

# ARTIVISM

Daniela Poch & Arcadi Poch

**CARPET  
BOMBING  
CULTURE**

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**PEJAC**  
**HEAVY SEA, 2016**

Europe is lost, America lost, London lost  
Still we are clamouring victory  
All that is meaningless rules  
We have learned nothing from history  
The people are dead in their lifetimes  
Dazed in the shine of the streets  
But look how the traffic's still moving  
System's too slick to stop working  
Business is good  
And there's bands every night in the pubs  
And there's two for one drinks in the clubs

Europe is Lost, written by Kate Tempest  
Courtesy of Domino Publishing Company Limited

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I'M NOT  
A REAL  
ARTIST

I'M NOT A REAL ARTIST  
Paris, France, 2014  
© SpY

# PRANKTIVIZM, SONOFABITCHIZM, FUCKTIVIZM, WHATEVERIZM

Someday, they'll understand things.  
Maybe, Wes said. But it won't matter then.  
Raymond Carver, *Chef's House*

This book has been a house to us. We've lived in it. At times it's felt a bit like a train-ride in a first-class carriage. In his *On the Natural History of Destruction* Sebald wrote that it was easy to spot a German on a train after World War II: they were the ones not looking out of the window. It may be just an isolated image, but it really helps to define precisely what we've been trying to do here: never stop looking out of the window. House, window, first-class carriage or whatever, this book is a compilation of thoughts and images that represent what a handful of people do when they aren't at home. The handful are individuals who have found their own way of expressing their protest. Aware as we are of the kicking we may get for playing with labels, we've chosen to call these ways 'artivism' – a fairly contemporary term, but a very ancient one too when we think of the artistic or creative components inherent in any communicative exercise since the dawn of civilisation.

Right, so the book's apparently about artivism, but no matter how far we stick our collective necks out of the window to study it, we still haven't the faintest idea what it is. And we aren't ashamed to admit it: confusion is the best seat on the train. This book is an attempt to approach some kind of a definition. Does it really matter if our knowledge of the subject is still rather blurry? In the early stages it felt like we were on pretty shaky ground, we have to admit. But since completing the journey, we've learnt that sometimes seeing something out of focus is the best way

to grasp things that weren't clear in the first place, and perhaps were never meant to be. Still, we should value our determination to comprehend this vast ocean of creative struggle. That's why you won't find any academicisms or taxonomies here: our selection of artists comes with no guarantees; there are no assurances that everything in this book is artivism per se. We prefer to leave that judgement to the reader, so she or he takes us not as scammers but as mere organizers of material that's up for discussion.

What we can say is that this book is about people who have placed their trust in protest as a form of happening. This is a book about things that happen. Everything you see here is a graphic record of messages delivered in full creative awareness with the aim of catalysing change sometime somewhere. As the Spanish anthropologist Manuel Delgado Ruiz has asked, is there a form of protest that wouldn't like to effect change right here and now?

We showcase examples here that illustrate a form of struggle but also demonstrate many further truths and provide us with lessons to make our window a crossable threshold – an unlocked, open door. No conditions. (When you get to the section on Jeff Stark, you'll see what we're talking about.)

How many of those who've collaborated with us on this project had never asked themselves whether they're artivists or not? It's

like when you used to ring someone up on one of those old phones that didn't identify the caller: when they picked up, you had to say 'It's me.' We couldn't say for certain, but we'd bet that almost all of those who agreed to appear here would pick up that old phone and answer with a simple, honest 'It's me.' And we'd reply 'You, who? The activist?' And they'd either hang up or say, as SpY did, 'I'm not a real artist.' Or, as Artaud might have done: 'Damn anyone who says what I do is art.' But none of the artists here did hang up. They answered the call because they liked the idea.

To draw a few conclusions, we've identified a series of common denominators or recurring traits in the different actions or individuals listed here as 'activist' or 'potentially activist'. They light the blue touch-paper for a possible science of activism. One of these is the artists' relationship with the street, or with that will-o-the-wisp 'public space'. The struggle is being fought on the streets, so most activist actions are too. The street is the backdrop against which activists or those committed to the social struggle – an aesthetic and creative one in this case – expose the mechanisms of domination we're subject to. This exposure rips open the system and by ripping open the system it makes the social happening possible.

