

## ***Dictator(ship): an insight***

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The *Dictator(ship)* project was inspired by Haiti in terms of analyzing the history of the country and the power of *Kanaval* as a medium for social and political protest<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, although the carnival is mainly perceived just as a touristic and joyful celebration in many parts of the world, it carries a deeper concept of critiquing power relations through the absurdification of reality and its satirical subversion of authority. In Haiti, this aspect is particularly enhanced making *Kanaval* a crucial site of popular gathering, cultural identity and political commentary<sup>2</sup>. *Dictator(ship)* was conceived with some of these concepts in mind. The collective of five artists designed the project broadening the capacity of the carnivalesque to discuss and criticize the issue of the unequal distribution of power in the world today, whose effects can be clearly noticed in the populist, nationalist and xenophobic disaster that the global society is currently experiencing.

Dictatorship is usually associated with an evident manifestation of repressive political power which has been part of humankind since time immemorial. When people think of dictatorship, they probably think of the most known regimes which characterized modern history: Fascist, Nazis, Communist. However, on a broader scale, it must be seen as a more abstracted concept which affects the global society on multiple and subtle levels. Borrowing Jacques Rancière's concept of 'distribution of the sensible' on the relationship between aesthetics and politics<sup>3</sup>, power is constantly generated and redistributed on different levels and with different outcomes, since it is structured on perception. In this context, the notion of dictatorship can be interpreted on a more general and abstract stage as the result of the distribution of power in terms of "*distribution and redistribution of places and identities, the apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible*"<sup>4</sup>. This reflection can include several and different forms of power, ranging from the political, the economic and, most of all, the capitalist one, which undoubtedly represents the most impacting form of power and control in current times.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the first inspirations related to *Kanaval* and its significance in Haiti came from the pictures of the photographer Corentin Folhen, published on National Geographic's website. At the basis of Folhen's research has been the will to discover and present Haiti beyond its negative stereotyped attributions: "*We talk about Haiti always in terms of poverty, but for me this island is one of the [richest]. Not with money, but with human creativity*". *Colorful Karnaval Costumes Show the Vibrant Spirit of Haiti*. (2018). *Nationalgeographic.com*. Retrieved 20 December 2017, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2017/02/carnaval-haiti-mardi-gras>

<sup>2</sup> The political element of the *Kanaval* emerges in many of its components. The main festival in the capital Port-au-Prince is funded by the government, and it is always the stage of several polemics and controversies which testify the impact that this celebration has on Haitians. One of the biggest struggles which affects the institutional carnival, is the exclusion of artists and musicians who are considered inconvenient for the government due to the polemical and denunciatory scope of their works. Next to the main festival dictated by the government, Haiti has plenty of simultaneous festivals taking place in smaller cities such as Jacmel, Aux Cayes and other locations. A further non institutional and meaningful carnival is *RARA*, a series of processions held during the Catholic Lent season characterized by a deep presence of music. The music is a fundamental part of *RARA*, where is often used for political purposes to the extent of addressing severe issues such as oppression and poverty within the country. For this reason, many *RARA* groups and musicians have often been banned from performing and forced to exile from the government.

<sup>3</sup> Rancière, J. (2009). Aesthetics as politics. In Rancière, J., *Aesthetics and its discontents*, Cambridge, Polity, 2009, pp. 23-44. For a deeper gaze about Rancière's theory about "*distribution of the sensible*", see: Rancière, J., & Rockhill, G. (2016). *The politics of aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 24.

It appears most readily in the context of Donald Trump's racist opinions about Caribbean and African countries, literally defined as "*shithole countries*", who says that the United States would readily welcome people from regions such as Norway and Sweden as opposed to citizens from Haiti or El Salvador<sup>5</sup>. Evidently, the lives of people from wealthier and more developed countries are worth far more than those who are forced to flee from a situation of underdevelopment and extreme living conditions. "*Shithole countries*", indeed, where the ideological machine that is capitalism is staunchly committed to destroying economies, exploiting resources, selling weapons and making inroads on the domestic front to secure its business and its overall control, and evidently pushing people to flee in despair. Beyond the case of Haitian refugees, to which Trump has referred, just think - for instance - of the current unfolding tragedy in Syria and Libya, from where the majority of refugees come who try to access Europe.

