



### Real Remnants of Fictive Wars (2004)

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*Real Remnants of Fictive Wars* (2003-2008) is a series of ephemeral actions, related to *Land Art* and documented on video and photography. Gaillard puts in operation industrial extinguishers in carefully selected spaces, among which is the iconic Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson.

## Superflex & Patrick Charpenel

### Conversation

Today, humans live enclosed in a political and economic system that hasn't been able to ensure neither stability nor welfare. Today, we operate in a structure that generates differences and conflicts within our various communities. Currently we foster an economy that compromises natural resources in exchange for strengthening the wealth of the fortunate few. For that reason, we have now created a system that promotes discontinuity, contradiction and nonlinearity in the way we operate. The etymology of the word catastrophe comes from the Greek katastréphein, meaning to overturn, which is composed of the prefix kata meaning downwards and of the verb fein that refers to the idea of turning. Thus, the literal meaning of this notion is to put things upside down. Today, as we all know, in Mexico we live upside down, in reverse, backwards. We live in a state of nearly absolute catastrophe. Contemporary art, with its ability to introduce new variables into the linguistic and social platforms of this great global structure, can and must change the material and symbolic order of our world. This explains the tendency for art, especially contemporary, to generate political experiences at Biennials and international exhibitions.

Today, with the presence of the Danish collective, Superflex, we face a unique case. This is a group of activists who generate different social experiences from an art platform. For this reason, I would like to talk to them about their work and their political stance.

Before I begin the conversation with two members of this collective, I would like to briefly explain how this presentation will be carried out. First, I will ask them questions. This will lead the way towards a dialogue. Afterwards, this dialog will be open to the audience and we will close with the presentation of a video entitled *The Financial Crisis*. It is essential for the content of this presentation that we conclude with this video. So we will have to limit the audience's questions to 3 or 4. Unfortunately, time does not allow us to extend ourselves for too long. Now I will switch languages to hold a fluent dialogue with Bjornstjerne and Jakob.

**Patrick Charpenel:** Thank you for being here with us at this symposium, and for visiting us here in Mexico. I know that it has been a long trip for you.

**Bjornstjerne Christiansen & Jakob Fenger:** On the contrary, thank you for your invitation.

**PC:** The fact that you have developed your work as a group, I mean, as an artist collective, confronts you with a certain exchange of ideas, thematic negotiations and dialectical dynamics. In what measure has that structure of collaboration influenced and driven your social activism?

**BC:** First, I'd like to tell you that we are three members, a group of three people. One partner couldn't come. We have been working together for sixteen years now. We met at the art academy in Copenhagen, and soon realized that we wanted to work as a group, in order to find a more dynamic process whereby one had to be confronted to the audience's response. And so this particular dynamic could lead us to an exchange with others and to develop projects on a larger scale. Not one on one, but to broaden our horizons. And being three people had an exponential effect. Also, we wanted to exercise our art, develop it and relate it to what happens in society, and we thought we had the possibility to make creative proposals. I think that every time you present your work, it becomes an example, a model, it is being creative and also, we are open to criticism, but you have to present something. So, it is a dynamic process and we really give great importance to it. When you ask us how it influences our role as social persons, as members of a society, activists too... Well, we don't use the term activist much to describe ourselves but rather, we think that our work, that is the visual arts, is an excellent platform to offer our proposals and examples, but these examples and models come from the context of art and we'd like to discuss our proposals in a much broader context. And this is why we really tried to launch it with these wider perspectives.

We can transform our ideas into tools, into more tangible things. So this is the role, it's how we see ourselves. And yes, we do see ourselves as social actors elaborating proposals and that is how we can influence our context. I think it's important. We also believe in everything we do. We are convinced of our work. We are also very ambitious in that sense.

**PC:** Very good, since you don't like the term activism, you don't see it's related with your artistic process, but I see you have a social commitment that is neither an ideological platform nor political one. But you generate these ideas through different organizations and different epistemological horizons. How do you understand political practice and how does it influence your reality?

**JF:** Well, to follow up on what Bjornstjerne said on activism and to continue with the idea of it, we intend not using the word. Lately, we have been working with political activists in the art field. But we know it's problematic because it has to do with the activists' images and presentations that aren't doing anything concrete. Also, for us the idea of political activism is based on some doctrine, some dogma, some

political belief and we function otherwise. Often when we start a project it is as a long-term process, then we describe a specific project. We may have a goal but it isn't necessarily a manifest. We don't really know what we are going to achieve. It's not a political focus.