One of the main criticisms of the common-or-garden activism is the issue of signatures. Signed activism is one of those painful paradoxes for some thinkers. They feel that if you put the author before the protest, their ego appears more important than the authenticity of the social commitment. What interests are disguised by a signature in an action that's supposed to be serving a social, humanitarian, political or environmental cause? This is the central precept of these critics' internal dialogue. We believe that

activism is born precisely with the appearance of an author who creates an artifice which inevitably brings about a separation from run-of-the-mill activism. One of the leading exponents of activism and the founder of the Enmedio collective, Leónidas Martín, sees it as a very different process from classic militant activism on account of one key element: the time factor. He claims that, the moment we incorporate fiction, the action acquires complexity in both time and interpretation: artistic thought applied to social criticism sets up a new parallel reality that shuttles back and forth between truth and illusion.

Nowadays this kind of activism usually involves sharp-edged actions with a specific focus, whereas the typical activism often ends up fossilized in eternal causes. The effort and perseverance involved are greater, but the results aren't always directly proportional. In the activist's world a creative response to a conflict must strike a balance between the rules and the basic pillars on which it is built. On the one hand art, on the other activism. The activist should be aware of the 'special' limitations and possibilities of her or his role, which is precisely to amplify the message and to repose the conflict within a political, social and/or media agenda. But any hope of solving the problem directly has gone down the tubes.

As Oscar Wilde once said, 'Disobedience, in the eyes of any one who has read history, is man's original virtue.' So let's be honest: we're all born into disobedience. The breach arises from competition between different human wills: some devote their lives to training the will just like another muscle; others lose it completely. Being a 'professional' rebel isn't easy in times like these. Many of our activists confront extremely serious issues,

conflicts of great social and political import that threaten the human condition itself. But what the rest of us onlookers have to do is to tap into the energy, creativity, enthusiasm and spirit behind these proposals for creative struggle. The great clown Leo Bassi once said that the biggest act of disobedience that exists in these turbulent times is enthusiasm.

Staying with the 'art' element in our frankenword, there's a paradox that envelops the world of the activist: namely that adding or subordinating the category of art to that of typical activism provides a valuable trump-card when activists come to defend themselves against the authorities. When you defend that what you're doing is an art form or a cultural contribution to the city, it's accepted without a fuss. When Manuel Delgado Ruiz argued in court that he'd set fire to a container to create an art work, the case was shelved. When art is put into the equation the authorities and political bigwigs no longer feel threatened. The label of 'art' provides clever camouflage for the fierce will to struggle.

Another of those common denominators we mentioned earlier is independent, creative funding. The activist isn't deterred by his or her lack of financial resources. They create and then see how to get by, because what they're doing primarily is struggling. And you can't put a price on struggle. The law of activist natural selection states that whoever develops the ingenuity to make the biggest impact at the lowest cost survives. That is pure creativity. But there's another big issue: should the activist have to act independently of markets? And if activism isn't independent, does it stop being activism? The answers to these questions are for each of us to decide.

The evidence may offend, but there's no activism without protest, dissent, pain or indignation. All the activists featured here have chosen emotional struggle as a way of life. They're all sensitive souls. In our opinion there's nothing more dangerous or necessary today than an activist, or whatever we decide to call them. They're people who throw parties in unemployment offices, or dress up as reverends and wander the streets with a choir preaching to the world's consumers. They steal contaminated metal from Chernobyl, send fake weapons to the United States in containers or set up percussion bands outside the G20. They impersonate businessmen to put out false media messages, or paint giant penises on drawbridges opposite KGB headquarters (you can picture the scene every time the bridge is raised to let a boat through). Or they don wrestler-cum-superhero suits and go knocking on the door of the US president's office. So ultimately this is a book about nutters who come up with wonderful ideas.

This isn't a book of tributes, but we do want it to stand as a recognition of all activists everywhere, starting with those who agreed to appear, but including all those we haven't been able to feature but who are also putting out great work.

And you the readers, we invite you to look out of this first-class carriage window and get out of the door as soon as you've turned the last page. It's a real rush.

Long live the creative revolution!

# HUMANIZING THE CITY: THE POETICS OF CRITICAL THINKING

JORGE RODRÍGUEZ-GERADA

[www.gerada-studio.com](http://www.gerada-studio.com)

