

What Are We Doing Here?

Alternative Spaces in Madrid at the Turn of the Century

September 25, 2020 — February 5, 2021

Museo Reina Sofía, Nouvel Building, Library and Documentation Centre, Space D

Monday to Friday, from 9:00 to 21:00 h

Presented in the context of the master's degree course in History of Contemporary Art and Visual Culture offered at the Study Center of the Museo Reina Sofía in collaboration with the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM) and the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM), *What Are We Doing Here? Alternative Spaces in Madrid at the Turn of the Century* is an academic and expository exercise conducted by students following the art theory and criticism track.



Maelström Cultural Association and Red de Lavapiés. *Once Upon a Time in Lavapiés and Other Stories. Housing Walk*. Madrid, 2001. Photograph without authorship

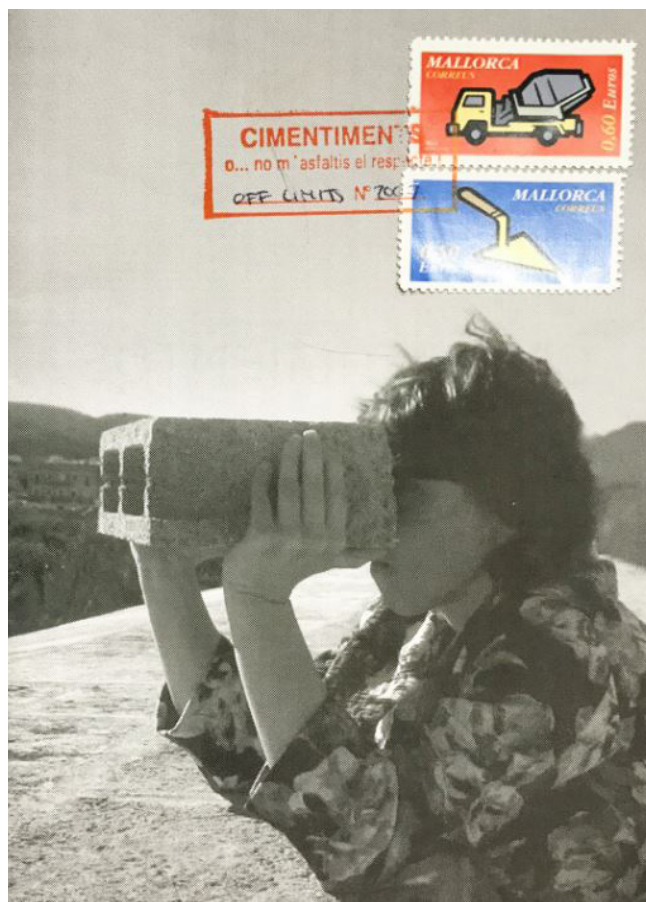
A document can operate as a catalyst to kick-start research into an archive, in a similar fashion to the way in which a symbol on a map of a city can position us in its broad-ranging cultural and tourist spaces: “You are here”. Yet knowledge of position does little to resolve the pertinence of doing in that location. In a first point of contact with the archives around which this show is constructed, the question “What am I doing here?” rises to the surface — it appeared on the catalogue cover of the 1999 exhibition held in Garage Pemasa and organised by the El Perro collective, whereby various artists reflected, at the end of the millennium, on the domestic sphere and the relationship between the public and the private. Subsequently, these issues led to an investigation into the concept of space and how to occupy it, as much in an urban, social and cultural sense as symbolically, through an historical approach to some of Madrid’s alternative spaces, substantiated from archives on the cultural initiatives of Garage Pemasa and Off Limits and the art collective Fast Food. These documentary ensembles form part of the *Network of Archives on Independent Practices in Madrid Since the 1980s*, an archive project propelled by the Museo Reina Sofía Library and Documentation Centre.

The cultural initiatives selected in the exhibition set out a reflection on the meaning of building collective spaces, the structural notion of this document-based show. On the one hand these initiatives were physical places that housed exhibitions and encounters, aiming to promote artistic practices that were not always accepted or supported from the institutional sphere of the time. And on the other, confined to a context of touristification and gentrification, they were places that demonstrated the potential of collective action and re-signified ruins and streets from alternative readings of the city.

The political decisions of regional and municipal governments in Madrid, framed within the 1997 General Plan of Urban Planning and the consecutive Zoning Laws in Spain, meant the modernisation of the inner city as a vehicle to promote the city and maximise its tourist value. The measures adopted resulted in the absorption or expulsion of everything that was not in line with the re-urbanisation plan and the exploitation of cultural capital. As a counterbalance at the end of the 1990s, these artistic collectives and spaces emerged, activating other forms of management bearing a close relation to their local and social environment.



