

MORIR SOÑANDO

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A conversation between Massimo Grimaldi & Manuel Cirauqui

MANUEL CIRAUQUI: This morning, almost by accident, I found myself killing time at Morir Soñando, that little Dominican luncheonette in South Williamsburg. As I grabbed an orange juice and stepped out for a smoke, I reflected on the place and its name, its quiet atmosphere and the erratic, melancholic behavior of its staff. Pretty much everything happening in and around the luncheonette seemed to be under the spell of that idea – ‘to die while dreaming’ – which gave every single being there the aura of a dreamer. Perhaps it’s inevitable to superimpose a poetic name on a prosaic space like this. I wonder why Morir Soñando – the place and its name, or only its name – were haunting you lately.

MASSIMO GRIMALDI: More than dying while dreaming, I thought about the chance, or privilege, of dying after having had the chance, or privilege, to dream. And just after writing this, I’m unexpectedly moved to add the word ‘massacre’. Not just due to the massacres that are taking place around the world as we begin this conversation, but above all, in memory of the ones that took place a few months ago in Bangui, the horror of which was recently described to me. Ever since visiting Bangui in 2009, to ‘emotionally’ document the work of Emergency’s Centre Pédiatrique, I’ve wanted to go back. But if I went there now, I would find very few of the things I idealized then, of the people I met. Sometimes I can’t bear the futility of working with art, as if it were an undeserved privilege arbitrarily granted to me. I’ve encountered too many lives lived with too much difficulty and insecurity, so much more than mine, yet not without such beauty, to be able to ignore them. To forget about them and lock myself away in a studio to focus on the daydream we call ‘art’. I’m always afraid I won’t be able to find a balance, and between dream and reality, I’m always afraid of turning one into the other, of melancholizing everything, aimlessly, without a real reason, a real goal.

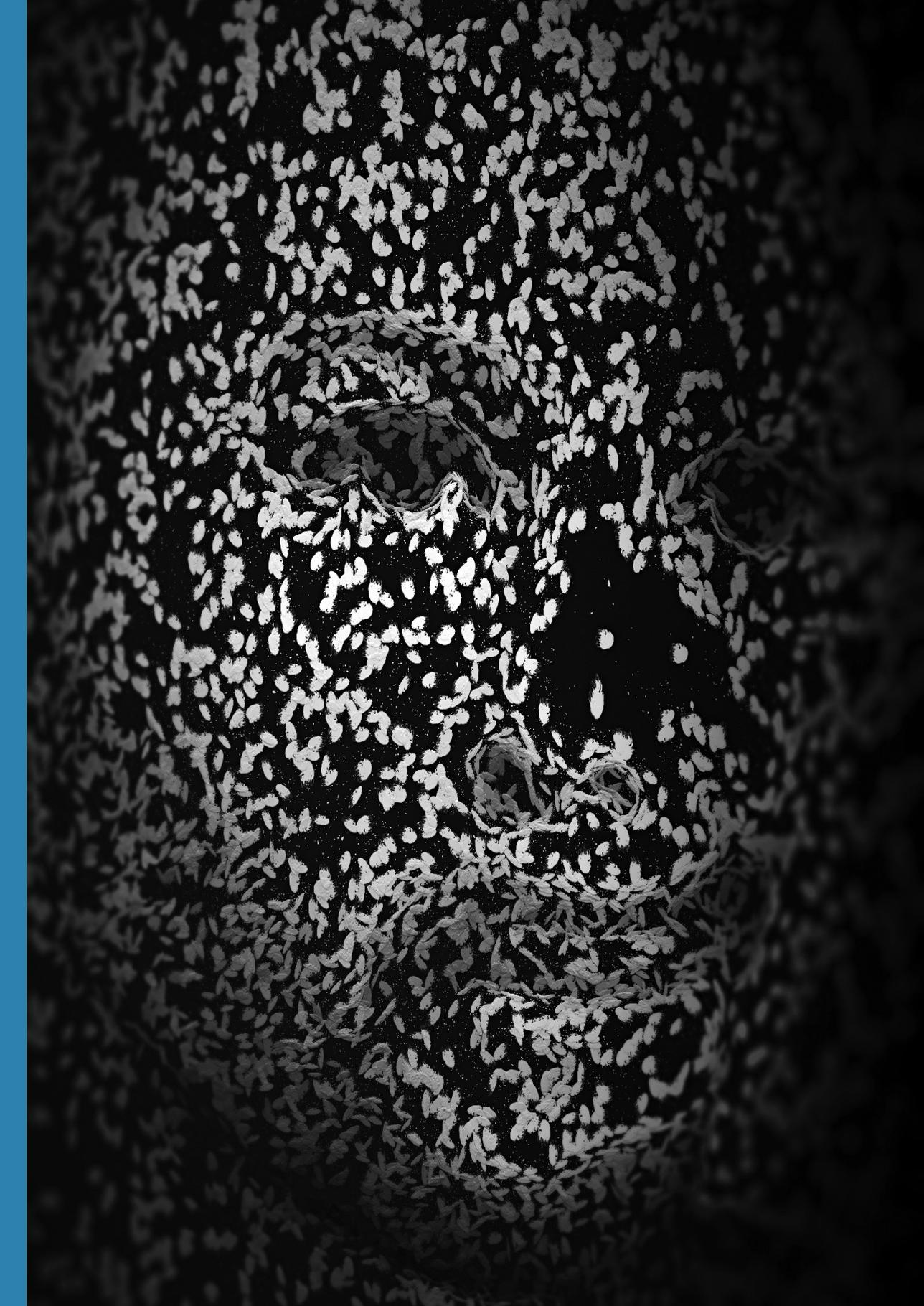
MC: ‘To die while dreaming’: I have the feeling we may read the phrase quite differently. Its heavy melancholic connotations can relate to opposite forms of death: on the one hand, the death of those who can afford to live dreaming, the dilettantes who spend their lives on chimeric fantasies, and die graciously; on the other hand, there is an accursed death for those who dream of the most elementary things – a glass of clear water, a day