If one were to look at the examples of Syria and Libya, the sense of tragedy is apparent, and testifies to the amount of hardships and risks that civilians face when they contemplate escaping from their countries. However, society remains to a large extent indifferent to what is happening nowadays. Overwhelmed by images of war, violence, poverty and death, people seem anesthetized and immune towards one another's' grief and miseries. While on the one hand the internet-era ensures a supposed-democratic accessibility to the information, on the other hand it has produced an increased mass of apathetic spectators. Reflecting on this issue, the 'Warholian' concept of the massification of everyday death and tragedies expressed by his *Death and Disaster* series, comes unavoidably to mind. Indeed, just as Warhol claimed that "*When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect*"<sup>6</sup>. Over fifty years on from Warhol's reflection, the naturalization of an aesthetics of violence for the mass has been undoubtedly enhanced through an onslaught of images, exasperated by the transition to the digital age<sup>7</sup>.

In this context sensitive subjects; the fragile, the victims - have become anonymous subjects of aesthetic contemplation: depersonalized and dehumanized. It is just at this point that the indifferent mass, self-contained in their own narcissism, become easy targets to manipulate, demonstrating to some degree an exasperated democracy of images which could result in a visual dictatorship. Furthermore, there emerges a reflection about the role of contemporary art, which acquires a fundamental role in terms of disrupting and resisting this process of mechanical reiteration. Art represents a courageous act of rebellion to any form of repressive power, and it cannot be separated from its social and political engagement. As a form of expression, it carries the duty to stimulate reflections and generate discussions, to the extent of helping us as a society,

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<sup>5</sup> The comment of President Trump came after being presented with a proposal to restore protections for immigrants from those countries as part of a bipartisan immigration deal. As reported by the *Washington Post*, "*in November [2017], the Trump administration rescinded deportation protection granted to nearly 60,000 Haitians after the 2010 earthquake and told them to return home by July 2019.*" Dawsey, J. (2018). Trump derides protections for immigrants from 'shithole' countries. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.225864944908](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.225864944908)

<sup>6</sup> *Orange Disaster #5*. (2018). *Guggenheim*. Retrieved 1 March 2018, from <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/4176>

<sup>7</sup> The diplopic disturb is the optical phenomena of the double-vision, the perception of two images for the same object. Cheroux borrowed the term *diplopia* from the ophthalmic jargon to define the tendency to an obsessive repetition of same typology of pictures released by media and press, which emerged particularly after the 9/11 attack. Cheroux, C. (2010). *Diplopia. L'immagine fotografica nell'era dei media globalizzati: saggio sull'11 settembre 2001* (Diplopia. The photographic image in the age of globalized media: essay on September the 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001). Turin: Einaudi.

as an international community, to transgress the current social order which privileges the “I” over the “us”, the “few” over the “many”; annihilating what Marx would have described as our “species being” leaving us in the vacuity and shackles of capitalism imposed by the establishment the world over.

Considering the possibilities of aesthetic subversion and satirical protest offered by the carnivalesque, *Dictator(ship)* interrogates how the power of art generates discussion and engagement on the issues of the current social and political landscape. Performing on a boat along the Regent’s canal in London, the collective of artists present a paradoxical situation portraying five defeated and humiliated dictators fleeing from their imaginary countries as if they were refugees. The costumes used for the masquerade have been designed combining research on the aesthetics of dictatorship mixed with the political history of Haiti, and the artist’s personal sensitivity. The outcome has been a set of hybrid and fanciful outfits in which it is possible to recognize the colours of the Haitian flag in brilliant hues and shades, and the rainbow of peace and LGBTQ rights glittering proud and bright on a military uniform. The representation of capitalist power is juxtaposed with the ceasaristic opulence of tyranny and the impudent luxury of those who have always lived exploiting the population. A various range of props and accessories, each one relating to a specific meaning, enriches the visualization of this improbable *Dictator(ship)*<sup>8</sup>.

The reasons which led to the choice of the performative medium stands in the expressive and communicative potential offered by its theatricality. Indeed, more than the traditional visive support, performative art allows artists to communicate with the audience (intentionally and unintentionally), triggering reactions and opening new platforms for contemplation and debate. One of the most interesting characteristics of performative art, and especially live art, stands just in its capacity of interaction with the audience. Hence, a form of art that can be declined to a peculiar social and political propensity, and which carries that *evolutionary-revolutionary* power, so defined by Joseph Beuys:

*“Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline (...)”<sup>9</sup>*

With the primary aim of attempting to elicit an exchange between artists and audience, the performance *Dictator(ship)* has been set up in an open and public space offered by Regent’s Canal. While cruising on their boat, the artists enact a series of designed scenes which recall multiple references. Some of the scenes have been extrapolated from their original context and reinterpreted with a modern twist. So, while the *Ship of Fools* opened the journey of the refugee-dictators, a sense of desperation and abandonment which comes to the fore in the inexorability of death, recalls Géricault’s representation of the *Raft of Medusa*.