**BC:** He means that our work may have a political impact but it depends on the context where we present it. When we do so, a common language exists, a common history according to this broader context. Then we prefer that others find the relationship between the context and our work. We are looking for others to accept our projects. We may have a specific project, for instance, a soda. It's tasty, gives us energy but it's also an artwork. Indirectly, it's also an economic proposal. In the case of the soda, it's the price of the raw materials for some peasants in the Amazon basin. Then, it can be an activist context. Maybe, they'd like to see the economic consequences in the short term. It would be their interpretation, and for us it's an art expression. Other persons like the project because it's 'made' by artists.

**BC:** You've also mentioned repetition, replication, and what's interesting is that this is like history and facts. These are constructions and when we realize that someone decides that this is a fact, we want to find out how we relate to that fact. But we can start questioning it by copying a statement and putting it in another context, another situation. And from that, something new could arise: it could be a proposal, a new question, a new inquiry to copy, to adapt. This is a fantastic thing and it allows society to become dynamic. This is what we believe in. This is our practice. And this is how we summarize what we propose. It doesn't have much value if it is static, if it stands there only as finished final product.

**PC:** Now, talking about another context. Recently, Superflex has been visiting Mexico several times. The reason is that they are designing something new; probably one of your most ambitious projects. So, in Mexico City you're working on a model and we'd like to know your opinion about it. You won't only produce the model but there will also be an exhibition where the process you followed to attain such technical and complex design will be shown. When did you start this project?

**JF:** Yes, this is the project you are looking at on the screen.

**BC:** We started working on the project more or less, in 1997 or 1996. The project consists in an energy system designed for rural areas. It's a biogas system that uses everything it needs to produce gas. It can be used in a gas-lamp or in a stove. We have been working on it since 1996 or 1997 and since then it has reached different phases. It's like a signature work. It's something we do a lot and I'd like to start by showing some images so you see what happened in '97. We built this power system through biogas. We produced it with a local NGO and it consisted of

a main idea: to launch proposals of a power system for families living in rural areas in Tanzania. I'll talk about the technical issues and then explain how it works.

For starters, you place organic material inside a methane system. We developed a system in collaboration with engineers in which there are two chambers that make a back and forth movements. The gases come out of there. The whole system is based on organic waste, which eventually produces gas. The waste goes up and at some point the valve opens and the elements mix. Essentially, it is biogas and we are sure we did not invent the system; it has existed for many years. But what we did with it, specifically in Tanzania, was that we saw the project as a potential aid project. Organizations working in Africa bring money and different projects. We wanted our project to be a product that families could buy, and if they didn't want to buy it, then it was because they did not need it. That was the concern. We wanted to introduce it in the households. Here you can see images from the first experiment. The first one is centred on these two plastic bags. Several years after, we did the second test in Cambodia along with an organization, an independent university. They are involved in biogas technology projects: they go to diverse regions in the country and introduce different systems. We did it to show what the project was about, and then we worked with people from Tanzania. Here you can see the kitchen. It's a brief video showing how the system should be installed. First, you clean the earth, then you clear the debris and you make a hole. The idea behind this project had to do with technology that is quite complicated. A brick dome had to be built. It's quite complicated and requires skills and knowledge to do it, to come up with solutions like these. We thought that it should be a system that can be easily installed. I would like to add that it was very important for us to work with cutting-edge technology because the fact that their income is low does not imply they can't afford this or that they have to pay a high price for it, no. The idea is that they can actually buy it within their income and still have cutting-edge technology. So the family would feel proud of having their own source of energy and therefore become more independent. Finally, money has to be spent in fossil fuels. The important thing was to try to develop something that was affordable and had high quality standards. Here in Mexico this has to be an important consideration, it needs to be redesigned.

Later, an artist friend invited us to Shanghai to do a test so the people could experiment with it. We had to modify the system because the structure was also new. But here we already had the wells in the ground. And every year, wherever we go, we know that the system must be modified. We had people from around the world participating, and who want to acquire the system because they see that they're useful and work. We worked in Tanzania for three years with trained members of

the NGO who are still producing and working on this project. This was the goal we could reach. They are still installing and developing the system on their own. In Mexico we will also establish a long-term relationship that is far-reaching. We've been getting together with people and now we are able to make a system that will be commercially produced at a massive scale. We've improved the three elements that we had trouble with before. This is a device that is one meter tall and that can be introduced into the ground to produce gas. Here we have reached a very ambitious stage, which is what we were interested in doing. We also did some workshops and clinics in Mexico City... Next we'll do water tests and then we'll install the first biogas systems in Guadalajara. Afterwards, we'll install ten prototypes in different places around Mexico. The sky is the limit, so to speak! It is indeed an ambitious project. We are very happy that this has come true in Mexico. It's been very interesting to meet with investing companies from all over the world. They invest in systems, the system is better positioned, the balance rises, etc.

