

Prototypes For An Upcoming Disaster:

An Interview With Adela Goldbard

by Saúl Hernández-Vargas

Over the past few years, Adela Goldbard has created a newspaper archive of fires and explosions in Mexico. Tragically random, this archive originates in the suspicious—and always political—motivations for the “events” that have been recorded. According to the Mexican artist, these events and the “fragility manifested in the structures” are “a reflection of a fragile and decaying political system.” Alien to the space where they are located, the photographed trucks seem to be delicate paper structures, weightless, constructed with neither plates nor screws. Seemingly made of cardboard rather than concrete, it is easy to imagine the buildings that appear in these articles being consumed and becoming heaps of ash and handfuls of dust.

But while it is true that the origin of the archive—and, therefore, some of Goldbard’s references—lies in the fragility of the structures, her research is much broader; it is related to the “narratives” about the “events.” As the Aymara sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui says, language has “become a fictional record, consisting largely of euphemisms that conceal reality, rather than naming it.” Thus, a person who is “murdered” is instead said to have “disappeared”; and “crimes of the state” are understood as “accidents.” In these records, the list of words that have been subverted, and used arbitrarily, is broad: it includes the “anarchists” in protests repressed by the police; the “guerrillas” who defend their lives and demand their territory and natural resources; and the “masked men” in the mountains of southeastern Mexico, who have maintained a lively conversation about dignity and autonomy. In a way, Adela’s work, as in the three pieces currently being shown at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), is intended to reject those in power who demand that we explain the world and, as Amador Fernández Savater says, “discredit them,” and destroy what we have taken for granted, despite the fact that it is always suspicious. Goldbard states that the media’s “manipulation” is “a form of violence” characterized by irreproachable images and words scattered in rubble, devoid of

meaning and any historical or political depth. And so, in order to enliven them, rather than choosing a solemn approach, she has chosen a festive and playful one.

A few days after the opening of *No Longer Extant*, I spoke with Adela Goldbard about the pieces in this show, as well as her work process and references. Here are her responses.

Could you tell me about your work process in terms of both the newspaper articles and references you use, as well as your relationship with artisans?

Over the last few years, I have collected newspaper articles about accidents, attacks, and protests where explosions and fires are political strategies or a result of the events that took place. The first thing that struck me in these articles was the fragility manifested in the structures that appeared in the photographs: planes that seem to be made of paper, facades—and even entire streets—where the buildings seem to be cardboard rather than concrete. These events are a reflection of a fragile and decaying political system, and the narratives around them are a mirror of the media’s manipulation. The ideological labels used—often interchangeably—by the media are a clear example: anarchists, terrorists, guerrillas, and masked men are some of the words that constantly appear in newspapers and digital media to talk about the same event. The perception of good and evil has been obscured; narco-violence has been equated with the actions of self-defense groups; [most of] the media are aligned with the government and classify the events however is most convenient for them: accident, attack, terrorist act, and never repression or crime of the state. [...] the manipulation of information is a form of violence.

The work I do with the artisans is collaborative: I arrive with an idea and propose a design based on pictures I get from newspapers, as well as architectural drawings and plans that I find in databases or make in collaboration with architects. We talk about different alternatives and possibilities, and modify the design together, adapting it to the specific work processes. With this new sketch, the master artisans and their team begin to build the structures. If necessary, the sketch also changes over the course of the construction process. We work closely throughout the entire process and I try to document it completely because I think it’s important to create an archive about the country’s traditional artisanal practices.

The pyrotechnic artisans and masters have also become guides to the countryside, helping me scout or find suitable settings for the photos and videos. During these trips and the days spent in the workshops, I have been able to learn about the materials and work processes, their problems and politics, as well as their traditions and the region where they live: what their relationship is like with the municipal and state authorities (from whom they request permits and support); what their relationship is like with the army, which issues permits for the production and use of gunpowder; what it means for them to work in a highly dangerous profession; what their political preferences are, and those of most of the region's inhabitants; how they have formed self-defense groups in these municipalities due to the violence in recent years; and how Central American migrants arriving on The Beast [the freight train commonly used to enter the country] have integrated into their communities. To conclude the project, I am planning to publish a book and release an audiovisual work that shows the processes and also talks about the problems they face.

