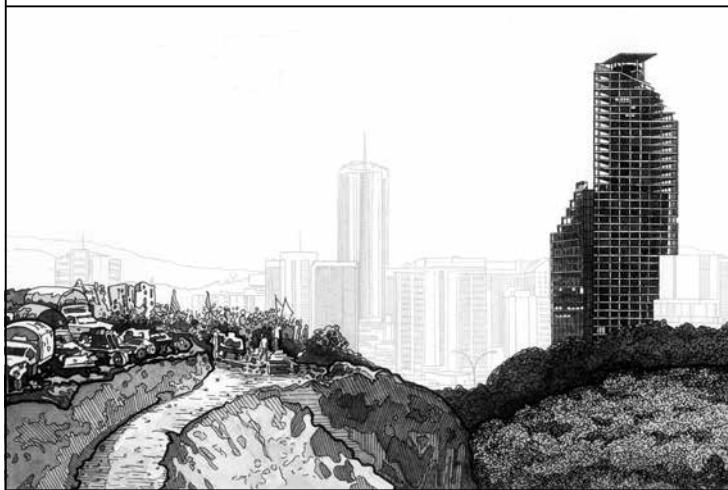


Ángela Bonadies &
Juan José Olavarría

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST



12.03 – 05.06.2022

In the ardent search for an answer to the chaos and routine that dominate life in the socialist Bolivarian Republic of the 20th century, A and J lead us on an adventure through the belly of the criminal beast. We will walk through prison spaces, through the strongholds of the warlord: an elusive figure who represents the macho military authority characteristic of a violent and heroic culture.

[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



In 2010, Ángela Bonadies (Caracas, 1970) and Juan José Olavarria (Valencia, Venezuela, 1969) initiated the project entitled *David's Tower*. This work in progress is based on the occupation by families and homeless people of the Confinanzas Financial Centre, a 45-floor, 185-metre-high skyscraper that was the third tallest building in Caracas. David's Tower took its name from its promoter, Venezuelan banker David Brillembourg. Construction of the building began in 1990, as part of an urban plan promoted by businessmen who had amassed fortunes in the stock market boom of the 1980s and intended to create a Wall Street-style boulevard in this area of the capital. However, work was stopped in 1994 because the Confinanzas group went bankrupt as a result of measures introduced by the government of Rafael Caldera. In 2007, with the building in a dilapidated state, poor families began to move in. At its highest density, it was occupied by 900 families—some 4500 people. With legal protection from the housing cooperative Casiques de Venezuela, they built their dwellings and remained there until 2014, when they were evicted by President Nicolás Maduro. After negotiating with the person in charge of the community, a kind of kingpin who governed the collective life and imposed the rules, Bonadies and Olavarria entered the tower and documented the domestic spaces and the new architectural morphology, in addition to holding conversations with the inhabitants. According to the artists, the tower is an icon of the last few decades of Venezuela: from the modernizing promise of capital to the revolutionary promise of the state.

Conceived as a graphic novel, *In the Belly of the Beast* is added to the numerous works carried out under the heading *David's Tower*, which adopted a variety of formats, including installations, sculptures and photographs, according to how they were displayed to the public. This exhibition includes not only the original drawings, but also a new museographic presentation that was conceived specifically for the Sala Miserachs.

LA TORRE DE DAVID / "THE WHITE ELEPHANT"

Ángela Bonadies & Juan José Olavarría

*We watched it for a long time from the outside
And pondered its form.*

*The altered grid represented a promise that had cracked
or was mere fiction. And that revealed on its surface
the tussle between abstract and figurative art.*

*We tried to get in several times, but the rainy season started
and the tide, as always, became turbulent. It collapsed as well,
of course, like many others across the country.*