We couldn't discuss activism without considering the work of Jorge Rodríguez-Gerada. While he defines himself as a plain artist, he doesn't obviously fit the bill when it comes to the vast bulk of artistic-activist development. To understand his work in all its simplicity and complexity, we need to journey back to his origins, to his birth in the Cuban city of Santa Clara in 1967, and even further back to his Lebanese and Galician lineage. He spent only a brief spell in Cuba before moving to the US state of New Jersey, where he grew up, and later to the metropolis of New York City, where he trained as a professional artist. A Cuban-New Yorker of European-Arabic descent who works as a street artist can never escape the search for truth in the central theme of his work: identity. His sense of identity has brought him mentions in books of the calibre of Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. Even in his earliest meanderings he established an artistic-æsthetic approach based on a critique of large corporations, altering their outdoor advertising and using their own semiotics to reverse, or rather decipher, the messages lurking behind the products (a bit like the disguised alien overlords manipulating the human race through the mass media in John Carpenter's *They Live*). He and other urban agitators were partially responsible then for the birth of a new movement in 1980s NYC known as 'culture jamming'. These self-styled 'culture jammers' rebelled against mass consumption using the codes of advertising and promoted a counter-culture that collapsed when brands discovered that such interventions increased their visibility and started hiring culture jammers for their outdoor ad campaigns.





CULTURE JAMMING  
New York, USA, 1990  
© Jorge Rodríguez-Gerada

## REMEMBER

Barcelona, Spain, 2016  
© Jorge Rodríguez-Gerada



This was when Rodríguez-Gerada moved to Barcelona to embark on a new artistic direction, reflecting on the social role of the distinctive identities of local citizens and on their sense of belonging to the vital landscapes that form an integral part of those identities. The Identities series, as he dubbed it, consisted in magnifying ordinary citizens in their immediate surroundings into large-scale, precisely-drawn charcoal portraits of anonymous faces, the ephemeral nature of such works standing as a metaphor for the identities of these individuals. This new direction grew out of an attempt to preserve the critical spirit he'd inherited from his New York days and out of the methodology rather than the codes of advertising. By magnifying these anonymous citizens, the artist aims to make the public space a sort of arena where large-scale images selling us products and political ideas compete with others 'selling' an unknown identity which, when magnified, takes on a conceptual dimension, while essentially remaining a simple portrait.



His renowned Identities have appeared in countless cities across the world. Taken together they form a giant catalogue of faces that both parodies and subverts product catalogues. This is where the true essence of his work lies. Regardless of whether or not we can consider him an activist, his work has a social charge as poetic as it is overpowering. It speaks to us of the realm of advertising and compulsive consumption, and consequently of the classic topic of the prohibition of street art. This is art that produces free-thinkers opposed to the kind of advertising and politics that indoctrinate new consumers and create social automata. We might even call it 'poetic activism'. Is a mural with no explicit message capable of getting society thinking simply by prompting questions about the appearance of an unknown face?

As a critical artist his work is based on the exploration of the visual impact produced by the society of the spectacle, which is what has led him to use the same codes as the concept of spectacle.

#### DAVID

Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2015  
© Ana Álvarez-Errecalde



This is the sole reason why his works are always conceived on a spectacular scale, with land art images that can cover anything up to four hectares, and require hundreds of tons of material and large teams, often made up of volunteers. Such thinking is along the classic lines of 'bigger is better': it creates more noise for the social cause that underlies the image; a conscientious, large-scale exercise in raising awareness about issues that need to be tackled due to their negative impact on particular social groups.

His first work on this colossal scale was done in 2008, when Obama first stood for president of the United States. At the time the whole world was in need of a hero, so Rodríguez-Gerada magnified his face in a gigantic one-hectare portrait, using more than 600 tonnes of sand and gravel. With the passing of time this grand iconic statement would be distorted and erased by the wind, just as the artist always knew it would.

#### EXPECTATION

Barcelona, Spain, 2008  
© Jorge Rodríguez-Gerada



# FLOATING UTOPIAS: LUNACY SUBVERTING REALITY ON A GRAND SCALE

SWOON

[www.swoonstudio.org](http://www.swoonstudio.org)

'I look at the word SWOON as a body of work, not as my name. SWOON is not me. I'm not SWOON. SWOON is like a way of thinking. It's a body of work. It's a series of interrelating thoughts,' says Caledonia, the woman behind the tag. When you first start looking into SWOON's work, you begin to glimpse her mental processes: what leads her from one project to the next, what makes her tick, her wildness, her extremism, her concern for the local, how she takes in and takes on the community issues that motivate her...

Swoon's interventions are profoundly artistic: some in the form of site-specific installations; others of projects designed for a community. Examples of her works can be found in Bethlehem, Ciudad Juárez, São Paulo, Kenya... Sylvia Elena, Swoon's project in Ciudad Juárez, is a clear example of how to use urban art to raise awareness of a horrifying problem: the disappearance of thousands of young girls, later found dead in the desert, in alleged drug-related incidents. Swoon got herself involved in the association Nuestras Hijas Regresan A Casa [Our Daughters Come Home]. Through them she made contact with Ramona, a woman whose young daughter - Sylvia Elena - had been murdered. Swoon staged an installation at the Yerbabuena Gallery in San Francisco. It consisted of a large-scale portrait of Sylvia Elena and a set of headphones over which people could listen to Ramona's account of events.