Once Upon a Time in Lavapiés and Other Stories. Housing Walk. Madrid, 2001



Lacasadelcactus, cover of *Cementimientos* fanzine, 2007

Garage Pemasa, a disused mechanics workshop located in Madrid's Salamanca neighbourhood, was opened as a cultural space in 1998 with the exhibition *Conjunto vacío* (Empty Ensemble), a project headed by Lurdes Fernández which sought to rethink the city's artistic framework via a collaboration between different agents, most notably the Fast Food and El Perro collectives, the members of which worked as artists and curators in both spaces. In 2000 the initiative moved to Madrid's Lavapiés neighbourhood, where it became Off Limits, a project closely related to its new surroundings, occupying an old bakery on calle de la Escudra. This change of site coincided with episodes of intervention and speculation that responded to different real estate and tourist interests, which in turn met resistance organised by local residents to defend the right to housing, the recognition of migrant communities, the re-use of abandoned spaces and the vindication of memory and identity of place. In 2002 and with the premises still a building site, the first exhibition was put on under the title *Arruinados* (In Ruins), where artists were invited to reflect on processes of the neighbourhood's decline, following to some degree the considerations of *Conjunto vacío*.

Garage Pemasa and Off Limits were spaces that reacted before the inaccessibility certain artistic practices had to endure from the public and private sphere, while Fast Food and El Perro rekindled and gave meaning to these spaces with projects that cast light on the precarious nature of common spaces and even their disappearance as a result of the city's privatisation, drawing attention to the tension between institutional artistic discourses and more dissident ones.

This documentary exhibition sets out a three-dimensional diagram where the different archives from these spaces and collectives overlap and come face to face, with their content helping to rethink their location in an institutional place and the frictions arising from the public-private dichotomy. The absence of documents that recount the history and practices of other collectives that were part of this network confirms the impossibility of one sole narration, opening fugues that can lead to new lines of research and routes inside the exhibition space and to consider possible responses to the question: "What are we doing here?"

These five documents displayed on the wall form the backbone of the system of relations arrayed in the gallery: reproductions of documents and materials



Alejandro Amador, photograph of Garaje Pemasa, 1998



David Hernández, *Contradiction*, 2001

extracted from the archives of alternative spaces Garage Pemasa and Off Limits, as well as Fast Food – initiatives developed at the turn of the century in Madrid. Each of these documents traces a conceptual line enabling the space to be crossed in different ways and thus establishing multiple interactions between the content. These conceptual lines are:

Traces: our inhabiting the city and the passage of time leave marks that summon memories and past experiences. The foundations of houses, cranes, bricks, cracks and graffiti on walls become traces and ghosts that recall urban and architectural solutions of a not-so-distant past, whilst playing a part in creating the image of a major city like Madrid.

Ruins: the municipal neglect of certain neighbourhoods in the centre of the city, of housing and local residents, the upshot of political decisions aligned towards urban restructuring based on economic interests, has brought about their impoverishment. One such example is substandard housing that typifies the decline of community dynamics and quality of life for the local residents in these areas.

Powers: cultural policies developed around the turn of the century in Spain, intended to disseminate Spanish culture and exploit it to gain capital for new infrastructures, caused strained relations between museum spaces, cultural spaces and alternative spaces. Such tension brings to light how discourses and rationales occupying official spaces are negotiated.

Neighbourhoods: the implementation of different urban municipal policies causing the gentrification and touristification of the city centre was followed by the arising need to create communities of neighbours, generate resistance, and build relationships, often contradictory, between activism and art, residents and cultural spaces. Madrid's Lavapiés neighbourhood is one example of this.

Displacements: What is the value per square metre of a property? Real-estate speculation evinces the predatory urban practices that blight our cities, to which art centres also contribute. As implacable processes, these phenomena have undermined exercises of resistance and force us to consider questions alluded to by the final document in the show (*EX-SITU*): What are we doing here? What is the role of art? Is there a real possibility of change or is the only solution escape?

Curators:

Javier Aparente, Bernardita Croxatto, Mónica España-H., Giulia E. Lo Basso, Blanca Molina, Paula Mora, Jo Muñoz, Sergio Porras, Fidel Villar, Luisa Villegas G.

Acknowledgements:

L. San Gregorio, Pablo Caldera Ortiz, Helena del Campo Fúnez and Víctor Sánchez de la Peña for his work as collaborators during the initial process of the investigation. Juan Albarrán Diego, Isabel Bordes Cabrera, Carolina Chacón, Pablo España, Joaquín Cortés, Lurdes Fernández, Alicia Fuentes Vega, Ana Longoni, Iván López, Román Lores, Beatriz Martínez, Olga Martínez, Alberto Medina, Guillermina Mongan, Fe Piquero, Rocío Robles Tardío, Ana Sánchez Llorca and Daniel Villegas, in addition to everyone involved in the Roadmap of Critique on the MA in Contemporary Art History and Visual Culture and their part in the initial research process of the archives.

In collaboration with:

The MA in Contemporary Art History and Visual Culture taught in the Museo Reina Sofía Study Centre, in collaboration with the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) and Complutense University of Madrid (UCM).

Programme:

Documentary Exhibitions, Library and Documentation Centre

Education program developed with the sponsorship of:

