

# Et In Libertalia Ego

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Vol. II

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Mathieu Briand

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## Foreword

Nicole: My first experience of Mathieu Briand's work was when I attended a talk he gave at an art school. I knew little of his practice at the time, and his talk didn't really help to shed any further light on it; however, to this day it was one of the most captivating artist talks I have ever heard. Briand told a story of a journey – one so strange that it was hard to tell what was real and what wasn't in his tale. Since then, fascinating new chapters in the story have unfolded. As a curator, working closely with an artist on a project is to undertake the journey with them. A leap of faith is required, bringing with it, like any great adventure, a mixture of excitement and anxiety.

Olivier: Mathieu Briand has found inspiration in the unexpected parallels of different civilisations. On a tiny island off the coast of Madagascar, Briand found a space where he could manifest the kind of creative community he had envisaged, one normally associated with the contemporary art world; by inviting artists to practice what they know best but in an unknown territory. Briand sees in the island a reflection of *Libertalia* – the eighteenth-century pirates' paradise.

Nicole: In this exhibition, Briand has appropriated several utopic stories and repurposed them into his own narrative. Many examples of utopias can be found threaded through *Et In Libertalia Ego*. Briand's utopia is not lost, yet it cannot be found – it is in a constant state of becoming, an active state.

Olivier: Now on Pitcairn Island, Briand has worked with the same notion. Using an island defined by the historical Mutiny on the *Bounty* he explores the unsettling subjects of colonialism and piracy, subjects that too carry relevance in Tasmania. Briand's fascination with the past present and future of opposing civilizations, finds its apotheosis in this exhibition. Briand himself has become the catalyst in this unusual creative process, where roles are reversed and creative authority challenged.

Nicole and Olivier: Briand's process of investigation puts primary importance on stimulating ideas and thoughts, rather than physical outcomes. This aligns in some ways with the motivations and interests of Mona. Yet Mona is a museum that makes exhibitions, therefore the process and the ideas need to manifest into something tangible. We focused on the narrative of the journey as the physical embodiment of the project: to take people on the same journey that we had been invited to take years before. Our incredible exhibitions team at Mona also took the journey and we are most grateful for their dedication and willingness to follow a path less travelled.

We now find ourselves thinking about the future of *Et In Libertalia Ego*. What will future generations of the island in Madagascar say about this man, Mathieu Briand? What will their thoughts be about the objects he has left behind? We imagine that Briand has become a character in a faraway land. He has become a part of the rumours and legends that will continue to be told for generations on the island. They will speak of a man who was friendly, yet had strange ways about him. His culture was different, yet he spoke the same language. Over time new stories will evolve around the objects, around who left them there and for what purpose. The tale is still evolving and the outcome is unknown. It may continue over several more chapters, or it may cease tomorrow. We find this uncertainty liberating.

Nicole Durling  
Co-Director of Exhibitions & Collections and Senior Curator

Olivier Varenne  
Co-Director of Exhibitions & Collections and International Curator

Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart



## Foreword

We are all tempted to ‘go and have a look elsewhere’. Nurses and lawyers, cops and florists all go on holiday; there they encounter themselves stripped of all their frippery. And we all know that profound uncertainty we feel on holiday about the validity of our professional lives – combined with an anxiety to **re-sume** them lest we altogether disappear. But the expression ‘going on holiday’ is rarely heard among artists. They might, perhaps, speak of an *Italian Journey* or a residence abroad. For them, it might be a way of learning new tricks or imbuing themselves with exoticism, without questioning either the utility of the works they produce or the legitimacy of western contemporary art.

Mathieu Briand’s project immediately struck me as completely at variance with the practices of the contemporary art scene, about which I must confess that – though responsible for a much-frequented contemporary-art **institution** – I too felt a certain weariness. In 2012, Mathieu came to suggest that we finance his departure for a little island near Nosy Be in Madagascar. The only inhabitants were a very socially deprived family, remote from anyone and anything. He was intending several successive long stays on the island and would invite artists to come and join him or send projects to be made in situ. We committed ourselves to this project, adopting a mode of production relatively new for the foundation, which consisted of funding (among other things) the air tickets of those taking part. Since La maison rouge is not a travel agency, we also decided to hold an exhibition which would attempt to reconstitute this seven-year adventure lived out on an ‘almost-desert’ island.

After a decade of scheduling ‘conventional’ exhibitions, the arrival of Mathieu’s proposal was a bolt from the blue, interrogating the art process and moving the focus onto what really matters about creation.

It is no easy thing for a gallery to convey an experience of this kind, but Mathieu Briand’s intelligence and commitment on every front – he quite rightly

sought to avoid excessively ‘exotic’ gestures – combined with the know-how of the maison rouge team (my thanks again!) made a success of this exhibition.

The work that accompanies the exhibition is less a traditional catalogue, more an artist’s book, a sort of illustrated journal of the project. The narrative provided by Mathieu himself, accompanied by the writings of artists invited to the island (Christophe Perez and Lucille Uhlrich), retraces the story of this project.

Mathieu Briand’s experiment raises a large question, that of the relevance of contemporary art outside its western context. It seems likely that the inhabitants of the island, whose principal concern even today is that of survival, perceived these *a priori* useless works and interventions as fraught, like their own ritual objects, with magic. That is good news.

Antoine de Galbert  
La maison rouge, Paris, 2015







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**THE TALE**  
Mathieu Briand

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## Preamble

In Latin, *ubique* means everywhere.

IN CHAPTER FIVE of my project *Ubiq: A Mental Odyssey*, I used *A Network of Stoppages* by Marcel Duchamp as the network of a map, a mental and magical map which, when projected in three dimensions, showed me a point. This point took the form of a sculpture made of the materials, rejects and rubbish from preceding chapters, representing an island on which I disembarked through other works.

**UBIQ: A MENTAL ODYSSEY** is a project developed by Mathieu Briand between 2006 and 2009 in the form of successive exhibitions/chapters. 'In Latin, *ubique* means everywhere. It is a visual "odyssey" mental and perceptive in which reality and fiction are mingled in a constant *mise en abyme*, in which time and space contract, dilate and are confronted with the infinite. Through this interpenetration of experience and the imaginary, Mathieu Briand interrogates the quality of a world whose reality today is barely nominal, so clearly does neither imagination nor experience predominate; on the contrary, their constant overlap produces what we take to be our reality. To this end, the artist partly reappropriated the visual language

of Stanley Kubrick and his cult film 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Recurring evocations of that work invest Briand's work with a vocabulary and an aesthetic connection. The influence of this film is also felt in another way, that in which the project's insertion into an emphatic temporal contradiction is envisaged. Through what we can only call a manipulation, through the use of physical objects and visual experiences, Mathieu Briand attempts to lead us into his world, which is made up of personal landmarks, empirical and imagined. The references thus assembled, once replaced in perspective, allow him to bring to light a different world, which has many modes of access but no outline. By questioning or even dissecting a certain number of components, he attempts

to bring viewers to seek their own path, confronting them with the need to progress through questions about the nature of their own entourage. The only way out of that obligation is to disentangle the skein of their perception of the world: their own stories. The first chapter of *Ubiq: A Mental Odyssey* comprises a faithful reconstitution of the artist's studio in which this vast project was worked out. There we encounter a complex set of clues that presage future developments while at the same illuminating the networks, ways of working and questions by which the project is fuelled and which supply its substance and structure.'

**NETWORK** (réseau in French. From the latin retiolus, 'net').

### NETWORK OF STOPPAGES

'In *3 Standard Stoppages*, Duchamp had explored the possibility of adjusting the metric standard through a random procedure. In this large canvas he complicated that idea, multiplying the curves of the fallen threads from *3 Standard Stoppages* by reproducing each one three times and positioning them in a diagrammatic arrangement. He also made the work by painting over the images on a canvas he had already used, those images being a female figure and a schematic, quasi-mechanical drawing of his ongoing project *The Large Glass*. The visible and semivisible layers of *Network of Stoppages* seem to contrast three representational systems: traditional figuration, chance operations, and the diagram, which maps the world without picturing it.'



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JUNE 2007

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JUNE 2007. My sister, who is staying with our aunt on the Madagascan island of Nosy Be, sends me an email with a picture attached.

The picture is of a sandy beach shaded by coconut palms and, beyond them, another, smaller island. This island becomes both a motive and a motif for me. I immediately fall under its spell.

I set myself to imagining a project that could take me there.

I call the project *Et in Libertalia Ego*, the name referring to the mysterious painting by Poussin entitled *Et in Arcadia Ego* and the anarchist utopia of Libertalia. I discovered the story of Libertalia thanks to *T.A.Z.: Temporary Autonomous Zone*, a book by Hakim Bey, alias Peter Lamborn Wilson. But the story of Libertalia was published for the first time in 1728 in the book *A History of the Pyrates, Vol. II*, by one Captain Johnson, of whom nothing is known; although it is widely considered that Johnson is a pseudonym used by Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*.

In its historical context, the book is above all an ode to liberty and a paean of hatred against tyranny. *Libertalia* is the tale of a veritable political, social and philosophical utopia: the establishment of an egalitarian society by pirates. The action takes place in Madagascar between Diego Suarez and Nosy Be, an area in which the presence of pirates is documented at the turn of the eighteenth century. The narrative, in which fiction and reality are mingled, is included in a larger work on a number of pirates whose existence is historically proven.

The 'pirating of reality' in *Libertalia* reminds me of Jorge Luis Borges's *Tlön Uqbar Orbis Tertius*, Adolfo Bioy Casares's *The Invention of Morel* and certain gestures of Marcel Duchamp.

Pirating is a temporary system superimposed on an established system; it reveals a different reading of reality. It displaces the function of one element in order to bestow on it a different one.

My initial project consists of building a boat with the inhabitants of Nosy Be and a group of artists (taking artists to be pirates), in order to reach the island, which lies only a few cables offshore.

Once on the island, the objective is to found a new Libertalia based on the ideas in Captain Johnson's narrative and *T.A.Z.* A film on the entire project will follow. It will have its own autonomous existence.

The project is not, therefore, defined in advance but seeks to respect certain principles: process, research and experiment will be priorities; the work will unfold in time and in space; it will be common; there will be no frontier between experiment, production and demonstration; there will be no exhibition in the usual sense of the word; my proceeding is intended to displace not only the location of exhibition but its very function.

It is process that interests me rather than any end point. Utopia consists of making a work whose realisation is not the objective. A work that escapes classical constraints in order to confront new ones.

**ISLAND** a stretch of terra firma permanently or temporarily surrounded by water.

**MOTIVE** that which drives one to act: any conscious element considered as influencing the determination of a voluntary act.

**MOTIF** in art, the motif is what an artist selects from visible reality as subject and model, in particular, landscape. Painting *sur le motif* refers to artistic work conducted outdoors before the subject of the work, in contrast with work undertaken in the studio.

**POINT** a fixed and determined place.

**SPACE** (from the Latin *spatium*, 'extent, duration')

**LIMIT** (from the Latin *limes*, 'edge, border') ♦ restriction, point beyond which one must not go.

**LIBERTALIA** name of the fictional libertarian colony founded by Captain Olivier Misson, an ex-officer of the French navy obsessed with Utopias, and a libertine Italian priest, Carracioli, a pioneering republican, who renounces his priesthood in order to embark with Misson on the *Victoire*, a French merchant ship. In the account by Captain Johnson, during an English attack, the ship loses its captain: the two men '[have] Fortune in their hands' and embrace it, taking command and raising the Jolly Roger. After a number of major captures, they decide to settle on the island of Madagascar and found an ideal society with their crew. They are joined by the pirate Thomas Tew, who is ordered to bring riches and new recruits to the colony. While Tew is at sea, the enclave is attacked by natives, who massacre large numbers of men, women and children. Misson escapes with

a handful of men on board. This is the end of Libertalia. This is the story of a veritable political, social and philosophical utopia. The pirates were against any form of authoritarianism: they practised a kind of representative democracy, without slavery, in which the community had the power to make laws and rules through systems of councils; in economics, they were against capitalism and foreshadowed the socialist economic system, instigating the: abolition of private property, egalitarian sharing of booty, and a system of welfare for the weakest.

**ET IN ARCADIA EGO** a Latin phrase signifying 'I [Death] am in Arcadia [paradise] too'.

**ARCADIA** (from the Greek *Arkadia*) ♦ idyllic land of pastoral harmony. In ancient poetry, Arcadia is represented as a primitive and idyllic place peopled with shepherds living in harmony with nature. During the Renaissance, Arcadia became a dream of Utopia and idealised pastoral life: a form of original harmony between man and nature.

**UTOPIA** (from the Greek *outopos*, 'no place') ♦ Greek neologism created by Thomas More in 1516 to designate the ideal society that he describes in his work *De optimo rei publicae statu, deque nova insula Utopia*. This work is partly a travel narrative and description of a fictive place – the island of Utopia – and partly a project for the rational establishment of an ideal society. Utopian society is fundamentally egalitarian and private property does not exist in it. It depends on a set of laws and a very rational and precise organization and is presented as the perfection of civilisation.

**T.A.Z.** (Temporary Autonomous Zone is a name), not a definition, introduced by Hakim Bey, alias Peter Lamborn Wilson, in 1991 in the book of that name. 'From the "Pirate Utopias" of the eighteenth century to the planet-wide networks of the twenty-first, manifest to those who can see it, "appearing-disappearing" the better to avoid the State Surveyors. It temporarily occupies a territory in space, time or the imagination and is no sooner registered than it vanishes. T.A.Z. is allergic to self-declared T.A.Zs, the spaces "granted" to liberty; it makes lightning conquests then returns to invisibility. It is an insurrection defying Time and History, a disappearing tactic.\*

**NOSY BE** a coastal island to the northwest of Madagascar, in the Mozambique Channel. The name of its principal town, Hell-Ville, comes from the name of a French naval officer, Admiral de Hell.

**CONTEXT** the perceptual 'frame' through which one sends or receives a message.

**ANARCHY** (from the Greek *anarkhia*, 'absence of hierarchy').

**LIBERTY** (from the Latin *libertas*, 'state of the free person') ♦ the right of the individual to self-determination.

**TLÖN, UQBAR, ORBIS TERTIUS** a short story by the Argentina writer Jorge Luis Borges. It was published for the first time in May 1940 and today appears in the collection *Fictions [Ficciones]*. The author's postscript is dated 1947. In this text, an encyclopaedia article on the subject of a mysterious country named Uqbar offers the first trace of the existence of Orbis Tertius, a massive conspiracy by intellectuals to create an imaginary world: Tlön. One of the main themes of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* is that ideas manifest themselves in the real world.