SWIMMING CITIES, WITH DEITCH PROJECTS.

The Hudson River, New York (USA), 2008

© Tod Seelie

Swoon's most memorable initiative to date is Miss Rockaway Armada. This was an art collective that built a fleet of rafts out of recycled materials to ply the Mississippi River from Minneapolis to New Orleans. Along its way the Armada disembarked in towns to provide non-stop art and workshops where people could meet, share their knowledge and experience and reinvent myths (while performing daily manœuvres and repairing any damage).

They needed so much material to build the fleet that they asked anyone they could find to give them anything they had left over. A lot of people gave them stuff in the hope that this far-out idea would be made reality. Which it was. And this is vital when we describe Miss Rockaway Armada as an act of activism,

because the project somehow became a demonstration of how to fare when faced with the impossible. A real pukka floating utopia. 'You've made me regain my faith in humanity,' read one of the many comments they were paid on their journey. There's a keynote of subversion in all this madness, and it lies precisely in making the madness happen. We like set out to make the wildest dreams we had when we were little come true. And everybody's really getting off on the idea of this new world of possibility. A girl who watched them all day when they were in her town said to them just before they left, 'You're the one perfect thing I've seen in my life and now you have to leave.' Miss Rockaway Armada is a project that changes folk: not just those who've lived it on the inside but those who've lived it on the outside too.

**SWIMMING CITIES, WITH DEITCH PROJECTS.**

The Hudson River, New York (USA), 2008  
© Tod Seelig



Later came other projects: Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea down the Hudson River in New York State and Swimming Cities of Serenissima on the Adriatic in Venice. This time around there were some salient differences: the people in Mississippi were agog; in New York they called the police. Another difference was that this second floating project had been commissioned by a gallery, so SWOON had an artistic storyline to follow and a collective working to make it happen. There was a budget, a script... The sense of belonging had lessened, although there were still dollops of that unplanned beauty you encounter when you work collectively towards building the real article: a floating utopian community.

As an artist SWOON is deeply involved in the urban space, social conflicts, and the community, and also has such an over-arching sense of what is possible that her works traverse unexpected thresholds. Now she has crossed the fine line from art to activism.