*We went round and round its base, trying to understand
its magnitude and to establish a common language
with this giant that had run aground. We surrounded it.
We climbed the slopes of a decadent paradise where the lower
levels and the top levels evoked different and separate eras:
From the horizontal, with its patio and the sun filtering
in from above, to the vertical, with the central atrium
and the sun that was dominated by a suffocated cage
of now broken mirrors.*

*We finally arrived at a dilapidated red door that led us
into its body, throughout which we journeyed.
The starting point was a concrete desert, an impressively open
and clean structure, symmetrical and substantial,
that connects several of the animal's organs, perforated by
repeated holes that shrink in perspective toward the sky
like an emptied out or inverted column.
Towards the innards the battle between shapes and shadows,
between reality and fiction emerges again,
with vehicles and objects that come from different decades,
in different states of disrepair.*

*The beast's stomach is broad, much larger than the rest,
guarded by sharp teeth, as if it were a jail,
a church or army barracks.*

*There are many things on show and others that are hidden.
The brutal disproportions increased as we climbed higher this
punctured cathedral that reveals juxtaposed layers of meaning.
At several moments we beheld a sense of the "eternally
unfinished" which concerned Simón Rodríguez when he
noted: "things should be half made while they are being made".
For therein breathes the beast-cathedral of the sunny climes
of American Societies.*

*We found signs of a certain tropical "perseverance", as always
occurs beneath the highways of our South American life,
where stubborn and twisted plants and trees emerge
from the gaps and joints, like "in the heart of darkness"
but in the concrete jungle, greenness finds its way
in and hangs down like some surprising
and ensnared presence, seeking out the light.*

*Worryingly precarious spaces appear, like the end of a story
or "shoa". Endemic symptoms that have not shifted for decades
And things that "should be half made while they are
being made" are left that way forever.*

*We walk through cultural prehistory, and it is shocking,
in a voyage in space and an even longer trip back
to a remote time.*

*History that is built and that comes falling down again
represented in an almost young enormous and robust body
whose skeleton is entirely broken.*

*Organic and pathological, bearing the marks of interventions
and cuts, the big white whale, aggrieved in its local
translation, the big white elephant, steadfast and devastating:
a backdrop for battles.*

And still, the romantic, exotic gaze enchanted by the magic religious system, with the distant and untamable animal from society's prehistory, with tribal spatial constructions inside the beast, with the hierarchical heart of a crowned chief and subjects of nothingness.

With a state of unfinished, unnamed things.

And still there is a certain gaze through the binoculars of civilization that applauds far-off stories of murders and rapes, that here can only give rise to power disguised as the dogma of faith, to the stomach that does not chew but ingurgitates, to the eyes of those who give orders and make categories.

*Inside: social classes, hierarchies, exclusion, false missions
And hundreds and thousands who need a roof over their head.*

The beast disguises itself as horizontal terrain, clad in participatory camouflage. But the truth is, there is only one head that decides what it tolerates or desecrates and that regiments—as it does in the whole country—the side it controls.

What's left in the organism is repelled or confined to an "other" state. To a state of exception that could last a thousand years. To a space-cum-nation where the beast becomes home and where the raving plans of the shepherd-captain of souls become law.

SOME PARADOXES REGARDING INTERVENTIONS IN THE PUBLIC SPACE: THREE EXAMPLES

Example one

The third edition of *Arte / Cidade*,¹ a project of urban interventions, brought together artists and architects from all over the world in São Paulo under the curatorship of Nelson Brissac Peixoto in 2002.

This edition was dedicated to Zona Leste, a huge urban area with high rates of poverty and crime located on the east bank of the Tamanduateí River. Twenty-five works investigated the memory, the present and the future of this area of the city proactively, exploring strategies that could offer a better understanding of the metropolitan tensions that beset it.

The architects who participated included classic names of the urban conflict theme (Muntadas, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Vito Acconci and Dias & Riedweg) and many others. Some of the most active groups of architects of the time were invited, including Schie 2.0 and Urban Fabric, Atelier Van Lieshout and the Casa Blindada group. However, the proposal that achieved the greatest public impact was that of Rem Koolhaas for the São Vito building, a skyscraper over 100 metres high with 624 apartments that was built in 1959 by Aron Kogan.