without war – as if precisely those basic things were unreal chimeras. And I agree with you, to die while dreaming is a privilege compared to dying in the middle of the materialized nightmare of misery plus massacre. But although art presupposes the possibility of dreaming dreams that are lucid and sophisticated – in other words: wealth – I wouldn't say art simply equals dreaming; one cannot make dreams. When art does not experience itself as necessary, it spreads into areas of existence where it can survive. Isn't that what happened to and in your work?

MG: Manuel, it's taken me a while to figure out how to answer. I could have said yes, of course, I wanted to introduce some brutally utilitarian element into my work, because I was afraid my work would become sterile. That my passion for the most extreme forms of abstraction would be my doom. Yet this felt like repeating the same things I've said in the past. And which I don't want to repeat at the moment. Here, in Port Sudan, where I'm writing you from. Where my project led in 2010 to the construction of a hospital. A place I wanted to become magic. Hoping to describe that magic. But all it took was the absence of Saba, currently on vacation in Khartoum – the little girl who had trotted along by my side ever since the hospital was just a building site, introducing me to the local children and adults, even taking me into their little shacks, and who to me represented the very idea of the hospital, the idea that built it – to make me realize just how much I rely on a delicate web of emotional connections. Unexpectedly removing one of them, Saba, whose presence I had taken for granted, it was as if a spell were broken, as if the translucent spider web of my arbitrary affections revealed their extreme volubility. It's taken me a while to answer, Manuel, because in the last few days I've been feeling like a spider.

MC: Your reply is like a little photo essay. Reading it, I feel that life's share – I mean, the part of real life that your emotional accounts on the pediatric hospital's everyday life represent, although it is not just that, there is much more – life's share takes over when you are there. Carl Andre said once that the best photograph of one of his sculptures is the one taken from the sculpture, showing what is going on around it. I have a similar feeling now, as I read your answer, and I imagine you looking at the things that happen around the hospital: that life. And yet, when you come back from that life – when you are back in Milan or elsewhere – what happens then? Does what you call abstraction take over again? Maybe it is simplistic to think about your work as an equilibrium between those two impulses.