The various landscapes offered by the canal have been particularly inspiring for the artists in terms of arranging and designing each scene. In front of a villa with a majestic neo-classic style

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<sup>8</sup> Numerous for instance the references to Plato’s *Ship of Fools*: a helm without any function, a jester hat symbol of the madness of our times, a pair of donkey ears as allegory of ignorance, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Beuys, J. (1973). *I am searching for field character*. Translate in: Tisdall, C., *Art into society, society into art*. London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1974. p. 48.

facade along the banks of the canal, the journey comes to a standstill. Here, one of the artists gets off from the boat and starts miming a reinterpretation of Haiti's Declaration of Independence, while the original text is played through the loudspeaker of the voice of the Trinidadian poet and musician, Muhammad Muwakil. This act has an impressive impact and generates a powerful counter-circuit: a fallen dictator has been forced to read one of the most important declarations of independence in history, albeit in its newly composed guise. Beyond the exile, the dictator suffers a further humiliation: having to recount the spirit of resistance, which has triumphed over repression.

With the same aim of subversion, the *Last Supper* of the Christian tradition becomes an occasion to reflect on the precariousness of life and the unpredictability of the future which relates to everyone regardless of nationality, culture or class. A symbolic picnic enacted on the side banks of the canal symbolizes that even the most powerful dictator can suddenly fall from grace, being subjected to the mercy of fate, such as the most anonymous refugee. Therefore one might pose the question: what do we really know about the refugees portrayed and caricatured each and every day by the media - mostly as hopeless faceless nobodies worthy only of pity or fear? The answer: barely nothing. However, society has become immune to suffering and pain, instilling apathy in us. Reinterpreting one of the most famous religious scenes represented in art history, this rearranged *Last Supper* is a strong invitation to reflect on the vulnerability of our human existence.

The allegory of the boat itself constitutes a powerful reference in *Dictator(ship)*. Represented within the most ancient cultures of humankind, the boat carries lots of different meanings usually tied primarily to spiritual, social and metaphoric assumptions. In classical European culture, the image was adopted by the Greek philosopher Plato as an allegory to demonstrate the fallibility of democracy, envisaging its almost inevitable collapse, since it offers freedom but neglects the demands of proper governance. In his sixth book of *Republic*<sup>10</sup>, he describes an imaginary '*Ship of Fools*' to claim that in a system where political power ('kratos') is left in the hands of the people ('demos') who do not have enough expertise, discipline and order, it would ultimately go awry and overboard leaving only ignorance and irrationality. Democracy would be left on its knees, rudderless, plankton-like, drifting rather than navigating - declining into tyranny and a total lack of freedom.

Plato's metaphor still sounds incredibly timely within the current socio-political climate in which populist and nationalist forces are furthering the cause for greater consensus and legitimization. In the face of an intellectual and political class which has progressively become ever more bourgeois, elitist and incapable of communicating with the populace, the global public opinion has shifted towards the empty promise of a phoney system represented by those politicians who made neo-liberalism and hyper-individualism their flags. Society is spiralling towards a deepening crisis of truth - what is real and "fake" natural bedfellows, and the greatest manifestation of this trend is right under our eyes, embodied by events like the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., Brexit in Europe and, most recently, Putin's reelection in Russia.

Another interesting connection with the boat image comes from Haitian mythology. A boat named *Imamou* is associated with the ancestor God *Met Agwe Tawoyo*, considered the mysterious guardian and sovereign of the sea-world. According to the Haitian interpretation,

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<sup>10</sup> Jowett, B. & Anderson, A. (2001). *Plato's Republic* (Theater of the mind; 10). Mills, Mass.: Agora.

