

Exhibition October 4, 2024 – March 9, 2025

Nouvel Building, Library and Documentation Centre Space D

Monday to Friday, 9 am to 9 pm

GENE

Topia and Revolution: 1986 – 1988



Members of GENE and collaborators during the action *Gameto a favor del paro* (Gamete on Behalf of Unemployment), January 31, 1987, Madrid

**MUSEO NACIONAL
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GENE. Topia and Revolution: 1986 - 1988

GENE was an artistic collective whose name derives from the phonetic transcription of the Spanish letters *G* and *N*, – the initials of Galería Nacional (National Gallery, the group's operational center) –, and from the Greek root *γεν* (present in the etymology of the words "origin" and "genesis"). The group's short but intense existence was marked by an attitude of uncompromising rejection of the cultural policies of the progressive Madrid of the 1980s, which had found that painting opened a path leading back to order after years of political and artistic turmoil. Under the influence of an amalgam of referents ranging from Kurt Schwitters to Joseph Beuys and from Lao Tzu to Gustav Landauer, GENE based its activity on its frequent gatherings and meetings, which resulted between 1986 and 1988 in seventy-seven dispatches of mail art, various actions, and the creation of the publishing house GENE Ediciones. Although these initiatives were launched amid an absolute paucity of means and a manifestly marginal position, they generated networks for the diffusion of ideas that offered alternatives to the usual artistic circuits, and they gave rise to works whose rebellious attitude occasionally allowed them to produce short-circuits in the spaces officially dedicated to art. Curated by Cayetano Limorte, this exhibition for the first time brings together all this material, both known and previously unseen, in order to present a documentary survey of one of the most significant groups of anti-institutional artistic resistance in Madrid during that period. Although absent from the history of Spanish art, the collective's notable actions nevertheless ensured it an appearance in the official press.

Origins of GENE

The first part of the exhibition is devoted to the origins of GENE. It presents two projects initiated in January 1986 that were to merge in September that year under the name of GENE. The first was the Galería Nacional (National Gallery), an alternative artistic space founded by Maite Arratibel, Celia García Bravo, Nacho Pérez de la Paz, and Pedro Roldán in the basement of



Gathering of members of GENE, 1986

an apartment block in Madrid's Chamberí district. Over twenty artists were involved in its two exhibitions and performances. The other initiative was the *Servicio Postal de Exposiciones Múltiples y Propaganda* (Postal Service for Exhibitions, Multiples, and Propaganda), a mail art project implemented by Manuel Saiz. Already appearing during its first months of activity were the names of future members of GENE like José Díaz Cuyás, Julio Jara, Pamen Pereira, and Pedro Roldán, together with those of other projects of the time with parallel interests, such as the recently founded *Société Anonyme* or the fanzine *Vípera*.

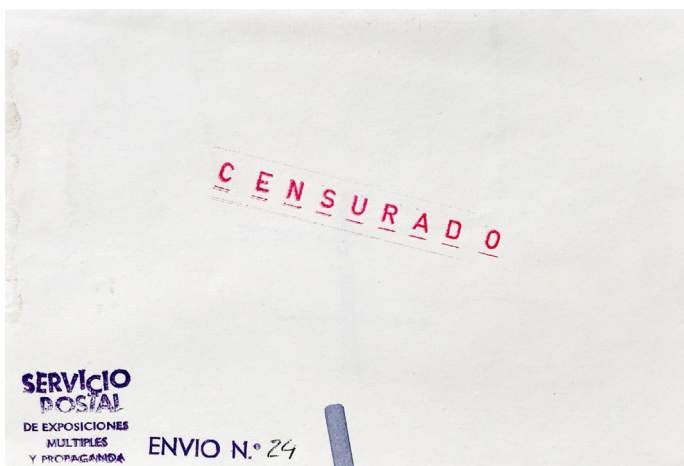
To inaugurate the artistic practice of GENE, as a collective, the video *Gameto Gene* (Gene Gamete) is presented. This was a sort of audiovisual manifesto devised by Javier Colis and Julio Jara in which the members of the group, wearing masks of their own faces but interchanging them among themselves, exhibited part of the iconography of their struggle against the hegemony of painting and academicism. Dedicated to Kurt Schwitters, a Dadaist purportedly rejected by the Dadaists, it is a clear reflection of the artistic debates of the time and of the radically combative position adopted by the group.

