



Anarchy at documenta:

Interview with Luis Jacob by Allan Antliff

I first met Luis Jacob in the summer of 1998, at meetings to found the Toronto Anarchist Free School (1998-2001). We eventually co-facilitated a class on "Anarchism and Art" at the AFS. In addition to making art, Jacob has curated a number of exhibitions related to Queer culture¹ and continues to be active in Canada's anarchist community. As his politics evolve, so too does his art. With this in mind we conducted an interview on occasion of his participation in documenta 12, where he exhibited *Album III* (2004), and *A Dance for Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice, Based on the Choreography of Françoise Sullivan and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth (With Sign-Language Supplement)* (2007).

Allan Antliff: How did the documenta commission come about?

Luis Jacob: This year's documenta was organized by curator Ruth Noack and director Roger Buerger. In 2005, they came to Toronto to do a public presentation about the origins of documenta (it began in 1955 as part of a horticultural festival in the war-devastated city of Kassel), and the guiding ideas behind their own upcoming documenta 12. I met them at a social event organized by Barbara Fischer, and eventually they asked me to propose a project.

Originally, I was asked to propose a site-specific project for Kassel but I hesitated at the prospect. For one, I had never been to Kassel before; and in any case, Kassel is not quite itself during the 100 days of documenta (the total audience for the exhibition is three times the actual population of the city!). However, I did propose to present an older work, and to produce a new artwork for documenta 12.

Allan Antliff: What's the curatorial premise of this documenta?

Luis Jacob: Recent installments of documenta have been characterized by the intellectual rigor of the curating. Catherine David's documenta X was a vast "other history" of artistic practices and their encounter with social and political reality. Okwui Enwezor's documenta 11 took the form of an ambitious discursive exercise at various sites around the world, of which the exhibition in Kassel was but one "platform". These efforts have been praised, on the one hand, for the rigor and seriousness of the curatorial approach – and criticized, on the other hand, for the absence of painting and for being "no fun".

documenta 12 is premised on three themes or what the organizers are calling three "leitmotifs". The first is based around the question of modernity, and whether or not modernity is something that for us is a thing of the past. The second is around the idea of "bare life", and our basic human openness, our vulnerability to care and abuse. The third is around the question of education, and the means by which we transmit experience from one context to another, sometimes quite different, context. Obviously, the three leitmotifs are closely related to one another.

Allan Antliff: The first theme, posed as a question—"Is Modernity Our Antiquity?"—suggests the values of modernity are behind us, that modernity itself is fading into antiquarian status. In the documenta installation, you are working through universalist values associated with modernity, but not cynically and not recuperatively, in the sense of seeking to replicate past modes of realization. To what end?

Luis Jacob: I'm interested in the modern concept of universality, which, at least in the West, is associated with the universalizing impulses of the Enlightenment. This impulse has given us, among other things, the idea of universal human rights (the idea that all people possess basic rights regardless of their particular social status, economic class, cultural/religious heritage, family affiliation, or national citizenship), and the idea of justice (the idea that all power needs to legitimate itself through being subject to a law applicable to powerful and powerless alike).

Clearly, these ideas about universality are important to many of us, and they are continually under attack. For instance, the unilateral and exceptionalist premises behind current U.S. foreign policy – ie, might makes right – are considered by many within the U.S. and around the world to be abhorrent precisely because they explicitly oppose the concepts of universal human rights and international justice.

universality exist for us only as an unfilled promise. In this sense, the status of modernity as a contemporary project has to do with the extent to which these ideas of universality are upheld or disavowed by us today.

It is necessary to recall, as many of the artworks in documenta do, the catastrophic aspect of universalism, particularly in modern times. Colonialism, for instance, has long claimed the universal as an alibi to justify itself – as an act of

"civilizing" or, today, as an act of "development" or "democracy". Totalitarianism, as well as Muslim and Christian fundamentalisms of all stripes, claims the universal as a disguised tool for social domination and control.

Recalling that disasters can arise from universalism, one is compelled to ask whether universal human rights are ever anything other than the ethics of particular cultural traditions forcibly disseminated around the world (against other traditions) in the guise of the universal – and whether law is ever anything but the perpetuation and naturalization of a social order premised upon the fixed separation between the powerful and the powerless. Considering the catastrophes continually justified in the name of the universal – and they are legion – it is tempting to become cynical and give up on the universal as a goal. Alternatively, ignoring these catastrophes and attempting to recuperate the universal "as if nothing had happened" is a form of cynicism of its own.