Popularly called *Treme-Treme* (tremble-tremble), São Vito began a slow process of degradation in the late

¹ See <http://www.pucsp.br/artecidade/indexp.htm> *Arte / Cidade* held three events based on the following themes: "Cidade sem janelas" and "A cidade e seus fluxos" (1994); "A cidade e suas histórias" (1997); and "Zona Leste" (2002).

1980s. Almost twenty years later, the building was no longer being maintained and many of the dwellings were used for drug dealing and prostitution.

After analysing the living conditions of its tenants and the morphological characteristics of the building, Koolhaas proposed a project that attempted to foster community ties and promote the reinsertion of São Vito in its immediate urban environment. To do this, Koolhaas proposed to build a new, modern lift that would energize the skyscraper from the private to the public space, from the bottom to the top and from the inside out.²

However, the inhabitants paralysed Koolhaas's intervention, wielding their right to remain invisible and isolated, undoubtedly as a means to conserve the relative invulnerability that they would have lost. Finally, in 2004, the São Paulo city council decided to expropriate this "vertical favela" and, despite strong public opposition, São Vito was demolished in 2011.

What conclusions can we draw from this case study? In his book *Culturas híbridas*,³ Néstor García Canclini points out an important issue to remember here: all hybridizations involve a complex process full of shocks that eludes the homogeneous and can in no way be understood as definitive. Furthermore, hybrids are fragile and hybridization does not record the places where a culture, a language or a series of community expressions intermingle, but the places where that culture, language or community expression resists the attempt at hybridization and blocks all contact with the outside world.

² <http://www.pucsp.br/artecidade/novo/koolhaas.htm>

³ Néstor García Canclini: *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, Paidós, Barcelona 2001

In some way, this gaze into the inner workings of hybridization—that is, into its conflicts rather than its successes, into the interrupted processes rather than their solutions—allows us to better understand the example of Rem Koolhaas in São Vito, where he effectively proposed an interface that favoured mixing, drawing hypothetical transfers between the personal and the collective. However, faced with this invitation to hybridize, the residents of the skyscraper responded with a belligerent refusal. This should not be understood only as a rejection of Koolhaas's proposal, but as a radical proof of Canclini's theses, according to which the history of hybridization is, above all, the memory of that which struggles to remain within its own autarchy.

Koolhaas's scheme for *Arte / Cidade 2002* does not seem so eloquent because it shows that reality exceeds any attempt to manage it. On the contrary, it is conceivable that the lift project for São Vito brings out a greater issue, which could be formulated as the following question: How do you work with the unexpected hostility, with the intransigence of a field of study that refuses any attempt to be analysed?

Perhaps the main difficulty we find when entering this problematic situation is not so much that of understanding its scope or finding an angle from which to approach it, but of how we interfere within that situation, how we smooth out the rough outsides and insides of the antagonism. Indeed, there are not two separate political spheres: one of analysis and one of friction. Hence, any tension that leads to the expression of hostility is the same argument, the theme and landscape of every critical project, rather than a concluding episode.

Resignifying the disagreement, resituating the disagreement and, finally, redirecting what fails to achieve consensus is a fairly common temptation in the face of dissent. If there is something that unites the above mechanisms, it is their preference to deal with static images of the conflict, postcards that favour not only cultural exoticism but also a certain vaguely humanistic, hygienic idea of what any intervention within collective frictions involves.

Going back to the example of São Vito, it should be remembered that perhaps one of the main “misunderstandings” that affected the proposal was that it disregarded the *fictional* nature of any interference in the vital space of the city. Koolhaas certainly overcame the ethnographic problem of excessive identification, but he undoubtedly made a “technological” error of verisimilitude, offering a hostile and alienating machinery that was too productive for those who had to use it.