Agwe journeyed from Africa to St. Dominique with the transatlantic slave trade and for this reason, he occupies a fundamental place in every peristyle in Haiti:

*“Many of our ancestors were given to his kingdom during the transatlantic trips as so many slaves did not survive the middle passage.”*<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the spiritual concept linked to the God Agwe, this allegory represents an important visual and conceptual reference in *Dictator(ship)*. The boat that centuries ago embodied the symbol of white supremacy through the slave-trade, continues to represent today the western colonialist and dictatorial power, even though under a rather different guise. The people who today are forced to move from their homelands in which they struggle with extreme conditions of poverty, famine, conflicts and atrocities, continue to be victims of a still extremely unequal distribution of power. What has changed is just the fact that centuries ago Europeans went to Africa to kidnap and trade slaves, while today the western powers continue to exploit resources and increase its revenue or profit. The indigenous population continue to suffer the predominance of the whites who imposed a condition of controlled underdevelopment and collaboration with locally corrupted politicians to be able to pursue and maximise their interests. The same thing that continues to happen in the countries of the Caribbean and Latin America as well. Is this not a subtle and brutal form of dictatorship?

The situation has now been paradoxically reversed. While there are no more people deported on mass from their homelands, there are people who choose to flee to those very countries responsible for their plight. Appropriating this paradox, *Dictator(ship)* applies to it a further parameter of subversion: imagining a situation in which the oppressors have been forced to become refugees, replacing the civilians. Incorporating the modern image of the boat representative of refugees, *Dictator(ship)* becomes the locus of subversion and transgression; a *fluid* and ever-changing anarchic platform of ridicule, dissent and change. Now the dictators are in the reverse situation having switched roles, experiencing at first hand the consequences of their very own tyranny. What remains of the *Dictator(ship)* are the pieces of flotsam washed ashore, the detritus of the journey: broken pieces of wood, the helm and abandoned costumes. We are faced contemplating the souvenirs and remnants of their fall, the faint traces of lives once lived. Empty and lifeless totems of power, like Shelley’s once-great pharaoh, *Ozymandias* “*nothing besides remains*”<sup>12</sup>.

The main goal of *Dictator(ship)* is to explore the potential of art by raising questions and generating grounds for acknowledgement and discussion. The project does not look to provide answers, rather it wants to reach out to the audience; stimulating empathy and leaving the space for individual contemplation and interpretation. The core reflection which guides the development of *Dictator(ship)* comes from the artists’ self-interrogation on the agency of contemporary art in dealing with the issues of the current social and political landscape. Within a society which appears day by day more disaggregated, atomised and intolerant, does art have the power to address the recovery of a critical way of thinking? Could art represent a starting point for social and political change? Should art be at the service of the global community? The answer, I

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<sup>11</sup> *Met Agwe and La Sirene*. (2018). *Kiwi Mojo*. Retrieved 8 March 2018, from <https://kiwimojo.com/home/haitian-vodou/the-lwa/the-rada-lwa/met-agwe-and-la-sirene/>

<sup>12</sup> *RPO -- Percy Bysshe Shelley: Ozymandias*. (2005). *Web.archive.org*. Retrieved 17 March 2018, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20061010122400/http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/1904.html>

feel, is yes. Without a social and political function, without a study or a deep introverted or extroverted reflection at the basis of its practice, art would not deserve its name. Such lack of a vision in the world would reduce art to just another useless aesthetic exercise, another meaningless commodity, only worthy of glamorous fairs and glitzy parties frequented by oligarchs, dodgy Sheikhs and the likes of Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, or even simply become a luxurious decorative furnishing - and that is ultimately an end in itself: the arse end of art, or to use Trump's words: the shit-hole of art.

Within these dissonant times of fear, insecurity and injustice, art can represent the beacon of light which would contribute to re-humanize the masses, smothering the alienation and stasis of modern humankind. Its disruptive potential is its essence. Is it not the case that throughout history art has been subjected to countless censorships, destructions, and attacks? At the same time, is it not the case that when a repressive power establishes its supremacy, its first target is the annihilation of the freedom of expression through art and the control of culture? The greatest battles won by Fascism and Nazism, for instance, have been played out on the cultural field since every kind of regime is in the first instance an ideological and cultural one. As a simple act of expression, art is inherently in and of itself a powerful political act, whose capacity of critique and denunciation has always been seen as a dangerous threat to be silenced.

*"Art is the only power to free humankind from all repression"<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Beuys, J. (1974). Public Dialogue. *Avalanche Newspaper*, pp. 5-7. Retrieved from [http://www.eai.org/user\\_files/supporting\\_documents/beuys\\_dialogue.pdf](http://www.eai.org/user_files/supporting_documents/beuys_dialogue.pdf)

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