When the organizers of documenta 12 ask, "Is Modernity Our Antiquity?," they are, in part, asking whether the impulse towards universality is something we are today committed to or not. Is the universal something we are bound to or not? Is it something that has vanished or not? And more emphatically: are we able to imagine a higher goal than universality – a goal that is neither an alibi nor a disguise – or are we in fact unable to imagine such a higher goal together?

I believe that the modern "universal" is something that paradoxically we are bound to, and yet has vanished. This, itself, is our contemporary form of modernist "disenchantment", and it provides an occasion for contestation over meaning. Struggling over the meaning of the modern concept of the "universal" is an act through which artists can contribute to historical traditions.

Allan Antliff: I'd like to talk about the anarchist politics informing your work. How does that tradition of rebellion against the hegemonic and universalizing projects of industrial capitalism and state power – "modernity" and its aftermath, which depend on hierarchical structures to foster relations of domination and inequality -- relate to the values of universalism you uphold? And how does your work for documenta further anarchism?

Luis Jacob: One way to deal with the questions I mentioned earlier is to orient

them, agonistically, around the figure of "the one who lacks".

Thought in this way, we may ask: Is the universal used as a tool for self-empowerment by those who are disenfranchised (as in the struggles for immigrants' rights)? Or is the universal used as a method to administer the annulling of difference and opposition (as in the structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank)? Does the universal function as the demand to measure yourself by the standard of the other, that is, as a call for mutual recognition? Or does it function instead as discursive violence, as an assertion of supremacy and exclusion over "others" who are dispossessed of universality? These are the very questions that anarchists pose time and time again, in the perpetually self-questioning effort against hierarchy and domination.

For documenta I have produced a new work called, *A Dance For Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice, Based on the Choreography of Françoise Sullivan and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth (With Sign-Language Supplement)*. This work is structured around a free-standing wall in the gallery – three videos are installed on one side, and a brochure reading-area and distribution site are located on the other.

The central video in the installation shows a man dancing in a snowy landscape, and "channeling" through his gestures two art-historical sources from the 1940s: the choreographic work of the Quebecoise artist Françoise Sullivan, and the stone-carving work of the British sculptor Barbara Hepworth. Presented on either side of the dancer's video, and partially obstructing it, are two sign-language interpreters who convey the words of Sullivan and Hepworth – accompanied by the words of their peers, the anarchist painter Paul-Émile Borduas and the British anarchist art historian Herbert Read – rendered in *langue des signes québécoise* (LSQ) and in American Sign Language (ASL). Seen as an ensemble, the sign-interpreters enact a kind of "dancing" of the written words in the brochure that is available on the other side of the wall, and that visitors may read in the gallery or take home with them.

Through this project I am trying to set up an experiential situation where there is a constantly vacillating "yes" and "no" to the idea of universality – where the universal is at once desirable, impossible and necessary.

Artistic practice is often idealistically

conceived as a universal language legible across historical and cultural particularities, by means of some mysterious artistic quality. In *A Dance...*, when I see a dancer as talented as Keith Cole performing, I am certainly brought in contact with this amazing artistic language that is conveyed "purely" through movement and gesture.

I decided to use dance-language as a way to summon an internationally recognized or "universal" abstract artist like Barbara Hepworth, and a regionally recognized or "marginal" dance artist like Françoise Sullivan (who, as a Canadian and French-Canadian artist is underappreciated even locally, at home).

Dance is a language that is pure because it is 'without words'. In my work, this language of dance is captioned – or supplemented as an expression of both fascination and skepticism towards this 'pure' language – by the 'speechless' communication of sign language; that the movements of the dancer in the snow require captions, suggests that a universally expressive language 'without words' must still contend with the tricky terrain of literacy.

Again, in these captions the 'universal' sign-language of ASL English (*a lingua franca*) is juxtaposed against the "vernacular" *langue des signes* of LSQ French. To be considered merely local or vernacular is to be dispossessed of universality. But I remain skeptical about idealist claims to universality.