In your work, from the piece you made in Zacatecas to the one that is actually being shown at UCSD, there is a recurrence of certain materials: wood, cardboard and reed. Can you tell me a bit about these, and how they have changed over time?

In my first projects, I was interested in exploring the relationship between sculpture and photography by constructing ephemeral structures that were able to endure (and transform) through photography. For example, I built sculptures and structures with fragile materials—like mirrors and cardboard—and objects that were usually used for different reasons, like soap, balloons and scrap metal. These flimsy sculptures became stable through the photographic medium, and were able to abandon their three-dimensional condition.

Since the beginning of my career, I have been fascinated with constructing structures in an artisanal way, developing manual methods to assemble each structure, often in collaboration with designers, architects and artisans. My work methodology changes with each project according to the nature and scale of the structures, and the techniques and materials used. Generally, the “testing period” is pretty long; in this period, I focus on experimenting with different construction or assembly methods until I figure out the right methodology for each work. This

process was especially important in the ephemeral sculpture/public action I did in Zacatecas, where the designer Roberto Romo was a key element. For this work, it was necessary to collect hundreds of reusable cardboard boxes, which were used to reconstruct five pillars from the Hall of Columns at the La Quemada archaeological site, in a critical exercise about conservation and official narratives. The ephemeral nature of the cardboard contrasts with the permanent nature of the original stone columns, and their use as a building material was a comment about conservation as a strategy of power.

Two years ago, I began to work with artisans from the municipalities of Melchor Ocampo and Tultepec in the State of Mexico, with whom I share a love for building ephemeral structures. In my project *Fantasy Island*, I worked with Carmelo Pallares, a master piñata maker in the municipality of Melchor Ocampo. For my most recent video piece, I worked with Osvaldo Hurtado and the Sánchez Contreras family, pyrotechnic artisans and masters from the municipality of Tultepec. Using ephemeral and reusable materials is very important in their work and in some cases is a reflect of their geographic location: reeds that, at least until recently, grew in the surrounding area, and bags of nixtamalized flour from local tortilla shops. However, the material that first caught my attention was newspapers, because it seemed apt to work with the same material that started my research.

In videos like *Lobo*, there are references to the Burning of Judas, bulls, pyrotechnic castles, and perhaps because or despite this, the idea of festivity. Could you tell me a little about the idea of the Burning of Judas? Are you interested in the idea of festivity in your work?

The allegorical reconstruction of the Burning of Judas is a critical exercise disguised as a celebration. In reenacting this tradition, reconstruction and destruction are used as strategies for the restitution of memory. The reed and cardboard structures remember and purge evil in a public and communal way: the Judases are financed by the community and destroyed in a public ceremony that seeks a collective catharsis. One month before Easter, just as one month before the day of San Juan de Dios, the patron saint of pyrotechnics, everyone in Tultepec focuses exclusively on preparing for the celebration. Once they are finished, the effigies are displayed in the plaza for several days so everyone can appreciate them: *alebrijes* [Oaxacan folk art

creatures], Disney characters, politicians; they have all taken on the role that was previously held by only the horned demon we all recognize. The shift from religion to politics is evident (this is why Judases are burned at other times than Easter). On the day of the San Juan de Dios festival, the *toritos* [a small representation of a bull, made of paper and fireworks] “walk” through the streets in a procession, alcohol starts flowing early (in the afternoon people will be sleeping it off inside the *toritos*). Fried food and giant micheladas are sold in the backyards and garages of houses near the plaza...and as it begins to get dark, there is snoring, shouting, running from one side of the crowded streets to the other. The *toritos* are carried on the backs of one or twenty people, and kneel in front of the church, giving thanks to San Juan de Dios for one more year of life before being “sacrificed,” before making those brave enough to approach them run away, pursued by the flaming *toritos*. The Judases, however, are hung one by one in front of the “band shell” in the plaza. They are pulled up on a rope before being detonated in front of hundreds of people who participate in this collective action of allegorical purging. Evil is remembered and forgotten in a single act; it is a metaphorical approach to reality through celebration, through construction and violent destruction.

