

#4 Natascha Sadr Haghghian

De paso

8 July – 12 December 2011

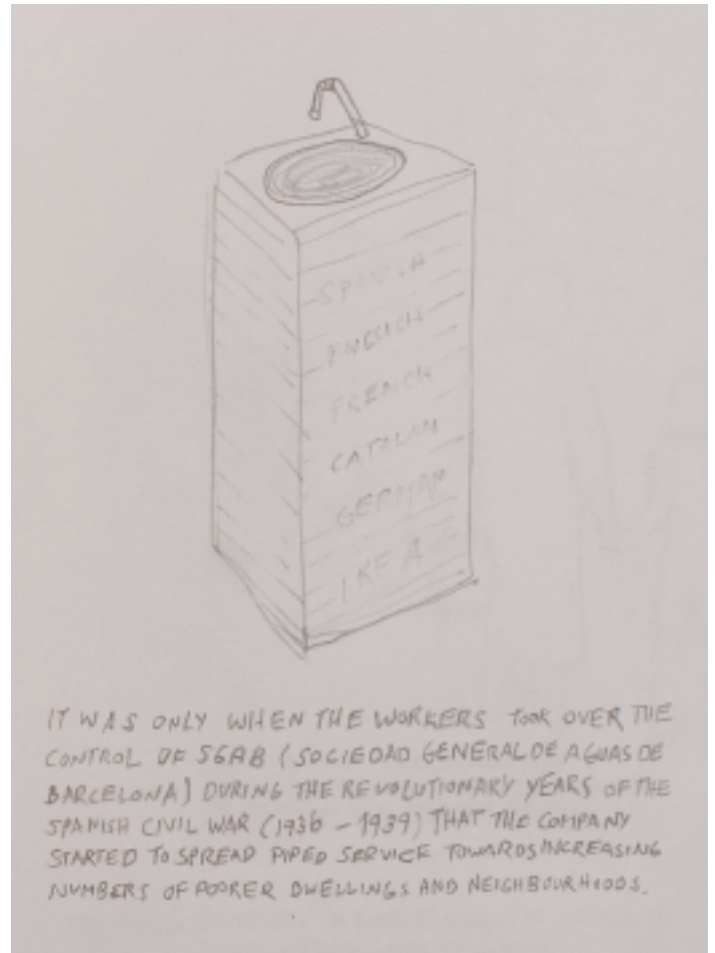
Capella MACBA

There is a generalised tendency in art to identify artists by their style, a frame of reference to help us approach and understand works of art. But one of the fundamental characteristics of the work of Natascha Sadr Haghghian is precisely the lack of an identifiable style.

Within the variety of subjects treated by the artist, there are projects related to science, such as *The Microscope* (2006), in which she investigates the construction of reality through a conversation with Evelyn Fox-Keller, professor of History and Philosophy of Science at MIT. Other projects, such as *I Can't Work Like This* (2007), deal with the difficulties of artistic production in the context of a commercial art fair, and the frustrations encountered with this type of creativity. There are also works, such as the artist's book published this year in collaboration with Ashkan Sepahvand for the 'Institute for Incongruous Translation', which look at the way students are taught to 'see' from a textbook published by the Iranian Ministry of Education, which is used to teach art in secondary schools.

Such diversity of projects, which may seem disconcerting at first, constitutes the thread that runs through a body of work that cannot be understood without taking into account the artist's way of working. Haghghian herself defines her approach as 'investigating, manoeuvring and doubting'. Through investigation and manoeuvring, Haghghian tries to understand the subjects in which she is interested while constantly doubting what she encounters. The aim of the final work is to introduce these doubts in order to provoke reflection and debate.

For Haghghian, the choice of the format of presentation is part of the process of conception of the work; and is the result of reactions and proposals that appeared during the process of investigation. The formats present the rules and hierarchies that are seemingly inherent to the systems of representation, and which can at



Natascha Sadr Haghghian, sketch for *De paso*, 2011.
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times be hidden and at times obvious. Understanding the workings of these rules pushes Haghghian to alter and destabilise them so that they may lose their authority and power and can, therefore, be questioned.

In *De paso*, Haghghian's exhibition at the Capella MACBA, the artist deals with two complex issues that are highly relevant to today's society: tourism and the privatisation of water. Through these issues, she has created an installation in which sound, as a central element, tries to provoke a reflection on these fundamental aspects of our political life.