My anti-idealist skepticism is tempered in *A Dance...*, by three things: by my faith in the unique expressive gifts of the dancer Keith Cole and the two sign-language interpreters, Anne Missud and Liz Morris – by my belief in the enduring relevance of Sullivan and Hepworth, of Borduas and Read – and, above all, by my trust in the capacities and resources that viewers themselves bring when they engage with this work.

Like me, most viewers will not understand *langue des signes québécoise* or even American Sign Language. I am reminded of the Serbian artist Miladen Stiljovic (who also exhibited at documenta 12), and a work he made titled *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is No Artist* (1994). What an urgent expression of what it is like to be dispossessed from universality!

Seeing the sign-language interpreters in my work, how will visitors react in the presence of others whose language is radically foreign and unfamiliar to them? This, of course, is uncertain, and as an artist I believe that this not-certainty in the work

can open up as a space of public-ness and agency.

The very presence of the sign-interpreters addressing us suggests that "it is the audience that lacks". It is all of us in the art gallery who are "deaf", who are unwilling (or simply unequipped) to hear what the dancer is trying to say in his cold and desolate environment. Will the expressive *élan* of the dancer and sign-interpreters – their *need* – arouse in illiterate viewers like ourselves (and who can blame us?) the need to try and somehow come to understand those strange and foreign gestured words uttered by bodies truly not unlike our own?

Will their collective "dance" succeed in melting the hearts of those – and we are legion – who have turned to ice? Is there a point or dimension within us all that is the universal root of all flowing, of all openness and connection from one to another, of all transmission across distance and across separation – and that is also the bare-life resource of heat, contact, pleasure, vitality and joy? I am convinced there is something profoundly anarchist in posing these questions.

Allan Antliff: Your language evokes notions associated with bodily experience and sensual connection that might be characterized as organic. What does the word "organic" conjure for you and how does relate it to the anarchist tradition in modernism? As you know, I have written on this issue, so it interests me to see you developing it in a contemporary context.

Luis Jacob: "Organic" indicates a particular kind of relation among the parts of a whole, and between those parts and the whole itself. The relation among "organs" in a living system, and between an "organ" and the "body" is of such kind. When we say, for example, that something has an organic relation to something else, or when we say that a process evolves organically in relation to a goal or aspiration, we are indicating that the relation between these things is intrinsic, is mutually dependent – and is not extrinsic, is not applied "from outside" (or, socially, "from above").

I am very interested in your research into Herbert Read and his reading of the abstract "vitalist" sculpture of artists like Naum Gabo and Barbara Hepworth, in terms of Kropotkin's idea of "the universal law of organic evolution". What a discovery it was for me to find out that Read – an outstanding figure in modern art theory – was an anarchist who had

edited an anthology of Kropotkin's writings.² This is the kind of knowledge that people in the art-world are, for some reason, compelled to render silent – so that one must become deaf to ever hear it!

According to your description of Kropotkin's writings, natural evolution is premised on interspecies mutual aid, on the kind of mutual dependence associated with the word "organic" – and not on Darwinist competition.³ For Read, Hepworth's abstract sculptures conveyed a type of abstract figuration of such organic relationships. Indeed, for him the very relation among people and between people and society is itself fundamentally organic. Not metaphorically, but literally organic!

He saw that hierarchic societies stifle these organic relations in a death-like manner so that people are divorced from each other and from the whole of society; and he considered anarchism as the only social system capable of nourishing such organic relations. In this way he came to read Hepworth's abstractions as a type of figuration or pre-figuration of possible social relations premised on anarchist organicism.

This organic relation between people and society was emblemized for Read in the relation between the artist and the artist's culture. He wrote in one of the many texts I quote in my brochure for documenta: "A culture is not a collection of individual artists. A culture is an organic growth. The artist must become once more a limb of the communal body. Only in that condition can the artist be nourished by the blood of the community, and live to express its spirit."

How foreign and obsolete – how historical, how *passé*, how "antique" – do these words sound today. How embarrassed one must become when uttering them today! For me, this embarrassment is a sign of our own extreme alienation from the idea of artistic culture.

Right now, there are more art museums than ever before, more artists than ever before, more art professionals than ever before, more art collectors than ever before – and yet there is so little art around. Where do we find – where do we nurture – art as life-situation, art as human-contact, art as discourse-creating, as social-sculpture, as passion-arousing, as together-dancing?