#### THE INVENTION OF MOREL

**[LA INVENCIÓN DE MOREL]** is a novel by the Argentinian writer Adolfo Bioy Casares, which appeared in 1940. The narrator takes refuge on an island that he believes to be deserted but is in fact full of people with whom no communication is possible. Through love, he will have to choose between the prisonhouse of the real and the liberating illusion of a 'holographic' existence produced by a fantastical machine – Morel's invention.



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JUNE 2008

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The infinity of the imagination is (potentially) no less a source of real pleasure than of useless pain.

JUNE 2008. I make a first voyage to my aunt's at Nosy Be to research Libertalia and assess the feasibility of my project. I stay with my aunt and her partner Djella. The only prop I take with me is a three-cornered hat.





From Nosy Be, I swim to the smaller island. I arrive on the east coast, and I immediately realise that the island is inhabited.

I'm afraid. I have entered a space that is already occupied and doesn't belong to me. I swim away again, completely ignorant of the high tidal range. It's late and almost dark. I realise this was really not a good idea.

The next day, I ask my aunt about the island and its inhabitants but she knows nothing about them. I go back the following morning with the advantage of daylight and the low tide.











When I arrive at the island this time, I am welcomed by young women and children who take me by the hand and show me around the island. We pass by two men who are digging the earth.

I feel as though I am in a kind of waking dream.

The women take me to a house where I find a man older than anybody else; he is called 'Papa'.

During a long conversation, I learn that he is the head of the family and the head of the island but also 'Prime Minister of the Prince of Nosy Be' and a 'sorcerer'. He communicates with the spirits and is in charge of rituals. There is a sacred tree on the island. But there are no pirates and there never have been.

I ask to return the following day and interview them with my video camera. They agree. I have no very precise ideas. I just want to capture this moment, as if to persuade myself that all of this is genuinely real.





The next day, Papa tells me how his mother bought the island from the French, planted it with banana and coffee plants and all kinds of edible species in order to trade and become autonomous. He is trying to maintain this. He tells me that he was born on the island and has always lived here. The same is true of his two sons and two daughters. Papa, his wife, his son Saïd and Saïd's children are the only people who live permanently on the island.

Some members of the extended family are Christian while others are Muslim, but they are all animists.

Throughout the year, they move to and fro between the island and the fishing village on the main island, where the rest of the family lives.

All sorts of rumours and legends circulate about this smaller island and its inhabitants.







I make better friends with Saïd. He is a master of the dugout canoe and gives me a tour around the island and its neighbourhood. In this way I visit the island every day, building my links with his family.

The island is the result of successive migrations. Originally it was a volcanic surface on which matter, seeds, land and marine organisms, animals and men were stranded, accumulating and mingling. I'm yet another migrant, whose goals are not yet decided.

I take videos and photos of these first moments. They will form the basis of my future work.

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**REALITY** the character of what exists, in contrast with what is imagined, dreamed or fictive. In the words of Philip K. Dick, 'reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away'.

**ANIMISM** (from Latin *animus*, 'soul, life') ♦ the view that non-human entities (animals, plants, and inanimate objects or phenomena) possess a spiritual essence.

**AUTONOMY** (from Greek *autos*, 'self' and *nomos*, 'law' or 'rule') ♦ the right to govern oneself according to one's own laws.













NOVEMBER 2008








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### Imagination tested by reality.

NOVEMBER 2008. After my first trip to the island, I understand that my initial idea is not viable. I have to adapt it: to keep the foundations but modify the form. The guideline constituted by Captain Johnson's fiction and Hakim Bey's *T.A.Z* will remain but I shall give up the idea of the boat, replacing it with that of a film on the foundation of a contemporary form of Libertalia.

I ask Papa if he would be willing to organise a ritual to ask the spirits to bless our encounter. He says he would. For me this is a symbolic means of settling on the island; it is also superb material for my film. It is simpler to collate real events in order to create a fiction than to film a fiction in order to make something real of it.

We organise a *joro* that lasts three days, during which a zebu is sacrificed under the sacred tree.













The following day, Papa comes to speak to me. He asks me to do something for him and his family: to 'settle' on the island in order to help them. This possibility had not even occurred to me; it matches the intentions described in Captain Johnson's story while running counter to the ideas of T.A.Z.

In the postcolonial context, what does this request mean? How can we escape the roles that we are all more or less consciously playing and which merely repeat the errors of the past? How can we escape our mimetic desires, each coveting the other's situation? Are not these precisely the questions that Libertalia seeks to answer?

I'm also aware of the technical difficulty posed by a request of this kind, since I am not always in situ. The island is remote, getting there is complicated and I did not originally intend to realise a long-term project there. Can an artwork confine itself to its intention? I need someone who lives locally to be a link. I ask my aunt if she would be so kind as to play this role, which she generously agrees to do. She is currently working in the hotel industry and tourism is strong. I suggest that the family should construct a bungalow that they could rent out. The idea is to create an autonomous space, respectful to the inhabitants of the island and the environment – in short, a responsible tourism project.

We are moving from an anarchist utopia to a new form of colonisation by tourism. It seems very difficult to escape one's heritage. Sometimes you can get lost following your own footsteps too closely.

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**JORO** Madagascan ceremony to ask for the blessing of gods and ancestors. A zebu is sacrificed as an offering. The occasion is marked with collective celebrations that can last up to three days.

**MIMETIC DESIRE** René Girard's unitary theory uses a single mechanism, imitation, to explain a large number of human phenomena. Mimetic desire is the immediate interference of imitative desire and imitated desire. In other words, what desire imitates is someone else's desire: desire itself.

**COLONISATION** a process of territorial and/or demographic expansion characterised by migratory flows taking the form of immigration, rapid occupation, and even the brutal invasion of a territory. In its most extreme forms, colonisation may be accompanied by a marginalisation, reduction or even massacre or genocide of indigenous populations.

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MARCH 2009. The Madagascan government is overthrown by a *coup d'état*.

The project of the tourist bungalow is abandoned. External events have driven me back to the path from which I had strayed.

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MAY 2011







**The work is a utopia. Utopia is the subject of the work.**

MAY 2011. After a period of thought, and in the light of recent political events, I decide to go back to the essence of the project and function by chaos. I return to my initial idea of Libertalia and eventually offer to rent a part of the island from Papa in order to set up my studio and so get on with the *Et in Libertalia Ego* project.

This has the merit of clarifying and simplifying our relations.

Papa goes to the sacred tree and speaks to the spirits, who accept my presence. But Papa advises that the moment my studio is finished, it is essential to perform a *joro* and sacrifice a zebu before I fully take possession of it.





During the course of the construction of my studio, the island becomes a mental space, one in which I can experiment with art outside its 'traditional/institutional' context, as I wanted to do initially.

I find myself in a situation that exceeds my every expectation. Apparently blocked, the road now opens up again before me.

The story is not confined to its territory.







The word 'art' does not have the same meaning on this island as in western societies: there is no exhibition space and no 'public'; but there is a ritual art, a sacred and magic art, which is an essential element of the culture of the island. With us, art and the sacred have been separated and the former, a *cosa mentale*, has replaced the latter. Art is a *cosa mentale*, just as magic is. The two notions seem connected by abstraction – both are things of the mind and derive from a strong belief. Both mobilise objects and rituals to address us, and both their messages pertain to form and mind. It was its magical aspect that first led me to art, and magic is precisely what I no longer find in it.

What determines the existence of art? What are its origins? On this little piece of land are all the elements of a microcosm with its inhabitants and foreigners, its rites and customs, its beliefs, etc.

What would art bring to this island – art in the sense in which it is understood in my society? Perhaps what is needed is precisely this reversal: to render sacred what is profane, and make the banal magical.

By confronting our two worlds on this territory, we cannot help but reach a new situation in which art will take on a new meaning: perhaps then it will become magical again.

It is with this in mind that I imagine transposing onto the island works that already exist, in a sort of deliberate 'pirating'. Not my own works – they aren't neutral because I am already part of the territory – but those of other artists. I ask three artist friends, Pierre Huyghe, Thomas Hirschorn and Damián Ortega, to allow me to transpose onto the island a work by each of them that I deem essential. They accept with enthusiasm and each produce a protocol that can easily be realised under the constraints of the location.

Now I can make a kind of sketch of the project.

**BELIEF** holding something to be true, independent of any proof of its existence, reality or possibility.

**CUSTOM** established usage, habit, and juridical oral usage considered sacred over time and accepted by the population of a given territory.

**ART** art is a human activity. The product of this activity or the idea that people have of it deliberately addresses the senses, emotions, intuitions and intellect. One might say that art is native to humanity and that it has no clearly defined function.

**COSA MENTALE** ('thing of the mind') ♦

this is a reference to Leonardo da Vinci's statement, *la pittura è cosa mentale* (painting is a thing of the mind). Frédéric Purtschet questions this statement, arguing that da Vinci's use of mirror writing suggests that we should reverse the formulation and read *la cosa mentale è pittura* things of the mind are paintings or representation.

**MAGIC** an art founded on the belief in the existence of supernatural beings or powers and occult natural laws allowing us to act on the material world by means of rituals.

**PROFANE** (from the Latin *profanum*, from *pro*, 'in front of', and *fanum*, 'consecrated place')

♦ not consecrated, not initiated, ignorant; anything that is not sacred.

**SACRED** (from the Latin *sacrare*, 'consecrate to a divinity, render sacred') ♦

a notion from cultural anthropology, the sacred allows a human society to create a separation or axial logical opposition between the different elements that compose, define or represent its world: objects, acts, spaces, parts of the body, values, etc. The sacred refers to that which is placed outside the category of ordinary, banal, common things, to that which is inaccessible, unavailable, placed outside the normal world; it is contrasted in equal measure with the profane and the utilitarian.

**TRANSPPOSITION** reproduction of a situation or condition in another context, under another form.



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NOVEMBER 2011

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NOVEMBER 2011. The studio is complete. We organise a *joro* and again sacrifice a zebu under the sacred tree in order to have the protection and authorisation of the ancestors for my settling on the island.











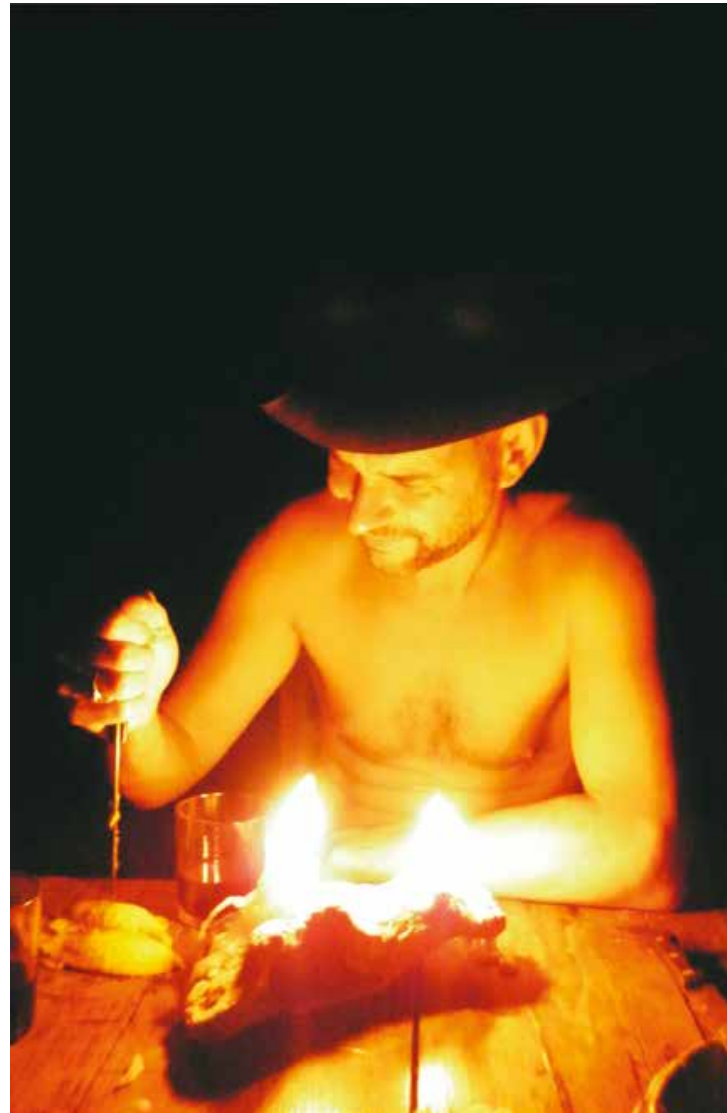
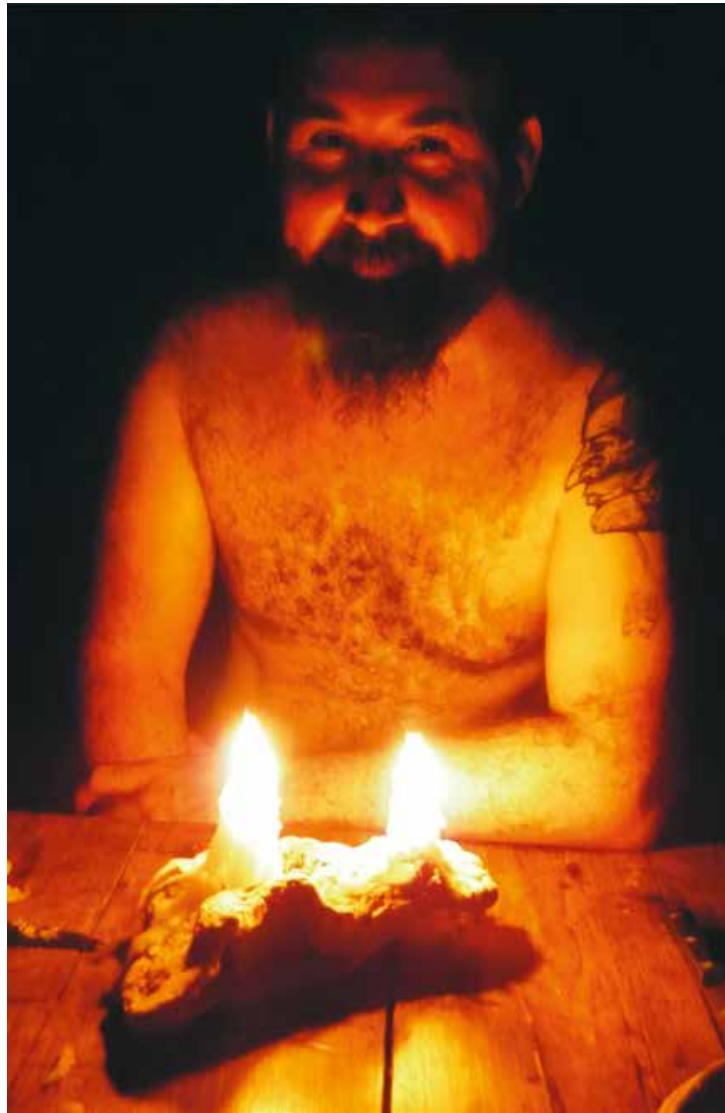






I can now sleep at the studio and spend my time there with my friend Christophe Perez, who has, out of respect for the context, renamed himself pirate-fashion 'the Otter'. He is accompanying me to share in the adventure and help me to realise the protocols.