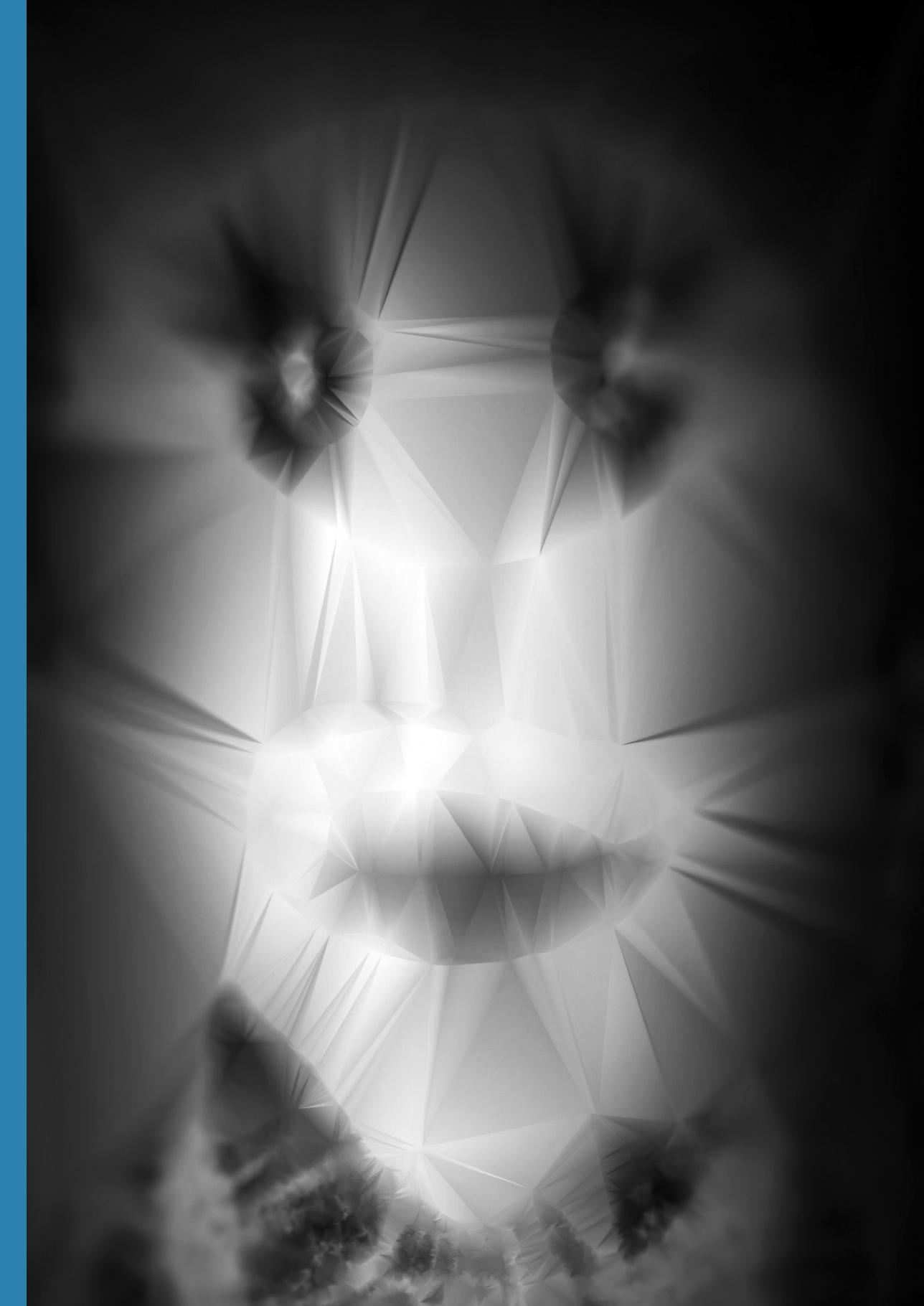
MG: Sometimes I find myself motionless, abstracted, pervaded by a strange sort of melancholy. Which doesn't seem tied to the past, but rather to some ill-defined future. Like the vague expectation of an approaching summer. Though it's a summer that will never come. My abstraction may begin after that 'never'. As a kind of defense. As if I were trying to fight off the invasion of reality. I find myself imagining a remote, skewed, skewable future, with no physical or mental restrictions. We tend to judge things by differentiating between them rather than analyzing them in and of themselves. But it seems these qualitative disparities are becoming simply pretexts to justify a difference that is superficial, not material. And so my future is massified, viscous, undifferentiated, an endless prairie where all meanings are relative and can overlap. A future that pursues a rapid comparison of surfaces, unconcerned with their depth. And in which I can place my idea of the perfect image. An image that has finally given up on depicting anything, on being comprehensible, since it is just one of its own infinite possibilities of existence.