For this reason, let’s say that the fiction of the project was out of tempo with the residents of São Vito, and the interests of the two parties were out of balance. This is what is called a continuity error in the cinema, and we could well argue that many of the “rescue” actions carried out in the public sphere and in the collective symbolic heritage suffer from this same error, that is, they become failures of urban continuity.

Example two

The Ponte City residential skyscraper located in the Hillbrow neighbourhood of Johannesburg is a 173-metre-high, 54-story cylindrical tower built by Mannie Feldman, Manfred Hermer and Rodney Grosskopf in 1975.

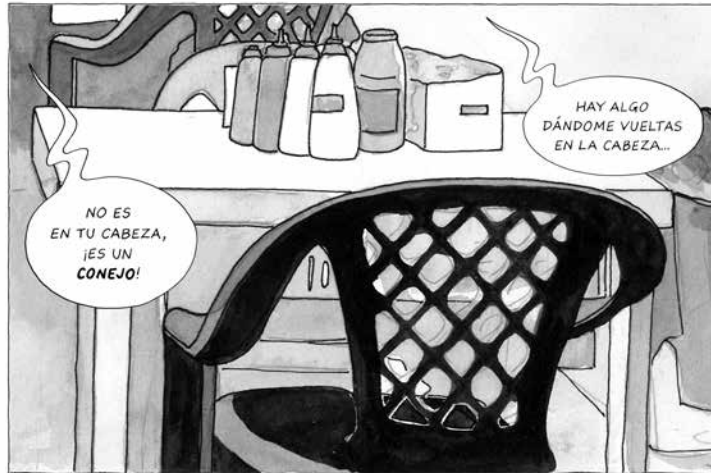
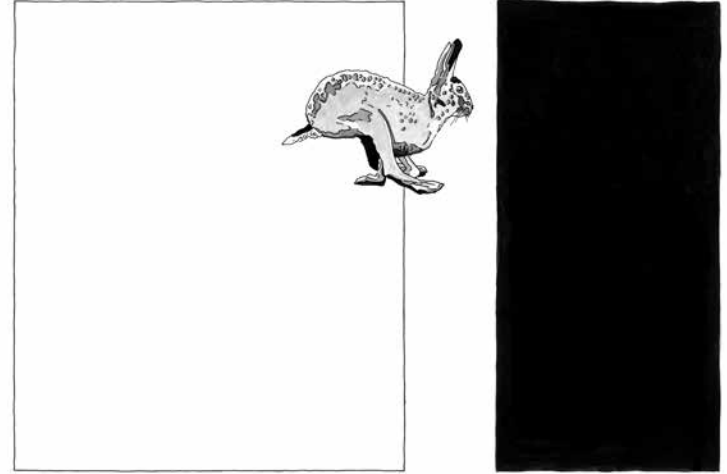
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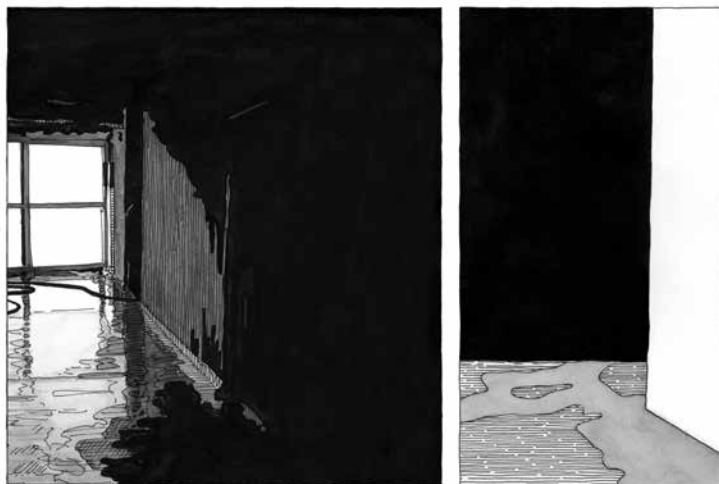
EL AS DE CORAZONES