We are now 'Brethren of the Coast'.



Christophe Perez

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*My treasure for those who  
understand me*

My four odysseys on the island have been marked by liberty, adventure, mystery and mysticism.

Everything began with a mysterious note scribbled on a scrap of paper that Mathieu had left with me during a stopover at Réunion, before we went our separate ways. It was an address: 'plage des Cocotiers' [Coconut Beach]. I made the rest of the journey alone with my doubts, fears and uncertainties. I was following the Ariadne's thread left by Mathieu in the labyrinth of his utopia. This was the start of a long initiatory voyage, as I later understood.

For me, this adventure was an opportunity to escape western civilisation, its artifices and its hyperconnectivity. In Libertalia, I sought the exoticism of Gauguin; I experienced piracy and its quest for justice and secret islands. I experienced mystical forces while following in the footsteps of peoples who have contrived to maintain a strong bond with nature and their ancestors.

I consider Mathieu a pirate. He has created an artistic identity that takes no account of traditional landmarks. He proudly lays claim to the marginal position into which both system and market seek to seal him. He identifies with the role that is ascribed to him wherever he goes. When he grapples with museums and galleries, his buccaneering reputation precedes him and strengthens his aura of myth.

On Libertalia, Mathieu wanted to create a 'pirate brotherhood', an alternative to the system of contemporary art. He summoned the best artists to his quest, seeing in them citizens of single utopian territory made up of nomadic clans scattered to the four corners of the earth but linked by a common aspiration. There they freed themselves of the servitude of the market and affirmed their liberty. Mathieu practised the pirate's code of hospitality: somewhere to sleep and to work, a dose of good old rum, and a pub crawl to get drunk and listen to the siren-song of the musician 'Djella of Nosy Be'. All this afforded so many opportunities to combine with and share the experiences of the Liberi population. Black or white but with the same red blood.

Over Libertalia floated the Jolly Roger with the words: 'Acta non verba' [Actions not words].







We begin with the work by Pierre Huyghe. This was originally a photo. In it one sees two paths that fork and disappear at the crest of a hill. One is a trekker's path that continues beyond the horizon of the photograph, while the other is a trompe-l'oeil that goes no further than we can see. We recreate this work by making a path that goes round the island – of which a considerable portion cannot therefore be seen but nevertheless exists – and a path that abruptly ends at the crest of the hill.

The Damián Ortega work that I have chosen is a corncob with all of its kernels numbered. Damián supplies a protocol adapting the work to a plant.

I've noticed that Thomas Hirschhorn often introduces books and little bookcases into his installations. I ask him to create his personal library which will become the one in my studio.

The works that we make lie hidden in the landscape like chameleons; they are neither indicated nor mentioned. They are simply there.

Pierre Huyghe

---

*Or*



#### **A fork in an existing path**

Additional path of the same size or slightly narrower than the existing one.

Ideally paths are formed by people walking through the grass.

They can also be created artificially by observing the aspect naturally created over time by people walking (as in shortcuts).

The main path leads somewhere and the additional path nowhere.

But the end of the additional path must not be visible from the fork.

The ideal place is a hill: if the grass is sufficiently low, the line of the paths will be visible. It is therefore graphic and photogenic, even if the lines of the paths are (seemingly) of natural formation.

Time and use modify the forms.

Pierre Huyghe, 2011.





**From:** Pierre Huyghe  
**Reply:** OR + OR of the ants  
**Date:** 26 November 2011  
**To:** Mathieu Briand

magnificent! a fork on a small island is still more beautiful because absurd,  
it doesn't allow one to get lost.

now we have only to wait for the rainy season when the fresh clearance will  
start to look a little more natural.

thank you!!

x  
pierre

yes ants always copy...







**Damián Ortega**

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*Classified Waste*



My idea is to classify all the leaves of the tree, to have a register about how these leaves grow and change during the different periods of the year. I like the idea of having a classification and registry of how nature produces this huge amount of energy and waste. A permanent circle of production and waste, a permanent recycling to generate more and more mutations, like the skin of a snake. It is important for the tree to not seem melancholic or decorated, it is important to make clear the idea of classification and codification of the tree – something like the classification of ruins when archeologists give numbers to each stone, or when biologists chip animals to assess the area and territory they occupy, or the distances they fly or run.

I use here a lacquer painting. This paint dissolves in water, but when it is dry, it is permanent. It would be nice to apply it with a thin brush: No. 4. It is better to use the face-side up.

Damian Ortega, 2011



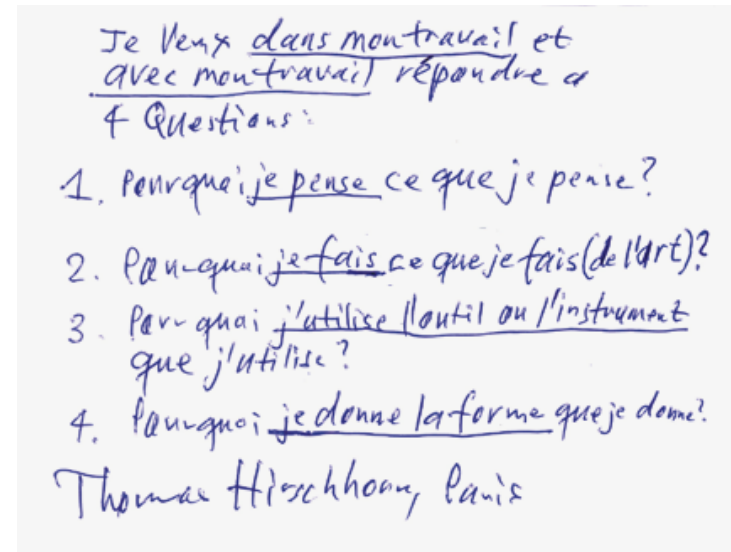






## Thomas Hirschhorn

Parisian Books

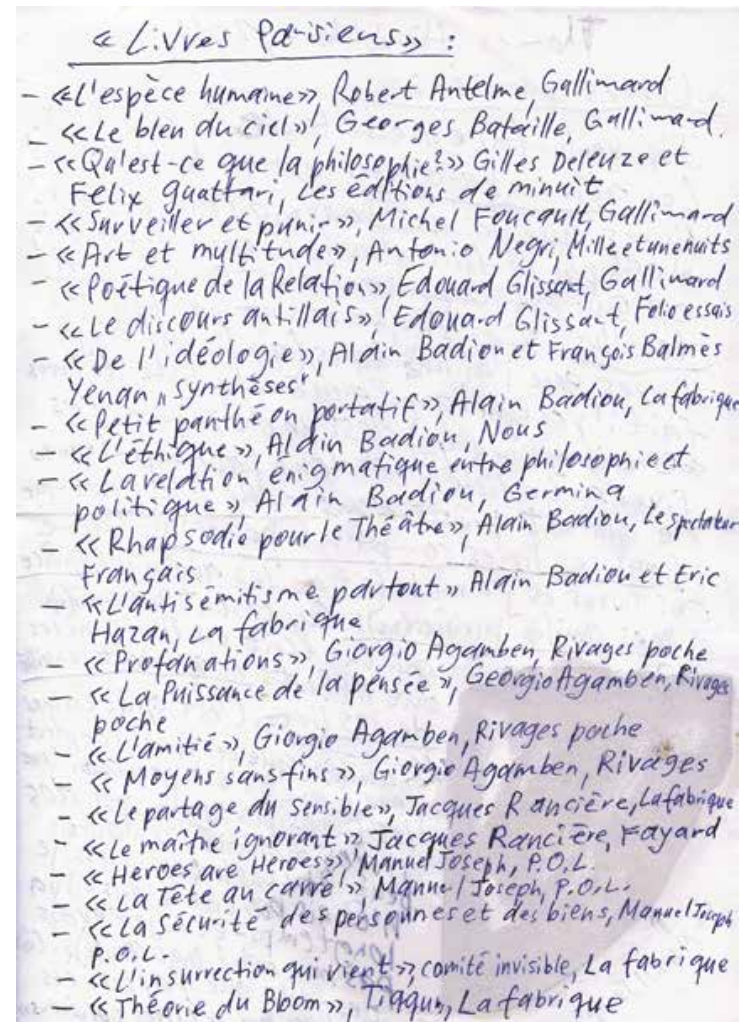
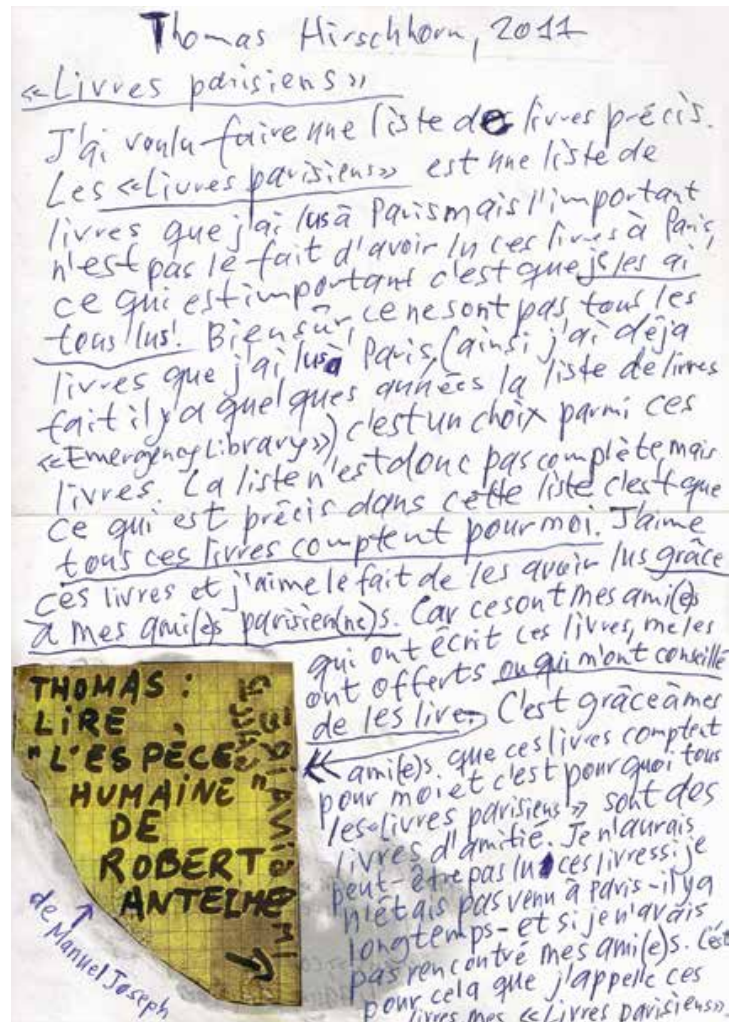


I want in my work and with my work to answer 4 questions:

1. Why do I think what I think?
2. Why do I do what I do (art)?
3. Why do I use the tool or instrument that I use?
4. Why do I give [it] the form that I give [it]?

Thomas Hirschhorn, Paris







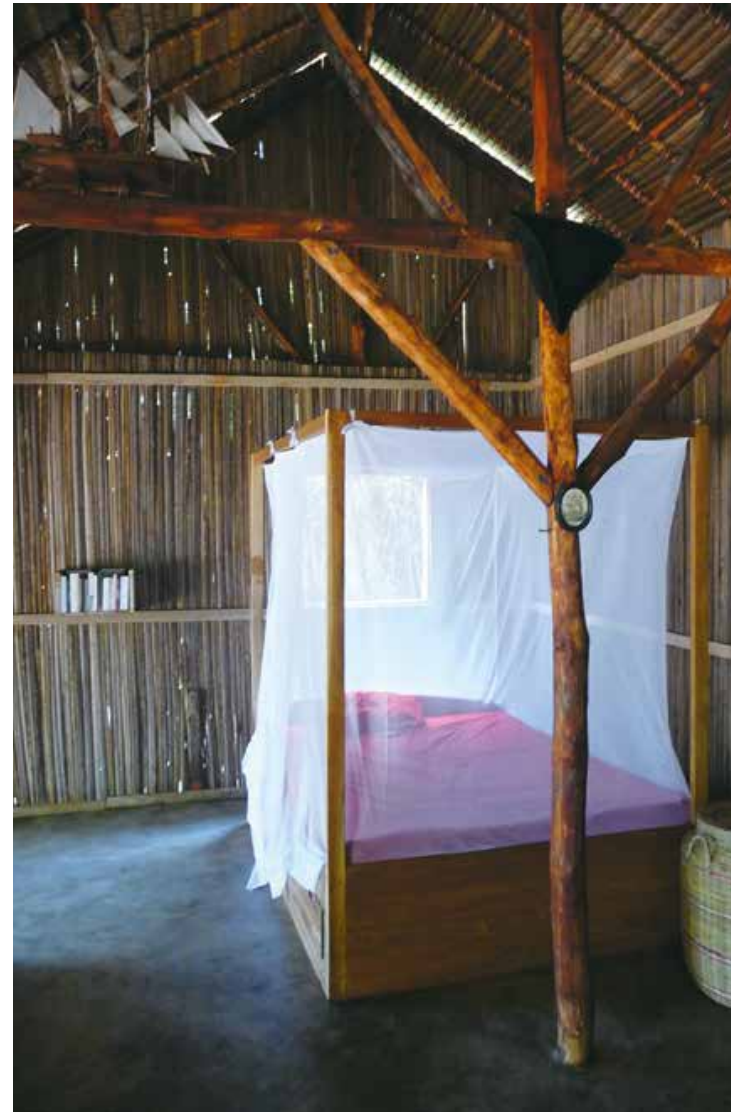
p. 98:

Thomas Hirschorn, 2011

#### 'Livres parisiens' / Parisian Books

I wanted to make a precise list of books. 'Parisian Books' is a list of books that I read in Paris but the important thing is not that I read these books in Paris but that I have read them all! Of course they are not all the books that I read in Paris (thus, several years ago I made the book list 'Emergency Library') but a selection. The list is therefore not complete but what is precise about this list is that all the books are important to me. I like these books and I like the fact that I read them thanks to my Parisian friends. For it was my friends who wrote these books, gave them to me or advised me to read them. I should perhaps not have read these books if I had not come to Paris – a long time ago – and if I had not met my friends. That's why I call these books my 'Parisian Books'.