The Capella MACBA appears empty from the outside, with only a few benches inviting us to enter and sit, offering a moment of relaxation from our current activities. As we enter, we hear sounds that interrelate with the space. Our perception of these sounds is transformed in a random manner as they mix with the sounds from the city. As we go further into the space, we realise that in each of the side chapels loudspeakers emit a different sound, albeit of the same 'family', which infiltrate and penetrate each other, until they all come together in the centre of the exhibition space. At any moment, and wherever we are standing, the sound will be different. It is a piece in continuous variation. At the end of the gallery we find the source of the sound: a trolley bag crushing a plastic bottle of mineral water.

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) defines tourists as people who 'travel to and stay in places outside

their usual environment for more than twenty-four hours and not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited'. Tourism has increased from 25-million arrivals in 1950 to 806-million in 2005, and, according to the latest 2011 data, the figures continue to climb.

This is a phenomenon that is currently being experienced by cities such as Barcelona and Berlin (where Haghghian lives and works). For the artist, it is impossible to talk of these cities without mentioning the pilgrimages of people with trolleys going from the airport to the city centre, a circumstance that has been accentuated by the rise of low-cost companies that have, on occasions, turned travelling into some sort of obligation. Added to that, we have that icon of modern life: the bottle of mineral water, indispensable for coping with the suffocating heat of the tarmac at midday or early afternoon, or for preventing a bout of dehydration that could so easily ruin our happy urban holiday.

The bottle of water symbolises another fact: the privatisation of water. The industrialisation and commercialisation of water has led to the wholesale buying of natural sources by big companies in the food sector. In 1998, our country consumed about 80 litres of bottled water per person; today we are approaching the so-called 'market maturity', with approximately 120 litres per person a year, according to the International Bottled Water Association. These figures give us an idea of the sector's huge environmental impact, in terms of residues, resources and energy. Then there is the transport to the final consumer and the petroleum by-products that are used to manufacture the bottles, of which only 20% of the total volume is recycled. While it is true that the tradition of bottled water is not a recent phenomenon (European springs began to bottle water as early as the sixteenth century), it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that it began to be commercialised in the United States as a popular consumer product. Nowadays, the market for bottled water plays an important part in our economy.

Drinking fountains were once a common water supply for most people. The sculpture resembling a drinking fountain in the adjacent Renaissance chapel at the Capella MACBA is reminiscent of this tradition. At times, water facilities even became a political symbol, as during the three years of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), when the Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona (SGAB) was controlled and collectivised by the anarchists. For the first time, water pipes were extended to the poorest neighbourhoods and water became a symbol of freedom. Among the members of the International Brigades who came to Barcelona at that time, whether to fight with the Republicans or to record the events, were David Seymour and George Orwell, both of whom documented that period in the form of photographs and writings. Among such documents are the fragment from *Homage to Catalonia*, written by Orwell in 1938, and Seymour's photograph of 1938, which we find next to the fountain. This tendency to document travel is still common today in

the form of travel diaries and souvenirs. And here we go back to the suitcase, tourism and the different ways of travelling and relating to the places visited, as well as to the reasons for travelling.

This form of approaching reality, of addressing politics through art, and reflecting on our environment in order to understand it, is a fundamental aspect of Haghghian's work. It is a way of thinking where logic is based on provoking debates rather than solving them, and on the capacity to seek for more than one solution to a problem. In other words: it is not simply a question of arriving at the essence of the issues involved, but of analysing how they can be represented, how images around us emerge and how to make artistic practice meaningful.

Activities

Thursday 7 July, at 6 pm

Special tour with commentary by Natascha Sadr Haghghian and Soledad Gutiérrez, MACBA's temporary exhibitions curator (exclusive to Friends of MACBA)
Capella MACBA. Limited places

Why and how do I make what I make? The artist speaks

Natascha Sadr Haghghian in conversation with Soledad Gutiérrez
MACBA Auditorium. Free admission. Limited seating
Date to be confirmed (October)

Further information: www.macba.cat

Presentations of the project

Weekdays, at 5.30 pm / Saturdays, at 1.30 and 5.30 pm / Sundays and holidays, at 1.30 pm
Available in English every Monday

Publicación

#04 Natascha Sadr Haghghian. *De paso*, digital publication of the Capella MACBA Series, available at <http://www.macba.cat/serie-capella> (in preparation)

Further information www.macba.cat and http://twitter.com/MACBA_Barcelona

Exhibition organised by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and co-produced together with the Han Nefkens Foundation.

Opening times

Weekdays, 11 am to 8 pm
(from 25 September, 11 am to 7.30 pm)
Saturdays, 10 am to 8 pm
Sundays and holidays, 10 am to 3 pm
Closed Tuesdays (except holidays)
Open Mondays

Capella MACBA

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