MC: Your words are pervaded by such a strong existential feeling that, even if I conjured up the ghost of Friedrich Nietzsche in front of me right now, I would hardly be able to counter it. Your nihilistic despair, which I share to a certain degree, has been around since at least the days of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. The difference between those bittersweet days of heroic modernism and the bittersweet today is as obvious as it is unseizable. To create newer and newer forms, to redefine and thus repeat the 'thrill of the new' as if it contained a pure hope, as for almost two centuries been the antidote to our culture's inherent nihilism and melancholia. And on its way to us, the modern impulse has generated all sorts of vital, critical revisions and reversions of itself, ad nauseam. We can't help seeing – even falling in love with – the beauty of its 'failure' in thousands of examples, and we acknowledge the decadence of that impulse while we dream of the infinity of works of art that are yet to be made. Still, some of us remain blindly faithful to the gestures, artistic and not, that intensified our lives in crucial stages, and the old question – Lenin's 'shto delat', Merz's 'che fare' – seems as urgent as ever. I think your 'duality' originates there, but there isn't by any means a clear split: a theory of digital imagery underlies your political stance, and you have spoken about your hospital projects in conceptualistic terms... Am I wrong? Isn't precisely that duality the only way to make both attitudes tolerable?



MG: I have a hard time answering that. 'Tolerable' ought to be the right word. And yet it feels to me like it isn't, that I often experience the opposite. Torn apart by the impossibility of joining together – through my life, let alone through my work – worlds that have little in common. I can't tell their stories, tell them about each other, as I naively thought I could. Sublimely abstracting, or straightforwardly healing. An ethereal form, or care for a sick patient. I'll never be able to combine them, except with the dissonance that is peculiar to me, that describes me so well. I will always be just a ferry between two distant lands, never the earthquake that could swallow up the distance and bring them together. Recently, a project of mine was included in the program for Siena's candidacy as European Capital of Culture for 2019. The project consisted in giving Emergency, an independent, neutral NGO that offers free, high-quality medical care, the sum of one million euros, drawn from the available budget and from probable funding, for the construction of a pediatric center in Bo, Sierra Leone. A photo essay of mine, projected in a public place, would have documented the construction of the center, forming a positive conceptual link between the city of Siena and the city of Bo. Turning a distant place into a plug-in for one's own area, an ethical extension of it. But Siena did not become European Capital of Culture for 2019, and although my project could still theoretically be carried out, I saw a potential future crumble before my eyes, a future that seemed within reach, and likely to be full of joy, and hope. I already know the path that leads from my table, from the computer on top of it, to the doctors who manage to save the life of a child in an unfamiliar city. I know that path, I strenuously pursue every opportunity that might allow me to travel it again. And I'm not sure I'm still talking about art. It even seems to me that I'm no longer interested in talking about it in the terms that people always have. I think back on your word 'tolerable', and wonder whether it might not be the opposite.

MC: This is certainly not an easy predicament to deal with. The word 'tolerable' (and its opposite, the intolerable) expresses an ethical feeling, and ethics and aesthetics are indivisibly tied even when (and especially when) agents claim they are not. But things get much more complicated when you look at them closely. I think your work, in its oscillation, addresses the tension between political action and its aesthetic value; between the formal self-sufficiency, the 'beauty' of that act and the radical incompleteness of existence; etc. – but refuses to neutralize that tension by dissolving its two poles (artwork/hospital) into one object. You don't seem to be trying to



paint your Guernica, and you are not abandoning formal art-making to become an NGO activist either. Yet, some connections make possible your commute between 'the lightness of form' and the need to 'assist the ill'. There is a common dynamic at work in everything you do, although the motivations may at times seem schizophrenic, and I say this not only because you at times use the same arts funding for the hospital to be built and your 'formalist' artwork to be made. My impression is that, as a maker of images/forms, you have often questioned and manipulated what conditions the image. That is, the form of form, but also the real behind the image and in the image: the reality of the image as a complex, irreconcilable whole. And that, to me, could be the path connecting the pediatric hospital, its plain visual documentation, to say, your more elaborated digital portrait series. I don't know if you would accept this schema, but my question would be: how much do the visitors of your exhibition need to know about Emergency's pediatric hospital in Port Sudan, in order to understand what is at stake in your 'melancholic digital portraits'?