Note, bottom left: Thomas: read *L'Espèce humaine* by Robert Antelme





MARCH 2012. I return to France and learn that the works and part of my studio have been destroyed by Saïd, who thought, in the wake of events on the island, that we had performed black magic.

I'm initially rather cast down. I've forgotten the goal of all this ... But standing back a little, I see my way ahead and understand that this destruction validates my objectives. The works have had an impact quite different from the one that they have in their original context. And this impact has been validated by a physical act of destruction. By his ascription of power to these works, Saïd has turned them into magical works.



SEPTEMBER 2012. I take the time to return to the island to clear the air with Saïd.

I want to discuss these events with him in order to understand the meeting point between what I consider art and what he considers magic. I want to try and create a dialogue around these two abstract notions.

For Saïd, the only reasonable interpretation of our acts (creating paths that lead nowhere, numbering the leaves of a tree, etc.) is that it is magic in the service of a purpose: that of appropriating the entire island and driving his family off it. Otherwise, why spend all this money?

Under pressure from his father, Saïd nevertheless allows us the benefit of the doubt and Papa allows me to continue, trying to reassure me by telling me that Saïd simply had a moment of madness.

Now I am trying to find a means of intervention based on the feasibility of works on the island and on their ephemeral character.

I also imagine inviting artists to come so that they can use my studio and the island as a work and demonstration space, though for me these two things are one and the same.

But I am confined by my resources. So I look for support to continue the project and spread word about it.

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**BRETHREN OF THE COAST** freebooters and buccaneers settled on the coast of Santo Domingo in the early seventeenth century. They established rules and a code of honour and lived out their various activities on the margins of society: hunting, smuggling and piracy. These were free

and independent men, who lived in solidarity with one another and loved the unconstrained life. Adepts of total liberty, they organised themselves into communities sharing risks, tasks and booty in egalitarian fashion.

OCTOBER 2012. After a series of meetings, La maison rouge commits itself to funding and supporting the project without requiring anything in return and leaving me complete freedom. We appoint 2015 as the date for organising an exhibition that will give an account of this adventure – but there again without really knowing or imagining what that might be.







MAY 2013. When we arrive, Saïd is still very agitated both because of his beliefs and because of tension with his father.

Papa is still the head of the island and Saïd is completely dependent on him. He finds it difficult to work out his place in life and my activities merely complicate matters. I am both a means and an obstacle to him. I have a strange relationship with Saïd: he is a sort of mirror and I think he feels the same about me.

We construct a new house for him and help him to send his two children to school. Working with us daily, he regains his tranquillity and a new affinity is established between us.







We reconstruct the well and buy new dugout canoes. At the same time, I set myself the task of reconstructing the houses in order to reinforce the family's presence on the island and improve their living conditions. For ideological reasons, I did not at first want to do this: I didn't want to play this rather patriarchal role. But the urgency of the situation ultimately leaves me no choice. Thus our lives mingle and our destinies intersect and mutually interfere.



















One morning, Papa tells me, 'I saw you walking from east to west and from north to south by night; I know that you found something but I don't know what'. He too imagines that we have hidden intentions. I reply, 'It's true, I have found *myself*.'

We make two more works following the protocols.

Juan Pablo Macias's brings together, on two tree trunks, Hélio Oiticica and his grandfather José Oiticica, an anarchist poet. Gabriel Kuri's work requires the coexistence of a hole and its inverted volume: its negative.

For the first time artists are coming to work on site. Dejode & Lacombe have imagined a kind of dream-object: a lantern using a candle that works underwater – a magic lantern. Another artist is coming with them: Lucille Uhlrich, Bertrand Lacombe's partner. She will be responsible for realising Gabriel Kuri's work.

We have a further companion in the form of a student of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Hugo Kriegel; it is important for me to pass on this project. He helps us with the campaign as a whole and produces his own work.





## Gabriel Kuri

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*Untitled*  
(Average Straight Line)

Mathieu

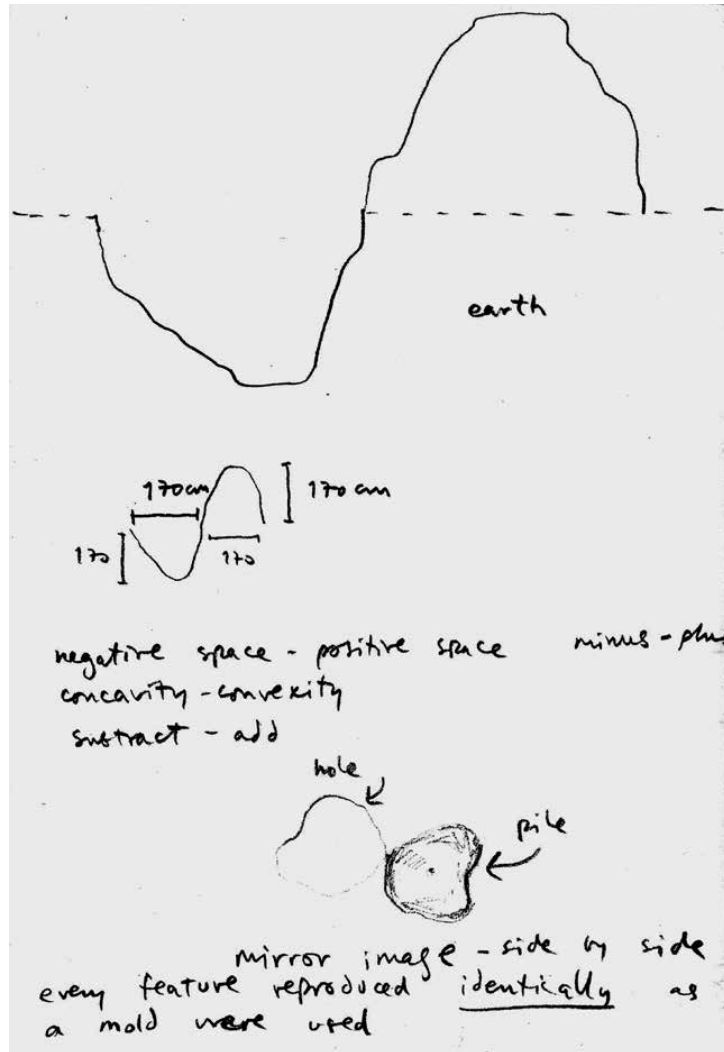
Here is my idea. As I said, it came to me in a dream. I have been grounding it somehow as I walk by construction sites and see piles of sand, or pits being dug, and it feels to me to have a certain solidity, in a primal way.

The idea is simple. A hole 170 cm deep and 170 cm in diameter should be dug. Immediately next to it (really shoulder to shoulder), the earth extracted from the hole should be sculpted so to mirror – in positive – exactly the relief of the hole next to it. The pile of earth should be 170 cm x 170 cm also and reproduce the hole in positive exactly, as if a mold were used (with all little volumes, incidents, straight and curved surfaces, etc. ...)

The idea is to create a mirrored volume negative–positive. If it were viewed in cross-section, it would be a line mirrored (see top of drawing). If viewed from the top, it should work as a trompe l'oeil as to which one is concave and which one convex.

Let me know your thoughts.  
All best wishes from Brussels

Gabriel



**From:** Uhlrich Lucille

**Reply:** I've just realised that you slipped me some retouched images!!

**Date:** 11 February 2014

Hello Mathieu,

Yes I blew up the image to put a better face on it because reality wouldn't measure up to the fantasy and I'd sworn to honour your request.

It would have taken 3 further days of heavy work to get it done and the 4 workers we'd hired were up in arms: they refused to work themselves to the bone just to accomplish the absurd. They were screaming at us: 'It'll all have vanished in the rain by next week!'

I told you what an ordeal it was for me; we were in thrall to a fantastical drawing that represented not just a hole the size of a mass grave but a stylised pile of earth that transparently needed the help of a machine.

I felt as if I were in charge of some colonial version of a 'hier gibt es kein warum / here there is no why' project.

This work is an exercise in conceptual tenacity and doesn't know it.

Coming back in the dugout canoe, I knew I was facing the impossible: I couldn't ask other groups to spend more days labouring on it – I'd reached a point of no-return myself.

I felt battered down and went into an intellectual rage about the value of an image and so I decided to blow up the pile on photoshop to make it a bit more acceptable. After all, I too could enter the image-chain in pursuit of his fantasy.

I wasn't trying to take you for a ride but to bring the project to its visual conclusion, with only one possible way out: if dust returns to dust, the image returns to the image. Why didn't I tell you? I'm a stickler in my work and I had to face breaking my promise for personal reasons that seemed inadequate in the context of my commitment. In short, out of shame!

I'm sorry. Will you hate me now?

Lucille











**Juan Pablo Macias**

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*Carving Oiticica's*

Dear Mathieu,

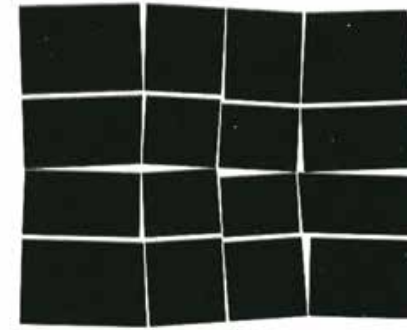
These are the instructions to carve the text I was telling you about:

– Pick two trees one next to the other in order to photograph them together at a close distance.

– Carve with a hard-pointed object this text in the left tree:

THE HUMAN PROBLEM CONSISTS IN OBTAINING  
FROM EARTH THE MAJOR AMOUNT OF GENERAL HAPPINESS

– Carve on the right tree the next figure, more or less this size:



– Take as many 35 mm slides as you can of the carving and its result.

Yours truly,

Juan Pablo Macias

24.04.2013

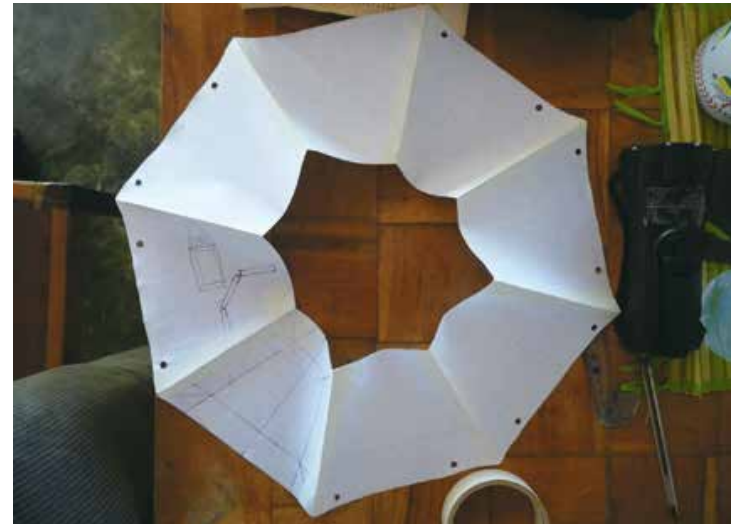






## Dejode & Lacombe

*That's How Strong My Love Is*

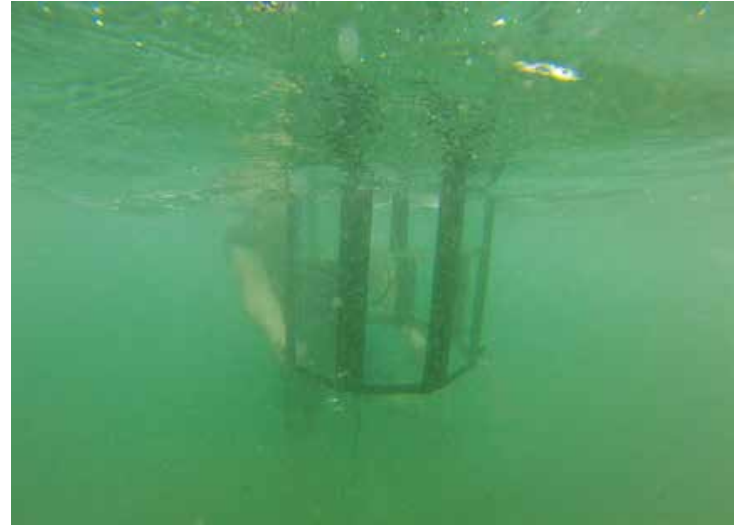


*That's How Strong My Love Is* is an underwater installation. The idea is to illuminate the underwater depths by means of a lantern secured under the water. On the surface of the reef, a lifeguard's chair is fixed into concrete. You climb up there at nightfall, before the tide is so high that you cannot return to the island on foot. Isolated in the dark, the solitary observer can contemplate the underwater fauna attracted by the light of the candle.

Sophie Dejode and Bertrand Lacombe











OCTOBER 2013. In the wake of a rumour, collective madness overtakes a crowd, which lynches an Italian, a Frenchman and a Madagascan by burning them alive on a Nosy Be tourist beach. This tragic event leads me to ponder the meaning of sacrifice. Till then I had considered the sacrifices and rites practised on the island in the light of folklore (with all the respect that deserves). But I had not grasped either the meaning or the importance of these sacrifices and each time I had questioned Papa about them, he was very vague. Reading René Girard enlightens me about these events (among other things) and about the way sacrifice lies at the origins of culture.

This goes right at the heart of my research. The tragic event that has just occurred seems to be what Girard calls a 'mimetic crisis' functioning through a 'scapegoat mechanism'.

The ritual that we have performed on the island is its symbolic second act, the one by which pardon is sought. By a kind of mimeticism, the killing is ritualised through the sacrifice of an animal, showing that a new awareness of the crisis has come into being and asking forgiveness of the spirits. Then the animal is shared just as the blame is shared. We thank the animal for nourishing us and the spirits for forgiving us. The sharing of the awareness of the blame incarnated by the sacrifice of the animal feeds us literally and metaphorically and absolves us.

Here the history of the world is played out again.

**SACRIFICE** (from the Latin, *sacrificium*, 'the act of making sacred') ♦ a real or symbolic offering to one or more divinities.

**RITE** a set of rules and ceremonies used in a religion or a society. It is a ceremony of sacred or symbolic kind, involving sets of acts, words and objects that are strictly codified and befit specific situations in life, as regulated by custom or law.

