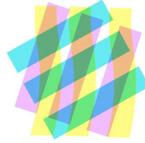


Water, Sand and Gravel

Lara Almarcegui

Hello Kristine, thank you very much for this irresistible chance to tell you my thoughts about the city at this current time. Like many other artists, when the COVID crisis began, I had several invitations to make statements or videos on the situation. I refused them, claiming my right to silence as well as needing time to reflect. To try and understand. My work started largely as a result of looking at the city around me, realising that there was too much construction, that all the space around me was designed. I started to work on ways to stop the construction, to stop the demolitions and to ask for less design and more control of the space. I was making proposals, that, come what may, should be the opposite of construction or the opposite of the idea of production. So, with the current COVID situation, the whole planet has come to a standstill, it was not the time for me to start producing at full speed. Besides, in Northern Europe, where they're more moralistic, there was a certain demand in the air. Since we artists are no longer of any use to society, without exhibitions, it seemed that we were obliged to deliver something.

I thought that before starting to make declarations blindly, if I had to be useful to society, I'd rather sweep and clean the streets. The fact is that I've always been very interested in artists who sweep the streets and collect rubbish. They have always seemed to me to be a reference point. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, an American artist in the 1970s, carried out actions by sweeping the streets of New York. She took her project so far that she ended up taking a job with the municipal garbage company, she merged with the place, she merged with the city, almost disappearing... Such was the intensity of her work... There is another artist, a filmmaker. The filmmaker, May Fung, performed an action in the 80s that consisted of walking through the streets of Hong Kong blindfolded, feeling her way along by touching the buildings. With that idea of trying to understand. I really like that attitude towards the city. I like artists that clean, what interests me and what I admire about them is that they don't accept the rules of the game, they don't accept the rules of the city. They don't accept what investors, politicians and builders propose, which is to give us a house, a box or a crate for us to get inside. No, I don't agree with it, there has to be another way; there are other ways of being in a city and being active in the space that doesn't involve getting inside a box. Cleaning or sweeping the streets seems to me to be a good start.



Another subject that is talked about a lot with COVID is the house and domestic space. I'm not really interested in my house. I'm not interested in the house, the box, the drawer. I don't believe that my house is a representation of who I am, of my ideas, identity or culture. That's 19th-century thinking to me. What interests me above all else is the neighbourhood, the people, the river.

The drawer is given to us to fill with purchases: a designer coffee machine... There should be another way of relating to space that doesn't involve buying it. Asking questions and analysing the city are already more interesting actions than buying or getting one's self inside a drawer.

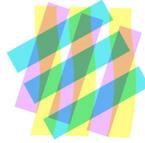
In the flat where I've lived for more than a decade, there is an attic that I've never gone up to. I've been roaming the outskirts of Rotterdam for so long that I haven't had the energy or the curiosity to go up into the attic. But, of course, my house doesn't interest me.

But I am very interested in the river next to it. Cargo ships go along the river. Many of them are loaded with sand for the nearby concrete production site. The sand was made high up in the mountains and the tributaries dragged the rocks and crushed them, sedimenting along the rivers and deltas. Nowadays, sand is barely allowed to be taken from the rivers, even less so from the plains. Much of the sand is now extracted from the sea. In gigantic quantities. Off the coast of the Netherlands, from the North Sea.

I went to a dredging congress organised by the port of Rotterdam, and in addition to the conferences, there were stands where they presented their latest products. One stand was dedicated to a new model of giant dredger. I asked the representative how much volume this dredger could dredge per day: 1000 m³? He laughed —oh no—, he said, this dredger can handle 1,000,000 m³ of dredging per day.

Imagine that, 1,000,000 m³ in a day.

How much is that in a month or a year? In the Netherlands, the top layers of sand, which for example could come from the river Rhine, were formed about 10,000 years ago. But if the sand is further down, it could be up to 40,000,000 years old, brought by ancient rivers that flowed here from the Baltic and that no longer exist; those rivers disappeared but the gravel that they dragged underground remained. These are the time scales for sand, because if we were talking about another building material such as iron to produce steel, it would be even older. Iron could have originated more than 3,000,000 years ago. This is how immense and forever the time scales in geology are.



In León, the river Bernesga's meanders were removed by channelling it and filling them out with soil. But then there's also the river Torío, which flows into the Bernesga; these places where the water of one meets the other are some of the magical and special ones within the city. Where a river passes through or where the city ends and the mountain begins, these are the kind of places that everyone needs during COVID, and they are becoming more and more significant.

What lies beneath the city and its buildings is a question of great interest and one that I have reviewed in books on the subsoil of cities. In Rotterdam, the subsoil consists of sand and gravel and there is water that drags it so that it moves bit by bit, I don't know how or at what speed, but it moves, so that we float on top of it. There is also gas down there. There is a concession, called the Rijswijk Concession, that extends under the whole city of Rotterdam. The mineral rights concessions go all the way to the centre of the earth. This concession is owned by Shell; when I read about it I couldn't believe it. I wrote to Shell asking for more information about their concession. They called me back immediately. Shell wanted to know who I was, who was this artist who had found out that we own a gas concession under the city where she lives.

So, to the pertinent question that Saskia Sassen asked, about who owns your city, I would like to add, who owns what's beneath your city?

Finally, I should get back to the question of whether I should go up into the attic. Obviously, it's not really something to brag about, the fact that I've never been up in that attic. But, I don't know, maybe there needs to be unknown spaces, places yet to be explored. Non-productive places. Waste grounds. Perhaps they're a possibility, a future.