MG: Viewers should be fully aware that they're looking at the obscure, hyperformalist convolutions of a Mr. Hyde, the tortured introversion of a cheerful Dr. Jekyll, who would rather portray the very idea of hope, and the ethereal beauty implicit in it. But your question demands a broader reflection on my attitude towards the viewer. In my text pieces on the wall I have tried to move past the metaphorical mediation of the object/artwork, speaking to my audience in a direct, frank, even bitter way about my own role as an artist. In other works of mine, such as the abstract images that are partially obstructed by the presence of my friends leaning against them, or snakes slithering in front of them, I've taken the opposite path. Trying to make the object/work an obstacle, a mere space-filler, a dull, inert mass that is no longer capable of conveying a two-way relationship between the artist and his viewers. And I think I'm developing an even more extreme stance, with works that seem totally indifferent to any audience they might have. This is true of the nocturnal slideshow projected on an outer wall of the MAXXI museum in Rome, made up of photographs documenting the genesis of the pediatric center that we talked about earlier, which was built through the museum's enormous MAXXI 2per100 award. Does it really matter whether those photographs – which also circulate on social networks and are regularly used by Emergency in its publicity material – are seen inside the work? They are obviously a mere justification of the process that has generated them, a bartering chip in the shameless piece of ethical blackmail presented to the prize jury. An offer that certainly



couldn't be refused: 'Will you, as jurors, choose a bronze sculpture or a project that will ultimately save human lives?' Obviously, the visible part of this project is the least important, most incidental pretext. And then, if I think about certain works that I've exhibited recently in conditions of semi-darkness, I'm afraid that I'm conceptually moving in a post-artistic sphere, that I'm thinking of the works more and more as mute relics of a communication that is no longer possible.

MC: I wouldn't be so sure about the importance of the actually 'visible'. Viewership, on the contrary, permeates all areas and tasks of the art sphere, no matter how preliminary or administrative (such as grant-writing, budget decision-making, you name it) or de facto 'invisible'; all of them give form to the artwork and can therefore be – have to be, somehow – manipulated. The fact that it needs no viewer is itself an object of viewership in your work. Meanwhile, art is always action – hence my effort to bring up the connections between the two areas of your 'split' practice. Now, the 'post-artistic atmosphere' you refer to is intriguing. Doesn't the very failure to abandon art prompt the artistic response? Isn't that the inescapable threshold of art-making today?

MG: Bagdad Café. Percy Adlon. One of my favorite movies. Brenda, bossy, irascible. She bursts into one of the rooms in her motel. She shouts at Jasmin: 'I've had it! And I ain't taking it no more. No way! Who the hell do you think you are, lady, eh? Just what is your game? You got something against me? You trying to drive me crazy or what? Nobody is gonna do that to me! No way!' Dragging her kids out. Yelling at her again: 'Get out! Move! And you, Mrs. Munschter, you pack up your bag of tricks and get the hell outta here. Pronto! Or I'll shoot your fat ass with buckshot!' Slamming the door behind her. Opening it a second later. Yelling at her again, regretting it a second later: 'Go play with your own kids!' Sad, milk-white Jasmin. Who answers, as if she were a work of art: 'I do not have any.'

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Manuel Cirauqui is Manuel Cirauqui is a writer and curator based in New York. A former resident researcher at Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation (IRI) in Paris and curator at Jeu de Paume, he currently serves as assistant curator at Dia Art Foundation, New York, where he has contributed to the exhibition *Carl André: Sculpture as Place, 1958-2010* at Dia:Beacon and its catalogue (*Dia/Vale, 2014*), and curated the lecture series *Monuments, Monumentality, Monumentalization (2013-2015)* among other projects. He is also an adjunct lecturer in Critical Curating at the Rhode Island School of Design, and the producer of the radio program *Symposium on WGXC*, New York. His most recent writing has appeared in MIT Press's *PAJ: A Journal of Art and Performance*; *Bomb Magazine*, and *Torrent*.

Massimo Grimaldi (1974, Taranto, Italy) lives and works in Milan, Port Sudan and other places. He has had exhibitions in various galleries and museums such as ZERO..., Milan; team, New York; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Villa Croce, Genoa; M HKA, Antwerp; Magasin, Grenoble; Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton; MCA, Chicago; Palazzo Grassi, Venice and the 50th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale, Venice.

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