

From the first invitation in 2014 until the opening of Poems for Earthlings in 2019, artist Adrián Villar Rojas and curator / director Jacqueline Grandjean continued their conversation on the Oude Kerk and the conception of the exhibition. Here you find some of their reflections.

1

**There is something about monuments that seems to attract you. Or is it the other way around? You developed a new installation on the National Observatory in Athens (2017) Jardin des Tuileries in Paris (2011) and the Baghe Babur Gardens in Kabul (2012). Why is heritage intriguing you?**

Accumulation of matter with symbolic value has always been a key human behaviour once “humanity” got to some point of its development. From tools to ornaments, from “art” and monuments to machinery and information, from territories and populations to gold and currency, humans—especially powerful ones, organized in classes, corporations, colonial nations, empires—accumulate, preserve and inherit matter, also known as wealth. History is also the history of wealth/matter accumulation—in fact, the cornerstone book of modern social sciences is Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations. In this wide spectre, Poems for Earthlings submerges into a symbolically-charged material space as Oude Kerk to revisit this history from its opposite: the immateriality and abstraction of sound, somehow a marginal element—for several reasons—in this timeline. One could say that, a priori, sound is impossible to keep in a safe.

2

**The animation of architectural matter paradoxically begins not at the moment of the completion of a sculptural form – but rather at the moment of its destruction. Matter and memory are closely entangled at the moment of demolition. In the 700 year old Oude Kerk – as an icon of iconofury – matter and memory seem to collide. How did you ‘read’ Oude Kerk?**

I’m reading Oude Kerk as a metaphor—or even a metonymy—of the conflicts between Reformists and Catholics in XVI century leading to the emergence of Protestantism in northern Europe and its split from the Vatican. The Reformation questioned Rome and the Pope authority under the idea of a national—or even local—church, with a bible available in the national language, and guided by criteria of bourgeois austerity and sobriety, rejecting wealth exhibitionism, deep corruption, and all the symbolic paraphernalia of fetish worship held by Catholicism. Paradoxically, this prepared the ideological ground (among other factors) for the development of capitalism.

Without indulgences to buy or titles to guarantee a place in Heaven, individual progress was the only way for preachers to relieve the anxiety of their parishioners regarding their salvation. If they succeeded in accumulating wealth on Earth, their souls were likely to ascend to the Celestial Peace. This was an amazingly efficient mechanism of social control, as well as the basis of the original accumulation of capital (according to Weber). On the other hand, a greater austerity of the religious leadership might have reasonably triggered a more austere life of the population, who definitely focused on making money without the economic pressure of the clergy. Getting rid of the enormous hierarchical structure of Catholicism and reducing it to a more horizontal and local organization, Protestantism released resources for the National State and above all for private accumulation, which

became legitimized as a virtue (and a proof of salvation) rather than being punished as a sin (of greed, gluttony, etc.).

Oude Kerk is, in *Poems for Earthlings*, the synthesis of this complex conflict between medieval thought and capitalist modernity, which had the Netherlands as one of its epicenters, especially since the conquest of America, when gold began to flow massively towards the Old World.

### 3

**Oude Kerk believes strongly in the presentation of times without borders. We feel past and present are connected. In art history especially, the division is made between past and present, as it were other fields of interest. In your work you present – via sound – a longer timeline. Could you tell a bit more about the notion of time, and how you feel about the term ‘interhistorical’ within the context of your work?**