APARECEN ESPACIOS DE UNA PRECARIEDAD ANGUSTIOSA, COMO UN FINAL DE HISTORIA O SHOÁ. SÍNTOMAS ENDÉMICOS QUE QUEDARON POR DÉCADAS EN LA MISMA POSICIÓN Y COSAS QUE "HAN DE ESTAR A MEDIO HACER MIENTRAS SE ESTÁN HACIENDO" PARA SIEMPRE.

CAMINAMOS EN LA PREHISTORIA CULTURAL, ESTO IMPRESIONA, EN UN VIAJE EN EL ESPACIO Y UNO MÁS LARGO EN EL TIEMPO, REMOTO. LA HISTORIA CONSTRUIDA Y VUELTA A CAER REPRESENTADA EN UN CASI JOVEN CUERPO ENORME Y ROBUSTO CON FRACTURAS EN TODA LA OSAMENTA...









After its construction, it underwent a process of degradation similar to that of São Vito, culminating after the end of apartheid in the mid-1990s, when a large number of gangs moved in, making it an icon of urban deterioration and crime.

In 2007 David Selvan and Nour Addine Ayyoub, developers of the Ayyoub Company, bought the building and promoted a lavish media investment campaign for what they called “New Ponte”. Their goal was to target a new rising middle class—young black professionals and business people from across the African continent who were fascinated by the typical Manhattan lifestyle. Selvan and Ayyoub were very popular brokers in Johannesburg. They even intervened in the new architectural scheme, thematically redesigning some floors on the basis of fatuous concepts such as “Future Slick”, “Old Money” and “Glam Rock”.

In 2008, with the fall of Lehmann Brothers and the ensuing global economic crisis, the Ayyoub Company went bankrupt. It therefore abandoned the rehabilitation proposal, leaving behind a new layer of ruins. The signs advertising “New Ponte” that are still visible offer a perfect metaphor for the ambitions and disasters of the contemporary financial system.

It should be noted, however, that unlike the São Vito building, Ponte City has kept its undeniable photogenic qualities more or less intact. A gigantic circular advertisement surrounds the top floors, which are owned by the mobile telephone company Vodacom, a leader in South Africa. Proof of the building’s attraction is that in 2007 the well-known film-maker Danny Boyle announced that he would direct a thriller inside it. Also, the final sequences of the science fiction film *District 9*,

directed by Neill Blomkamp and produced by Peter Jackson, which premiered a year before the 2010 FIFA World Cup, is set in the impressive hollow interior of Ponte City. No digital retouching was needed to give it the look of a gothic futuristic ruin.

Finally, the South African photographer Michael Subotzky, helped by the British artist Patrick Waterhouse, won the Discovery Award of the photography festival *Rencontres d'Arles 2011* with a project entitled *Ponte City*. In this work, an installation of light boxes included countless images of the building and its inhabitants, shown as an object mosaic.⁴

The photographs by Subotzky are reminiscent of the great panoptic images of Andreas Gursky, only here the individuals are portrayed in isolation, next to collections of windows, doors, bars or televisions. They look like the result of an endless channel-hopping session.

All the images have a sophisticated technical drama that makes them almost unreal. In the text that accompanies the project, the photographer focuses on the dreams of the inhabitants of Ponte City, a kind of romantic melancholy that has taken over the building. However, Subotzky's words also suggest a feigned consternation, a vaguely paternalistic compassion that Susan Sontag defined as attraction to the pain of others.

However, we do not need to judge the moral intentions of this text on ruin, misery and the effects of economic capitalism, because the simple montage on which it is based is even more paradoxical.