**SCAPEGOAT MECHANISM** According to René Girard, if two individuals desire the same thing, there will soon be other people who desire it. The object itself is quickly forgotten. As the mimetic rivalries become more acute, the rivals tend to forget the objects that were the source of the rivalry and are more and more fascinated by each other. This is a stage of hate-filled fascination and the selection of antagonists

becomes more and more random, unstable and volatile; one individual's characteristics may make him or her a focus of violence. Once this polarisation has begun, it gathers force mimetically and snowballs: the entire community then finds itself unanimously ranged against a single individual. Thus the paroxysmic violence will tend to focus on an unanimously chosen arbitrary victim. The elimination of the victim abruptly removes the appetite for violence that possessed everyone the instant before, leaving the group suddenly appeased and stupefied. The victim lies before the group as both the cause of the crisis and the agent of a miracle: the return of peace. The victim thus becomes sacred, that is, fraught with the prodigious power

of unleashing the crisis and restoring peace. What Girard has discovered here is the genesis of archaic religion, of ritual sacrifice as the repetition of the originating event, of myth as the narrative of this event, and of taboos which prohibit access to all the objects in which the rivalries originated that degenerated into this traumatising crisis. This religious development gradually occurs over the course of successive mimetic crises, whose resolution brings only temporary peace. The elaboration of rights and taboos constitutes a sort of empirical knowledge about violence.

**DESIRE** the effort to reduce tension caused by a feeling of need.





Lucille Uhrich

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*An Island*

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There exists on this globe, off the shore of a larger island, a second island, behind which can be seen a very small island, no bigger than a fantasy. This third island is home to the new artistic project by Mathieu Briand. But it also clogs up our western thinking as a grain of sand jams up a set of cogs.

At the mercy of poverty and the sun, the third island is set in an orbit of turquoise water and surrounded by polychrome coral and rugged, black volcanic rocks. On its soil, a tropical and luxuriant nature tolerates a family whose isolation requires a neologism to define it. It is neither reclusive nor native; it constitutes a cell of eccentricity and solitude on the margins of the second island's mores. The grandfather named Papa is a sorcerer with a heartache; one of his sons has left the third island, while his second son, Saïd, remains at his side and causes all sorts of problems. Saïd looks like flabby athlete and at first sight seems a little threatening, but his abrupt manner conceals a very sensitive soul. To the advantage of our narrative but the detriment of his own life, Saïd is a bit of a character. Driven alike towards religion and alcohol, he wanders around in an atmosphere of decadence, confounding drunkenness and madness. His mischievous air and novelistic excesses amuse the inhabitants of the second island where he persists in seeking a new wife and drowning his sorrows.

On the third island, amid seashells, worn-out sandals and rusty batteries, three children play in the company of a few chickens. Two boys in a state of strange stupor go around with a much livelier little girl, who is lucky enough to go to school by dugout canoe. Behind them, in the shadows of a dilapidated cabin, you can make out a silently toiling woman whose efforts seem to hold the walls of the house upright.

This is the cast of the island as it appeared to me. Now we must add Mathieu Briand, a dugout canoe, a bungalow and contemporary art.

Yes, in the first instance, it's as unexpected as that.

This double dose of exoticism is nevertheless more unilateral than it seems; we white people are nothing extraordinary here. We belong to a family of which I had never before heard: the *wasas*. Etymologically the term *was* means 'white', but metaphorically it is infinitely more fraught. During my stay, I embodied no more than these two syllables, signifying colour and a reputation burdensome as a traveller's trunk.

The population of the first and second island is caught up in the nets of corruption and for the time being nothing there happens legally: the rights of the first-comer shamelessly prevail and arbitrary laws arise that seem never to acquire documentary form. One hears fragments of regulation scamper one after another like rustlings in the brush.

From this point of view, Mathieu's settling on the third island takes on an air of conquest. His artistic project resembles the universe of piracy in a number of ways and the clichés of the genre are not exactly put to bed when he wanders off in his dugout canoe wearing a three-cornered hat and a broad smile. But the fantasy novel that his project scatters to the winds conceals a more complex perspective. Any anecdotal or salty aspects are brought down to earth by a pre-eminent factor: economic reality. Let us be clear, Mathieu's presence keeps the third-island family alive; this is what gives him his residence permit. This reality is pink like the setting sun, that is, halfway between day and night. What we might call Mathieu's *wasa* power exacerbates Saïd's changeability: his moods fluctuate between gratitude and anger. This confusion has two sources: a principled refusal to depend on others, and the unbearable experience of cohabitation with our standard of living – *wasa* money explodes every category of Madagascan thought. In Saïd's eyes, Mathieu is at once Bill Gates, Barack Obama and Mother Teresa. In caricatural form, he embodies the possibility of being housed, cared for, clothed and educated. Despite these formidable merits, Mathieu remains a strange kind of neighbour: his carefully rationed aid is confined to the elementary while he himself enjoys a futile and very strange activity. Digging a hole in a surprising shape, making a path, engraving a tree, placing a work underwater... Saïd vainly tries to channel his incomprehension relative to an art that passes his understanding and, depending on his moods, he excels as 'good friend' or adversary. His mood shifts replay on a microcosmic scale the vicissitudes of tourism in developing countries, with the difference that here events centre on the niche market of art.

### **An Artistic Project**

The day we arrive, Saïd noisily and vehemently admits that he is behind the disappearance of a little something – a work. He has thrown all the books from Thomas Hirschorn's bookcase into the ocean and the explanations that he bellows in our faces get bogged down in excuses: the books were 'live' and anyway he was drunk and ill and therefore a victim.

Overwhelmed by his status as a 'bad son', Saïd yells at the top of his voice, '*moi je connais bien*' (I know), hoping in this way to reassure us of his common sense but also of the religious nature of his gesture. The more his explanations contradict one another, the more depressed he becomes. His embarrassment haunts me day after day and I don't know whether I am more moved by the strange political poetry of his gesture or by the emotional shambles of his explanation. The subject of the disappearing books is nothing compared to the quantity of misfortunes that have marked this project. We would need a cross between calendar and novel to represent the chronophagic monster that Mathieu has invented. As the weeks go by, the extent of the work hypnotises me like a documentary filmed in real time. I move about in a zoom to the power of zoom and every detail is distended by the precariousness, the torpor, the humidity and palaver.

Between chance disappointments and exhilarated dilapidation, Mathieu finds himself forced to repeat the same gestures: three times he repairs the same well, four times installs the same piping, twice has the same dustbin-hole dug, buys one dugout canoe, then a second, and sees the third one sink – the one built by his friend Christophe. These misfortunes are no sooner encountered than they have ceased to exist... Unless Mathieu deigns to tell their story. But our pirate is delighted by our gaping curiosity and joyfully exclaims, 'Storytelling!' What an exuberant provocation it is, introducing fiction into so torrid a reality. When Mathieu challenges my intellectual faculties with this word, I feel a cold sweat gathering: I'm afraid I'm hallucinating. And when I wonder about the need for documentation or traceability, Mathieu looks off into the distance and implies that I don't yet understand the real destination of the voyage. Then I feel like one of the fifteenth-century sailors en route for the Indies and my intuition tells me that a surprise awaits me when we arrive. At that point, I become aware that I'm taking part in an expedition whose existence is partly a *vanitas* – one within which events will, more than ever, tend to disappear or take on mythical form.

At different hours of the day, I let myself be stunned by the 'Fitzcarraldesque' character of the project or excited by our common interest in advancing the limits of perception, coveting the inaccessible, playing with the unverifiable, and dipping our toes in provocation. The titanic size of the project opens vast fields of interpretation and makes room for contraries of a crazy kind. In particular, the project makes Mathieu both master and slave. Leafing through the catalogues of his exhibitions, I find myself familiar with the lexical field but am unable to make a specific interpretation of it; I simply recognise the ambivalent condition



of liberty and creation. Faced with the tropics, my thought processes lose all their ballast; they drift away and each new consideration tilts the balance in a contradictory direction. Even though I can now imagine the aesthetic criteria that I will acknowledge when I see the exhibition at La maison rouge, at the moment I no longer know to look at the work of art. The island possesses me, Saïd skulks and I examine with a degree of fascination Mathieu's energy, which nothing can disorientate.

What can be made to last on an island ravaged by obsolescence and the impetuosity of a wholly uncontrollable neighbour? And how much of this insular reality can reach an exhibition space? The issues of archiving and the idea of reconstituting this experience through form fills me with a sensation of nothingness, somewhere between barely recalled references and emotional shock. I see my yellowing memories of the imaginary museum, of the ritual of the serpent, of *Lost in La Mancha*, *Cobra Verde* or *The Five Obstructions* all jumbled up on the sand...

Over the course of the next few months, works appear and disappear on the island in just the same way as the present moment piles up in impenetrable reefs.

I bring back from my stay an intense sense of human adventure and, more than anything else, a new mental amplitude, within which I explore ideas endlessly undercut by paradox. Ever since, I have been impatiently waiting to see this flow-of-experience transformed into an exhibition at La maison rouge – or to give up what I know in favour of elsewhere.

**FITZCARRALDO** a film by the German director Werner Herzog, released in 1982. Fitzcarraldo, whose real name was Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald, arrives in Manaus with his partner Molly, having navigated 2000 kilometres down the Amazonian rivers in order to hear Enrico Caruso. A devotee of opera, he dreams of constructing an opera house at Iquitos, in the middle of the Peruvian jungle, where Sarah Bernhardt can appear and Caruso interpret Verdi. Since his ice-block manufacture is insufficiently lucrative to finance the operation, he buys a concession on the river Ucayli to exploit rubber from *Hevea brasiliensis*, the rubber tree. He purchases a boat from a competitor and begins recruiting

a crew. With his boat patched up and re-commissioned, he begins a long voyage upriver during which they encounter the Shuar people, who are seduced by Caruso's voice from the phonograph. Though they do not believe that Fitzcarraldo is the 'White God' described by their myths, they know that the white chariot can be useful to them in appeasing the demons of the rapids. The rubber concession is on a different river but the two riverbeds are separated only by a hill. The Amerindians agree to realise Fitzcarraldo's mad idea: to flatten the hill and winch the ship over to the other river. Finally, the Indian chief cuts the moorings and, after a perilous descent of the river, Fitzcarraldo finds himself back where he began.



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DECEMBER 2013

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DECEMBER 2013. When we arrive, I know that Juan Pablo's work has been deliberately effaced and that Gabriel Kuri's hole has naturally disappeared as its negative gradually collapsed.

We construct a piece of architecture by Rudy Ricciotti: a monumental roof laid directly on the ground.

In my studio, I begin a work by Gilles Mahé and Yvan Salomone (made and donated by the latter). This poster is a story of friendship.

The Chapuisat Brothers (Grégory Chapuisat is accompanied by his assistant Mathieu Girard) come and set up hammocks in a tree.

The family still finds it difficult to understand that I can help them by producing these works, and that everything is connected. My principal and original goal, to which I am still committed, is not to help them but to find a system that allows us to help each other. And that paradoxically takes the form of the creation of ephemeral works which require a lot of money and energy.













## The Chapuisat Brothers

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### *Hammock Tree*

'Around 1590, hammocks were adopted for use in sailing ships; the Royal Navy formally adopted the canvas sling hammock in 1597. Aboard ship, hammocks were regularly employed for sailors sleeping on the gun decks of warships, where limited space prevented the installation of permanent bunks. Since a slung hammock moves in concert with the motion of the vessel, the occupant is not at a risk of being thrown onto the deck (which may be 5 or 6 feet below) during swells or rough seas. Likewise, a hammock provides more comfortable sleep than a bunk or a berth while at sea since the sleeper always stays well balanced, irrespective on the motion of the vessel. Prior to the adoption of naval hammocks, sailors would often be injured or even killed as they fell off their berths or rolled on the decks on heavy seas. The sides of traditional canvas naval hammocks wrap around the sleeper like a cocoon, making an inadvertent fall virtually impossible. Many sailors in the Royal Navy, during the 1950s at least, used a spreader – a length of wood with a V cut in each end to engage the second hammock string on each side. The first string was set up more tightly than the others so that it raised a protective lip along each side to keep out drafts and prevent the sleeper being thrown out. A narrow mattress was also issued which protected the user from cold from below. In addition naval hammocks could be rolled tightly and stowed in an out of the way place or in nets along the gunwale as additional protection during battle (as was the case during the age of sail). Many sailors became so accustomed to this way of sleeping that they brought their hammocks ashore with them on leave. The naval use of hammocks continued into the 20th century. During World War II, troopships sometimes employed hammocks for both naval ratings and soldiers in order to increase available space and troop carrying capacity. Many leisure sailors even today prefer hammocks over bunks because of better comfort in sleep while on the high seas. 'Hammocks have also been employed on spacecraft in order to utilize available space when not sleeping or resting. During the Apollo program, the Lunar Module was equipped with hammocks for the commander and lunar module pilot to sleep in between moonwalks.







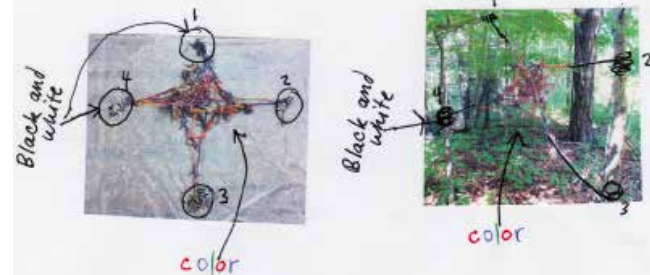


Jacin Giordano

The Catchers

Hey Mathieu,

Installing the "catchers" is pretty straight forward and you will have a lot of freedom on how to hang them. There are four "catchers," all with the same basic structure. The middle of each piece is made of colored yarn and around the edges you will find 4 "points" of black and white yarn (except the "Triangle catcher," which has 3 points of black and white yarn). You can use the black and white yarn to attach the "catchers" to the tree branches. Here are some example pics:



The main requests that I have when you install the "catchers" are: keep them within close proximity. They don't have to be touching, but they should all be seen together from a distance. The "star catcher" should face East, in order to catch the sun's light as the day begins and the "triangle catcher" should face West, to catch the last of the sun's light before it sets. The two "square catchers" can be arranged between the "star" and "triangle." Otherwise take any liberties you like or need to install the works. There is no specific orientation of up/down, left/right or back/front. Hang them in any direction you see fit. And thanks for including me in this project.

