

## Núria Güell

**Confinements, Escape Plans and Various Kinds of Jouissance** | solo exhibition | 13 april - 1 july 2023

### Civil disobedience as an artistic medium

If artists work with uncertainty, they also very often work in socio-economic contexts that are oppressive, unjust, racist, colonial, sexist... the list goes on. Instead of merely denouncing such repressive laws and systems, Catalan artist Núria Güell's work tangles with them via concrete action. Her exceptional status, that of an able-bodied white artist enjoying the rights and privileges of the Schengen area, gives her the symbolic and material conditions that allow her to undertake acts of civil disobedience, which becomes an artistic medium in its own right. Her actions carried out in legal loopholes produce works that are far from being mere balms for a society in need of aesthetic reassurance. They are operational protocols for actions bearing upon, and above all commenting on, an ideological system that constructs all our perceptions. Her performances can easily be compared to a language with its own grammar and alphabet that decodes relationships of power and which is itself fuelled by strategies inspired by political, economic and artistic authorities.

It all began when Güell graduated from the University of Barcelona School of Fine Arts and met the Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera: a decisive encounter. She stayed in Havana for the first time in 2004, returning in 2008 to join La Cátedra Arte de Conducta.

La Cátedra, a "training course" run by Tania Bruguera from 1998 to 2009, was a major project on the Cuban and international art scene. Focusing on the discussion and analysis of social and political behaviour and an understanding of art as an instrument of transformation, it would profoundly and permanently influence Núria Güell's work. Her experience in Cuba, which included working alongside researchers, artists and curators highly engaged in the social sciences, would shape her plans for her future life and work.

In 2008, Güell developed a decisive artwork that would influence her entire career: her marriage to a Cuban! It was a concretisation and artistic transposition of the famous 1960s feminist slogan *the personal is political*, interrogating it from the perspective of neo-colonial practices. From the start, her action aimed to make the biased relationships between citizens of the first world visible and legible. *Ayuda Humanitaria* was a five-year performance, from the love letters written by applicants to the couple's departure from Cuba and finally the divorce, which took place in Eindhoven in 2013.

The presentation of Güell's masterpiece ***Ayuda humanitaria (Cuba - España 2008-2013)*** at Salle Principale provides the keys to understanding the latest pieces, especially in prison. Núria Güell's work could easily be confused with a caring charity project and be part of the category criticised by Claire Bishop as

"do-gooder art". The arranged marriages and prison visits are opportunities to change the lives of would-be migrants or to improve living conditions for prisoners. Güell's work is far from being a "charity project" fulfilling a superegoistic urge to improve society.

Despite their good intentions and apparent compassion, Güell's projects precisely reproduce uncomfortable power dynamics. In fact, the humanitarian aid that gives the work its title involves exchanging the nationality of "first-class citizens" for sexual services or company. In the case of Güell's marriage, her Cuban husband had to be at her service at all times (from writing a diary to being present at exhibition openings).

The unfair clauses that govern society are highlighted by the artist and lie at the heart of her creative process, which are akin to social sculptures but also exist in a space of struggle and resistance via art. Her artworks do not only involve her personally and legally; they also involve the art institutions that host her, which have to take a stance just as she does.

The exhibition at Salle Principale also comprises a series of protocol works presented for the first time in France. They highlight relationships of power and individual freedom as well as relationships between art institutions and judicial institutions.

### **941212144 (España, 2021)**

The artist set up an active land line connected to a prison in the lobby of a museum. A toll-free number was given to hundreds of prisoners across Spain to that they could speak directly to visitors, who were free to take the calls or not. Shortly after the opening, the prison authorities blocked the toll-free numbers. The reasons for the refusal are unknown, but we can deduce that the prison authority doesn't like that prisoners can express themselves publicly.

### ***Ejercicios de confinamiento delegados (España, 2021)***

#### ***Delegated Exercises of Confinement***

When, on the occasion of an exhibition, the artist was invited to publish the journal of her confinement, she delegated this request to his friend Amadeu. Amadeu, 61 years old, has been incarcerated for a total of 28 years in different prisons in Spain. She asked him to draw for her, from memory, the different cell models in which he had been confined. Amadeu accompanied the drawings with a brief description of each prison and the cell.

### ***Toda obra de arte es un delito no cometido (España 2021, Chile 2022)***

#### ***Every Artwork Is A Crime Not Committed***

The artist asked the art institution to hire prison inmates or ex-convicts convicted of crimes of theft of valuables and/or works of art to guard the works in the exhibition. They acted as museum attendants and security force during all the show.

These three performances directly connected to loss of freedom highlight the fact that prison is not the "daughter of the law" but the daughter of *norms*. If, as Michel Foucault wrote in 1975, the judicial system serves society\*, today's

society has considerably reinforced its system of voluntary alienation (e.g. by adopting the biometric surveillance law for the Olympics).

Núria Güell has many long years ahead of her. We are convinced that her work will resonate in France—it's something we all need!

Béatrice Josse – 04.2023

Translation – Martyn Back

\* *Surveiller et punir : naissance de la prison*, published by Gallimard

**Béatrice Josse** - Béatrice Josse, curator free lance completed higher education in both law and art history. Director of the FRAC 49 Nord 6 Est Frac Lorraine in Metz, she has pioneered the acquisition of intangible and invisible works (performances, protocols, etc.), and pursued an ongoing interest in audiences and publics. She has repeatedly questioned the place of women artists in public collections. Director at the National Art Center of Grenoble from 2016 to 2021, she has set out to transform the centre into a permacultural locus, a platform for thinking and exchange among undisciplined artists, activists, therapists, scientists... helping to develop the role of the artist in society. His research now directs him towards more collective practices linking art/ecology/society, education and transmission.

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