Here we can consider (again, of course) Walter Benjamin's idea that a photograph is fundamentally what

happens outside the frame and that, therefore, in order to tell the story of images, we must access the optical unconscious, which cannot be achieved through a story or chronicle, but rather through an interpretive montage.

In the same vein, referring to the famous four negatives of Auschwitz, Georges Didi-Huberman said that they are images *despite all*,⁵ that is, photographs whose particular technical conditions or formalistic difficulties cannot be eliminated without manipulating them towards some unexpected ideological horizon.

Didi-Huberman thus seems to vindicate just the opposite of the Ponte City photographs: a restitution of the testimonial value of photography based on its involuntary formal rhetoric. On the other hand, Subotzky's colourful montages use that same technological intentionality not only to cause sensation but, in some way, to enter the existence of the residents as if through a protected tunnel, avoiding the problems that they seem to embody, just like that cylindrical void inside Ponte City. And yet (*despite all*), they fail to concretize this existence, to offer a full representation of it.

The tendency to essentialize social conflicts, transforming them into conciliatory slogans, has generated a good number of iconographies and ecstatic discourses that observe antagonism with veneration or iconoclasm. Indeed, some artists such as Subotzky appear to us as captive, unemancipated spectators, as pious visitors to their own teachings.

As Jacques Rancière points out, it could be argued that despite the obvious differences, the São Vito and

⁴ See <http://www.subotzkystudio.com/ponte-city-dwt/>

⁵ George Didi-Huberman: *Images malgré tout*, Minuit, Paris 2003 [*Imágenes pese a todo*, Paidós, Barcelona 2004]

Ponte City projects reproduce an unfortunate common misunderstanding in many interventions with a political dimension: that art and architecture can leave their disciplinary perimeters, visit and mingle with conflict and then return to the ghetto where they normally live to observe the effects of their interaction.

As the popular 1968 slogan proclaimed, “*Tout est politique*”: you cannot dip in and out of politics; you have to live within it.

Example three

Precisely this position is narrated by the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska in one of her most exceptional works, *Children of the Age*: “We are children of our age, / it’s a political age. All day long, all through the night, / all affairs—yours, ours, theirs— / are political affairs.”. Ángela Bonadies and Juan José Olavarría mention this poem in an interview about their project *David’s Tower*, which is our third example.⁶

This proposal includes texts, exhibitions, drawings, sculptures, workshops and lines of research. This broad activity shows the extent to which *David’s Tower* is the antithesis of postmodern interventions such as those of São Vito and Ponte City, despite dealing with similar urban problems and even buildings with similar connotations and features.

From the outset, we could say that the work by Bonadies and Olavarría does not reject what Viktor Shklovsky called “estrangement”, that is, an inclination to deactivate the ideological and representative autom-

⁶ See <http://latorrededavid.blogspot.com.es/>

atisms that invariably lead to stereotypes. Hence, according to Bonadies and Olavarría, Venezuelan artists operate within “a story that violates the limits between fiction and reality and between such basic meanings as protection-helplessness, security-insecurity, curtain wall, window-emptiness”. This means working inside a territory with fluctuating perimeters, which refuses to be approached from any assumed exemplariness.

David’s Tower thus testifies that there is a middle way between paternalistic intervention and the exoticism with which collective problems are sometimes viewed, between the heroic rescue of an authenticity that is about to be lost and the various frivolously anthropological safaris.

The approach of Bonadies and Olavarría to the living conditions of the Tower, to the power structures and the vertical morphology of the building, should in no way be seen as the search for a strategic site from which to visually exploit the skyscraper. Rather, it should be seen as an exercise in compilation of all the political densities, all the heavy elements that come together in it. This is precisely what we were referring to when we mentioned estrangement, that Brechtian distancing that *David’s Tower* seems to revisit as if it were a working methodology, a reflective rather than precautionary way of collecting evidence, information, testimonies and disagreements in order to overcome the most simplistic contingencies and get to the root of the present situation.