For example, in Africa, the people could not buy it, now it is affordable. People can install those systems with their own incomes. It has enabled exchanges. This is the kind of economy we should respect. In Mexico, we are working to develop an efficient system to give people an idea of what they can achieve with low incomes. We hope that this will be the final model.

**PC:** It's very interesting to observe the impact it could have on people, and also on the economy.

**JF:** We try to conserve an 'open' philosophy, I mean, knowledge evolves if we leave things open, other possibilities arise. We can apply some of these strategies. For example, in India we thought this tool could be useful with a technology difference from ours, adapt it to India's reality. Tools have a different impact in different regions but we have an idea of how they could be used.

**PC:** Because of timing, I think we could now open the discussion to the audience and then we'll watch a video related to the word catastrophe. Unfortunately, we do not have enough time to open up the discussion to many questions and comments. From now on we'll open up the dialogue with the audience. We can't go on for too long so if anyone has a question or a comment, please, this is the moment.

**Participant:** Could the system be escalated in a community for other uses rather than just one house or one household? Is there a more complex workshop and could these be better interrelated so you don't tend only to one home?

**JF:** Well, our focus has been the household but it could take place anywhere. We have made these biogas systems in small size and scale. If you want to be a part of this kind of investment, we think that the family structure is ideal. There have

been attempts to escalate the system to communities and it can be more difficult, but yes, technically, a larger scale is possible.

**BC:** Also, there are state resources. This gives a sense of pride; people are given the chance to feel that they can achieve certain independency, so the project can be taken to communities and also to the market. But during the fifteen years that we have worked in Eastern Africa and Cambodia, our experience demonstrates that this must start at the household level and in the families before entering the whole community.

**Participant:** But if they decide to do so, could you help and assist during the introduction of a bigger system so a workshop could take place in a small community? If they wanted to have a workshop, would it be possible?

**JF:** What we did was to produce a system guide where it states, “do it yourself.” You could do it at any scale you like or need to. The communities could decide to do them on their own. We have highlighted the importance of this practice: a product that can and should enter a small-scale economy. Our experience has shown that this is really how it works. Moreover, we think that on an economic level, we have reached a point where an investment could be made and then use the gas for cooking, and this could be done during a period of fifteen years. The cost for a hand-built system is one thousand dollars more or less, but we think that the price could be lower.

**BC:** We have developed a product that could be produced in a massive manner. We have to find the right partners in Mexico, the investors. But we are very happy with the partners we already have for this project. It began with Patrick, for example.

**PC:** Cuauhtémoc, please.

**Participant:** It's a matter of how you negotiate the fact that you are looking for investors and how you want this to work in a capitalist market. What is the technological structure? There is a precondition to the investment, and it has to do with technological property through patents.

**BC:** That was in the old world. This has now given way to new strategies, and is more accessible. If we have a product we can be distributed, and do it affordably. So we can no longer think about protection and patent. It really does not interest us. Protection today means that it should be open and in circulation. We are protecting the product idea. We don't want to store it in a box. We believe this is the best structure.

**Participant:** Yes, but in terms of negotiation: you find investors, but you are not selling the technology. Don't they get a percentage of it?

**BC:** Yes, people can invest in this in the same way they can invest in a medicine with a patent. But our philosophy is very different. Anything could happen. We have to stay open to really make the product accessible. There's people who have a

product and then sit on it. They don't promote it, they don't disseminate it, and they don't know to what extent it can be put to use. For us, the method we've followed is the most viable. We are trying to work. Although we do have a patent, it is dated from '96 or '97 when we first started to work. But we waived the patent. Even though everybody says “you have to have a patent first” but it was never about investing in a product for poor families in Africa. We don't believe in those mechanisms.

**PC:** One last question

**Participant:** Since you have tried to implement this device in Denmark and Europe in general, what do you think about this gap in the sense that when we refer to Europe or the US, gas is still gas but comes from cleaner technologies. This is something that is being used nowadays. That is my first question. The other one is: Did you use a real McDonald's in your video or did you have to reconstruct it?

**BC:** The McDonald's was built for this piece. We built the building from scratch and the image of the restaurant is a studio production. And regarding the gas project: biogas systems exist in Denmark but in a much larger scale. It is very hard to isolate it since the temperature changes. In Africa, we have much more stable weather. Our focus therefore is precisely to reach those areas. The technology is simpler, not as complex and at the moment, we are not interested in entering Denmark.