In Argentina, academic tradition in social sciences has a strong historical approach, as well as a wide spectrum of progressive citizens and sociopolitical movements does. This means that we -intellectual elites, if you want, and maybe also the following rings of population- are quite aware at least of our recent past and its linkage to the present, perhaps also due to a strong commitment with democracy construction after the Terrorist State of the last military dictatorship (1976-1983). Human rights organizations such as Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, H.I.J.O.S. and several others have contributed to build a consistent and widespread historical memory which was key to bring those who were responsible of the genocide to trial. More than four hundred men (now most of them over-70-year-old retired) of the Armed Forces and the Police are currently in prison, and this would have been impossible without a sustained social construction of memory. Every 24 March—the commemoration day of the 1976 Coup d'État—literally millions of Argentine citizens of all ages throughout the country take part in massive demonstrations in what is now a foundational ritual of our democracy. My sight towards the ‘interhistorical’ is absolutely traversed by this cultural element, and is increasingly turning into a critical problem both in my practice and in the current events taking place in South America: the interpretation of the past and its impact in the present have become in the last years of sociopolitical polarization a critical issue as well as a key input in the hegemonic struggle now unfolding in the region.

Regarding my practice, I set myself from the fictional viewpoint of an alien who is gazing at the planet with total horizontality and lack of prejudice, without even knowing what's first and what's next, or not even understanding the difference between an animal and a pebble. This decision of expelling myself from ‘humanity’, so to say, is related to a quite early interpretation of the art history and the tasks left to me and my generation in that wider panorama, just for the only reason of having been born in certain space-time coordinates: that is, after Duchamp, with whom I metaphorized or condensed the idea of a completion, that art as we would teach, study and practice it in the West—I regard myself as a subject coming from the Far West—had completed its ontological journey. No doubt, I applied a historical approach, I wasn't at all innocent in this early design of my plans, but based it on a radical interpretation of art history, as it follows: If there's nothing left to do inside art, what's left to me—to us? And the answer was also radical: to go outside art, to its very border, to the shores of the post-end and begin a huge mourning perhaps encompassing my entire life and its entire history. To mourn art. That's what I had to do, and that was the beginning of a huge adventure, as I—i.e., the alien—had the entire planet—the entire multiverse, all times and spaces—to toy with.

4

**During the building up we worked with people around the Oude Kerk, Amsterdammers and volunteers. How important is the human factor in your work? (and why?)**

I use to say that, more than clay or any other material, the prime matter I work with are humans, in two directions: context and team. Total commitment with—and immersion in—local and institutional contexts defines projects; that's why pre-production in my practice is key and perhaps the most long stage of the process: scouting visits—sometimes beginning two or three years before the opening date—allow me to meet people, local agents, providers, aiming to get a more or less accurate cartography of the territory I'm working in; on the other hand, face-to-face exchange with curators, producers and authorities of the commissioning institution is what makes the great difference between being a human among humans or a commodity in a supermarket: through deep, sustained dialogue we build confidence—by far the main input for the future project—and a common diagnosis—not without respectfully facing conflict—of what we need/wish from each other. All this process is what I call the politics of the projects, the construction of a multidimensional connection with the site (both territory and institution) where I develop my practice, which is in fact mostly to build these bridges. The other side of the human factor is my team of collaborators arriving in the site with all this ground already cemented. From then on, I start with them a working process involving open dialogue and exchange—once again, never ever excluding conflict—as a key element of our interaction. This dynamic led me to create a theatrical metaphor: an itinerant troupe where I'm the director and my team, performers enacting roles—sculptors, goldsmiths, carpenters, masons, etc.—I help to shape. The material results of the 'rehearsal process' (sculptures, objects, installations, etc.) are, more than the goal to reach, what remains—the testimony—of that human experience, impossible to save or retain because it's pure present—a here-and-now event—as theater itself.

5

**Sandbags are often used to preserve heritage and prevent monuments and historical objects to be damaged by f.e. bombings. In the Netherlands, sandbags are also used to prevent floods, dykes are often protected with sandbags. How did these two meanings find its way in your work?**

I started to work with this image of the sandbags protecting buildings and sculptures some years ago, doing archival research for a project in the Moderna Museet of Stockholm, *Fantasma* (Ghost) (Villa Rojas, A., 2015), in which I tried to imagine how it would look like a retrospective of my practice in the future—some two hundred years, for instance—considering the perishable nature of the materials I work with. *Fantasma* deployed dozens of organic pieces—coming from another exhibition in Mexico City the year before<sup>1</sup>—in advanced state of decay, so a reflection on preservation, memory and heritage was triggered. How will a narration of my practice be built on the basis of such scarce remains? Is there a critical minimum of matter necessary for memory to survive, for history to be written? In this context, I found in the Internet visual documentation of the efforts made to protect and evacuate the cultural, artistic and architectural heritage during the Second War World in France, Italy and