— Jacin







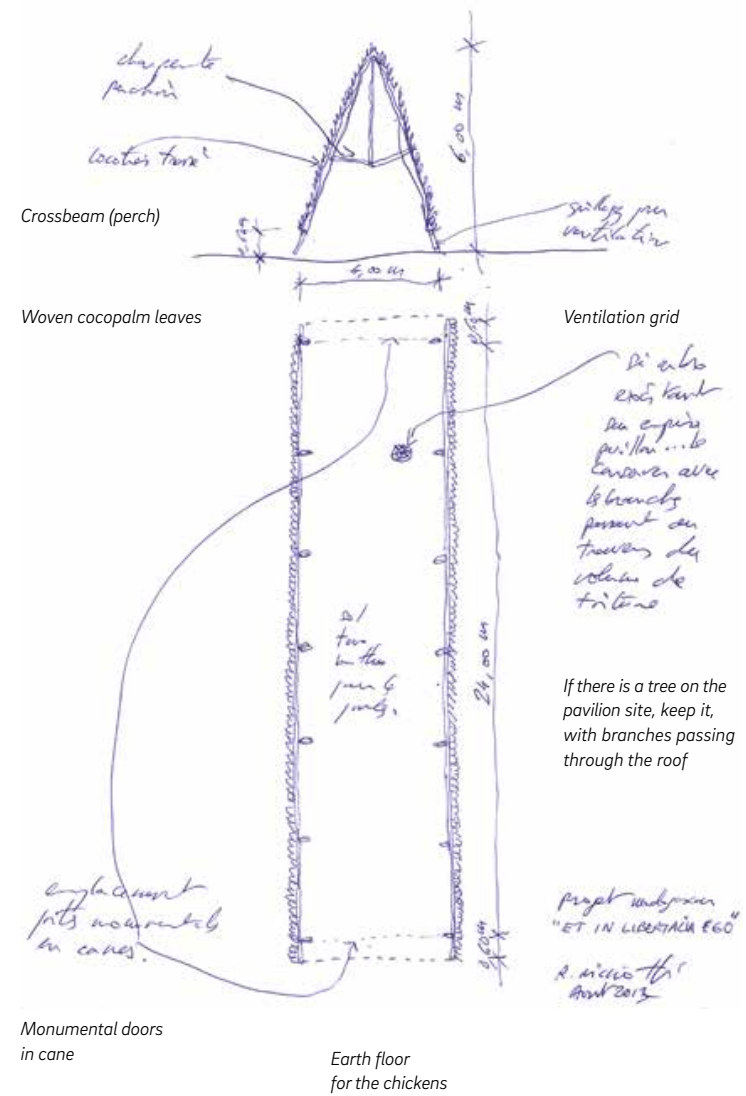






Rudy Ricciotti

Shelter





















Yvan Salomone and Gilles Mahé

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*Copy*



Gilles is here, Rudy too, you and me... my island is a square, perhaps a rectangle that warps in the humid air.

Yvan Salomone





MAY 2014



MAY 2014. I organise a big session on the island with Mike Nelson, Prue Lang and Richard Siegal, Koo Jeong A., as invited artists. We are accompanied by Christophe Perez, 'the Otter'.

Pierre Pauze, a young artist who leads projects in Madagascar, comes to join us en route.

Gabriel Kuri's hole has finally refilled itself. The rest of the works are there but in a state of advanced decay from natural causes.

Someone has made an installation during our absence ... I later learn that this was Saïd's brother.







We organise a big party to celebrate the fact that we are all here on the island and reunited with the family.

Francis Alÿs's participation takes material form in a straw mat imprinted with a stylised drawing of a finger held to lips in a 'shhh' gesture. I install it in the entrance to my studio. We don't know whether it is ordering us to be silent or to keep what's happening on the island quiet, as if all this stuff should stay hidden.

Prue Lang and Richard Siegal do a performance for the family. At first the family are silent but then burst out laughing. This is not the laughter of mockery but of communion. A simple moment but a very strong one. A powerful song is raised: 'They are at home with us and we are at home with them'. I'm deeply touched.



**Francis Alÿs**

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*Silencio*







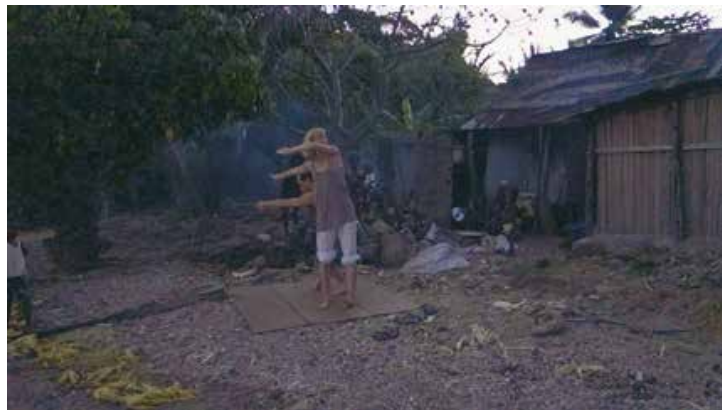
## Prue Lang & Richard Siegal

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*Performances for the Family*







That night, a snake blocks my path.

The next day, the gendarmerie comes to the island and expels all of us, including the family, *manu militari*.

A Frenchman has sued Papa for swindling him. Papa is said to have sold him the island long ago.

We have to leave immediately escorted by armed men and we no longer have the right to return to the island. Saïd and other members of his family try to defend themselves and are thrown into prison.

Throughout the years, I've been told dozens of incredible stories about the ownership of the island. I'd decided not to get mixed up in it, to let chaos follow its course, and that has been fine till now.

It's an extraordinary 'coincidence' that this expulsion should occur while we are here, given that the verdict was handed down four years before and had never been implemented. The 'coincidence' allows us to help the family to react immediately, in fact, on the last day when appeal is still possible. Acting for the family, we bring a legal action to defend the unjustly imprisoned family members and have them released.













The case as a whole reflects the state of our societies: power, money and corruption are implacable towards the penniless; law is the armed instrument of a new form of colonisation.

Is it possible to free ourselves from what seems the inevitable fate of our common history? Papa is always saying, 'Black skin, white skin, red blood, all of us the same'.

A strange atmosphere prevails after this expulsion.

Mike Nelson makes a duplicate of the island on the beach; it slowly disappears. Koo seems to be afflicted with deep thoughts and inner tensions.

The island is right under our noses, we've all made considerable efforts to be here and now access is forbidden. It's very frustrating.

As a result, many questions come to the surface about to our presence here, our status as artists, indeed our very function. We count for little. What we do has no value here. We are useful principally because we are here at the decisive moment and capable of reacting to the situation. We originally organised the session around Mike, it took us two years to find a time when Mike could come to the island, and our expulsion has occurred on precisely those dates.

The story is unfolding before us and involves us.

We must go with the current or be drowned. This is a story whose director is chaos itself.

One event drives out another. But here everything is concentrated, which makes the whole thing more visible and so more violent.

I know that behind these new events, there is a parallel history, which has to do with the sacred.

**Mike Nelson**

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*About Land (in conclusion)*













### We ask the spirits to enlighten and support us.

Djella's friend, Jimmy, is a *Tromba*. He's willing to help us in exchange for a certain number of promises that must be kept. We have to believe. Belief makes us act. I have asked the family to believe in what I believe in: art. Now I owe it to myself to believe in what they believe: magic, spirits, the sacred.

The *Tromba* tells me that I've been 'bewitched' by the family through the image of the island and that I am now linked to them. He explains to me that Papa has stopped conducting any rituals for the ancestors other than our rites and has thus departed from his duty. As a result, the island has ultimately expelled him.

He explains to me that the snake blocking my path the day before the expulsion was a sign, like the chameleon I saw near my studio.

He takes us to a sacred waterfall. On the way, I start to follow a different path to the others but a snake crosses my path again. This is the second time in two days, whereas I had never previously encountered a single one.

The *Fomba* involves rituals of washing, prayers and vows.

The *Tromba* gives us coins with the power to protect us. One of these is a 'Hercule', a silver five-franc coin stamped with motto 'liberté, égalité, fraternité'. It dates from the period when Madagascar was a French colony... I feel as though I have fallen into *Les Maîtres Fous* / *The Mad Masters*, a film that made a big impression on me when I was studying art.

















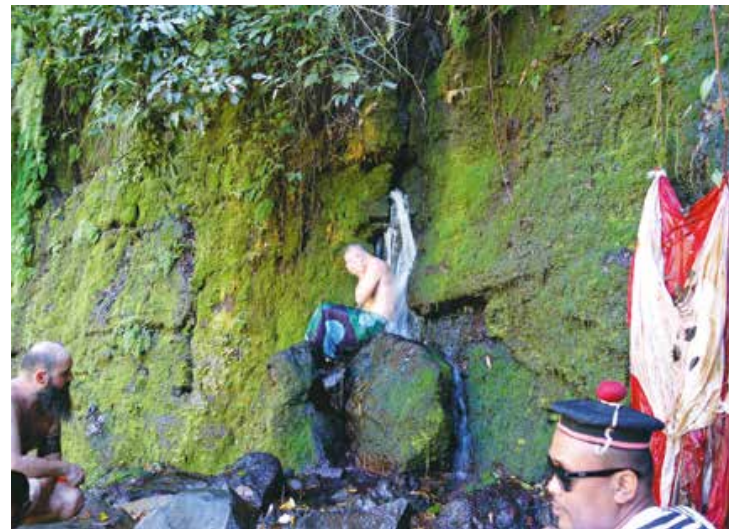


















**Koo Jeong A.**

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freedom of movement and cross-pollination  
are crucial principles  
in an innovated society like twenty-first century  
on an earth to arise further quality,  
in the end for our shining living,  
shining living  
Koo Jeong A.





The island is still forbidden territory but we secretly return there with Prue Lang and Mike Nelson. Without the family, it is a ghost island. My feeling of disquiet is enhanced when I notice that boundary markers have been set up on the island by the government.

The *Tromba* said that I must now do things by myself, first and foremost a *Fomba* at the sacred tree, so that the island returns to us.

While Mike Nelson sets up his work and Prue Lang does a performance, I perform the *Fomba* under the sacred tree.











**Mike Nelson**

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*Totem Witness*  
(for the Bailiffs and the Shaman)













## Prue Lang

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### *Performance for the Island*



During my visit to the island, the only way I really felt that I could communicate honestly was through movement. The course of events continually unfolded in opposing directions, as did the constant rise and fall of the tide, making our visits to the island sporadic and unique.

On the one hand I felt unfamiliarity, a lack of deep understanding and confusion. On the other hand a familiar warm environment, a mutual curiosity and eventual complicity. For this reason I felt that my moving body could act as a kind of membrane – an active and autonomous structure between the various zones – through which I could absorb, act, react, experiment and create on and around the island.

Prue Lang
















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THE FOLLOWING MONTH, after our first victory in the courtroom, Saïd and his cousins are freed from prison.

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**TROMBA** a manifestation of possession very common in northwest Madagascar and in the Comoro islands. The term refers both to the ritual and to the person possessed, who embodies a dead person. A prestigious ancestor speaks through the mouth of the possessed, advising the living, and its verdict is irrevocable. The person possessed is a significant protagonist, since, through trance, he or she becomes an intermediary between the living and the dead.

**FOMBA** ('custom' in Malagasy) ♦ ceremony organized to define a ritual act.

**THE MAD MASTERS** an ethnographic documentary made by Jean Rouch, released in 1955. This short film illustrates the ritual practices of the religious sect of the Haoukas, poor immigrants in Accra (Ghana). In these rites, colonial figures (the governor, the captain's wife, the engine driver, etc.) are incarnated in trance; the rituals are organised around a public confession, frenzied choreography and animal sacrifice (chickens and dogs).

**BOUNDARY MARKERS** material signs placed to mark the limits of property.



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SEPTEMBER 2014

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SEPTEMBER 2014. We return to Nosy Be with Christophe Perez, aka 'the Otter' in order to pick up the document rescinding the expulsion verdict, – another victory – has allowed the family to resettle on the island.



2 images in low resolution!





image in low resolution!



















image in low resolution!



**From micro to macro.**

We must allow time to pass if we are to discover the space and understand it as a whole. The more time goes by, the more space expands.

To focus on the moment is to focus on a tiny part of the event and consequently run the risk of having a confined interpretation of it. Therefore one must stand back. Stand back and observe.

The coup d'état, the destruction of the works, this expulsion and all the serious and less serious events that we have experienced – they are many – have allowed access to concealed things for which I had long been searching. They reveal themselves in situations I thought insuperable but which have been solved by the passage of time.

We've lived together, the family, the artists, the friends, these ordeals, this adventure. We have made Libertalia. We are making Libertalia.

Libertalia is a collection not of principles but of actions. And when we act, we must think about this: am I a free man? Libertalia is not a physical territory, since actions have no territory. To that extent, Libertalia need not exist in reality. Libertalia is a self-sufficient concept, the concept of liberty and Libertalia, just as liberty is a state of mind. Libertalia spreads. It is for everyone to carry within them their own utopia, take the risk and through it discover themselves as sometimes hero, sometimes wretch.

When last we heard, Papa had performed a *joro* during which he sacrificed a zebu to ask the spirits to conserve the island.

To date, the family are still on Libertalia.



new format, this is the original in higher resolution,  
please send it to the engraver





FEBRUARY 2015. The first exhibition related to this project was shown at La maison rouge, Paris. The second will take place at Mona, in Tasmania.

The first exhibition worked by contrasting what was happening on the island in Madagascar with the book that you now hold in your hands. The comparison highlighted everything that separated the exhibition space from the island space. 'Here' (the exhibition) could not be the same as 'there' (the island) and vice-versa; this was the paradox I wanted to foreground: the space between these two localised and defined situations in a space of personal and private experience.

That first exhibition also worked – in inverse fashion – by association. The word 'exhibition' was replaced by the word 'project', meaning that the book, the exhibition and the actions on the island were all one and the same thing. So a single title was used to define all of them: *Et In Libertalia Ego*. Each element of the project was both a critical mirror and a piece of the puzzle.

The second exhibition, to be held at Mona, has revealed its own dual and dream-like origin, plunging it into a spatio-temporal no-man's-land. While this exhibition is running, I plan to go to Madagascar and display photos of both the Mona and La maison rouge exhibitions in my island studio. On my return, I will then display in my 'studio' at Mona photos of this process.

To this end, I will to organise a *fomba*/exhibition in Madagascar lasting three days. During this time, a zebu will be sacrificed on a painting entitled *Colosse Zébu / Zebu Colossus* that was exhibited at La maison rouge. I will then re-exhibit the painting, marked by this action, at Mona.