The architects say that “is an icon that represents the last 30 years of Venezuela: from the modernizing promise from capital to the revolutionary promise from the State”. By pointing out the building’s resistance to being only the heritage of some people or others, in the

propensity to claim it as success or failure, Bonadies and Olavarría avoid a set of fissures, a collection of *interludes* that are an invitation to translate the current difficulties of the building through the devices of art. The unfinished building promoted by David Brillenbourg, occupied until 2014 by the cooperative Caciques de Venezuela, also reminds us how antagonistic community practices can bring out points of friction, propositional horizons that also lead to the most insurmountable paradoxes.

One of the main tasks of art is to promote new patterns for the thinkable, new forms of political imagination that destroy totalitarian agreements, that allow the complexities of life and reality to be given an expressive and developmental space. But what tools can artists use to prevent these tensions from remaining in the vague territory of critical representation?

Maurice Blanchot wrote that a community can only survive and believe in itself when it administers the languages that name it, when it becomes unavowable.⁷ On the other hand, Jean-Luc Nancy said that it is in the absence of heritage, in disavowal, that communities are strengthened, because they have nothing to venerate or protect beyond their own ties, their own being-in-common. However, perhaps both philosophers were only trying to give a suitable name to everything that comes out when we are together within the same violence, when we are in a situation of stress.

David's Tower is a project that invites us to think how far art should listen to the fictions that narrate the world in conflict to us uncontrollably and chaotically. It

⁷Maurice Blanchot: *La communauté inavouable*, Minuit, Paris 1984 [*La comunidad inconfesable*, Arena, Madrid 2002]

introduces the idea that artistic practices perhaps need to lose their preventive or elegant distance, take a step forward to “respond” to the demands of these stories in which we are confronted with distorted images, contradictory words. Without this will to respond, the antagonism leads to a kind of surfing through the quagmire of others, a quick way to isolate them in the numerous suburbs of morality, in order to watch how they develop there, accepting that they will never continue their rebellion and, above all, that they will never come to ask us for answers, accountability.

However, as Bonadies and Olavarría have persistently stated, the main danger of this false agency regarding the dispute is a distorting homage and its consequent populism. This is what the geographer Francesc Muñoz called “urbanization”, a term that refers to how the heroic and dramatic representations of some artists result in the city becoming an uncritical and pompous stage setting with the props preferred by unscrupulous politicians and urban planners.

Finally, with regard to *David's Tower*, we must recall the film by Agnès Varda entitled *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, which traces an intimate ideological story of the savage capitalist economy of abundance and precariousness, delving into the lives of a series of individuals who glean the food that others throw away.

The film ends very poetically when employees in the Paul-Dini municipal museum in Villefranche-sur-Saône discover a painting by Edmond Hédouin called *Glaneuses à Chambaudoïn* (1857) and take it out into the museum's courtyard. This canvas portrays a very strange scene of a group of gleaners running with their bundles of wheat on their heads before a storm. By chance, when

the painting is shown to the camera, gusts of wind hit its surface as if they had come from the depths of the canvas to goad the three women gathered there. Unlike Jean-François Millet's famous canvas on the same subject, in which the gleaners work conscientiously on the harvest, Hédouin's young women seem to emancipate themselves from their task, helping each other and even laughing as they are sprayed. by the first drops of rain. Thus, against the moralistic representation of individual effort and alienating work, we see the sudden solidarity aroused in the community, a feeling of abandoning the distribution of assigned roles and social hierarchies.

The always problematic and never homogeneous journey from a bucolic scene to that of a group of women organizing themselves differently, from a reassuring postcard to a document that records a process of disorder, is the place that seems to be occupied by *David's Tower*. Bonadies and Olavarria also glean the contradictions and fissures of a situation full of opacity, a proposal that prefers to look at where the storm is coming from and how strongly it will hit those who are in the open, instead of recording how they will pose before the delicate hand of the artist, before the sometimes cynical eye of the camera.

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