In my work, I’m interested in using the meanings and aesthetics of these traditions in order to—just like what happens during them—remember and expose through reconstruction and destruction, by staging a scene. I’m interested in how the community expresses their political beliefs and their anger through festivity. Reconstructing to remember; destroying to not forget, even though it appears to be just a celebration.

In some of the pieces related to the Burning of Judas, I find a lot of irony and humor as a critical element.

Most of my recent projects are, in part, a political parody; that is why irony and humor are incredibly important elements. I think that is another affinity between my work and traditional festivals like the Burning of Judas. Humor is a central element of our culture and has been a very important communication strategy in the history of Mexico, in the political caricatures that originated in the second half of the nineteenth century and the *carpas* [touring theatre performances, much like vaudeville] in the 1920s and 1930s. The introduction of humor and

parody in journalism serves a dual media strategy: expand the scope of criticism within the population and avoid censorship.

Could you tell us a bit about the “sculpture” you are showing at the UCSD? It strikes me that your structures now seem much more fragile and delicate than before.

Architectural Prototype for an Upcoming Disaster is a critical exercise about housing policies in Mexico. It is also a reflection on materials, labor and housing along the northern border.

In collaboration with brick makers, masons, builders and architects from Cerro Azul, a small community located on the outskirts of Tecate, Baja California, we designed and built an architectural prototype of a brick and cement house, using exactly the same materials as a full scale house (which makes it different than an architectural model). We mimicked the self-construction process that takes place particularly in low-income neighborhoods (a phenomenon of which Cerro Azul is a clear example). The starting point for the construction of this architectural prototype was a sparse plan generated from the minimum dimensions for housing according to the official regulations and provisions from the Baja California Infonavit [the Mexican federal institute for worker’s housing]. The one-bedroom, single floor house was gradually transformed and grew, in an ironic exercise of the “right to dignified and decent housing” (Housing Law, dixit) until it becomes a three-bedroom house with two floors, a terrace and two bathrooms.

The scale of the house was reduced according to a 1 foot=1 meter guideline, forming an exercise in border shrinkage. The prototype was constructed in Cerro Azul and then imported from Tecate, Baja California, to the other Tecate, in the North American state of California. It was transported on a platform (just like old wooden houses were transported across the border, but in reverse). These are houses discarded by their US owners that have become part of a landscape where wooden structures are rare and where the recycling of North American construction products is extremely common. Importing the prototype meant importing (in reverse) foreign materials and work methods across the border.

It was necessary to make 5000 bricks at scale to build the prototype. These bricks, like half of the bricks in Mexico, were produced by traditional processes. In Cerro Azul, a brickmaking community outside Tecate, the process begins with the extraction of earth and clay from the same mountain where the workshops are located. The exploitation that has taken place for over 25 years in the region is obvious. The workshops are constantly moving further up the mountain and away from the town center, seeking new clay “mines.” There are about 30 workshops that are dedicated to making handmade bricks and pots in Cerro Azul. But many of Cerro Azul’s inhabitants, especially the young people, have decided not to continue the family trade and instead have found jobs in the maquiladoras around Tijuana; the salaries are better there, and they have social security and benefits. Some have also decided to work “on the other side.” In Baja California, the minimum wage of a bricklayer is 75 pesos per day; in California, it’s 8 dollars per day.

The work’s title refers to another problem. In this country, many homes are left unfinished for economic reasons (from a lack of money to complete them and inhabit them, to embezzlement of their owners because of alleged fraud orchestrated by social housing producers, often with the consent of the government) or social reasons (insecurity and unemployment). These unfinished homes become perfect settings for illegal activities such as safe houses, drug dens, clandestine laboratories, body dumps, etc. The concept of dignified and decent housing seems to be an act of cynicism considering that most of the obstacles to building this kind of housing are come from the systematic violence that is a result of the ineptitude and corruption of the governments themselves.

Link to original text: <http://www.tierraadentro.cultura.gob.mx/prototipos-para-un-desastre-inminente-entrevista-a-adela-goldbard/>