Postal Service and GENE Gametes

The exhibition continues with the *Servicio Postal GENE* (GENE Postal Service), the group's most sustained and characteristic project, which functioned in its turn as a means of diffusion for the rest of its activities. The documents sent by courier services to its subscribers thus served as a register and record of the actions that took place both in public and at GENE's headquarters. Displayed like an atlas in this central part of the exhibition is a selection of the seventy-seven dispatches of mail art that chronologically traverse GENE's history, interspersed among which are photographs, press cuttings, various objectual multiples, and certain publications. This heterogeneous set of documentary material allows viewers to grasp the group's ideas and working philosophy and the place it occupied in the artistic context of Madrid in the 1980s.

For example, the authorship of the dispatches, signed individually and in the name of GENE, reveals a particular philosophy in which the collective viewed itself as a set of free individuals developing and carrying out their own initiatives after having previously agreed on them in collaboration with the group. They expressed this in the following way in the interview published in the newspaper *Buades*: "GENE as an ideal/attitude accompanies us in all our individual activities. GENE as a group is a sum of individualities." Unlike other groups of the time who argued for the dissolution of the self and authorship in the name of the collectivity, this characteristic functioned in the case of GENE, with its anti-authoritarian position and its cooperativist practice, to draw it toward certain historical debates on socialist and individualist tendencies within the framework of libertarian thought.

With regard to the actions, called *Gametos* (Gametes) and documented in the exhibition, *Envío nº 24* (Dispatch No. 24) by Pedro Roldán opens one of the most significant episodes in GENE's early stage: the group's interference with the exhibition *13 jóvenes pintores* (13 Young Painters) organized at the Círculo de Bellas Artes by Madrid's City Council in 1986. The dispatch consists of a facsimile version of the work by Pedro Roldán, a member of GENE and a participant in the exhibition, which had been



Pedro Roldán, *Envío n° 24* (Dispatch No. 24), facsimile of the censored work withdrawn from the exhibition *13 jóvenes pintores* (13 Young Painters), 1986



Envío n° 26 (Dispatch No. 26), circular informing of the constitution of GENE after the merging of the *Servicio Postal de Exposiciones Múltiples y Propaganda* (Postal Service for Exhibitions, Multiples, and Propaganda), 1986

withdrawn by the official organizing the show on the grounds that the work lacked the necessary size and weight to be a painting, and a letter to the editor of *El País* dated September 19 and signed by Roldán himself together with ten other artists in which they denounced the censorship of the new democratic regime. This episode subsequently motivated a postal action consisting of sending a rejection letter to different institutional art open calls employing their own institutional language. It read: "I regret to inform you that your competition has not been selected for the inclusion of any work of mine this year. I thank you for the interest you have shown and look forward to your further collaboration for the next edition."

In another of the actions, subscribers were invited to take part in a walk from Talavera de la Reina to the GENE headquarters in Madrid. Under the name of *Recorrido tercer mundo* (Third World Tour, 1986), it was an initiative of Julio Jara inspired by Romani nomadism and situationism. Besides the invitation, the action is documented by several photographs and a video. This is also the case of *Gameto a favor del paro* (Gamete on Behalf of Unemployment, 1987), an action against the machinic rhythms of the capitalist world held in the streets of central Madrid, of which several photographs are preserved along with a brief text and a set of instructions. Finally, also on display are the dispatches of the action *Gameto tiempo muerto* (Time Out Gamete, 1987), with which the group resumed its reflection on productivity and the friction between individual and collective rhythms. This was a sit-in at the GENE headquarters during which a profuse artistic debate took place. Afterward, the ashes of the assembly proceedings were sent to subscribers as a physical and conceptual memory of the event. Included in the same dispatch was a brief text on the significance of the action motivated by the reading of Gustav Landauer and his concepts of topia and revolution.

