concealed—the local Aboriginal radio station that up to then was inaudible in the posh area of the Art Gallery. The sculptural tower and transmitter, along with drawings and a hand-written text telling the story of a number of people involved, as well as a monitor with a video by Matta-Clark, were exhibited. Shortly afterwards, the city cancelled the tax to lodge proposals for the urban renewal of Redfern, and the local community was thus able to take

part. To this day, the Block, a location for Corroborees or sacred meeting grounds for thousands of years, is still an open field in the heart of Sydney, and the friendships and stories initiated with this project remain. The tower and some drawings were donated to the Van Abbemuseum in Holland.

For my dOCUMENTA (13) exhibitions in Kabul and Kassel, you responded to the devastation of cultural heritage that had taken place in World War II Germany and more recently in Afghanistan. Like other artists, you accepted my invitation to go to Afghanistan, to understand, *brevi manu*, what on earth had happened in Bamiyan, where the Taliban had blown up several giant and ancient Buddhas in Spring 2001, as if the destruction of those cultural artefacts could ever erase a past, the people of that past, their craft, their memory. War creates facts. But art, too, can create facts of a highly different order. I remember we discussed at length the question of whether or not to engage in projects in Afghanistan – in a location clearly under siege yet also in a state of hope, retreating and, more than almost anywhere in the world, on stage in the media worldwide. Afghanistan had suffered the Soviet occupation and then twenty years of civil war from 1978, the totalitarian Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001, and occupation by foreign, European and US forces beginning in late 2001. We wondered whether organising artistic projects in war zones or occupied territories ran the risk of being instrumentalised by the forces that wish to normalise such outrageous events. Or could such an engagement be a form of alternative action keyed towards enacting and testing the potential of art to intervene effectively and decrease violence, injustice, and conflict in those places? To answer that, one could ask whether art and its display system through exhibitions is not always somehow ‘instrumentalised’, and if so, why one would question such an instrumentalisation only in non-European or non-Western contexts, ignoring those same agendas in the West? We made the decision to act in ways that do not isolate people even further, but provide opportunities for the opposite.

And so, in the spring of 2012, in the archaeological area and UNESCO/MoIC Training Centre in Bamiyan, inside a large upper ‘cave’ close to one of the two niches on the cliff where the giant sixth-century Bamiyan Buddha sculptures stood for centuries before their destruction by the Taliban in March 2001, you collaborated with archaeologist Bert Praxenthaler and Afghan artist Abbas Allah Dad on a workshop with local Hazara students. Your aim was to recuperate the traditional craft of stone-carving intrinsic to Afghanistan’s Hazara region, using the stone of the Bamiyan area as well as lime tuff stone from nearby Dragon Valley and Band-e Amir. The final results of the seminar were presented in the dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition in Kabul, together with a small stone book that you had carved yourself. The title of your project *What dust will rise?* was derived from a proverb on cooperation: ‘What dust will rise from one horseman?’

In Kassel, *What dust will rise?* consisted in the re-creation from Bamiyan stone of a number of the books that were destroyed in a fire in the Fridericianum Museum building during the bombing of 1941. Some of these were donated to the National Museum of Afghanistan, severely damaged in the 1990s and 2000s. You also referred to the Edict of Ashoka, a rock inscription by the Mauryan emperor (269–231 BC) installed at the entrance of the Museum that features a text pleading for a more peaceful coexistence, like a message from the past to overcome the traumas of today.

One of your most beautiful and strangest works is the 2017 video *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*, made using a stop-motion animation technique to film a doll inside a vitrine containing Mesopotamian votive statues at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. This unusual work, a distorted Winnicottian fantasy of transitional objects, is based on a true episode that

occurred in February 2005, when a video was released by a group of Iraqi insurgents called the Mujahideen Brigades showing what appeared to be a captive US soldier with a gun pointed at him, whom they were threatening to kill unless Iraqi prisoners were released within 72 hours. The US company Dragon Models recognized, however, that the figure in the video was a hoax, since it was in fact their collectible toy soldier called Special Ops Cody – made in China in an edition of 4000 in 2003 to sell on bases in Kuwait and in the Middle East. Soldiers stationed in US armed forces bases bought the Special Ops Cody doll to send back to their children, perhaps as surrogate for them. In your film, the male soldier doll with the female voice of a real US veteran of the Iraq war, climbs into the glass museum case and apologises to the statues, urging them to escape from the museum. The war veteran speaks in a flow of consciousness, only half remembering the traumatic events she witnessed in Iraq:

> Where am I? Why am I here? Who am I? What are these things doing here? I never knew things like this really existed . . . but when you see these things up close . . . there are no words, something you feel, something you know . . . the last thing I remember I don't want to think about that . . . I remember faces . . . I remember the faces . . . I remember it was back in 2005 it was February. . . when those people were working in their in admin, they were too squeamish to do the retinal scans because they did not want to touch the body of a dead detainee, a dead Iraqi . . . He said I did the whole work alone . . . but I don't remember . . . You look like them . . .The blood had ceased running through their veins, they had formed clots on the cots so it dripped onto the floor . . . I'm sorry . . . Why do you look at me like that, like we're different? Look, I said I was sorry . . . We're not different, cause we're also the same, cause we were created, we were sold and created. We have stories to tell. Just keep talking. I guess to myself, cause you're not answering . . . You guys, why are you here? Don't you want to go, be free? I can get you all out of here . . . when I see you, your faces, without eyes and I think of that day . . . they were broken but we destroyed them. You are broken so we keep you locked up, though, temperature-controlled, always gloved – I will always be gloved and never again shall blood course though my veins.

The immobile statues ignore the soldier's words until a curator comes into the frame to shut the glass vitrine, and Special Ops Cody is transformed into a static museum artefact. In 'The Storyteller' (1936), Walter Benjamin (Berlin, 1892 – Portbou, 1940) noted that:

> With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.[8]

What does it mean that the fragile Cody, a mere object, restitutes a voice and a story like a ventriloquist's puppet, through the displacement of experience onto an enchanted thing, a toy?

Turin, 18 May 20

[1] I thus use the terms ‘thing’ and ‘object’ in the opposite way to how Martin Heidegger uses them in his essay ‘The Thing’, a lecture originally delivered to the Bayerischen Akademie der Schönen Kunste in Munich in 1950, then published in *Poetry, Language and Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

[2] A. Gell, ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’ (1992) in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, edited by J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994, pp. 40–66, and *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

[3] David Winnicott’s first mention is in his lecture given at the British Psycho-Analytical Society on 30 May 1951, published in 1953 as ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession’, in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, no. 34, pp. 89–97. He develops his ideas in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971).

[4] Ibid., p. 14.

[5] D. Winnicott. ‘The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications’, New York Psychoanalytic Society lecture, 12 November 1968, published in *Playing and Reality*, cit., p. 94.

[6] D. Winnicott, *Psychoanalytic explorations*, edited by C. Winnicott. R. Shepherd and M. Davis (London: Karnac Books, 1989), p. 226 (original lecture ‘The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications’, 1968, cit.).

[7] M. Klein, ‘Infantile anxiety-situations reflected in a work of art and in the creative impulse’, *Int. J. Psychoanalysis*, no. 10, 1929, pp. 436-443.

[8] W. Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’. First printed in 1936; repr. in *Illuminations*, transl. by Harry Zohn, edited and introduced by H. Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1968), pp. 83–109.