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<sup>1</sup> *Los teatros de Saturno*, kurimanzutto, Mexico City, 2014.

other European countries. It struck me to see those bullet-shaped brick vaults hiding Michelangelo's Slaves and David in Florence, or the sandbag-scaffolding-wooden wall made to shield Leonardo's The Last Supper, and several other examples of this amazing emergency plan carried out throughout Europe by governments and citizens to save no less than the past. In this scenario, sandbags played a key role reinforcing walls against bombing and gunfire. Beyond war, sandbags are also well known as defense against water raising during floods. Their symbolic charge is thus undeniable, especially in countries such as the Netherlands that suffered both catastrophes. I'm not at all innocent about this, and have some expectations in the emotional impact its use may cause. I can even double the bet and ask: what if sandbags were able to preserve sound?

**6**

**We hear sounds of all ages through the space. Monkeys, baby's and human voices. I believe this is one of the first times you work with sound. How did you come to think of sound – a museum of sound?**

Sapiens have always been obsessed with matter. Since the invention of the first stone tools thousands of years ago, communities and societies have set themselves to accumulate an ever broader archive of their material culture for the next generations to inherit. The creation of museums crystallized this inherent vice, preserving for instance, armors and swords from the French-British battles of the XV century. But, where are the sounds of those traces of bloodshed between the two reigns? Where are all the painful shouts, the clash of the iron against and through the iron, the whistle of a thousand arrows stubbing the air? Where are the endless crying of all the mothers mourning the dead of all the wars? Forever lost, may be the answer.

And what about planets and stars? Black holes and galaxies? Rats and worms? Dinosaurs and deers and spoons stirring a cup of tea? What about all that secret and forever-lost symphony played in the universe by the friction of matter and energy against the space-time surface? As the string theory asserts, all what exists is nothing but notes and chords in a delicate pentagram.

Imagining a speculative history of sound, I tried to deconstruct the obsessions and agencies of Western preservation culture, questioning the strong bias towards accumulating value in certain kinds of scarce enduring objects. Summing up, I propose to revisit our passion for matter via the immateriality and infiniteness of sound.

**7**

**You are born in Rosario, Argentina and you went to art school there. Your studio is in Rosario, you work with a lot of friends and relatives on your work but you also travel a lot. Could you tell us more on how you operate as an artist.**

It is important to make clear that I don't have a permanent studio, but just a room in my parents house in Rosario and a team of collaborators currently working from home and traveling abroad when needed, for the production, assembly or dismantling of projects. I went through different stages in my practice—one of which was this itinerant company where I played the role of director and my collaborators that of actors performing different roles—but

the key to understand my dynamic in the “art” field as well as in the world is nomadism and the construction of temporary, site-specific workshops. As I said above, embedding myself in the local context through sustained visits over long periods enables me to go beyond producing commodities to create meaningful events rooted in a territory, a community, an institution, and a concrete reality.

I have always worked on and through communication, regarding the exchange with my collaborators as dialogical fields with several codes functioning at the same time, from philosophical reflection to a factory command, from psychoanalytic transference or Socratic maieutics to engineering technical plans or architectural 3D digitally composed renderings. I trust the opacity of language as a way of making discoveries, embracing the impossibility of a perfect, rational and transparent communication as one of the richest sources of intersubjective creativity. Conflict and misunderstanding feeds the system.

I love keeping parallel dialogues with several people, as if creating workshops in a multiplicity of consciences. These workshops housed in the minds of my interlocutors mature over time without necessarily reaching a productive goal in Fordist terms, but they surely have effects on “reality”.