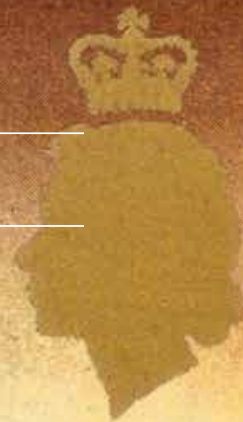
For the first time, the two abstractions, magic and art, will be united in time and space, with the painting as their witness.





PITCAIRN ISLAND

MAY 2015



PITCAIRN ISLANDS

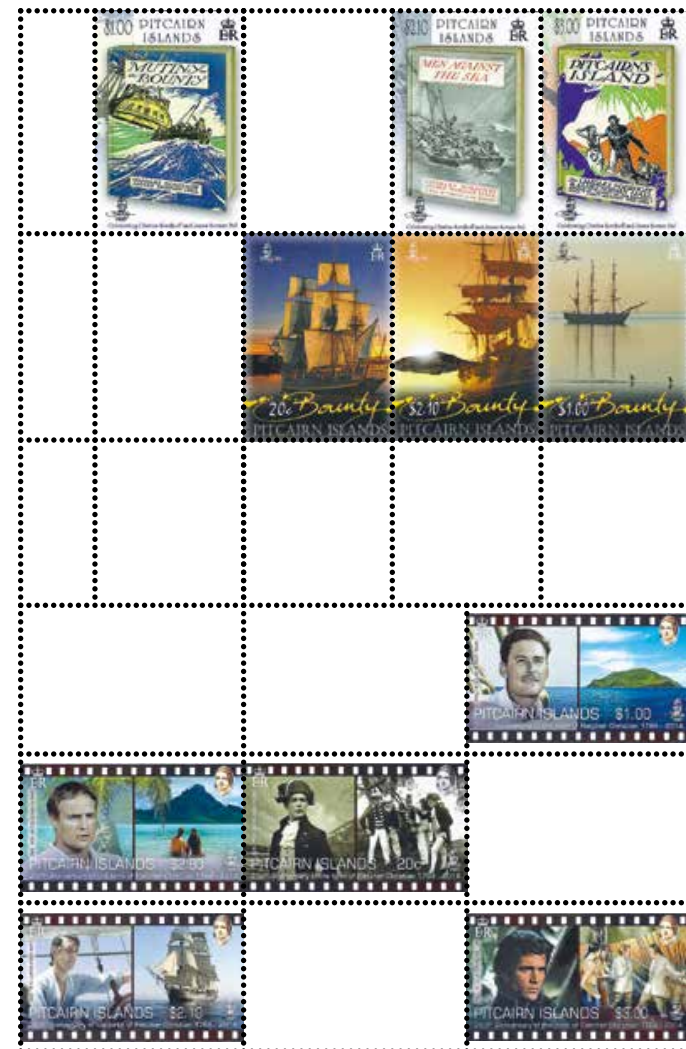
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*One night, when I was on the island in Madagascar, I dreamt that I was sailing a doomed boat. We had to harvest plants in paradise to feed the slaves in hell. When we reached paradise, sirens seduced us and distracted us from our terrible purpose. We broke our chains and steered for a place that did not exist. Though full of good intentions, we were possessed by madness and eventually killed one another with unspeakable violence.*

It was while discussing Libertalia that I learnt my dream had been realised on Pitcairn Island, where the *Bounty* mutineers had ended up.

Like everyone else, I knew the story of the mutiny on the *Bounty* through Hollywood films. But the films so misrepresent the reality of the event that I associated this narrative with a fairytale, a myth, something remote and long lost in romanticism.

In each of the films, the spotlight is on the mutiny itself: on its causes and dénouement rather than its consequences. No emphasis is given to the fact that the *Bounty* was involved in the worst abomination of the time: slavery. The films highlight the rejection of authority – of the immutable royal authority – by seagoing peasants who stumble upon an indolent life under the sun with nothing more to do than to make love to exotic women in a tropical paradise.





The *Bounty* was chartered by the British Admiralty to collect breadfruit trees in Tahiti so that they could be planted in the West Indies and feed the slaves working on the British sugar plantations.

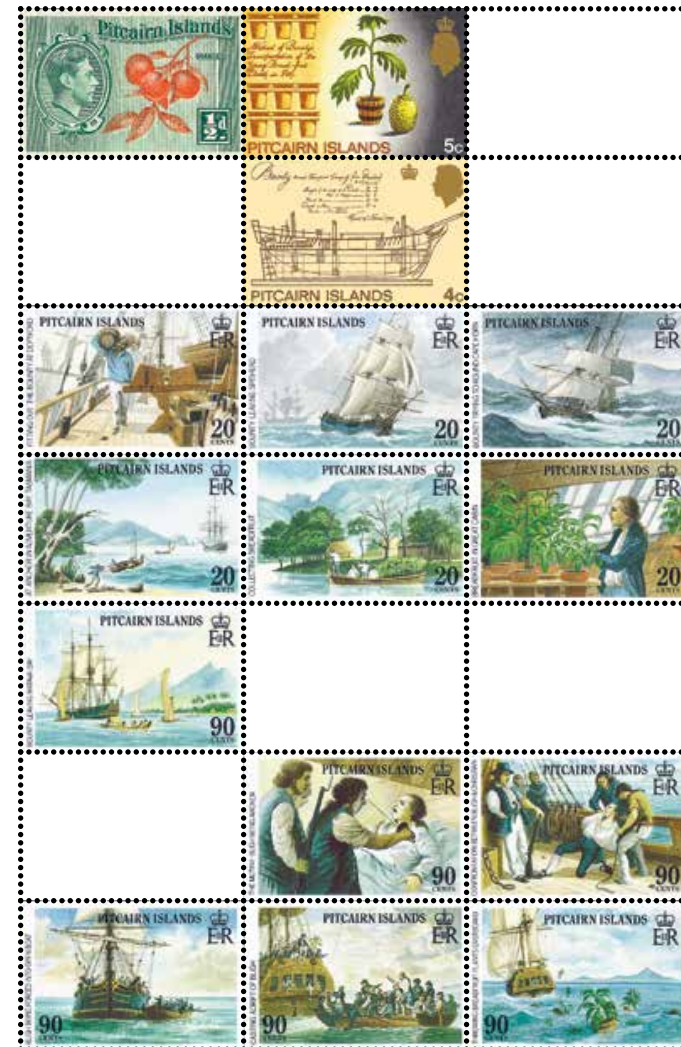
Capitalism, in the form of colonialism and slavery, was in full swing. This was the order of things. In the late eighteenth century, piracy had been defeated and the hopes of certain men had been dashed by its defeat.

On 23 December 1787, the ship set sail for Tahiti. It arrived, after ten months at sea, on 25 October 1788.

Soon, many of the crewmen had fallen under the spell of the Tahitian women. The men remained in Tahiti for several months, time enough to acclimatise to a life without constraint or discipline.

On the return voyage, the living space on the ship was reduced to make room for the breadfruit trees. Tensions rose.

One of the crew, Fletcher Christian, led what I call 'the other revolution'. The date was 28 April 1789. Along with other disaffected crewmen, Christian seized control of the *Bounty* and set Captain William Bligh and eighteen loyalists adrift in the *Bounty*'s launch.







McCoy, who had once worked in a distillery, discovered how to brew a potent spirit from the roots of the ti plant.

By 1799, Quintal had been killed by Young and Adams in self-defence and McCoy had drowned himself. The two remaining men decided to found a new and more equitable society, inspired by a Bible discovered in the remains of the *Bounty*, which they used to teach religion and English to the children of the island. Adams instituted a system of law that is still observed in the twenty-first century. Then, in 1800, Young died of asthma.

When the American ship *Topaz* reached Pitcairn in 1808, John Adams was the sole survivor of the *Bounty* mutineers and stood at the head of a community composed mainly of women and children.

I find the historical and narrative similarities between Pitcairn and Libertalia extraordinary.

When I learn that some fifty descendants of the mutineers and their Tahitian wives are still living on the island, I become obsessed by the potential this affords and think of a myriad different projects.

I imagine Fletcher Christian reading the bestseller of the time, *A History of the Pyrates, Vol. II*, which contained the story of Libertalia, and dreaming of its existence to the point where he set out to make a reality of it. Here was Christian, some seventy years after the book was published, seeking an alternative reality in which Libertalia could exist at another time and in another place, exploiting a hole in space-time to take shape in the middle of the Pacific in 1790.

History has more than one avenue and I understand that people find this disconcerting.

I realise I have to go to Pitcairn to check out the reality and see what has become of my dream.







There is one town, Adamstown, where there is a small school and health centre.

An irony of fate: in 1838, Pitcairn became the only British territory in the region because the mutineers were British.

Pitcairn nevertheless has its own government, making it the smallest country in the world. A kind of aristocracy, based on direct line of descent from the mutineers, effectively holds sway.

Religion on Pitcairn is Seventh-day Adventist, which established itself on the island by turning the early islanders' error into a sign; the mutineers had made a calendar error and were living one day in advance. Thus their Sunday was in fact a Saturday, the day considered by the Adventists as the Sabbath or day of rest. The inhabitants long remained under the authority of the Adventists but this has now declined.

The island was self-sufficient at one stage, but is now supplied by air and sea, and is connected to the world by the latest communications technology, though this is very expensive.







Traditional crafts soon became a financial resource as they were sold to tourists on passing cruise ships. Today, that is their only purpose, although the number of passing cruise ships has declined.

One of the island's main sources of income is the sale of postage stamps. The Pitcairn Island Philatelic Bureau has issued stamps since 1940.

More recently, the islanders have sold Pitcairn domain names. They have also started to produce honey.

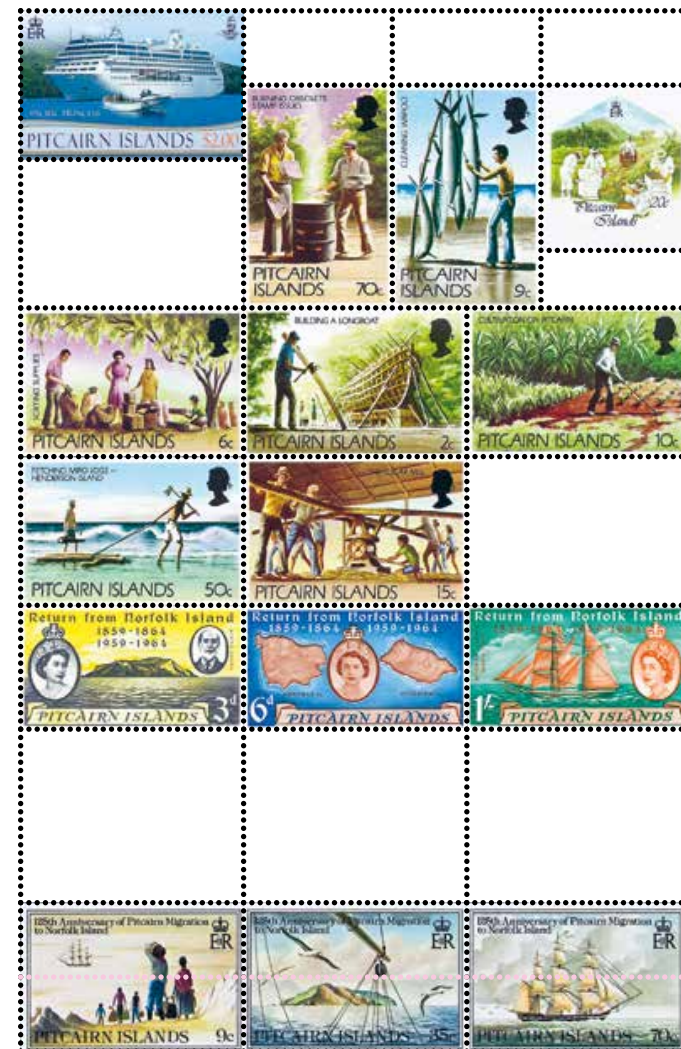
There are no taxes on the island. Part of the population is employed by the British government. They also receive European aid.

Though some of the inhabitants seem well off, surviving on this remote island a permanent struggle. The community is inexorably declining in numbers and the burden of work to keep things as they are is enormous. Periodically, foreign workers are employed on the island, and the islanders are vainly attempting to attract more immigrants. We are a long way from the time when Pitcairn was overpopulated and the islanders asked Queen Victoria to help them. They emigrated to Norfolk Island after the prison there had been emptied and its occupants sent to Tasmania. But some of the emigrants were unable to adapt to life on Norfolk Island and returned to Pitcairn.

Today, Pitcairn looks like a huge abandoned building site. Construction machinery, sheds and materials can be found of every part of the island.

Projects seem to begin and are then abandoned in favour of others as power shifts and resources become available. There is no discernible overall control or direction. You can spend the entire day walking and scarcely meet anyone; installations and public spaces are everywhere, but with no one to use them. This leaves a terrible sensation of emptiness on the island, as though a thousand people had been there the night before and were going to return the next day.

Pitcairn has no clearly defined plans and finds it difficult to situate itself outside its own ill-identified heritage.



Pitcairn Islanders have a very problematic sense of identity, a fact that has become ever more evident as the population has declined.

Though they live in the middle of the Pacific, surrounded by a millenarian Polynesian culture from which they too descend, the identity they assert is English.

They have chosen a cultural past that is limited and defined by its foundational act, the mutiny on the *Bounty*. This choice closes them off from any possibility of projecting themselves into the future and limits their past to an act that they have inherited but for which they are not responsible.

They have reinforced this sense of enclosure by accepting the authority of an external government representing the country that their ancestors denied and defied.

They seem to have 'forgotten' the origin of the mutiny and do not connect with the ideals with which the island was founded, and the mutineers' hopes that Pitcairn could become a utopia.

Libertalia was a place where an ideal was embodied. Since Pitcairn no longer connects with its original ideals, it has become a no-place that its children abandon.

There is nothing before the *Bounty*, and nothing after. I feel that the islanders are as if imprisoned physically, mentally and historically by their story, their space and their notoriety.

As in Adolfo Bioy Casares's novel *La Invención de Morel* / *Morel's Invention*, the film is played by actors who hand down their roles from generation to generation; it is shown as an endless loop with the same beginning and ending: the mutiny on the *Bounty*.





But a further consideration exacerbates our sense of anxiety about Pitcairn and its people.

In 1999 a scandal occurred that shook the community to its depths.

In the wake of a rape accusation, a large number of cases of sexual abuse came to light; they had been committed by certain men on almost all the Pitcairn women while the latter were still minors.

Some of the accused appealed to practices current and ancient, claiming in their defence that underage sex had been widely accepted as a Polynesian tradition since the settlement of the island in 1790.