The GENE group participated in June 1987 in *Punto 87* (Point 87), an exhibition dedicated to young Madrid artists, at the invitation of its curator, Miguel Fernández-Cid, who was a subscriber to the *Servicio Postal GENE*. By way of an action, the works presented were carried on foot from the GENE headquarters to the Centro Cultural de la Villa in a kind of procession featuring the table at which they held their artistic discussions. Upon it was a sculpture titled *Quien a buen árbol se arrima, mal rayo le parta* (May

whoever shelters under a good tree be struck by bad lightning), made with the corpse of a dog that had been run over, picked up during the march of the action *Recorrido tercer mundo*, and kept for nearly a year at the entrance to the gallery. In addition to these two works, they included a drawing titled *Nunca siempre menos* (Never Always Less), which they hung on the wall of the venue (as can be seen in some preserved photographs in which the table also appears). The idea was to take everything they had at the GENE headquarters along with the group's manifesto, a collage made up of phrases taken from the texts sent through the *Servicio Postal GENE*, which was published in the catalogue.

GENE Ediciones

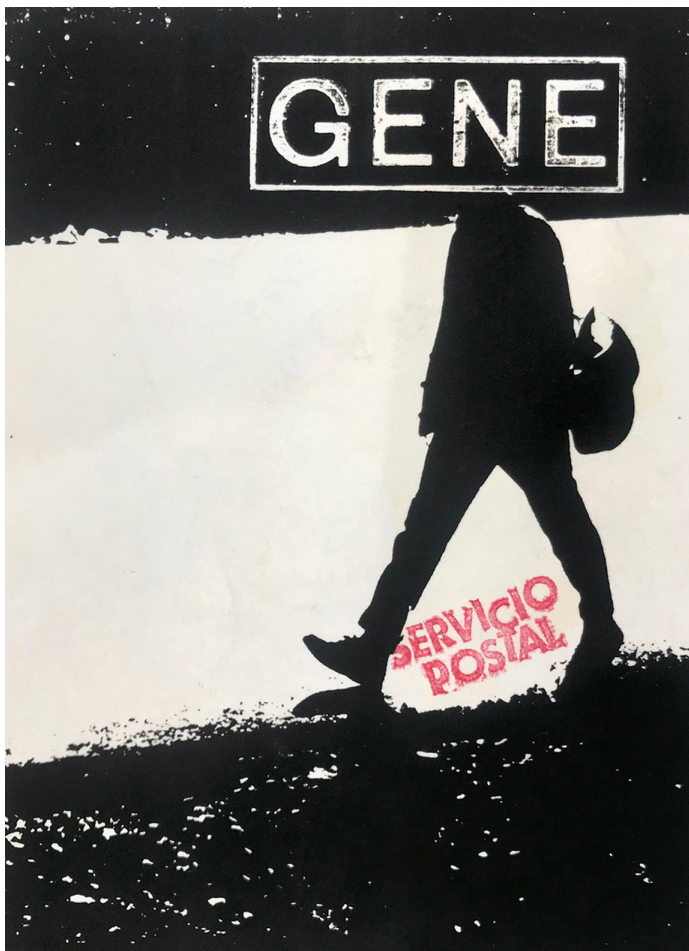
The trip taken by the members of GENE to document 8 in Germany in September 1987 marked the end of the activity of the *Servicio Postal GENE* as well as the beginning of the end of GENE itself. During that trip, besides their stay in Kassel, they also visited the second edition of Skulptur Projekte in Münster and the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, following a kind of pilgrimage route that was strongly marked by the figure of Joseph Beuys, the group's great referent. The journey would expose certain differences that started to wear away progressively at the group's cohesion. Nevertheless, in an attempt to revive their activity, they created GENE Ediciones at the end of 1987. On view as examples of its output are a selection of postcards made by various members of the group, the two *GENE* magazines (No. 0 and No. 1), and five artists' books (by José Díaz Cuyás, Celia Martín, Pedro Roldán, Manuel Saiz, and Alberto Vidarte). The display is completed with the testimonial multiple by Julio Jara, about the end of GENE.

Curator

Cayetano Limorte

Acknowledgments

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Card advertising the *Servicio Postal GENE* (GENE Postal Service), 1986

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