Specialists in specific topics complement my hardcore staff when needed, as is now the case with sound, where I am collaborating with a sound designer whose practice is localized in the “film world”. The idea is, in general, to maintain an open and porous network of human synergy in constant exchange, expansion and rearrangement.

**8**

**In your work, nature is vividly present. Could you explain more on the notion of the anthropocene and how this forms an important frequency in your work?**

More than the apolitical Anthropocene, I prefer to define the current geological era as the Capitalocene, the stage in which the process of capitalist accumulation has completed the transformation of the biosphere into a global factory run under the logic of an extremely unequal ecological exchange, with irreversible consequences for humanity and all the other species that inhabit planet Earth. Anthropocene is a dangerous term because it explains these changes as part of our ‘nature’, as our set of behaviours or actions or conduct as a species, as humans and nothing else; this is again: DANGEROUS. When talking about Capitalocene we give a stronger agency to a number of human peoples that are the main protagonists of this alterations in our surroundings. This process has very evident specific managers, there are societies and regions (USA, Europe, China) that explain 80 percent of the carbon emission, or 70 percent of the plastisphere.

**9**

**We met for the first time in 2016. You visited Oude Kerk, and told me you were taking some time off because you had been too busy. The mind needed more time for reflection. How did this ‘time-out’ feel and what are the results of this period?**

2016 was a year of planetary exploration in which I chained several pending trips that took me over at least three continents, and that meant a deep change in my working dynamics (it

determined the impasse of the 'itinerant company'), eventually resulting in the 2017 arch of projects consisting of four simultaneous exhibitions in four different cities (Los Angeles, New York City, Athens and Bregenz) under the umbrella title *The Theater of Disappearance*.

**10**

**Past months you worked with the genius locis of Oude kerk. What did you find out doing that?**

The most striking discovery I made is how the institution is still functioning as a church and keeping a fluid exchange with the community using this building for their rituals. A community of about forty people that gathers both Reformists and Catholics. It's interesting to think that, in a clearly atheist environment, there has been no other option for Christians but to join themselves to survive, even for two previously irreconcilable factions. The struggle between Reformists and Catholics plunged Europe into blood, death, mud and destruction at levels hardly imaginable for contemporary Westerners, and even for me, a sort of correspondent coming from the western borders.

**11**

**You started in 2018 with a process of 'housekeeping'. This is a rigid way of emptying the space, getting rid of elements that are interfering with your work. It is not only erasing objects, but also the way the institution is present. In our process you slowly also got rid of signs referring to Oude Kerk as an institution. You even wanted to design the poster campaign and the hand-out. What do these gestures mean? Why do you start with 'housekeeping'?**

Housekeeping means someone is taking care of a specific place and its status; someone is sweeping the floor, painting the walls, checking the number of electricity outlets; housekeeping is a type of labour that enables other types of labour (and life) to happen and when it's well done nobody sees; and this is a quality I am interested in, committed to and that I want to embody. I want to cooperate with my hosts and enable them to use me as a platform for transformation. 'The container generates meaning', and ultimately, the 'container' is always interdependent with operations and practices of individuals, so: in order to achieve whatever you wish to do you have to negotiate with people, the architecture is just one component. This is the bio-political agency of housekeeping, and it is part of what I call the sustained 'host/parasite' relationship I develop with the institutions I engage with.

Moving from the 'tangible' housekeeping aspects to onto-political levels: I want my work to transactionalize as an avatar that could be used as a deposit for my own doubts—and of others—about the highly western, colonial project of 'museums' and its apparent function to save, gather and present culture. We can neither go on facing our practice as a commodity equally valid for any place and time, nor as a universal subjectivity descending with its truth to specially customized platforms installed all over the world, such as galleries, institutions, foundations for our comfort and self-assertion. My response to this deadlock has been full commitment to social, political, geographical, idiosyncratic, even geological systems, assuming as much risk as I can to produce not a commodity but a process that mostly remains topographical and chronological specific as an irreproducible experience.