I am stunned by how anti-life the art-world is – how calcifying and conserva-

tive is its search of novelty, how professionalized are its channels of access, how closed and airless are its means of discourse, how discouraging to outsiders are its manners of socializing. This situation is what the dancer's frozen environment so frequently recalls in my mind.

Allan Antliff: I sense in your work a coming to terms with a certain thread in anarchist art concerned with the dynamic interrelationship of the ecological and the social.

In Gramsci is Dead, political theorist Richard Day has argued against the Marxist project of striving for political, social and economic hegemony as a revolutionary strategy.⁴ He counters that affinity can bind us together in a manner that does not tie us down to a hegemonic social program. Furthermore, the refusal of hegemony frees us up to evolve our society organically – it is the prerequisite for the anti-determinism that anarchism argues for. This organicism, this free flow of social experimentation, has an ethics that demands ends and means be complimentary, ethics that carry over to our relationship to the world in all its diversity. In what sense, then, is your art ethical – metaphorically and experientially?

Luis Jacob: The peculiar thing is that, despite all my talk about universality in this interview, I vehemently believe in the value of the universal's "other".

What is heretical is true, because it is heresy that propels the gears of Truth as an activity, rather than as substance. We judge the freedom of a society by its treatment of dissent, of difference, of poverty. The concept "freedom", like "democracy", becomes an empty signifier open to abuse unless it remains rooted in the experience of the dispossessed within society.

The cripple, the queer, the one at the margins, the minority, the one who is unintelligible, the one who lacks – these are the only beings who give the universal its content, and it is they who are most immediately and keenly impacted when the universal is instrumentalized as an alibi or disguise. There would be no universal without these beings, there would only be the cruel abstractions of universality.

Although the experience of dissession ought not to be glorimized, I am convinced that there is a profound resource in the experience of alienation. Anarchists have long been suspicious of the hegemonic tendency in Marxists.

The important anarchist concepts of affinity and mutual aid are intended to replace the substantive concept of 'class' as the basis for the formation of collective identities. Anarchists need to be careful, however, that our 'affinity groups' do not become a comforting alibi for relating only with 'those like ourselves', and thereby perpetuate already entrenched social divisions. At every level, how 'we' relate to 'them' is the ethical question that the discursive idea of the Universal keeps ineluctably open.

I'll avoid saying too much about myself at this point, because it is truly up to those who come in contact with my work to determine the extent to which that work contains an ethical dimension. I will, however, end by mentioning the work of another artist exhibiting in documenta 12, whom I have come to regard very highly: the Polish artist Artur Zmijewski.

His sound-art work titled *Deaf Bach* (2003) was included in the documenta audio guide⁵. This was a recording of various Bach cantatas being sung in a church by a group of deaf or near-deaf people, as a choir, as duets, and sometimes accompanied by a trained singer.

Zmijewski's sound-work allows for an incredibly moving experience. Is its cacophony experienced as noise or as music? Can this cacophony possibly configure itself for us who can hear, as anything resembling music and not noise? Are we able to hear the music emerge out of the noise, as a higher-order musicality produced by the noisy efforts of people transcending social and bodily limitations, and joining their voices in prayer?

From our own particular life-situations, are we open to experience a bare-life, human affinity with those whose experiences and even whose bodies appear as so fundamentally different to our own? What kind of spiritual or artistic or educational or transformative process is required to connect and convey from one life-situation to another: from me to you; from you to me? Again, posing these questions is profoundly anarchist to begin with.

NOTES

1. *Out of the Showers and Into the Streets: Remembering the Bathhouse Raids*, Art Metropole, Toronto, 2001; and *The JDS Years: 1980s Queer Zine Culture from Toronto*, Art Metropole, Toronto, and Helen Pitt Gallery, Vancouver (1999)

2. Herbert Read, ed. Kropotkin: Selections from his Writings, London: Freedom Press, 1942.
3. Allan Antliff, Open Form and the Abstract Imperative: Herbert Read and Contemporary Anarchist Art, Re-Reading Read, ed. Michael Paraskos London: Freedom Press, 2007.
4. Richard Day, Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements, Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005.
5. It can be heard at www.radiodays.org/program.php

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