They also adduced nineteenth-century English laws regulating sexual relations, in which intercourse with under-twelves was admitted. But as British subjects, they were judged under the laws current in Great Britain and sentenced accordingly.

The verdict seems designed to reassure us about our own values and to ensure that Pitcairn has none of its own. Judged by laws that were established by others and accepting their verdict, the islanders acknowledged London's powers by adopting the values on which they were based.

Even Captain Misson admitted that a higher power, to which they had to render accounts, governed his community.

All this leads me to a point concerning Libertia, one that has been obscured by the settlement's romantic quality: the place of women, and more particularly, native women. Pitcairn is my conduit to this further flaw in Libertia, for what difference is there ultimately between the women of Libertia and the Tahitian women of the *Bounty* and their descendants?

Libertia might have been a libertarian utopia in which slavery was abolished, one that preached freedom and equality for men; but women seem to have had no role in this project. On the contrary – their status there was regressive.

The combined condition of woman and native reduced women to the status of objects; men could possess several and share them. A woman's existence centred on a husband whom she had not chosen.

Thus liberty does not apply to women because they are not considered individuals. They are the hidden exceptions to the prevailing liberty.

This exception in turns leads us to another: the application of capital punishment. Though it had been unanimously rejected by the colony, an event occurred that made Libertia, speaking with one voice, announce that 'there were some exceptions to rules'. Misson's ideal was subordinated to the group interest, which imposed exceptions.

So death too is present in Libertia. *Et In Libertia Ego*.

Libertia as embodied in Pitcairn has become a physical and mental prison because it was not Libertia that was libertarian, but its story. Johnson used his book like a pirate ship to carry his ideas around the globe. No utopia can grow up in a closed space. We need others with whom to compare ourselves and correct our tendencies by a kind of inverted mimeticism. This kind of comparison leads us to consider our own values more objectively.

The better to validate his ideals, during his account of the colony, Johnson compares Libertia to another colony founded by some of his former sailors, just as we can compare our world to that of Pitcairn. But, like Misson, in such comparisons we omit our own flaws; the omission, moreover, has the reverse effect and ultimately highlights them. Unlike Pitcairn, our world is not closed.

Libertia thus stood exposed to the gaze and judgement of others, which Pitcairn seems to have avoided.

Johnson finishes his story by showing how his fixed and imperfect utopia was destroyed by natives.

In the light of this, Said's gesture in destroying my studio and the artistic works on the island in Madagascar take on a completely new meaning. For even if this action came from magical thinking, it also derived from a downright rejection of a system that he considered unjust and from which he ultimately felt excluded.





I had excused myself, hiding behind the idea that humanity is imperfect, instead of believing in its perfectibility. I had had to go outside the world in order to understand that. By replaying colonisation in critical mode I had again made it a reality.

I realise I've been lost and wonder what I'm doing in this reality with its distorting mirrors. But I begin to understand why the sacred tree had called me to the island. From the very start I have been merely the instrument of its designs.

I try to take stock of what has happened.

The family had attracted me onto the island in Madagascar, thanks to the tree, in order to help them. I had gone there to undertake an artistic project. To that end I had honoured the tree and had, unwittingly, connected myself with it.

The tree had then expelled the family because they had ceased to observe its rituals. I'd had to perform a ritual in order to request that they might be allowed to return, promising that they would start their ritual observances again. They had then been able to return to the island and keep their word.

We are all connected and our lives and actions continue their constant interaction.

I understand that I have to return to Nosy Tanga.

I understand that the only valid reality is that which you construct yourself. We have to honour the tree together and together work out a new project.

During my last days on Pitcairn, I decide to look beyond my prejudices and open up to people. Doing this, I meet touching and endearing individuals, and I have a sense of humanity stripped bare. The story of the scandal on the island is too recent for me not to feel a sense of disquiet when I meet the protagonists: the culprits and the victims still live in close proximity to one another – they are, after all, members of the same family. A malaise is everywhere, even in our own interactions with the few remaining children.

In an effort to get beyond the past, to see beyond unhappiness, to turn over a new leaf and open up to the future, suffering has its own role. And if that is what the islanders are doing, it is my duty to follow in their footsteps; one cannot imprison people in one's own perspective.

On the eve of my departure I am invited to tea by a woman who lives on the island. I take the opportunity to ask what had brought her here and why she has stayed.

She says:

*Fletcher Christian was obsessed by a tale.*

*He read this story in a book written by a captain who nobody knew,  
and Christian was obsessed by this mystery.*

*He got confused between fiction and his own reality.*

*He told this story to some sailors and to his wife Mauatua.*

*The story is about a utopia made by pirates and indigenous peoples  
on the coast of Madagascar years before.*

*Some say that is what pushed him to the mutiny.*

*But I don't know.*

*I really don't know but I never give up.*



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THE TALE

Part. III



Mathieu Briand

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SEPTEMBER 2015. I go to Nosy Be with my friend Christophe Perez, aka the Otter, with the goal of realising the *fomba*/exhibition project (see p. 284).

Two students, Rémi Buffet and Auguste Brisot, who told me they would like to go to the island, have preceded us. In addition to their own research, their mission was to carry out the protocol generously made by Annette Messenger for the children of the island.

We arrange a first meeting at my aunt's place with Koto Razamany, the spirit that inhabits our friend Jimmy – his *tromba*.

I present him, as I promised, with the book of our adventures, and the Otter presents him with a *lambouane* [colourful Malagasy cloth] that summarises it. I explain to him why we have come.







He then lends me his sailor's cap for the duration of my stay.

A connection, a sort of folding of one into the other, is created between the three-cornered hat that I wore when we first arrived and this cap, which represents the spirit of a dead sailor (Koto).

He prays for the success of our undertaking and tells us to meet him at the sacred waterfall. We purify ourselves there the following morning and pray at the foot of his sacred tree, of which we ask protection and blessings.

Koto tell us how the *fomba*/exhibition must take place.



Annette Messenger

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*The Children of Libertalia  
Are Artists*

Dear Mathieu

For the children of the island

– Ask of each of them to find their best signature (like the collection that I long ago made) and display them.

– Then they should make shadows with their bodies on a sheet stretched taut and hung outside, alone or with a few friends, their hands or their faces covered with a mask of their favourite animal – the masks will have been made beforehand with paper, carton, waste plastic, cloth, etc.

– Then they should photograph all these shadows and add their very best signature!

Regards,  
Annette Messenger









We spend our first night on the island. I have the sense that something is coming to an end. Everything is calm or, rather, appeased. Appeased after all the crises and irruptions. Papa seems happy. The island has been reorganised. Rokia and her children have taken over Saïd's house and Saïd is now living in Dzamandzar. When I come across him, he is towing behind his dugout a little boat made of bits and bobs that nevertheless contrives to look like a galleon. The simplicity and efficiency of his representation gives it a special beauty.

Ultimately it is our memories that link us to a place and to people. I realise that I now have lots of memories and that what was foreign to me is now familiar. I can consider this as an ending or simply as a phase. Time has done its work for all of us. I have now been working all but exclusively on this project for seven years. Seven years, so that our lives should be ineluctably connected.



I'm very excited about the *fomba*/exhibition but I still don't really know how it's going to happen or what effect it will have.

Here, what I find difficult is to remember that time is not synonymous with productivity. Here, time is what people need to live.

I let myself be guided. Djella takes care of the general organisation. In this way, everything falls naturally into place.





I had planned to pin up the photos of the maison rouge and Mona exhibitions in my studio but it begins to seem obvious that I should do this on the large outside wall facing the sacred tree.

At this point, I meet an artist, author and interpreter with whom Djella is working. His name is Djedje Manjary.

He bombards me with questions about what I am doing here on the island. Using the book and the images that I am putting up on the wall, I begin explaining to him.

He asks if he can keep the book and I give it to him.

He begins avidly reading it. He comes back to me with the book open on the section devoted to Thomas Hirschhorn and tells me that the four questions that Thomas wrote as an introduction resonate extraordinarily with him.

He connects perfectly with the project – it's like magic.



Then he begins to explain to the people who are arriving and gazing in fascination at the images what it is all about.

A sort of synergy is created around him.

He becomes the go-between. The fact is extraordinary, unexpected and so very necessary.

Everything becomes clear.

There is no longer any suspicion about my presence. There is simply the pleasure of being there together and proudly sharing this common history.

The exhibition has never been as true as it is here; it is as if it revealed the invisible. But this revelation was only possible through the presence of a set of elements. These deliberate or chance elements are sometimes invisible but always alive.

And so the exhibition is the corpus of all the elements, of which the exhibition itself is one.





Papa settles down under the sacred tree while I install the *Zebu Colossus* canvas at the eastern entrance. When his family members have joined him, I do so as well. They speak the phrases and then we sing.









The zebu is brought onto the canvas and placed on the ground with its head turned towards the east, coinciding with its painted double. There is a moment of silence and tension then it is sacrificed, cut up and finally shared.

The whole thing looks like a massacre.

But as in an inverted mirror, it is our society that I see reflected in this carnage. The real carnage is not here but there. If 'art is life', I must say that its contemporary habitat – within white walls – currently make me think of a coffin and its funeral prayer to the 'song of the sign' – its swansong. Reality is brutal but its negation is more brutal again. What is most brutal is to discover a truth so close at hand when it has been buried under an infinite number of filters and signs that we have created for ourselves and that we thought would help reveal it to us. *Et In Libertalia Ego*.

Yes, death is here with its brutality, and it was death that led me to Libertalia but it is not here to prove the imperfection of Utopia; it is here to remind us that Utopia means enjoying life.









Music rises from under the mango tree.

Saïd arrives and presents me with money and a bag full of fruit. Yes, I am moved. We dance together. Ultimately this is the only way in which we can fully share our joy.

Djedje shows Papa the exhibition and explains the links with the book.

Everyone is busy cooking, drinking, eating, singing and dancing. It's a party. The book is passed from hand to hand.









I think that, overall, the prevailing feeling is one of pride.

For them, pride in seeing their culture alive, inspiring and celebrated in other cultures and countries, particularly France. Pride that all that stuff was really worth explaining. Pride that our two cultures placed in common should have produced an adventure of this kind.

Pride on my part that, despite all the obstacles, we have arrived at this point of convergence, where, as Papa says, 'white skin, black skin: red blood, all of us the same'.

A thrill of happiness runs through us, the happiness of sharing and enjoying this moment absolutely together.

I can't help looking back with a new sense of distance over the path that led here.

I am proud and so grateful to those who accompanied me, both here on the island and there, during this fabulous crossing, this return to Libertalia.

To my friends, I want to say not 'goodbye' but 'see you soon'. *À bientôt!*



### Think as a pirate, act as a captain.

That's where art has taken me – or was it the sacred, or ultimately both at the same time? What is certain is that we seek a truth in everyone. There is no magic, there are only beliefs. Art comes from the sacred and allows the sacred to remain alive. And through the sacred, art questions the people who invented it.

Yes, in Libertalia art and the sacred met, and it was death that united them.

That same death that left its trace on the canvas.

But that death is there to remind us of, and to feed, life.

I believe that 'art as sign' is dead. By losing sight of its sacred origin, it has reached the limit of its projection.

It has become a potential source of meaning like everything else.

We thought we were liberating ourselves by projecting ourselves into everything and making a sign of everything. But ultimately we lost ourselves en route.

In a world dominated by the sign, we have constantly to be our own pirates (to be pirates ourselves), to foil our own signs, subvert our own thoughts and see beyond the curtain of reality; to that end, we must never consider reality as an absolute truth.

Art is an adventure that you enter through a mirror-door.

The path that art opens up first discovers and then again covers over new spaces that have become ancient, spaces of a landscape through which we pass and that changes with our own peregrinations.

Each of us must leave behind our own trail but we must do so delicately if that trail is not to become our coffin.

My aunt and Djella move out. The view on the island is different, a new perspective is afforded.





To my father for everything he handed down to me, not least a love of art.  
 To Lubna and Pearl, be free, fight to stay free and help those who are not to become free.  
 To all the Brethren and Sistren of the Coast.

My thanks to

- Sylvie Millard and Djella Jao, without whom the project could never have existed.
- Papa, who welcomed me onto the island and more generally the Voly Ary family.
- Saïd, my brother.
- the artists for their complete commitment and trust: Francis Alÿs, The Chapuisat Brothers, Jacin Giordano, Pierre Huyghe, Thomas Hirschhorn, Koo Jeong A., Gabriel Kuri, Bertrand Lacombe & Sophie Dejode, Prue Lang, Juan Pablo Macias, Annette Messenger, Gilles Mahé t, Mike Nelson, Damián Ortega, Rudy Ricciotti, Yvan Salamone, Richard Siegal, Lucille Uhlrich.
- Without them, no art; without art, no liberty.
- Antoine de Galbert, for having the courage or folly to allow me to bring this project to fruition with such generosity of means and trust.
- Paula Aisemberg for her unfailing commitment. She is the only person in my acquaintance with the gift of ubiquity ;-)
- David Walsh, the pirate of Tasmania, who invited me to moor at his landmark, Mona.
- Olivier Varenne and Nicole Durling for having followed and defended me over these last few years. Here we are.
- the entire teams at la maison rouge and Mona for their exceptional work (too many people for so little space).

- my friends Anne Emsallem and Philippe Bellitty, Luisa and Kyp Bosci for their generosity at a decisive moment.
- all those at Nosy Be who worked with us and brought me such joy and such hope.
- Jocelyne Fracheboud for her immense patience and passion during the time we spent assembling the narrative.
- Pierre-Yves Jacques for his unshakeable support over what are now so many years.
- Yannick Gonzales, Frédéric Bonnet and Sally Ross for their invaluable advice.
- the people of Pitcairn and those who helped us to organise this amazing trip: Heather Menzies, Brenda Christian and Mike Lupton Christian.
- the artists of Pitcairn who gave me theirs times: Merelda Warren (thanks for the story ;-)) and her mum Mavis, Reynold and Nola Warren a wonderful artist couple.
- my mate, Ben Speth who accompanied and put up with me on the most isolated island. We came back friends ;-)
- Lucille Uhlrich for witness and assistance despite all adversity.
- Hugo Kriegel, Mathieu Girard, Pierre Pauze, Auguste Brisot and Rémi Buffet who came to give us a hand in situ.
- my 'Otter'... My friend, what an adventure we had there. To be continued.
- all the pirates famous and anonymous for making us dream of freedom and hope for more clement times during these storm-tossed times.
- my darling for accompanying me during this long trip, and to have helped me through tempest. Thanks my artist, your continuous engagement in your work is a precious beacon in the dark nights.
- 'Fair wind, my friends!' and thank you again. Liberty! Liberty! Liberty!

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