**SYLVIA ELENA**  
Juarez (Mexico), 2013  
© Caledonia Curry





**BETHLEHEM BOYS**  
St. Louis, USA, 2011

# TICKLING REALITY'S UNDERBELLY

SpY

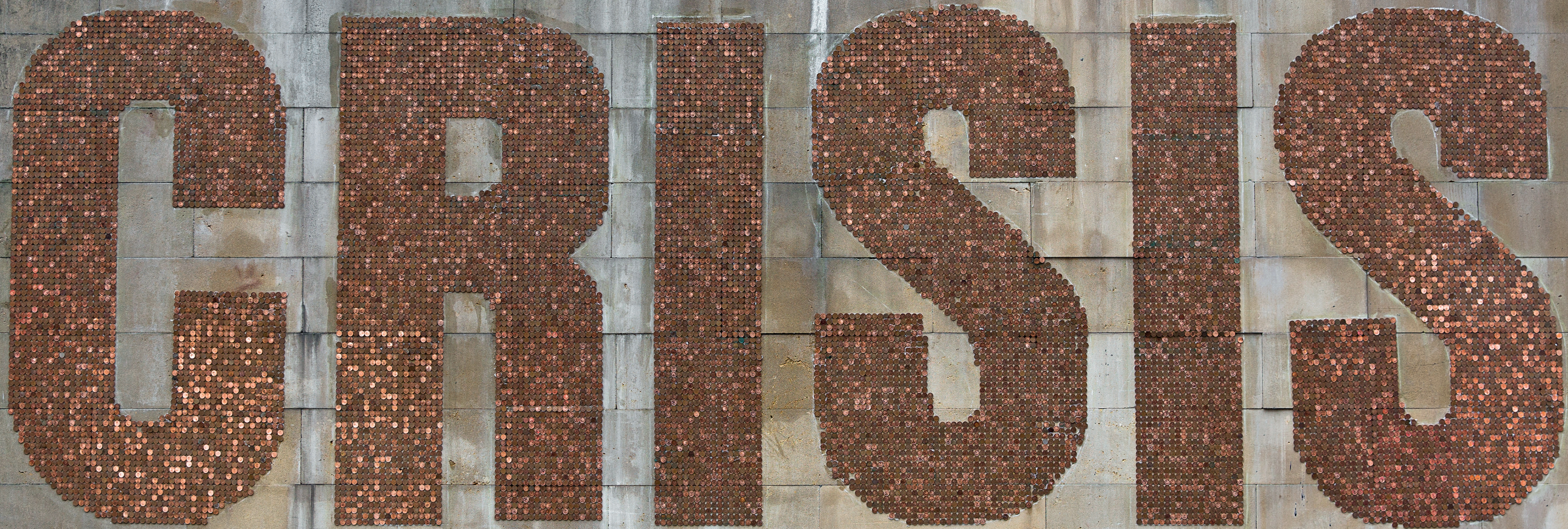
www.spy-urbanart.com

CAUTION  
New York, USA, 2008  
© SpY



Incisive, sharp, caustic, critical, simple, powerful, scathing, relentless... We could go on like this for years without finding the exact word to define the stimulating Madrid-based creator who styles himself SpY. He is a character without a face, who jealously guards his real identity from the media. He started out in the deprived outskirts of the Spanish capital painting graffiti in its purest form. His artwork – be it graffiti or highly conceptual art – is rooted in the most elemental aspects of guerrilla communications: savage exercises in citizen appropriation, either extremely graphic or irreverent interference. He disrupts urban reality and human boredom.

SpY is considered one of the most compelling conceptual urban artists around. His work impacts the spectator like a sharp instrument, leaving deep gashes in the consciousness while still being capable of drawing a smile. SpY has that ability, that gift to turn the critical into the parodic, the formal into the informal, the serious into the comic, the obvious into the uncertain: his work can be seen as one all-encompassing act of artistic sabotage that plays apparently contradictory images, situations and concepts off against each other. His wry and rather amused outlook usually materializes in a perturbing context – a practice in this day and age as fundamental and indispensable as it is healthy.



The simplicity of his work raises for the spectator the classic question pursued by every artist: 'Why didn't anyone think of it before?' The question could be applied to practically each and every work of SpY's: he always seems to be several steps ahead of his fellow urban agitators. His aim is always true, without ever losing sight of that magical simplicity of his. His work is a complex catalogue of heart-wrenching truths. Every one of his ideas works like a fist to the face of a public already anæsthetized by an urban landscape smeared with invasive advertising and bristling with brand-names.

These are the settings for brilliantly creative experiments like CRISIS, which he installed in Bilbao in 2015: a mural composed of €2000 in two-cent coins that spelt out the word. The work was gone in a day but remains a powerful metaphor for the economic crisis of the past decade: if there had been no crisis, who in their right mind would have spent their time scrabbling at a wall for such small change? It also served as a sociological experiment: no bankers or businessmen were anywhere to be seen; it was the immigrants, homeless people and people in the low-income bracket prising off the coins. CRISIS is ultimately a portrait of the forgotten and the invisible.



**CRISIS**  
Bilbao, Spain, 2015  
© SpY



**SWASTIKA**  
Mumbai, India, 2017  
© SpY

As art critic and urban art expert, Javier Abarca says: 'SpY's works are not a monologue, but a dialogue between the artist and his environment, between the passer-by and the piece. [...] His work involves the appropriation of urban elements through transformation or replica, a running comment on urban reality and an interference in its communicative codes. The bulk of his production stems from an observation of the city and an appreciation of its components, not as inert elements, but as a palette of materials brimming with possibilities. The unmistakable hallmarks of his actions are his will to play, his careful attention to the setting of every piece and his constructive, non-invasive attitude.'

SpY's steadfast provocation knows no borders or flags. This was true of his work for the annual meeting of the Global Cultural District Network, which took place in Barcelona in 2017 and gathered over 120 cultural and urban leaders from 26 countries. This event collected several events such as workshops, cultural tourism and animation of public spaces and convened featured panel discussions on branding and identity of cultural districts and cultural infrastructure. Under this context and the curatorial of The Polyhedric Festival – one of those events –, SpY placed the flags compulsory at any international rally in the path of those attending; only, in this case, he deployed images of the world's major currencies, a critical look over the institutional neo-liberalism that uses culture as their own flags to empower territories.



**FLAGS**  
Hospitalet del Llobregat,  
Barcelona, Spain, 2017  
© SpY



**CAMERAS**  
Madrid, Spain, 2013  
© SpY